Research: Your Best Friend and Your Worst Enemy

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Abstract: Debate is a game of research. The more you know about a given topic, the better prepared you will be going into tournaments. However, it is often overlooked, under-utilized, or done inefficiently. This article will teach you how to find better articles, as well as how to read articles in a manner that will increase your understanding of argument structure. Having a well-founded knowledge of these things will significantly enhance your ability to answer arguments, and in turn, make it much easier for you to win debates.

Why Should You Research?

One of the most undervalued skills in debate is the ability to effectively research. Research is undoubtedly one of the most important things you can do to prepare for tournaments. The debates that play out in the literature are very similar to debates that play out in rounds. This means that you should be thinking of topic literature as a debate tournament. The best authors on the topic would, in this analogy, be the debaters that make it to the late elimination rounds.

The reason why it's important to think about the literature like this is because you need to be reading articles in the topic literature just like you would survey your opponent at a tournament. You need to know what points the author is making, and you need to be able to prepare for that.

As you will find through research, the best articles in the topic literature may even represent a round in and of themselves. The authors will explain a position that they defend, they will discuss objections to that position, and then they will rebut those objections. Every debate that takes place within scholarly literature is similar to debates that take place in tournaments.

Moreover, research is crucial so that you know what the arguments on the topic are, and not just the best arguments. You won't always be debating people making the best arguments on the topic, so you need to be prepared to answer the bad arguments, as well. If you have read the literature, you will know what the bad arguments are, and what their shortcomings are.

The Process of Researching

The first step in researching is to find contextual definitions of every word and phrase in the topic. This will help define the conflict scenario in the topic. But more than understanding the phrases in the topic, you want to understand how those phrases are described in the literature. You want to move beyond thinking about individual arguments, and begin thinking about the broader issues that are associated with the topic you are debating.

Next, you want to read for general information. Every good LDer should be a great extemper, as well, in that you need to know current events, controversies, and specific issues as they relate to the topic. If you know these in and out, you will be able to use them as examples for your arguments. Other purposes that knowing this information has to include being able to talk about the links in your arguments in a very specific manner, which increases your credibility and makes your arguments much stronger.

The third step is to do a survey of the literature. You need to think about the topic literature as representing the universe of arguments and articles on a topic. There is an epicenter, and that epicenter represents the most common arguments on the topic. The idea behind this is that there is a center to the topic, these are the most common arguments, and as you span out, you will find more obscure, but still related, arguments at the margin of the topic literature. By being able to identify where these arguments fall on the sphere of arguments within the topic, you will also be able to identify the theoretical legitimacy of those arguments.

Then you should begin to categorize your arguments and authors. This categorization is key because it will increase your efficiency as a researcher by giving you topic areas within the topic toward which you can focus your research.

Before you begin pulling evidence for your positions, you want to cut objections to those arguments. The best way to debate or write a case is to anticipate the strongest possible objection to your side, and defeat it directly. You cannot be the best debater if you don't know what the strongest objections to your position are and prepare to defeat them. Once you find the best objections to your argument, then begin to cut the argument that you plan on making. If the argument you want to make isn't capable of defeating the strongest objection, then do not waste your time on it. If you haven't first categorized your arguments, however, you won't know which arguments are capable of being made, and which arguments are wastes of time.

Throughout the researching process, you always want to be reactive. Researching isn't something you do once, and then stick with that research the rest of the topic. If you want to be good at researching and at debating, you have to continue to research throughout the entire topic, and this requires researching as you hear arguments being made that you hadn't prepared for.

After this, start coming up with some search terms that you can plug into Google or other databases that you use to research. If you want to find a specific argument, type into Google the ideal tag for that argument. What this means is that you think about what you want your evidence to say, and then you think about what tag line you would use for that piece of evidence. If your specific search doesn't work, begin to get increasingly broader. You can also create synonyms for the words that you are trying to search to see if those bring up any hits.

How to Read Articles

When you are reading articles that you have found, there are six things that you want to ask yourself.

First, who is the author, and what is the date that the article was written? Just because an article is more recent, doesn't necessarily make it a better argument. However, if your argument relies on specific, current situations, the more recent your article is, the better because it will more accurately identify causality.

Second, you want to think about the context of the article. What is the atmosphere in which the author is writing? Is it a historical situation, or a social situation? Every author writes from some context, and if you can identify what that context is, you can more appropriately and effectively use their argument.

Third, you want to know what the thesis of the article is. In almost every well-written article, authors are going to say that their central point is X or that they will argue and defend a certain claim. Any time an author introduces personal pronouns, you should have an indication that they are about to tell you what their thesis is.

Fourth, you want to understand what the aim or motive of the author was when s/he was writing that article. Why is the author writing that article? Debaters are taught that the "motive fallacy" doesn't exist. The motive fallacy is where you seek to undermine an argument on the basis of undercutting the motive of the author. This is where you can make specific kinds of ad hominem attacks. Just because someone is being paid to write an article doesn't mean that they are wrong; they may still have merits for writing what they're writing about. Given that it is impossible to prove absolute causality for something, evidence provides an objective basis to assess the validity of the claims being made. It is not always fallacious to use the author's intent as proof of an argument, or to discredit an argument. Furthermore, categorizing arguments becomes much easier when you know the intent of the author because it allows you to understand the nature of the argument surrounding that specific topic area.

Fifth, you want to be able to categorize whether the article that you are reading is an affirmative or negative article. This is something you can discover very quickly by reading the abstract of the article, and then jumping down to the bottom and reading the conclusion. This is very important because you don't want to be reading evidence from someone who concludes the opposite of your position as that will weaken, if not entirely discredit, your argument.

Sixth, and finally, you want to know what the major qualifications are. A qualification of an argument is a condition that the author, or speaker, places on the veracity of their conclusion. It is extremely important to understand the qualifications of the article because it makes the article time sensitive, and you then have an access point to refute that argument by denying the conditions upon which it relies. For example, you could agree that the conclusion that the author reaches may be entirely accurate, but it is predicated on false assumptions, making it an unsound argument.

Conclusion

Being able to research and read articles effectively will not only help prepare you for tournaments by giving you an understanding of what arguments you can expect to hear, but it will also make you a better debater. By seeing how arguments interact and understanding better the nature of arguments, you will increase your ability to refute arguments, even if you are hearing them for the first time. The ability to produce quality research, then, is one of the most important skills that you can have as a debater.