IMPROVING YOUR RESEARCH SKILLS

by
Dr. David M. Cheshier

The role of evidence in policy debate is often criticized as having overtaken oral and critical thinking skills development, and there is some truth in the complaint. It does sometimes seem as if the activity has conflated *evidence* for *argument*, when the two are importantly distinct. Our collective reliance on quoted materials is sometimes a basis for ridicule — from judges who wish students would break free of their files to advance intuitive and logical arguments in debates, and from coaches who despair about the educational value to be derived from digging through thousands of student-prepared files.

And yet, the research component of policy debating produces essential benefits not only for the activity as a whole, but also for students who learn to produce high quality evidence for their claims. Reliance on quoted experts, despite its obvious shortcomings, does anchor policy controversies in the actual literatures of lived disagreement. And despite the prevalence of the absurd myth that "one can find a card to say anything," advocacy is spared from even more outlandish claims than we hear by the requirement that significant claims be backed by authoritative evidence.

Of course there are also the simple but extraordinary benefits that accrue to students who dive into complex literatures and gain confidence in their ability to converse on demanding and jargon-laden questions. Students who do serious research are less likely to be silenced by arbitrary claims of authority and expertise, not an unimportant outcome given the number of so-called experts who daily demand our acquiescence. And even were actual debates less dominated by card reading,

it's still clear that students who have mastered the difficult literatures will fare better competitively than those who have not, and this is as it should be.

That policy debate is organized around the production and use of evidence therefore produces important consequences, along with the benefits. Our reliance on evidence has thus generated a long history of concerns, ranging from the popular complaints about the risks of evidence fabrication popular in the 1970's, to the rich-poor concerns emphasized in the 1980's, to concerns about the proliferation of prepared and summer materials in the 1990's, to today's concerns about our near obsessive reliance on up-to-the-minute database materials. Still, researching is a vital precondition for higher order critical thinking skills, and students who succeed at it develop inspiring levels of expertise.

Despite all this, students struggle. Research is hard work, and for those whose attractions to policy debate centered on travel and face-to-face arguing, the prospects of blindingly dull hours at the computer or in the library are less than inspiring. Perhaps for this reason many coaches do not even bother to ask their beginners to do original research — though they often justify such a choice on the grounds that there's just too much else to learn, surely the tedium of research plays a role in their thinking.

And research can be hard to teach — different schools have such different access to information materials, despite the Web, that generalized instruction often fails. Students sometimes struggle to pick up research skills, unlike speaking and arguing skills which they seem to absorb more easily. But this is so because we do not regularly provide students with organized feedback on the quality of their research, in the same way debaters receive arguing feedback at the end of every debate. And so students quickly gravitate to the easier-to-research issues, like Bush/politics and the state of the economy, where evidence falls off every page of Lexis-Nexus coverage.

In the rest of this essay I want to offer some very practical advice about how debaters can improve their research. In talking with students over the years, I've encountered a series of very common and understandable obstacles that stymie success. Here I present some of the most common, and offer pretty basic advice for how these problems can be overcome — there's no rocket science in what follows, just some lessons you may not have considered in your own struggle to cut better cards.

My problem is…..

Doing research bores me, and I find I quickly lose focus. Don't be embarrassed if this is your major problem, because it's more common than you think. And sometimes doing research is boring — one often encounters material that isn't exactly geared to the assignment, and it can be a drain to slog through a full book that only yields five usable quotations.

There are many ways to work through this problem, and over time you'll find yourself intellectually energized by research. In fact, like many other debaters, you may end up concluding that the search for good evidence and the quest to get your brain around tough intellectual literatures is actually the best part about policy debate. In the meantime, consider these tips: (1) *Pick an argument that interests you*. There is always, it seems, an infinite amount of potentially productive work to be done. Given that, pick an argument you think will prove interesting given your passions — like philosophy? Write a kritik. A political junkie? Fine, work on Bush. Want to be a doctor? Read up on the latest drug therapies for mental illness. Want to be a millionaire by the age of 29? OK,

