

# Controversies and Issues:

The Media Center's Role  
in Teaching the Art of

# Debate



**D**ebate. Forensics. Whatever you call it, the exploration of both sides of contemporary and often controversial issues is making a comeback in American schools. The resurgence is fueled in part by recent findings that examining issues, with a goal of debating them, encourages critical thinking in young minds.

Though high school and college students are the primary targets, debating skills continue to move down the classroom chain, with middle schools and even some elementary schools teaching the art of point and counterpoint. Patrick Daley in an article for *Instructor* noted that debate skills are effective at all grade levels. "The debating process teaches students how to investigate new ideas, develop their reading skills as well as critical thinking capacities."

# Explore the Yin and Yang *of today's hot topics*



## Gale introduces *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center*

Opposites attract according to conventional wisdom — a contemporary take on Eastern cosmology: the yin and yang of complementary forces at work in all things in the universe. It isn't a question of consensus, but of interdependence. And our attempts to understand it give way to discussion, debate and opposing viewpoints.

Drawing on Greenhaven Press™ acclaimed social issues print series, Gale's® new online database *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* helps students find, learn and measure the many viewpoints surrounding today's increasingly complex social issues. Gun control. Health care. Teen pregnancy. Tobacco use. The war on drugs. The war on crime. The war on terror. This dynamic library of current event topics provides a format and functionality that clarify the facts of each topic as well as the arguments of its proponents and detractors.

*Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* helps students investigate today's hot topics by providing:

- More than 2,500 viewpoint articles
- More than 1,000 topic overviews from Gale and Macmillan Reference USA™ books
- More than 3,000 statistical tables, charts and graphs
- Nearly 600 hand-selected images
- 24 titles from the *Information Plus Reference Series* of statistics, government data and legislation
- And much, much more

Receive a **free mousepad** when you sign up for a free trial. Call 1-800-877-GALE or visit [www.gale.com/GreatDebate](http://www.gale.com/GreatDebate).

INFORMATION INTEGRITY

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## “The important thing to remember

is that students have their own interests and they’ll be more attentive, enthusiastic students if they’re allowed to explore the issues they feel are most important.”

—Dan Leone, Greenhaven Press

While debate is good for students, it’s also good for libraries and media centers, forming natural touch points between the media specialist, the student, and the teacher. Effective debate centers on effective use of information and research—the bread and butter of the library.

“There is no doubt that contemporary policy debate, both in high school and college, is largely research driven,” say Penn State’s Gina Ercolini and Pat Gerke. Authors of the research guide for the 1999 World Debate Institute, they note: “Our capacity to do research has a great deal to do with our capacity to participate in debates and to succeed in debate. Judges, coaches, and students have largely taken up the position that debate is an information processing activity in which we handle enormous amounts of information in order to discuss important issues.”

Ercolini and Gerke recommend that students and serious debaters divide their preparation into two units, spending 30 percent of the time researching and 70 percent of the time processing the information.

### Understanding the Millennial Generation

So how does a media center prepare to be the center of debate research? It may start with understanding the students and where their interests lie. The millennial student is strikingly different from the classic debater of the 1970s. “As a group, millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory,” say Neil Howe and William Strauss in their book *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. “With a greater commitment to team than to self, they’re less inclined to vociferous debate. Yet, the authors warn not to confuse millennial politeness with a lack of interest in the world. The authors contend they’re deeply committed.

San Diego-based Greenhaven Press’s Dan Leone agrees and notes that today’s students are simply interested in different issues than the students of 20 years ago were. Leone, who has watched the changes through the lens of Greenhaven’s venerable *Opposing Viewpoints* series, says today’s students are interested in “more human issues. Euthanasia, death issues, medical issues, like genetics. During the 70s and 80s, there was much more political dissent.” Leone notes issues relating to national security may begin to take hold in light of 9/11, and Greenhaven is preparing for this change with a variety of new topics.



Dan Leone, President, Greenhaven Press

“The important thing to remember is that students have their own interests and they’ll be more attentive, enthusiastic students if they’re allowed to explore the issues they feel are most important.” He encourages educators to provide broad assignments that allow students to choose their own topic. “Students are different from editorial writers and academicians. The death penalty, abortion, cloning. Those topics are more interesting to them than economic issues or the global theatre. Don’t confuse what’s in the papers with what a high school student wants.”

The cornerstone for a good topical research library is to provide background on a broad spectrum of issues, ensuring they’re up to date and in keeping with the ethos of today’s students.

