RESEARCH

I've noticed that talking about doing research is a much less effective debate tool than actually doing research. Unless by some great good fortune a topic happens to fall into your area of expertise, there is probably a need to go out and learn something about that topic, often from the ground up. But, of course, life is short, and research is work, and sometimes it's easier to watch TV and sleep late and generally find other ways to spend one's time. As a result, you will lose your debate rounds, usually to people who *did* do the research. The initial determination of whether to embrace a work ethic or a goofball ethic is entirely a student's own choice. The goofball ethic is fairly unrewarding, though, and given that most people who are initially attracted to debate have some belief in their own inherent intelligence and want to exercise it a bit, the choice of the goofball ethic is a little hard to fathom. Why would people want to lose, as they inevitably will if they don't do the background work? I suspect that chief among the reasons people drop from the activity after a year or two is that you can just lose so much, and while everything under the sun will be blamed for these losses other than their own lack of preparedness, it's ultimately the goofball ethic that results in another forensician biting the dust. On the bright side, of course, as juniors and seniors they have nothing to interfere with their attempts to memorize every nuance of "The Simpsons." What else do they have to do with their spare time?

In Policy and Extemp, where research is the backbone of the event, and it's pretty obvious from the get-go that endless research is de rigeur, there's probably not much of a problem understanding the need to do it (and, for that matter, the need to hit the road if you don't intend to do it; you won't last for more than a week or two, I would venture, if you're not up to the task). In LD I

think it may be a little harder for people to perceive how important it is to do research. Take the preemptive strike against nuclear proliferation resolution, for example. You could conceivably concentrate your energy entirely on the justice side of the argumentation, and never learn much more about the actual subject than the card you borrowed from a teammate on the effects of nuclear bombs. And this is despite the fact that the topic area is important, current, complex and fascinating. To wit, the US has been in what you might call the resolutional position since 1943, when the Soviet weapons program was inaugurated. Lines of argumentation for both sides of the rez come from Russia, Korea, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Israel, South Africa, Libya, China, Japan (yeah, I know, but there's solid content in their antinuke position), and maybe even France and England. But you've got to know their stories. You've got to find out about them and derive the lessons these stories tell. You've got to do the research. Or maybe not. Maybe writing a case that is 75% framework and 25% theory is good enough. That way you can avoid meaningful argumentation altogether about a subject that may be among the most important facing the contemporary world. Sounds like a good educational choice to me, coach! No wonder so many debaters don't want to be judged by seriously competent "lay" judges (i.e., lawyers, executives, federal court judges, etc.). Who, given the choice, would want to be evaluated by a seriously intelligent adjudicator on a subject of high interest when they are running a case bearing no relationship to that subject? Ah, digressive debate…

In PF, the situation is clearer. No research, no victory. The activity, at least at the moment, has no body of digression or theory or malarkey to hide the fact that you are presented with a proposition of current political merit that you must either negate or affirm, and you don't have much time to do it, so you'd better grab it by the horns and have at it or you're dead in the water. Not

arguing the resolution is not an option. And the resolution is announced one day, then maybe 28 days later you're debating it. Zip, zap, zoom. But the problem is, at least at the moment for some of us, that we are coming out of an LD mentality into the PF world. I believe (at least for now) that it makes some sense for students to first spend a year learning basic debate principles in the forge of LD before doing PF. That just seems to make sense to me. And of course, since PF is still in its youth, most of the coaches still come from some other background, probably more often LD than speech (but I detect changes in that). In any case, the PFers don't necessarily yet have the discipline or training or mindset to grasp the research needs of the activity until it's too late, after they've lost to someone who *has* gotten that discipline or training or mindset. As students, and as coaches, we need to learn how to do the research, both individually and systemically. That is, given the fact that the starting gun goes off and we're tossed into the thick of it almost immediately, while debating in the thick of last month's rez, we've got to master the balancing act and get the job done, and we've got to do it fast and efficiently.