then, get started by reading the business section of the newspaper every day, and work on the major economic positions. (2) *Collaborate* with someone you like working with, who won't just distract you. Having a research partner works for the same reason having an "exercise buddy" does — when the temptation to quit for the day strikes, you can keep each other focused and motivated. And when two are working together, the work goes faster. (3) *Work in short intense doses*. It's easier to stay focused for thirty or forty minutes than to plan to work for ten hours straight. Work for 45 minutes, and then take a quick break to recharge. Or alternate between reading and processing evidence. (4) *Work in a distraction-free environment*. Let's face it: unless you are a cyborg, it is simply impossible to fully concentrate on high-level research while trying to watch television. Some work more easily with music on, while others are distracted by it. Which group are you in? Find a quiet place to organize your research where you won't be constantly interrupted. (5) *Start out with the obviously more productive sources*, and read those while your energy is high. Then move to harder material. Finding a lot of cards right away will energize you, and also more quickly familiarize you with the range of issues. By the time you get to the more dense material, you'll have a better sense of what needs to be carefully read and what can be skimmed. (6) *Set benchmarks* for yourself. Evidence quality matters a lot more than evidence quantity, but if setting the goal that "by the end of today I'll have cut 150 cards" helps you stay focused, then set it. Create a contest with a friend who is also researching for who can find the "sweetest card" over the day's work. Yes, it sounds a little foolish. But such motivational tactics can help when your energy flags.

I'm a slow reader, which means I don't end up finding much evidence despite all the time I spend doing research. This is another very common problem, and it can also seem a little humiliating to admit it. But who can blame a student for feeling frustrated when he or she spends eight hours working attentively, only to have made it through twenty pages of text?

To some extent, the slow reading problem is a function of inexperience with the topic-specific literature. It is natural to speed up one's ability to cognitively follow hard material as the year goes by. Experience counts in another way — reading more quickly is partly a function of one's effort and attention. If you work to improve your reading speed, and concentrate on it, you will succeed in jumping your rate of review.

The magazine *Business 2.0* ran a short story on speed reading courses in its April 2002 issue — you know, those classes that supposedly teach someone to read a book in a half hour (the actual land speed record for fast reading is 110,000 words per minute). One of their reporters took a class with Diane Alexander, the president of a consulting firm called MindWorks. The reporter discovered these interesting facts: The average American reader averages about 200 words per minute, which is about par for a typical fourth grader. And of direct relevance to debaters, "The trick to speed reading is to run your fingers along the page. Reading isn't about intelligence; it's just hand-eye coordination." That sounds a little junior high, doesn't it? But it actually works. I saw another news account that reviewed more than 1000 of these speed reading courses. The one trick they found that pretty much everyone taught is the "follow with your finger" rule. The *Business 2.0* reporter discovered her speed and comprehension both jumped when she ran her finger down the page: "To prove the point, Diane has us read for speed only, sans finger. My eyes are darting all

over the place. I'm at 800 wpm but 55 percent comprehension. Then she has us run our fingers underneath the lines of text. Though I don't think I've gotten much out of it, I guess at the answers to questions and come up with 90 percent comprehension at 700 wpm." Try it for yourself.

I've heard other suggestions for increasing reading speed. It seems to me that each comes with a potential set of drawbacks, so decide carefully what works for you: (1) Some recommend that instead of getting bogged down in the thought process of where to begin and end bracketing, you can speed your reading by simply *carding whole paragraphs* that you know contain useful information. The tactic is fairly safe, since the paragraph, if well written, usually provides a minimal baseline context. (2) *Don't underline as you go* — you'll want to do that later anyway, when you brief, and it takes a long time to underline. (By the way, this is a tip which may help for debate but hurt in other contexts. Education scholars often recommend underlining when you are reading for detailed mastery, as in when you are studying for a test.) (3) *Read* only until you've identified a paragraph's *thesis sentence*. If the thesis is useful to your debate work, keep reading. If not (for example, if the paragraph is making a purely factual or historical point unlikely to be useful), move on. (4) *Practice* reading faster. Often the problem is just that you're prone to daydreaming, where you stare at the same page for an hour. Concentration and practice can get you over this common problem. (5) *Learn how to skim* extraneous chapters. Historical, tangential, irrelevant case study chapters may be safely skippable. Obviously one must be careful, and if you have the luxury of studying every word, then do so. But the skill of skimming can be very useful. (6) *Start by reading the introduction and conclusion*. Those passages will lay out the essay's basic architecture, and if you have that in mind, you'll move more efficiently through the body. (7) Sometimes it is useful to *start with a good secondary source*. This tip will horrify those who are dedicated to having students start with primary sources and with fresh eyes. But if you're just bogged down, a secondary source can, again, give you a useful idea of the bigger picture. (8) *Break long essays into manageable chunks* of material. (9) *Minimize the amount of reading you do from the computer screen*. Reading from a monitor strain the eyes can be slower unless you're using the computer to help you process at the same time. And it can be easier to lose one's place on the screen than if you have hard copy in front of you.