### Provide Balance

However, breadth of content is not enough. Leone stresses that good research is “balanced” research and

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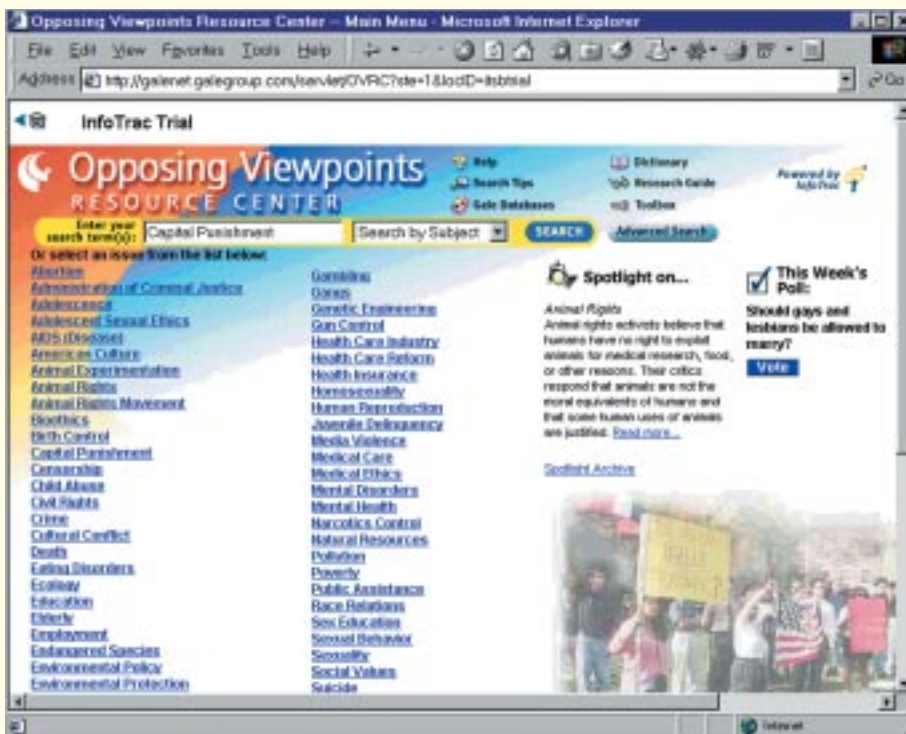
encourages libraries to be sure they provide the entire spectrum of opinion. Most educators feel that if a library has limited space or budget, great depth on a limited number of topics is a superior mix to the alternative. There are three primary reasons. First, critical thinking skills are honed when students gather evidence, examine both sides of the issue, and draw their own conclusion as to which side is “pro.” Second, formal debate requires knowledge of both sides of the issue to develop counterpoints. Additionally, debaters are often called on to present one side of the issue first and then the opposite side. Finally and most simply, true understanding of any issue happens only when all sides are explored.

Leone says that the development of *Opposing Viewpoints* issues take editors “all over the map. It’s all about balance. We review *Time*, *Newsweek*, the major outlets, but we beat the bushes to be sure the range of opinion is presented. Sometimes we’re contacting defunct organizations or reprinting speeches. It can become very emotionally-laden, but censorship really has no role here.”

Leone recommends that when librarians are assembling resources for a debate library, they look carefully at the range of sources they include. Packaged resources designed specifically for use in analyzing issues should include both experts and non-experts and equal amounts of material on both sides of the issue, and should come from a variety of outlets, including the Web, publications of all kinds, and transcripts of speeches. Additionally, these sources should avoid labeling sides of the issues as “pro” or “con,” which lead students to assume there is a “correct” side of the issue.

### Take Advantage of New Technology

Like most research areas, the advent of Internet technology has changed issues research dramatically. A wealth of information on virtually any topic is a few key-strokes away as long as there’s an Internet connection. However, Web searching at the high school level and in lower grades (and even in many undergraduate programs) should be approached with caution. Web surfing for data



**Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center** greets users with a well-organized and rich selection of topics.

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General Web dangers aside, another problem exists: the fire hose nature of hits on general search. Research is slowed immensely if students have to wade through hundreds of useless hits. However, a new generation of online products is providing the ease of electronic searching in a vetted, more manageable environment.

Greenhaven's newest product is a case in point. The *Opposing Viewpoints* print series launched last spring in a new online incarnation—*Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center*. The product was already on the drawing board when Greenhaven was acquired by Gale in late 2000, providing the technological resources the company needed to bring the product to market.

“Our goal for the online version of *Opposing Viewpoints* was to create a unique resource—something that had more than a periodical base, a product with real editorial value,” says Leone. “That goal became a reality when we joined Gale because of the incredible mix of content we

had access to and of course, we suddenly had this great technology model called the Resource Center.”

Leone describes *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* as a one-stop shop for current issues research. With *Opposing Viewpoints* as the content base, the product also provides context for the students by including statistical information, overviews, and other relevant information from Gale and its imprint Macmillan. The product's content goes through rigorous editorial scrutiny to be sure it represents the highest quality.

