



B. Researching a motion

Information and Activity Plans for School Debaters

INTRODUCTION

This section looks at researching a debating motion. Not only is this an important part of debate preparation but it also links well with skills required by students in most curriculum areas.

So does this mean the debate preparation is just like homework for any other subject? The answer is that it is very different. Evidence used in debate can come from a wide variety of sources – linked as it is to politics and policy formation – and knowing the headlines on a certain topic in the main ‘tabloid’ newspapers is as important as understanding some of the more detailed discussions you might get in a ‘broad sheet’. Equally valid sources are TV and radio news. We can also show students how to access exciting sources of information such as the CIA’s world fact book – a public information portal based on the intelligence work of the US security services and one of the most complete sources available of information on different countries of the world. Of course, this will also help increase levels of general knowledge – important in debate, university and in the job market.

Of course, that’s about as ‘James Bond’ as researching for a debate is likely to get, but this section contains a variety of ideas for making the task interesting, relevant, and fun.



Activity B1 – Newspaper editor for the day

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session students should be able to:

- Distinguish different types of newspaper and their relevance to debate preparation
- Identify key topics in the press in a given period
- Identify key arguments from within those topics

Resources Required

- A selection of newspapers from a complete week (ideally including Sunday papers and a range of tabloid/broadsheet – you may ask pupils and colleagues to help collect these)
- Journal and magazines can also be used
- Scissors and writing materials
- Coloured highlighter pens

Introduction

The idea behind this session is getting students to engage with newspapers in a more interesting fashion than simply sitting down to read one cover to cover.

This session works better the more newspapers that you manage to provide. However, always keep them to a restricted time frame (ideally one week, perhaps two).

Running the Activity

STAGE 1

1. Give each of the students two/three newspapers and ask them to work on their own, flicking through them and identifying the key stories in that edition
2. Suggest they look at 'news', 'features', and 'editorial' articles
3. Ask them to cut out the key stories of the day
4. Once all the students have a pile of cuttings ask them to work together to identify key stories they all have cuttings on, to create a 'pile' for each story which should now cover a number of newspapers from a number of different days
5. Select two/three piles with the most different cuttings



STAGE 2

6. Divide the students into groups – giving them a 'pile' of cuttings each
7. Ask them to define a motion around the chosen topic which has two clear sides, for example 'This house would allocate campaign funds to political parties from central taxation', or 'This house believes in an elected second chamber of parliament'
8. Ask them to use one colour of highlighter pen to highlight evidence/comment that could be used in support of the case, and a different colour to highlight evidence/comment that could be used against the case.
9. Ask them to consider how these might be used in a debate

STAGE 3

10. Ask each group to outline the key points they have identified, and why they have chosen them.
11. Encourage the group to discuss the different values of different papers (for example, 'The Sun' and 'The Metro' are important in gauging and setting public opinion because of their large circulations; while 'The Times' and 'The Independent' are likely to include more depth of coverage, cite more detailed evidence, and are more credible sources to quote).
12. Encourage the group to discuss the difference between 'news', 'features', and 'editorial' articles and discuss the contribution each might make for preparation to a debate. If you also managed to use magazines and journals then consider the different role of each of these types of publication

Assessing Progress

- Did the students working individually manage to identify key stories from the week?
- As a group could they effectively define a motion with two clear sides?
- Could they identify the difference between 'news', 'features', and 'editorial' article?



Finishing Up

To close the session emphasise to the students:

- The difference between different types of newspapers, magazines, journals, etc.
- That debate motions will often relate to topical issues from the time the motion was set
- The different types of articles, and their relative merits
- How evidence can be used in a debate

Variations

A variety of variations are possible:

- Students can be asked to mock up a 'weekly news review' magazine by pasting articles onto paper – then provide their own editorial comment on the week
- If articles clearly fall into 'for' and 'against' categories you can carry out a prioritising and rebutting exercise – like in activity A2



Activity B2 – Internet detective

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session students should be able to:

- Identify relevant sources of data for preparing for a debate
- Identify the factors used in establishing the usefulness, significance, and persuasiveness of a source

Resources Required

- Access to the internet – a minimum of one computer per group
- Either – a printer or writing materials to record evidence and urls

Introduction

This activity aims to encourage students to engage with websites that they may not have used before, becoming aware of the range of information available on the internet. It encourages them to identify and critique different sources in relation to their usefulness, reliability and potential biases. Finally, it uses some difficult motions (far harder than, for example, you would see in the early rounds of the Society's competition) to set an evidence gathering challenge for students on a topic they probably have little prior knowledge of, or even where to access such knowledge.

Running the Activity

STAGE 1

1. Allow the students to work alone, or, depending on access to IT, divide the students into appropriate groups so they each have access to a computer
2. Provide the students with the list of urls on the accompanying worksheet listing websites
3. Allow them 5-10 minutes to quickly log onto each one and see what information is contained in them



STAGE 2

4. Provide the students with the worksheet of motions
5. Depending on the size of your group(s) get them to investigate one or more motions using the sources on the website list. THE RULE is that they can only use the websites listed, or any that are linked to from those websites. They should NOT use a search engine.

Assessing Progress

- Could the students effectively identify issues around 'usefulness', 'reliability' and 'biases'?
- Did they identify relevant data and arguments that could be used in a debate?
- How did they cope with being given a more complex motion to work with?
- Was it more difficult to separate and prioritise the strong and less strong arguments?

Finishing Up

To close the session emphasise to the students the:

- value of the web as a research tool
- issues surrounding using internet sources
- need to seek credible sources of information, which will be persuasive in a debate

Variations

A number of variations are possible:

- Depending on the age range and past-experience of the group different websites and/or motions could be used within the same structure to create an exercise at an appropriate level
- If you do not have ready access to the Internet for your group motions B, C, and D can be used in a 'library hunt' exercise – where students are asked to identify materials from among school library holdings. You could also work with a local library or youth club that may have internet access



WEBSITES - WORKSHEET

- Examine each of the following websites
- What information is available on each
- What search facilities do they offer
- What other websites can you link to

CIA World Factbook

<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>

The Scottish Parliament

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk>

The Scottish Executive

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk>

The World Health Organisation

<http://www.who.int/en/>

The Law Society of Scotland

<http://www.lawscot.org.uk>

The Law Society of England and Wales

<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk>

Oxfam

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk>



MOTIONS - WORKSHEET

- Use the websites you have just looked at to gather evidence
- What sources might be useful for identifying key arguments?
- Consider what facts and figures might be useful
- How 'reliable' are these sources?
- What 'biases' may be present in the sources?
- Note – these are deliberately more complicated motions to get you thinking – you are not being asked to put together a complete argument at this stage, just to identify what information might later help you to do so.

- A. This house would establish an independent body to manage complaints against the legal profession
- B. This house believes free drugs to treat HIV/AIDS should be provided to Africa
- C. This house would prioritise overseas aid on the basis of average life expectancy in each applicant country
- D. This house believes law has contributed more to society than science