I can't seem to find a lot of material when I am getting started. Sometimes this complaint is frivolous, since what it really means is the debater failed to find dynamite evidence on Lexis-Nexus. Still, it can be a serious problem, too. Some suggestions: (1) *Think* systematically from the start *about every possible major source of evidence*, and whether it is likely to cover your topic: law reviews, newspapers, government documents, books, academic journals, the radical press, web pages. Consider them all, and make sure your citation strategies are covering everything. (2) If you are working in a particular library's databases, *consider accessing other institutional sources online* as a way to broaden your worldview. Many card catalogs are available to anyone who wishes to log on. And think about using general search terms within the major bookselling databases, such as the one run by Amazon.com. (3) *Broaden your search* bit by bit to accumulate a manageable amount of information. If the search retrieves hundreds of articles, you have several options. You may simply need to read through all of them, because if the topic is broad you'll just have a lot of material

to master. Or, scroll down to the first major and obviously useful source. Start reading that article, but with an eye toward refining your search terms – what is the major court case in the area? What are the terms of art used by experts in the field? (4) If you hear other students who seem to have already written the file, *copy* down their *citations*, and use that as a starting point. And track footnotes in the material you're reading.

It is vital to use all the available sources. For example, one resource called the *Alternative Press Index* covers journals not in the mainstream, and thus unlikely to appear in ProQuest or Lexis. Think about tracking down book reviews for the major books you're covering. One phenomenal online resource is the *Social Science Citation Index*, which is available at nearly every major research university in the world. The SSCI includes a feature which allows a user to enter an author's name; once carried out, the search retrieves the citation of every major publication written *since then* which footnotes the original. You'll sometimes find that even apparently similar indexes retrieve very different findings, given the journals they cover.

One common possibility is that a reasonable search in a database like Lexis-Nexus is returning fewer results than it should because of how the search is configured. In LN Universe, which is increasingly available in university and high school libraries, the very primitive (and recently retooled) search engine that functions as the default usually only carries out your search within the first paragraph or headline in the articles. Simply using the "Guided Search" screen and specifying that you want Universe to carry out your search in the full text can generate results more familiar to those used to using the full access database available to lawyers.

It's also a good idea to use the best library in your area as a resource for brainstorming. When you take a specific book's call number to the bookshelves, look in the neighborhood for other related books. The Dewey decimal system is a subject system, and so like books are shelved together – take advantage of that to discover books you might not have known about.

I can't figure out how to calibrate my searching. It seems like I either find way too much ("your search has been truncated because it is likely to return more than 1000 documents") or nothing. This is a related problem, and the solutions are very similar. The trick is to discover the search terms that will get you to the important literature without retrieving too much. Sometimes there's no problem with getting a lot of hits — maybe you've just hit a very mammoth literature and it's time to dive in. Or, at a minimum, a large search can then be narrowed once you acquire a better sense of what matters. Again, (1) read the major and wonderfully well connected essays with an eye to *generating more precise search terms*. (2) It also helps to *keep track of your searches*, so you have a record of what worked and what came up empty — there's no reason to reinvent the wheel a month from now when you need to update your early season efforts. (3) *Get a handle on basic Boolean logic* as a strategy for narrowing. Is your search for evidence on "mental health parity" retrieving articles about parity as it relates to professional baseball salaries? Then consider the search "parity and not baseball." In Lexis-Nexus consider search limiters, such as the option to search for "George Bush w/20 political capital," which instructs the computer only to return articles where those two phrases are within twenty words of each other. (4) If you aren't finding much of anything, *consider performing a very basic Google or Altavista search* — both of those online search engines will retrieve large numbers of web sites, and those

long retrievals may help you get started. (5) Once you seem to have hit the jackpot, *refine your search* around that outcome. For example, do a follow-up search specific to the author who wrote the great evidence you've just discovered. (6) Ask for help. A librarian, fellow debater, coach, or parent may help you think about the topic in a different way, and by use of different terms. That can help in refining likely search terms.

I don't know how to deal with very complicated theoretical material –– I just don't know how to get good cards out of Foucault, or Deleuze, and the other kritikal literatures. Ah, a tough one. It truly can be difficult sometimes to find policy-related evidence in sources which are resolutely not concerned about the policy context. What is one to do?