Research, step one

In the above material I whined about the lack of research that is abroad in parts of the debate world. And as I said, the nature of research is different in the different debate activities. I won't address research issues in Policy, because I'm not in that particular business, but it is interesting to point out that, as I understand it, the origin of kritiks in Policy is tied into the inability of smaller programs to compete with the research-gathering abilities of large programs. That is, they arose as an attempt to level the playing field, as compared to their use in LD, where they arose as an attempt to disrupt the playing field. Interesting…

So we'll stick to LD and PF. These do require different approaches, but there are some overlaps. And the first step is, for the most part, entirely identical. So we will start at the beginning, in that overlap.

Knowledge on a subject does not accrue in a vacuum. I would like to be able to come up with some clever analogy, but the obvious are the best. To build a house, you need a foundation. A foundation is solid and firm and, in fact, can support all kinds of different houses. You can build a raised ranch, a colonial, a nifty little modernist number, whatever, on the exact same foundation. But without that foundation to provide support, you take your chances that the structure will be able to hold the building up. It certainly won't withstand a hurricane. Or to look at it another way, you can't improvise on a musical instrument until you know how to play it in the first place. For that matter, you can't do variations on a theme unless you know the theme. You gotta pay your dues if you wanna play the blues, Jack.

The foundation we are trying to build in PF and LD is that of general knowledge of political/social events around the world. We need to know the important things that are happening, especially those important things that revolve around human rights issues and civil rights issues, foreign policy, and law, to name some important categories that come to mind. These are regular areas of problem and conflict. There are others as well, and they are in the air of our culture. Hence they make their way regularly into resolutions.

To maintain the necessary foundation of general knowledge for PF and LD, I make two recommendations. Perhaps one of the two will suffice, but I suggest that they are complementary and that it is worth doing both of them. And I don't really know of any decent substitute for either of them.

First of all, you need to read the news. Every day. In a newspaper, either physically or online. And you need to read a newspaper worth reading. There are, sadly, few of these, and they don't include local Gannett papers (which I personally enjoy and read for local news and the comics, but that is the extent of their reach), *USA Today,* or even a number of second-tier major metropolitan papers. They also don't include news-related websites. The experience of getting news from a newspaper, even an online version of "Today's Paper," is different from getting news from a website simply devoted to breaking stories. The medium is the message, and you absorb differently from a newspaper than you do from a website. If nothing else, the serendipity of turning the pages or scrolling through a newspaper will bring to light different information than will surfing a web site. The hyperlink experience tends to be subjectively selective while the page-turning experience is objectively determined by the publisher of the paper (although still subject to the subjective randomization of your eye catching something interesting). In any case, when I say reading the newspaper every day, I mean that literally. And I recommend the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times.* I do not say that there are not other newspapers at that level, but I can comfortably point to these. I'm willing to add others, if someone wants to recommend them to me. Forgive my parochialness, but I am where I am…

Read the newspaper. Every day. And there is a way to do this. You must first read every headline on page one, and if the story is of interest, read all of that story that is on page one, and if you're still interested in that story, open the paper or follow the link and finish it. The reason stories are on page one is usually because they are important. There may be a human interest story of some sort there, more entertaining than important, and frankly, I enjoy these and do often read them through, but the knowledge bread and butter we are seeking for the debate foundation is elsewhere. Secondly, you must scan all the editorial and opinion pieces, reading fully any of those that provide commentary on issues of general concern. An article suggesting an exit strategy for Afghanistan, for instance, or the growing presence of China in Africa, would be more important than an article on the latest Sarah Palin gossip. That is, separate the wheat from the fun. You may like reading about Trainwreck Palin, but she's not essential for the knowledge foundation. Read her for entertainment, not debate. Thirdly, read the stuff in the paper that you like to read. Reward yourself. If you like sports, read the sports columns; if you like movies and theater, read the reviews. Read the music columns. Indulge. You've been a good little soldier, and now it's time for some R&R. Overall, your "required" newspaper experience should take no more than fifteen minutes to half an hour. You can take longer if you really want to go at it, and you can turn all the pages and just read whatever catches your fancy. I do this on days when I'm not rushed. Unfortunately, I don't have as many of those days as I would like.

