

How to Research an Issue

Why do I need to research?

Thorough research is an important component to a successful advocacy campaign. While you may begin a campaign in an area of personal experience or expertise, often advocacy campaigns arise from within a community as like-minded people come together with a desire to see a particular issue addressed.

There are a number of key areas that you will need to be aware of including:

- The background
- The major players
- The relevant legislation
- Government policy
- Similar campaigns or precedents for your action

A good understanding of these key areas through thorough research on your advocacy issue can empower you to raise your voice in an informed way and give authority to your call for change. Be aware that there will be those who oppose your advocacy campaign and they may be extensively resourced with convincing statistics and research of their own. With this in mind, thorough and reliable research is important because it provides a steady foundation of knowledge and information that you can bring into the discussion to support your case. By researching we can discover truth and then bring these details before those in power; by researching well we can “speak truth to power”.

Where do I begin?

Internet

The internet is a great starting point. There is a wealth of information on the internet. By typing your research topic into a browser such as Google, you can get a basic grasp of an issue. You can find out who the key authors or theorists are, what’s happened with these sorts of campaigns before and so on. It’s also an effective space to contact people in similar situations and get leads to further research.

Be careful! Anyone can have a web page and that means the quality and reliability of the information you find can be questionable.

Here are some ways you can judge if a website is reliable - however this is not an exhaustive safeguard against unreliable data :

1. Look for sites from Established Institutions: Sites associated with trusted institutions that have been around for a long time have a proven track record of reliability.
2. Avoid Commercial Sites: These are sites that are run by companies or business and usually end in ‘.com’. These sites are often trying to

sell you something and their information may be biased in favour of their own interests.

3. Check the Date: Up-to-date information is important to stay on top of the current issues involved in your advocacy campaign. Check the ‘last updated’ date of the bottom of the web page to make sure that the information you’re reading is still relevant.

4. Check the Authors: A website with no author or publishing institution is less desirable because you can’t trace the information back to a reliable source. Also pay attention to the potential bias of the author. You can even enter the name into Google to check their credentials before using their information.

Quick links to some reliable websites:

Australian Bureau of Statistics - <http://www.abs.gov.au/>

Refugee Council of Australia - <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au>

Australian Human Rights Commission - <http://www.hreoc.gov.au>

Database: Google Scholar - <http://scholar.google.com.au/>

World Bank – www.worldbank.org

World Health Organisation – www.who.int

World Wildlife Organisation (Australia) - <http://www.wwf.org.au/>

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

What other sources are available to research an issue?

Email lists/Newsletters

If you find groups already dealing with the issue you are interested in, they may have an email list you can sign up to. These lists can keep you up to date with new information as it becomes available and will often open you up to a wider range of opinions on an issue.

Library

Libraries are a useful place to search for authors or books that you know are significant to your issue. At public libraries you may find staff willing to assist you in your research. You can also use a library’s database to search key words or topics around your advocacy campaign. Most libraries are hooked up to a central database, so if one library doesn’t have the book you want, you may be able to get it from one of the other libraries in the area.

Journals

You can search for academic journals in state libraries and university libraries, as well as via free online databases such as 'Google Scholar'. Journal articles may be particularly helpful to your research because they are highly specialised and are peer-reviewed. The information in these articles has been tested against academic standards, and the research methods used are reliable. For this reason, refereed journal articles can carry extra weight in a debate.

Hansard

Hansard is the record of all parliamentary proceedings and can be a helpful research tool in understanding the policy decisions that are relevant to your advocacy campaign.

An electronic version of Commonwealth Parliamentary Hansard from 1981 onwards is available at <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/>

State Hansards are available on the several State Parliament websites.

'Freedom of Information' (FOI) Requests

An FOI request is a request sent to Government departments, local councils, public hospitals, statutory authorities or boards for documents or information that should be publicly available. This type of information can provide authority and weight to your advocacy campaign because often advocacy campaigns are calling for policy change from these governing bodies. The process of submitting an FOI can be useful in bringing to light the research of these governing bodies or authorities that supports your position.

For more information on FOI requests see the advocacy guide: 'How to submit an FOI request'.

Similar examples

Finding people who have participated in similar campaigns can provide valuable insight into how you can improve your own campaign. People who have been in a similar situation are often happy to share their knowledge and give you advice on the challenges and strengths involved in the running of an advocacy campaign.

Public Meetings

A public meeting is a forum that is open to the public to discuss your advocacy issue. It can be an effective way of gauging public opinion and hearing voices from the community that you may otherwise not have the opportunity to hear.

The Media

Reading newspaper articles, magazines, listening to the radio and watching the news on the television can be important in keeping up with key developments around your campaign issue. Also, to build your understanding of the background to your topic, it might be useful to look back through old newspapers, magazines, journals etc.