Some starting suggestions: (1) Think about the specific uses to which each paragraph might be best put. That is, as you read difficult material you should *perform a kind of sentence-by-sentence test*: "Can I think of a way to use this in an actual debate?" In this case, tagging evidence along the way may be productive and efficiency-enhancing. (2) *Start with secondary sources*. Sometimes the greatest difficulty is simply knowing what the terminology refers to, and getting a bigger sense of where the debate fault lines exist in the literature. Secondary sources — major companion books (like the *Cambridge Companion* series or similar ones published by Routledge and Blackwell), encyclopedias, general websites, review essays, and so on — can fill in the holes and start you on your way. An especially useful series is Blackwell's, which includes a set of volumes with the generic title (fill in the name – Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze) "____ and the Political." (3) *Be more open than usual to material that originally seems tangential*. To take one example: Michel Foucault often wrote his most piercing philosophical accounts through the vehicle of history. His writing is thus historically engaging but not self-evidently relevant to contemporary concerns. And yet the historical anecdotes often track very precisely to current controversies, and Foucault picked them for that very reason. (4) When encountering unfamiliar philosophical texts, *consider starting by overcutting*. When in doubt, mark it. You can always weed out extraneous or duplicative evidence later on. (5) From the beginning, *brainstorm the obvious argument categories*: link, implications, permutations and permutation responses, evidence for and against alternatives. With those categories in mind, you're more likely to make important connections to actual debates along the way. (6) Be especially mindful to *copy citations for the outstanding critique cards* you hear others read. (7) *Keep a dictionary nearby* — it can really help.

How am I supposed to know what to cut when I haven't yet figured out what the argument says in the first place? There is a certain circularity to the research process. One has to understand what she is looking for before she knows what to mark. And yet how is one to understand a position before he's cut any cards on it? The answer, of course, is to think through the argument along the way so that you'll quickly gain a mastery of the material and its potential relevance to actual debates. Here are some ideas to facilitate the process: (1) Before you read, try to *think through the argument's basic "story."* If you wish to write a disadvantage, you know it must have an impact, and that it must link to the affirmative policy. So, what link seems most likely given what you know about the world? What kind of scholars are likely to be the most attentive to such an issue? Sketch the story out, in outline form if that helps, on a piece of paper. Keep notes close at hand so the overall structure will stay in your mind. Of course the "story" will change along

the way — you'll encounter nuances you didn't understand before, and the framework will undergo modification. But at every point along the way, you'll have a basic idea of what you need and want to find. (2) *Talk to others on your team about the argument* as it's unfolding. Or put it in writing, a process which forces you to clarify your thinking. For college students taking a seminar with me, I usually recommend they read a wonderful writing guide, *The Writing of Economics*, by D. McCloskey. One of McCloskey's points there has relevance to the issue of sorting out one's thinking: "You do not learn the details of an argument until writing it in detail, and in writing the details you uncover flaws in the fundamentals… Good writers… often find out that what looked persuasive when floating vaguely in the mind looks foolish when moored to the page. Better, they find truths they didn't know they had. They sharpen their fuzzy notions(s)…" (1987, pgs. 4-5). Talking through the position with colleagues or a coach works the same way — in verbalizing your idea, weaknesses will quickly become apparent, and you can focus your energies on dealing with those problems. (3) In the early stages, *process as you go*. Although it seems more efficient to hold off on cutting, taping, and labeling until after all the quotes have been marked, at the early stages it actually helps to process frequently, even every day. Processing along the way will give you a very specific ongoing sense of how the project is coming along. If you don't have any link evidence, you'll quickly be in a position to assess your research priorities, for example. (4) Be willing to *use secondary sources* to orient you to major literatures. Encyclopedia entries and "___ for Dummies" books can be invaluable when you are simply trying to figure out the jargon that goes along with a position.