Leone says when students use the product, “Any search will give them what they need, but they won't be overwhelmed.”

Indeed, *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* is manageable from the opening screen, where the user is met with a well-organized list of topics. The product allows students to choose from the list—which acts as an idea starter if one is needed—or search on a phrase if they have a topic in mind. Results are delivered in a series of “tabs” (think file folders), each including a selection of one of the

The screenshot displays the 'Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center' interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Basic Search: "Terrorism"', 'Search by Subject', and buttons for 'SEARCH', 'Advanced Search', and 'Search History'. Below this, a row of tabs includes 'Viewpoints', 'Reference', 'Statistics', 'Magazines & Newspapers', 'Images', 'Primary Documents', 'Web Sites', and 'SEC Search'. The main content area shows 'Document 6 of 44' and the title 'The Attacks Revealed America's Lack of Preparedness Against Terrorism' by Franklin Foer. A bio for Franklin Foer is provided, along with the source database information: 'Source Database: All Issue: The Attack on America, September 11, 2001'. A 'Table of Contents' section lists 'Further Reading' and 'Source Citations'. A paragraph of text at the bottom discusses the U.S. government's actions following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

**Each topic includes viewpoints, reference materials, statistics, and a wide variety of other material that provides context for greater understanding.**

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following: viewpoints, reference, statistics, magazine and newspaper articles, images, primary documents (digitized for view on the screen), or Web sites (vetted for appropriate content by editors). A final folder includes search hits from Gale’s popular *Student Resource Center* if the library or school also subscribes to that database.

Within the tabs students can mark and save or download whatever they need to complete their assignment. All the material is full-text.

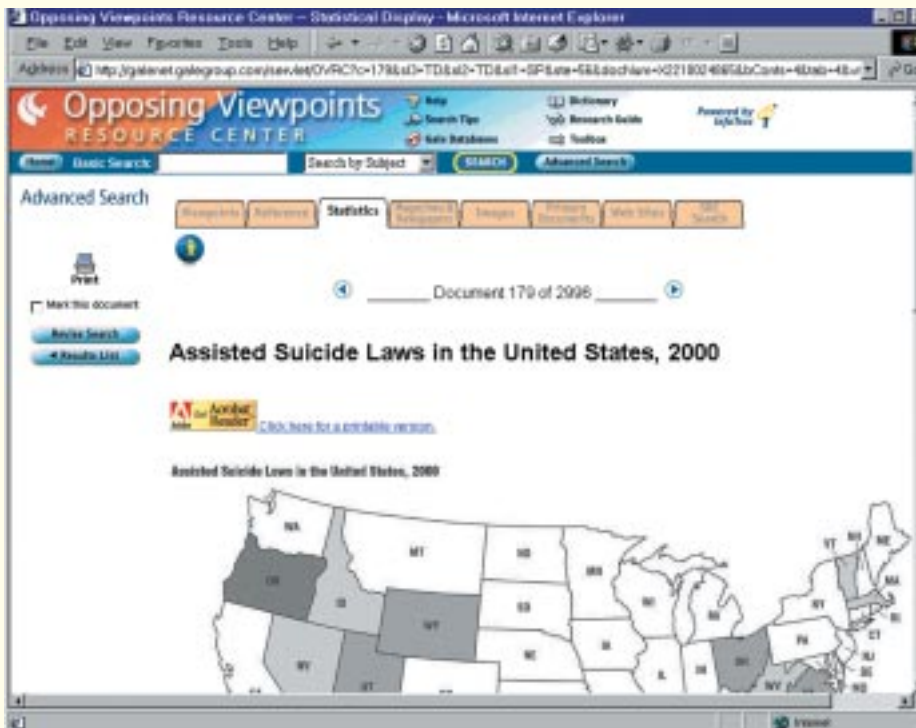
Greenhaven’s goal of creating a product with “real editorial value” comes in more forms than the extensive, vetted topical content. *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* also includes a variety of value-added features, including a Research Guide. The guide teaches the user how to evaluate and analyze biased, opinionated material. Used by students, it provides insightful context and prepares them for potential pitfalls in their research. Used by the teacher

or media specialist, it forms a template for teaching information literacy skills.