The second recommendation for building up general knowledge is to listen to the news on NPR. Let's say a half hour to an hour a day, every day, of "Morning Edition" or "All Things Considered." It is almost impossible to come up with a good excuse not to listen to the morning show, even if it's just background noise. You might prefer one of those newfangled funky music groups

all the kids like nowadays (and while you're turning down that noise you can also get off my lawn), but don't tell me you can't find a few minutes in the day to have in-depth news analysis on in the background. I promise you, you will absorb some of it even if you're not listening. And occasionally, something will come up and you'll stop what you're doing and you'll pay attention, and you will actually get something out of it. And if you're a true right wingnut and believe that NPR exists entirely to convert the country to Communism, then listen to it the way a left wingnut might watch Fox news, just to get your dander up. In any case, there is no other radio station that can be recommended. Deal with it.

Between these two media, serious newspaper and serious radio, you will be on your way to building a solid foundation of knowledge of the world around you, so that you actually know what's going on in a lot of places, and can begin connecting the dots when the time comes to debate about it. And these recommendations aren't that big a time-suck either, because I'm saying a half hour tops on the paper, and radio mostly in the background while you're eating your morning gruel with a side of Spam. No debater, to my knowledge, has even been harmed by either of these media, except that time when Soddie hit O'C on the nose with a rolled-up Sunday want-ad section, but that had nothing to do with general knowledge, and the less said about it the better.

There is one more basic that needs to be added for the LDer. Let's assume that the LDer, whose topics change half as often as PFers', can spend a little less time on their current event studies. Let's posit that, in addition to the above, the PFer will read the occasional *Time* magazine or web aggregate news site. In contrast, in that time the LDer has a need to read up on a little basic philosophy of some sort or other. By basic I do not mean Plato-type elementary, but simply philo-

sophical or sociological works of a general nature that provide analysis of the literal values that LDers claim to uphold in rounds. That is, the reading of what reputable guides to the subject have said about justice, or morality, or the place of law in society. Books on ethics, or ethical practices. Studies of constitutional rights issues. Whatever. I'm not saying the LDer needs a steady diet of these, but one every now and then, every couple of months, say, plus another couple over the summer, is a good idea. Some of these books will be difficult, hard or impossible to read, and most will remain unfinished. But you'll begin to get a sense of them. You'll get, for instance, more sense of Foucault by reading him than reading a Wikipedia article about him. This is true of everyone. Since you've already evidenced an interest in this sort of stuff by signing up to do LD in the first place, taking it to the next level is not really that much of a stretch. Instead of working on your Nietzsche blocks, read Nietzsche; if nothing else, that reading will inspire you to block him left, right, sideways and down. Tackle Baudrillard: you might enjoy him. If you do, send me a postcard from Disneyland, the postcard with the picture of the parking lot. Anyhow, you get the drift. Reading the great thinkers, whoever they are, will help you understand their great thoughts, and could even encourage you to have a few great thoughts yourself.

So, the serious LD or PF debaters' life includes daily newspapers and in-depth radio news, and the LDer needs to also get involved with texts on ethics, philosophy and theory. All of this will provide the solid foundation on which to build when it comes time to research a specific issue, which we'll discuss next. And the worst-case scenario is, well, you'll be generally smarter as a result. In other words, there is no down side whatsoever.

Step two, topic-specific research

There are, in essence, two specifics in terms of the actual doing of the research. The first, and more important, is *what* to research, and the second, and more flexible, is *how* to research. Let's add to this the different needs of LD and PF, and try to keep it all straight and meaningful.

The first thing that is necessary regarding any resolution is understanding the context of that resolution. No topic exists in a vacuum. There is a history surrounding every topic, and often a precipitating event that has inspired the topic in the first place. For instance, a growing sense that the US might invade Iran can obviously be seen as the direct antecedent to a recent PF resolution, "The United States would be justified in pursuing military options against Iran," and the similar vintage LD "It is just for the United States to use military force to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by nations that pose a military threat." As a general rule, the PF resolutions are pretty specific, and it's easy to see what is being referenced. LD topics might be a little more general; at least at the moment, this is a function of how and when the topics are chosen by the NFL. I would imagine that this would remain true going forward. Let's start with a proposal for a PF plan for research.