It seems like it takes me forever to process and brief the evidence I find. One could write much more extensively on the basic methods for processing evidence, converting it into an organized and useful form, but here are some starting places: (1) Consider creating a *filing matrix*, a code into which every card can be categorized. Different students use a matrix differently. Some create a combination letter/number system, where, for example, "A15" is the 15th discrete link argument and where "D05" represents cards answering the perception turn. Once you have the basic system in place, every new card can be coded along the way, which makes filing easier. Others do the same thing, only in a less formal way. They might process evidence every day and then sort cards into envelopes reflecting major filing categories. (2) *Think about where your own inefficiencies are*. How often does your system for researching require you to read the very same card over and over? If you read it on first encounter, and then again to file, and then again to sub-divide, and then again to brief, and then again to highlight, is this the most efficient use of your time? (3) *Write the page number* of the original *in the margin* as you mark. That way you don't have to note it again in the citation when you are further along in evidence processing. (4) As you are marking evidence, consider putting a *star* or some other mark you'll understand next to *evidence you'll want to use in a front line shell*. (5) If you are working *with online sources, think about processing right on the computer screen*. The editing and copy functions can really speed up your work, and you'll waste a lot less paper when the time comes to print. And not least important, (6) if you have a massive amount of infor-

mation to organize and brief, *get help*!

Is "tagging" evidence as I read a good idea or not? By "tagging" I simply mean to refer to the task of creating the label for the card you will use to introduce it in the debate, and the issue here is whether you should invent that label as you're reading for the first time. The answer, in my opinion? It depends. Early in the process, when you need to stay focused on how specific pieces of evidence will actually be used in debates, putting a short label on the card as you read can be useful. Maybe the evidence is not obviously connected to your argument — in that case putting an argument tag on the card can trigger your memory later in the process (this is especially true when you're dealing with difficult philosophical content, where the flow of the overall position may be lost to you later).

There are downsides to early evidence tagging, though. A good tagline connects the particular claim or supporting material in the card to your broader overall debate position. This fact means it may be unproductive to tag evidence at a time when you are still oblivious to the overall position context and to the other cards which will appear on the same brief.

Some Final Suggestions

The experience that makes one an outstanding researcher takes time to accumulate. With each assignment you'll pick up a new insight, new ideas for the future, and the more you read, the more you'll find connections to other vital positions on which you need evidence.

Here are some final, overall tips which I think can be especially helpful regardless of your experience:

Pair up with someone more experienced than you at research, and learn what s/he does. Often the best way to learn is by collaborating with someone who knows more about research than you. Look at the process she or he follows. It can sometimes be easier to see inefficiencies in others than in ourselves.

Keep a notebook. This is vital — keep a bound notebook (loose pages are bad) in which you keep a record of citations to be tracked down, cites from teams you debate or watch, and a record of what searches you've already pursued.

Keep something to read/research nearby at all times. Research can be productively done in all kinds of settings. You'll be surprised at how much marking you can get done in ten minute intervals, while you're just waiting for something better to come along.

Track down other debaters' good research. Debate is col-laborative – if a competitor is reading amazing evidence, then copy down the citation and research it yourself.

Get the most out of prepared materials, by making them your own. Among certain national elite debaters, there is a kind of arrogance about handbooks. Students who don't give a moment's hesitation to picking up and reading a bad summer workshop file turn their noses up at thinking to read evidence from a handbook. But that's foolish, since some of the most brilliant debate minds in the nation produce handbook evidence. Of course, as with all prepared and inherited materials, one should recut originals to the extent possible, and reorganize the overall material so the final argument product is distinctively yours. Re-briefing summer and handbook files will help you better understand what kind of evidence ends up mattering most.

Read a general newspaper every day if possible. The major databases are wonderful, and in some respects, we can't do without them. But a major shortcoming of databases like Lexis-Nexus is that to use them well one has to know going in what to look for. That is, the kind of idiosyncratic connections one might make by seeing a random newspaper article on some political topic are less likely when the search narrows out the extraneous from the beginning. Reading a major newspaper, browsing in bookstores in general topics for new related books, and regularly perusing the new book shelving at your local library is a good way to broaden your intellectual horizons — and the process will spur you to greater argumentative creativity.

Develop tricks to sustain your attention and focus. There are times when research bogs down for even the most dedicated researcher. Think about what distracts you, and what motivates you too. If you have a short attention span, take frequent breaks. If you lose motivation, then make card cutting a game. Even apparently foolish tricks (like the card quotas and card-cutting contests I mentioned earlier) can get you through tough times.

Finally, *keep working at it*. The more you read, the better your understanding of the topic will be, and the more successful you'll be in debates. Reading will become more fun. The more you read, the better researcher and thinker you'll become — and that, after all, is the whole reason for debating.

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SOCIETE' DE 300

(continued from October, 2002 Rostrum)

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