### Provide Access to Print and Electronic

The response to *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* confirms electronic resources’ usefulness in issues research. Adam Janowski, a library media specialist at Naples (Florida) High School, says it’s “one of those rare resources that elicits ‘awesome’ from students.” He uses it with “Sociology, speech and debate, and senior thesis students, and the reaction has been incredible. I am actually seeing them go to *Opposing Viewpoints* rather than *Google* and *Yahoo!*”

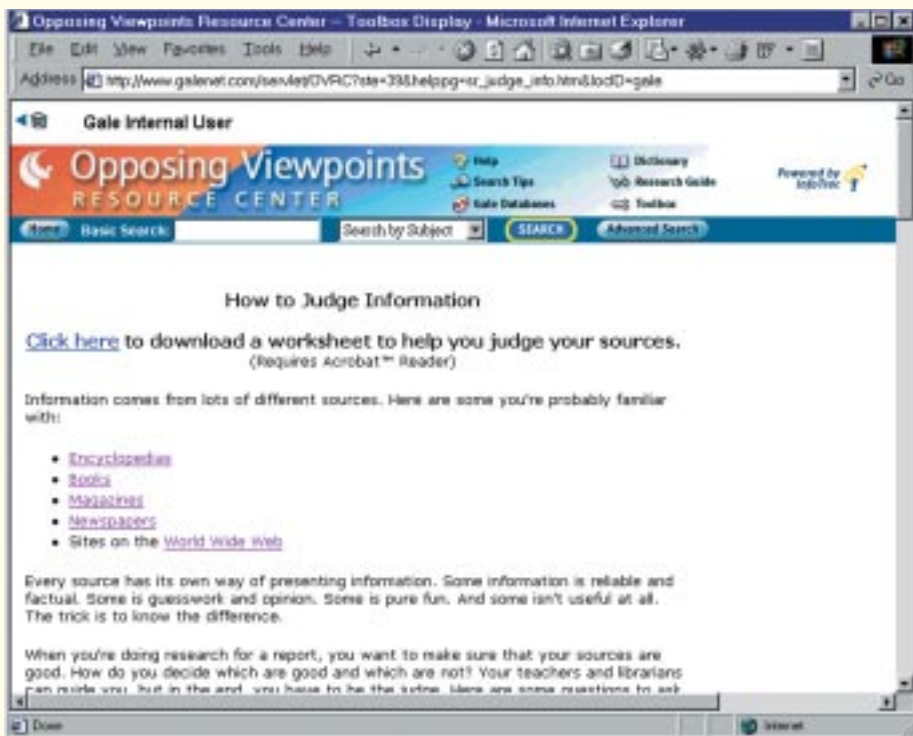
Yet, Leone feels that print will continue to hold a place in issues research. “Print and online will have a happy marriage. It’s not one or the other. Students sometimes just want to cart something around. There’s a place for both.” However, he feels online “will play a larger and larger role. Online is easi-



Statistical information provides raw data that can be interpreted by students.



**A Research Guide provides students and teachers with background to create better reports and prepare for debates.**



**The Toolbox option is a rich resource that includes material for enhancing information literacy skills.**

er to update and keep current. Print will be good for less timely stuff.”

## Embrace the Movement

Debate’s natural base in the library provides a huge opportunity for librarians and media specialists to build strong connections to the classroom. Serious debate coaches and educators welcome the chance to look over new library resources that will support their students. Providing time for them to examine materials and tour new online products can build an everlasting bridge.

Media specialists in schools with less rigorous (or non-existent) programs may want to offer the same opportunities for faculty to examine resources. In those situations, ideas for new assignments surrounding issue research may blossom, especially if faculty are exposed to new online tools. Media specialists may want to consider getting a free trial to a product like *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* to introduce faculty to changes in issues research. (Visit the product Web site at [www.gale.com/GreatDebate](http://www.gale.com/GreatDebate) for information on free trials. Password: debate.)

While classroom connections and increased relevance of the media center are laudable goals, perhaps the greatest benefit of debate is to the students. Cal State Long Beach forensics coach Matt Taylor recently remarked to the *Los Angeles Times*, “It’s easy to see problems, but very hard to solve them. In forensics, students see that it takes time and the patience to work through solutions. It’s a great activity that teaches you so much, but also introduces you to a world of possibilities. Not only do they know the world can be better, they know they can have a role in making it better”

*Beth Dempsey is a frequent writer on trends in online reference.*



## **NINA LEVINE, \*PRODUCT GENIUS**

Nina Levine, library media specialist at Blue Mountain Middle School in upstate New York, has great chemistry with Gale®. When a change in education standards and testing required eighth grade students to conduct research on chemical elements, Nina contacted Gale to find out what resources were available to satisfy this curriculum change. At the time, Gale imprint UXL® was finalizing plans for *Chemical Elements*, a topical reference aimed at middle school students. UXL editors asked Nina to evaluate this material and provide feedback. After reviewing the sample text, outline and index, Nina suggested several key revisions relevant to the assignment needs of students. Her recommendations proved prescient: students now flock to *Chemical Elements* for answers and Nina's library purchased a second set. Now that's what we call a positive chemical reaction.

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