PF

To debate a resolution, you need to understand the history of that resolution, i.e., the history to which the resolution refers. There is an inherent story behind any resolution, a history, a series of events that have led us to where we are today, which is presumably a point of having to deter-

mine how to go forward. Debating—presenting a position explaining how to go forward—requires an understanding of that history, of where we have been and how it has brought us to where we are, and often requires a presentation of that history. This is less germane to LD than to PF, which often requires some storytelling to set the stage. In the rez about military options against Iran, we explain that the history of US/Iran is this, and this is where we are now, and if we pursue military options, this will be the result. Other PF resolutions are comparable, as a general rule: where we've been and why it's gotten us to this point, the niceties of this point, and why a specific choice or situation is good or bad.

So what to research in this PF context is fairly straightforward. First, you need to research the history of the subject, because in your story/case, you are going to explain how that history is relevant, having brought us to this point. In the topic "That Russia has become a threat to U.S. interests," that history and this point are the end of it, because there is no request for action. In the "use of military options against Iran" type topic, you must then add material on the what-if side. But in both cases you start with the history. And you can take this to the bank: if one team sounds as if they really know the relevant history on a subject, and the other team sounds as if they really do not know the relevant history on a subject, the team that knows its stuff will win every single time, period, end of story. If you're talking about Iran, maybe you need to know the series of events from Shah to Ayatollah to Ahmadinejad. If someone mentions the embassy hostage crisis, which may or may not be irrelevant, you can't reply by asking "Say what?"

In other words, step one, research the background/history of the resolution.

The next part of your case is the explanation of the present situation, i.e., the context of the topic. There is probably going to be a specific issue here. And it's probably going to tie into your recommended plan of action, if the resolution is asking for one. In the Iran rez, you would need to know what, exactly, is happening now between the US and Iran. In the Russia topic, you would need to know what, exactly, is happening in Russia now that might threaten US interests. Here you're going to look into the latest events relevant to the area you're researching, something as clear as "Iran nuclear threat" or "Iran threat to US" or something like that, or in the Russia topic, you're going to focus in on areas where you think the threat might be, like economics or military or whatever, and look up "Russia economic expansion" or "Russia military threat," or whatever other angles you think might be promising.

Step two, therefore, is context, researching the specifics of the resolution at the present historical moment. If the resolution offers wording to narrow the research, so much the better, but don't count on it. Try different areas; you'll find the one that yields the best results.

The final part of your case is making it convincing. Why do I believe you, aside from the fact that you've got a lot of facts at your fingertips? Here I think you need to go beyond those facts to comparable situations, and show why the action or analysis you're proposing is the correct action/analysis, by showing how other situations have been similar. When and where has the US, or any other country, taken military action in a similar situation to that present day Iran/US situation? How has that worked out? Obviously Iraq is a perfect model of comparison, but perhaps other historical examples have worked out better. Whichever. Proposing your case's conclusion in the light of comparable situations is yet another level of knowledge that will make your posi-

tion all that much more convincing, and make you sound all that much more knowledgeable. Similarly, you might find experts who agree with your proposal/analysis, backing you up with their authority.

Step three, therefore, is to research comparable situations and accepted authorities to support your conclusion.

LD

LD, which is usually looking for a transcendent justification for action in general rather than at options in a specific situation, requires a different approach from PF. The sheer lack of attempting to achieve a value inherently defines the concerns of PF differently. But don't take the differences I'm suggesting between PF and LD too seriously. I don't mean to imply that they always require completely different approaches to research. Much of the approach is the always same, or interchangeable, and a specific topic in one might very much require exactly the sort of research I've recommended for the other. But I do feel that the overall approaches will be different, and that the differences are enough for a separation of the two in this essay.

LD asks if certain actions are right or wrong. And usually those actions can be boiled down to applications in a variety of situations. So while PF asks if we should engage Iran militarily, a question to which a variety of political, military or philosophical answers could be provided, LD will ask about preemptive strikes in general. The PF researcher will look specifically at Iran and the US and what is happening between the two, and at whatever else would affect a Commander-

in-Chief's decision to engage. The LD researcher would look both at the concept of preemption and at the possible examples, including Iran. The LDer wants a viable blueprint or action plan for all examples of the given situation; the PFer is looking only at the given situation (but will, of course, compare other meaningful examples). The distinction is thin, but real. And it should guide the thinking of the researcher.

