HMDC Presents... How to Read Your Background Guide

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Harvard MUN Online, December 5-6, 2026

Every committee at Harvard MUN Online has a background guide, written by the committee's own director to explain the topic you will debate. It matters more than any other paper you read before the conference, because the whole committee starts from the same guide, and the chair will expect you to know it well. This guide shows you how to read it slowly in three passes, handle the hard words, and turn what you read into notes you can use for your position paper and your speeches.

WHAT THE BACKGROUND GUIDE IS

1. **Coming from the director:** At Harvard, each committee's director is the expert on its topic, chooses the topic, and writes the background guide (Harvard Model United Nations, Guide to Delegate Preparation, Last Accessed: November 2026). When you read it, you are reading what the person running your committee thinks is most important.
2. **Serving as the foundation:** Harvard calls the background guides "the foundation of substantive preparation for each committee" and warns that a delegate who has not absorbed the guide will not be able to contribute well (Harvard Model United Nations, Guide to Delegate Preparation, Last Accessed: November 2026). Our HMDC reports, videos and graphic novels help you understand the topic, but they never replace the guide.
3. **Reading it more than once:** Harvard's own advice is to read the guides, discuss them, and read them again (Harvard Model United Nations, Guide to Delegate Preparation, Last Accessed: November 2026). That is why this guide asks for three passes instead of one.
4. **Pointing you to more research:** Harvard says its background guides include a section called "Suggestions for Further Research" (Harvard Model United Nations, Guide to Delegate Preparation, Last Accessed: November 2026). That section is the best place to start your own research after you finish reading.

FINDING YOUR COMMITTEE'S GUIDE

Harvard posts each committee's guide on that committee's HMUN Online page. Each file is locked with a password, so ask your coach how to open it before you begin.

Committee	December topic	Guide
WHO	Social Effects of Addiction	Open guide
UNESCO	COVID-19 Education and Technology Gaps	Open guide
UNICEF	Childhood Hunger: Food Waste, Food Recovery and Farmland Restoration	Open guide
SOCHUM	The Role of NGOs	Open guide
Legal	Cyberwarfare Case Studies	Open guide
DISEC	Drone Surveillance and Privacy	Open guide
Special Session on Terrorism	State Sovereignty and Intervention	Open guide
SPECPOL	Corporate Surveillance, Accountability and Privacy	Open guide
Futuristic Security Council	Use of Space in 2100	Open guide
Mongol Empire, 1225	The Death of Genghis Khan	Open guide

Committee pages and guide files: Harvard Model United Nations, HMUN Online Committee Offerings, Last Accessed: November 2026.

READING IN THREE PASSES

A background guide is written for high school delegates, so it is long and full of difficult words. Reading it in three short passes, spread over several days, is easier and more effective than reading it once in a single night.

1. **Skimming the whole guide first:** On the first day, read only the title, the table of contents, every heading, and the first sentence of each section. Write the headings on your notes page, because they show you how the director has divided the topic.
2. **Reading closely, one section at a time:** On the following days, read one or two sections a day. After each paragraph, stop and say what it means out loud in one sentence of your own, and if you cannot, read it again before you move on.
3. **Reading again for your country:** On the last pass, look for your country's name, its region, and the groups it belongs to. Write down the page number every time it appears, because those pages will become the center of your position paper.

HANDLING THE HARD WORDS

You will meet many new words, and that is normal for every delegate. The goal is to understand each idea well enough to explain it to a friend, not to use the longest words in your speech.

1. **Using our Key Words first:** Before your first pass, read the HMDC Key Words file for your committee, because it already explains many of the words the guide will use.
2. **Guessing from the sentence:** When you meet a new word, read the whole sentence again and guess what the word means from the words around it. Then check your guess in a dictionary such as the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries.
3. **Learning to say it:** Never use a word in a speech that you cannot say clearly. Listen to how the word is pronounced, practise it, and replace it with a simpler word if it still feels difficult.
4. **Keeping a word list:** Write each new word with a short meaning in your own words on your notes page, and review the list before every practice.

TAKING NOTES IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Notes are useful only when they are written in your own words. Harvard expects all work a delegate submits to be the delegate's own, and it checks submitted work for copied text (Harvard Model United Nations, Guide to Delegate Preparation, Last Accessed: November 2026).

1. **Writing ideas, not sentences:** Close the guide for a moment, then write the idea from memory in a short phrase. This keeps your notes in your own words and proves to you that you understood the paragraph.
2. **Recording where facts came from:** When you write down a fact or a number, add the page number of the guide beside it, so you can find it again and cite it correctly in your position paper.
3. **Sorting your notes into boxes:** Use the two notes pages at the end of this guide. Each box matches one kind of knowledge you need for the conference: the problem, its causes, who is harmed, what the United Nations has done, and what other groups have done.
4. **Collecting the director's questions:** If your guide lists questions for delegates to consider, copy each one into the questions box. The director is telling you exactly what the committee will try to answer, so every question deserves an answer from your country.

TURNING YOUR NOTES INTO ACTION

Reading the guide is the first step, not the last. Harvard wants position papers that show a clear knowledge of your own country's policies and interests "instead of simply reiterating parts of the Background Guide" (Harvard Model United Nations, Guide to Delegate Preparation, Last Accessed: November 2026).

1. **Building the position paper:** Your boxes on the problem and its causes become the background section of your position paper, and your boxes on United Nations and international action show what the world has already tried.
2. **Adding your country's view:** Use the pages where your country appears, together with your Country Guide and Country Profile, to explain what your government wants and what it is willing to trade.
3. **Starting your own research:** Use the guide's research suggestions and our HMDC reports to find two or three strong facts of your own that go beyond the guide.
4. **Bringing questions to practice:** Bring your questions box to every coaching session, because a question you ask before the conference is a mistake you will not make during it.

CHECKING YOUR WORK

1. **Explaining the topic aloud:** You can explain your committee's December topic to a family member in one minute, without looking at your notes.
2. **Knowing your country's place:** You know every page of the guide that mentions your country, its region, or its allies.
3. **Answering the director's questions:** Every question in your questions box has at least a short answer from your country's point of view.
4. **Owning your words:** Every note is written in your own words, every new word is on your word list, and you can pronounce each one clearly.

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Background Guide Notes, Page One

Name: _____ Committee: _____ Country: _____

The Headings in My Guide

Write the main headings from your first pass, in order.

The Problem in My Own Words

What is the problem, and why does the world care about it?

Why the Problem Happens

List the main causes, with page numbers.

Who Is Harmed, and How

Which people or places suffer most, and what happens to them?

New Words to Learn

Word, then a short meaning in your own words.

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Background Guide Notes, Page Two

What the United Nations Has Done

Name each resolution, agency or program, with its year and page number.

What Other Groups Have Done

Countries working together, regional groups, and non-governmental organizations.

Where My Country Appears

Page numbers, and what the guide says about your country, its region or its allies.

The Director’s Questions

Copy each question, then write a short answer from your country’s point of view.

My Questions for Practice

Anything you still do not understand, to ask at your next coaching session.