Introduction

Success at a Model United Nations (MUN) conference is not just correlated with prior experience or charisma or skill at public speaking or at the writing of resolutions. Research plays a pivotal role, too. One who knows what they are talking about is naturally more likely to breed success, and, as a delegate at a MUN conference, there are two essential things to know about:

1. the topic of discussion,
2. the position of one’s country on that topic.

(It can also be useful to have background knowledge of the committee a delegate will partake in.) As such, this brief guide aims at assisting delegates in embarking upon the task of performing research; although one’s research will differ immensely from another’s – depending, not least, on what topic or country one is researching – below figure a number of general tips that can work as starting points.

1. The Topic

Some delegates will begin by researching their country, others will start with the topics on the agenda, and others still will be zigzagging between them, jumping from one subject of research to another. Although each has its own merits, it is generally more advisable for delegates to begin their research with an investigation of the topics. This is the case for one simple reason.

A delegate’s knowledge of his or her country needs not be terribly extensive, but just sufficient to grasp his or her country’s position on the topics. But how could one understand their country’s position on the topic if they yet do not grasp the topic itself?
An understanding of the topics to be discussed enables one to establish a scope to their investigation of their country, hence delegates are advised to explore the topics before they delve into their own country. We thus begin by considering how to research topics.

1.1. What is there to know about?

First of all, we ought to ask ourselves: what does it mean to have understanding of a topic, given that it is such understanding that we are striving for? The topic is, surely, if it is to engender controversy and fiery debate, a multifaceted entity composed of many different factors – of many different areas of research – and so it is an inclusive understanding of those areas of research that ultimately yield an understanding of the topic as a whole. These are the areas of research of any topic:

- The History of the Problem (every topic is a formulation of a problem to be resolved)
  - Its roots and primary partakers.
  - Why has it persisted? (If new, focus only on the roots.)

- Past attempts at resolvement, their strengths and their weaknesses (especially weaknesses – which in many cases will be strongly related to why the problem persists)
  - Include both domestic and international efforts, primarily international and, if the United Nations (UN) has been involved, pay careful attention to it.

- Potential solutions
  - Recommendations and plans from policy-advisors; recommendations from academia; plans of international organisations and etc. Ultimately it is the potential solutions that matter most, hence it is worthy of careful thought.
1.2. How to investigate the areas of research?

Now that we know what it is we ought to focus on when researching topics, it remains to determine how the researching is to be performed. The evident place to start is the Study Guide available on a committee’s page of the LIMUN website, written by the committee’s Directors. In most cases and for most people, that will be the primary source of knowledge, but it is important to perform some further, independent research.

The Study Guides provide only an introduction to the topic, a map to what matters, and it is up to the delegate to navigate himself with that map. For instance, if a guide mentions a failed UN resolution as a past attempt at solving the problem, and briefly outlines its content, the delegate should go and have a read of that resolution; similarly, when a guide mentions that one aspect of the problem is a result of some other state of affairs, and proceeds to provide a basic account of the relationship between the cause and the effect, it is up to the delegate to perform further research on that cause.

That is the path to more in-depth knowledge, and the depth of knowledge is essential to the quality of speech and the ingenuity of writing. As such, let us consider some sources for further research:

Encyclopaedia

Being students, we may have an intuitive distasteful feeling at being told to use Wikipedia for academic(-ish) purposes, seeing as most of us grew up with the common phrase ‘Wikipedia is unreliable’ from our teachers. But in reality, Wikipedia – and any other such encyclopaedia for that matter – is a great source to get a grasp on aspects of the topic, even if superficial. This applies especially to the historical causes and context of a problem.
In essence, Wikipedia can play the role of a second Study Guide; even though it may too often not provide adequate in-depth understanding, it can reinforce the understanding gained from the Study Guide, build upon it, and suggest the course of further research. And the references, although too often dysfunctional, can be of great help too when they include legitimate sources like news companies, think tanks and international organisations. This is not to say, however, that Wikipedia’s factual information is entirely reliable, so do keep that in mind!