Step one in the LD research process is exactly the same as in PF, which is to learn the broad historical story behind the resolution. As in PF, the more you know, the better off you are. Sticking to the example we've been using, the preemptive use of military force when enemy nations are planning to acquire nuclear weapons, at the very least we would need to research preemptive strikes so that we can analyze them and be able to use them as examples, and we would need to research nations' acquiring nuclear weapons, since there's a history of nations throughout the world either acquiring them or not, with the US's resulting reaction to those acquisitions, and we would need to research nuclear weapons, so we know what's different about them from conventional weapons.

Step two is where things start getting different. In LD, we now have to take a step sideways. Having studied the history, we need to draw lessons from that history, to find the similarities and differences in order to detect patterns of practical behavior. That is, we need to derive from the events a set of circumstances to which we can apply principles of action. In this case, we look at all the preemptive strike examples we can find. Why did they take place? What happened when they took place? Can we detect patterns? Then, with these thoughts, we need to research the concept of preemptive strike removed from practice. Are there theories of preemptive strike? Gener-

ally accepted universal practices? Some great philosopher who made his fame and fortune in the preemptive strike business? When we had a "plea bargaining in exchange for testimony is unjust" resolution, we would first try to find some examples of where this actual might have happened (organized crime, Enron oil spill, terrorists), and then step back and look at what we could distil from the examples about the process, and then we would look at the distillations removed from the specific examples.

So the second step is to distil the historical, real, examples down to patterns and theories and general practices, and then to research those patterns and theories and general practices. In addition to enlightening us on the specific issue at hand, we will begin to collect a broad understanding of various areas in general. There are plenty of legal/constitutional resolutions, for instance, and as we look at each one, we are putting together pieces of a broader understanding of law for the future. Or with a combination of other topics like Jan-Feb we're building up a sense of "just war" versus realpolitik. We go from specifics to generalities, and back again whenever we need it.

Step three: Doing it

The mechanics of research have changed dramatically in the last few years, and have changed even more dramatically since my own short pre-computer debating career, and maybe it's safe to say that the mechanics of research will continue to change rapidly in the future. Access to research may change too. It is not inconceivable that all tournaments will at some future date not

only allow computers in rounds but will allow those computers to connect to whatever they want to connect to (short of cheating). Or maybe my handheld device will do what I need to do. Whatever. The point is, some things will change, but some things will remain the same. I'll try to stick to generalities, allowing you to tailor them to the specifics of your own situation, team size, etc. I also won't be explaining things like Boolean logic and how to do better Google searches: they should teach you that in school (and they usually do). We're after bigger game here.

First of all, if possible, research should be a team effort. Obviously much research can be done on one's own, but if one does have a team, the sharing of research is clearly beneficial to everyone. Just because you work late at night digging on your PC doesn't mean you can't pass along what you find to your teammates on the next day. Setting up a process for the interchange of data is important. Create shared online folders, perhaps, in Dropbox, for example. Or figure out a way to pass along printed copies of material (which does seem to waste a lot of paper in this day and age, though). Whatever. And note that holding on to the research past the expiration date of a resolution is also a good idea. The same ideas will come back to haunt you in the future. For instance, the explanation of retributive justice someone uncovered for the plea bargaining topic may be just as useful for the hate crimes topic…

Starting out, either alone or as a group, presupposes an elementary understanding of the subject area. That is, we presume that the first thing people will do is individually get their bearings overall: if the topic is Russia as a threat, in other words, you would obviously begin by some general and personal research into recent Russian history. This was the first step outlined for both LD and PF. Before you can do deep-level research, you first have to absorb the basics of the

subject area. Spend an hour or so on the computer reading through elementary resources like encyclopedias. Click around on various links and go where it takes you. This will provide a starting point.

Next, decide what, exactly, you are going to research in depth. If you're doing it as a team project, work together to make a list; if it's just you, a list is still a good idea. With the team, different people could be assigned different areas. This is especially important if you're planning on physically attacking a library, which is a very good idea especially early in a topic's life. Everybody bumping into one another in the same place looking for the same things doesn't make a lot of sense. Let's say you're researching the US preemptively striking against pre-nuclear enemies; you might decide to research hegemony/superpower, international law, geopolitical justice (whatever that is), nuclear proliferation, nuclear v. conventional warfare, just war, preemptive strikes, and analysis of the nuclear fraternity nations vis-à-vis the US. That's a good start. Most topics will have similarly broad areas (as discussed above in the what-to-research section).

Look for two different things in your research: look for facts, and look for meaningful opinions. People are always looking for warrants in evidence. A fact is a pretty good warrant: 82% of the population of a country are starving to death would be a convincing warrant for establishing a program to feed them. Meaningful opinions will be materials where someone else has marshaled some facts/warrants and drawn their own conclusions. Given that, presumably, those opiners are looking roughly at the same facts at which you are looking, you may find good arguments in what they are saying beyond simply cutting a card. That is, if a former Secretary of State outlines a rational approach to dealing with preemptive strikes and, using evidence and historical analy-

sis, makes a good case for or against, what is stopping you from making that same argument in your case? The idea of doing research to find opinions that can be transmuted into one's own arguments is often overlooked in researching. It's not just about collecting information for cards or warrants. It's about studying the arguments people in the field are making. Most likely the arguments people in the field are making are the ones you should be running, if you really want to address a resolution in a meaningful way. If you find that you are leaning toward an argument no one else in a position of rational authority ever seems to be making (e.g., the capitalism is inherently evil therefore all US actions are inherently evil), then you might want to reconsider your position.

When collecting evidence, look to the credentials of the source. Few debaters seem to bother to warrant the authority of their sources. That is, they simply throw out some name, followed by a quote. What is that name's claim to authority? If I don't know that (and you don't know that), I have to wonder how much weight should be given to that quotation. If a former President of the General Assembly of the UN makes a claim, and your Uncle Newt the one-armed barber from Cleveland makes a counterclaim, how do I evaluate those claims if I don't have a sense of the authority of the claimants? This is something that always bothers me. A random quote by some random person has virtually no weight, but no one in rounds seems to care. If you can explain to me why your validating your sources' authority won't be in your favor if your opponent is not validating his or her sources, go for it! I've been waiting for years to hear it.

So what about your actual sources, after you type some germane phrase into your Google search box? I'll just throw out a bunch of possibilities, and you can choose among them however it

makes sense for that particular topic. Some of this is library-based, some if it is internet-based. Other approaches will be invented the minute I finish writing this, which means they're too new for me to know about. But the drift should be clear.

- **General research guides.** Encyclopedias, reference texts on law or government or politics or whatever.
- **Books on the subject.** Short of actually reading the complete text of a book (which is theoretically your goal with all important sources, but not necessarily always an achievable one), read the introduction and the first and last chapter, which usually will give you an author's theme/hypothesis. Keep in mind that books are sorted by categories in library card catalogs. Lots of books are available online as well, or at least lots of introductions and beginnings, which may be more useful than you think. Use various sites' look-inside-the-book feature. If you're literally holding a book in your hand, look at the index for specific coverage of the topic you're researching, and then consult relevant sections within the text.
- **Journal articles on the subject.** There are some serious (and costly) online journal search tools. If you have access to these tools, the better for you. If you don't, then consult a list of magazines such as A&L Daily's, and try the likely candidates there. Most magazines do keep some sort of archive.
- **Supreme court cases.** Opinions—including dissents—from the justices, after you sweep away the specifics, always have bodies of theory to explain the decisions. Look for them on important cases. In other words, do more than just find out that such and such a court case is relevant: read the actual opinions. There can be some real meat there.

- **Philosophy.** If you're drawing on a particular philosopher, reacquaint yourself with the source material. Don't just say "social contract," but go back and read the handful of pages that are relevant in Locke or Rousseau or whoever so that you're truly familiar with the concepts. Sometimes looking at something afresh that you think you know inside and out will lead to new insights. If you're drawing on a new philosopher, take your time to understand the work and make sure you're using it correctly. Read *about* the philosopher as well as within the philosopher. It might help.

From this point on, it's mostly a matter of organizing and sorting the material. Create topic folders, either real or virtual, with each piece of evidence (or cutting, or article, or whatever you're storing) clearly indicated without having to spend a lot of time sorting through it. Quick access is very useful if you're actually in a round, and need to pull a card of some sort. (LDers claim that their evidence is the typing they did of something in their case; one snickers at the thought.)

And that's about that. There are certainly other approaches to research, and no doubt other more specific tips and hints, but this is at least a start.