UN Website

Quite unsurprisingly, a very helpful source for Model United Nations research is the United Nations website, which contains information on, amongst other subjects, peace and security, development, and human rights, which thus covers most topics to be discussed at a MUN conference. It also comprises links to other useful bodies in the United Nations System, and archives of every session of every body since their inception. One can also expect the UN Website to cover the information necessary for a thorough grasp of a problem, for the people who write those reports actually have to tackle these issues in real life!

Website of the specific body

When Directors and Secretariat-members conceive of the topics to be discussed in LIMUN committees, they evidently do not simply invent them; rather, the topics are researched beforehand and selected. In many if not most cases, these topics stem directly from the agenda, past or present, of the specific UN body that the committee is simulating. As such, for instance, a delegate in the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) might do well to visit unep.org and see what they have to say about the topic he or she is researching.
Additionally, often the body performs work akin to that of a think tank, providing research on, and interpretations of, the problem at hand. If delegates cannot find sufficient information for their research from the website of the body they will be simulating, they should try the websites of similar bodies – for instance, the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) website might have information on the World Health Organization (WHO) topics; similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) will surely have extensive information on the status of women, which can be useful for UN Women delegates.

**News agencies**

Most topics in Model United Nations bear direct relations with current affairs, and so news agencies – which, by nature, address current affairs – figure amongst the most useful sources. They can help delegates in, primarily, two intertwined ways:

1. they provide more in-depth analyses of specific aspects of the problem,
2. they enable delegates to increase their powers of persuasion by appeal to examples and statistical information.

One important factor that distinguishes the prominent delegate is his or her ability not to speak only in the abstract – that is, not only about the generality of concepts, like ‘corruption’ or ‘state-failure’ –, but also back-up their claims with concrete examples: e.g., in the case of corruption, the countries where corruption is worst, estimates on how it affects GDP, theories of its effect on social cohesion and so forth.

Pertinent news articles will generally provide such examples. Among the most prominent agencies figure the BBC, the Guardian, Reuters, the Economist and Foreign Policy.
Other potentially-useful sources include think tanks and non-governmental organisations. In the latter group, some high-profile organisations like Human Rights Watch and Transparency International conduct extensive research in their fields and are viewed as authoritative bodies, often working alongside the United Nations itself.

2. The Country

The research performed on a specific country will vary widely from delegate to delegate, as what a delegate will need to know thereabout differs extensively, depending foremost upon what topic is being researched. Some general patterns can be discerned concerning what every delegate should know of their country, and some useful sources therefor can be listed, but these remain very basic – as such, delegates will personally have to be imaginative and proactive when it comes to researching the state they represent.

2.1 Generic areas of research regarding states

Every delegate should have some knowledge of their country’s:

• Geography (including location, neighbours, natural resources, size of population, ethnic composition, and whether it has access to maritime trade)

• Political system (including the format of the regime, key leaders, and public perceptions of the regime)

• History (including the foundation of the state, previous political systems, relation to colonialism, and military conflicts)

• Economy (including World Bank classification, gross domestic product [per capita], and primary trading partners)

• International relations (including allies, rivals, membership in organisations, and party to treatises)
It is important to note, also, that the depth of knowledge a delegate will need about their country will differ on the country represented and the topic under discussion. A country that has a key role in the topic, like North Korea on an issue of nuclear disarmament, or Pakistan on an issue regarding drones, will have its position on the problem known to every delegate in the committee, and its own delegate will be a cornerstone to the flow of debate.

As such, delegates from key countries – which will usually include the P5, regardless of which topic – will need to perform more in-depth research on their country’s position than other delegates.

2.2 Useful sources

Generic information related to the areas of research listed above can be found on Wikipedia, in the CIA Factbook, and in further depth in the Library of Congress’ country studies.

Further information on the political situation and the economy can be found from different sources, including the:

- World Bank, which provides data on economies and serves as the prime authority on the level of economic development
- World Bank Governance Indicators, which provide data on the level of ‘political development’
- Human Development Index, which provides data on important aspects of social well-being
- Freedom House, which provides data on the level of personal freedom enjoyed in a country
- Democracy Indices, of which there are many, which provide data on the level of democratic governance