Research Strategies

CONTENTS:

How to Get the Paper Edition

1
Taking Charge

You may be saying to yourself, "I've never been good at this. In fact, I don't think I have a good research project in me."

My response is, "Of course you don't. A good research project is out there, not inside you. What you have to do is get out there, find the data, work with it, and make it your own."

Now, before you run off to lurk in a dark alley frequented by black market sellers of data, let me offer you a safer alternative. What follows is a list of basic things that you need to have working for you in order to turn your anxiety into a brilliant project leading to an excellent product.

You need an intense desire to do a brilliant project, not just an average one. By definition, most people can do an average project.

You need to take your time and plan your research as a *strategy* rather than as a mad dash through libraries and databases. Libraries know when you have reached the panic stage. The books close ranks and refuse to be found. Titles in the catalogue trade places so that you can't locate them. The smell of musty books renders you numb and silly. Databases can do even worse things to you (don't ask).

Never panic. Take it easy. Work out a plan and show that data who's in charge here.

You need to become a friend to structure. If you're the kind of person who might follow your schedule if you could remember

where you put it, or someone who views a library overdue fine as a reasonable price to pay for never having to think about a due date, research is going to be a battle for you. Structure and organization, from the beginning of the process all the way to its triumphant end, is crucial, no matter how much pain it will cost you to change your ways.

You need to develop ***lateral thinking***. Lateral thinking is akin to what happens in a football game: The quarterback has no openings at all. If he runs with the ball, he'll be flattened. So, instead of moving forward, he throws the ball sideways to another player who can move it forward. These are the steps:

- Recognize that your advance along one line is blocked.
- Abandon your approach and look for another that is completely different.
- Run with your new approach and make it work (or try yet another).

It's like the old story of the truck that got stuck in a highway underpass. No towing vehicle of any kind could get it out, and so the workers were left with the option of dismantling an expensive truck or tearing down an even more expensive underpass until…

…until the light bulb went on and some bright lateral thinker suggested letting the air out of the truck's tires to *lower* it. Lateral thinking works beyond the obvious, in the realm of the creative. Nurture this gift within you.

Wrestling with a Topic

"I'm writing a paper on the Lollards. I don't know who they are or were (and I'm finding it hard to care). When I'm done – if I can find anything in this confusing yet undersized library – I will have a research paper describing the Lollards. It will stress description of the Lollards. Its theme will be 'Describing the Lollards.' The point I will seek to make is that the Lollards can indeed be described."

Exciting, isn't it? Don't those old Lollards just thrill you to pieces? Not really. It's just another research project, as tedious as the last one you did. *Fact is, it isn't even research.*

"What?" you say. "Not research? I searched the library catalogue and periodical indexes and even the Internet, and I've got a ton of stuff here. Don't tell me I'm not doing research."

All right, I won't. Go ahead and write your paper and describe your Lollards. Turn it in and wait for your professor to read the thing and give you the usual dreary mark. Obviously, you don't like your prof anyway, and that's why you keep doing this too him or her. Professors are no

strangers to the kinds of boredom you inflict on them. In fact they're almost used to the tedious task of marking your essays. You bore the professor, and the professor pays you back by giving you a C. Any illusion that you actually did research will be dead by the time you get the essay back.

Not wanting to be harsh without giving you some help, let me ask: What is genuine research if it's not what you've been passing off? Let's begin by looking at what it is not.

Elements of False Research

- False research assumes that the task is to gather data and synthesize it. Thus the typical student "research" project involves amassing data, reading and absorbing it, then regurgitating it back onto a fresh piece of paper (sorry for the disgusting image).
- False research deals in generalities and surveys. It loves a superficial look at a big topic, and it abhors depth and analysis.
- False research asks no analytical questions and makes no pretense at advancing knowledge. It is content to report on what has already been done, to summarize the past.
- False research is so boring to the researcher that it's amazing that it ever gets completed, let alone foisted on the longsuffering professor.

The Key to Genuine Research

What's the point of doing research? A flip answer might be that a professor or employer told you to, and you're just following orders. But that's not the answer I'm looking for.

Consider this dilemma as an example: A few years ago you bought a car that was a disaster. Its maker should have been executed for delusions of adequacy. While most cars have water dripping out of the exhaust pipe, yours had lemonade. You spent so much time pushing it that you were able to qualify for the weightlifting competition at the next Olympics. Your mechanic added a new wing onto his house with

the money you spent keeping it on the road. Now you're due for a new vehicle, and you are not about to be stung again. So what to you do?

Research!!

You pick up every consumer reporting and car testing book or magazine you can find. You ask your friends. You go on the Internet. Why? Because you have a burning question to answer, and somewhere out there is the data you need to answer it.

This is what research is all about. The key to genuine research is *a good question.* Without a question, nothing you are doing can be called research. Just as your search through car books is driven by the query, "Which car should I buy this time?" so any research project worthy of its name is driven by a single research question.

What constitutes a good question? Here the situation becomes a bit more complex, because you need to begin rethinking the whole research process.

Later in this chapter, we will consider the actual processes involved in getting a topic ready for research, but for now we need an overview of the basic principles. The first of these is that most any research project presented to you needs some work before it is viable enough to use.

Assume, first of all that the topic is probably too broad to be workable unless you're planning to write a book. A topic like the Lollards or abortion or economic conditions in Russia today is not likely to inspire depth of analysis because you don't have space in ten or twenty pages to deal with anything but the superficial. You are going to have to focus on a more narrow aspect of the topic so that you can deal with it in depth. Consider a bathtub with a gallon of water in it as opposed to a bathroom sink with a gallon of water in it. Which is deeper? The sink, because its borders are narrower. The same principle works in a research project – the narrower your focus, the more chance you have of getting some depth into your project.

Assume, second, that you are going to have to develop a sound working knowledge of the topic before you're going to know what to do with it.

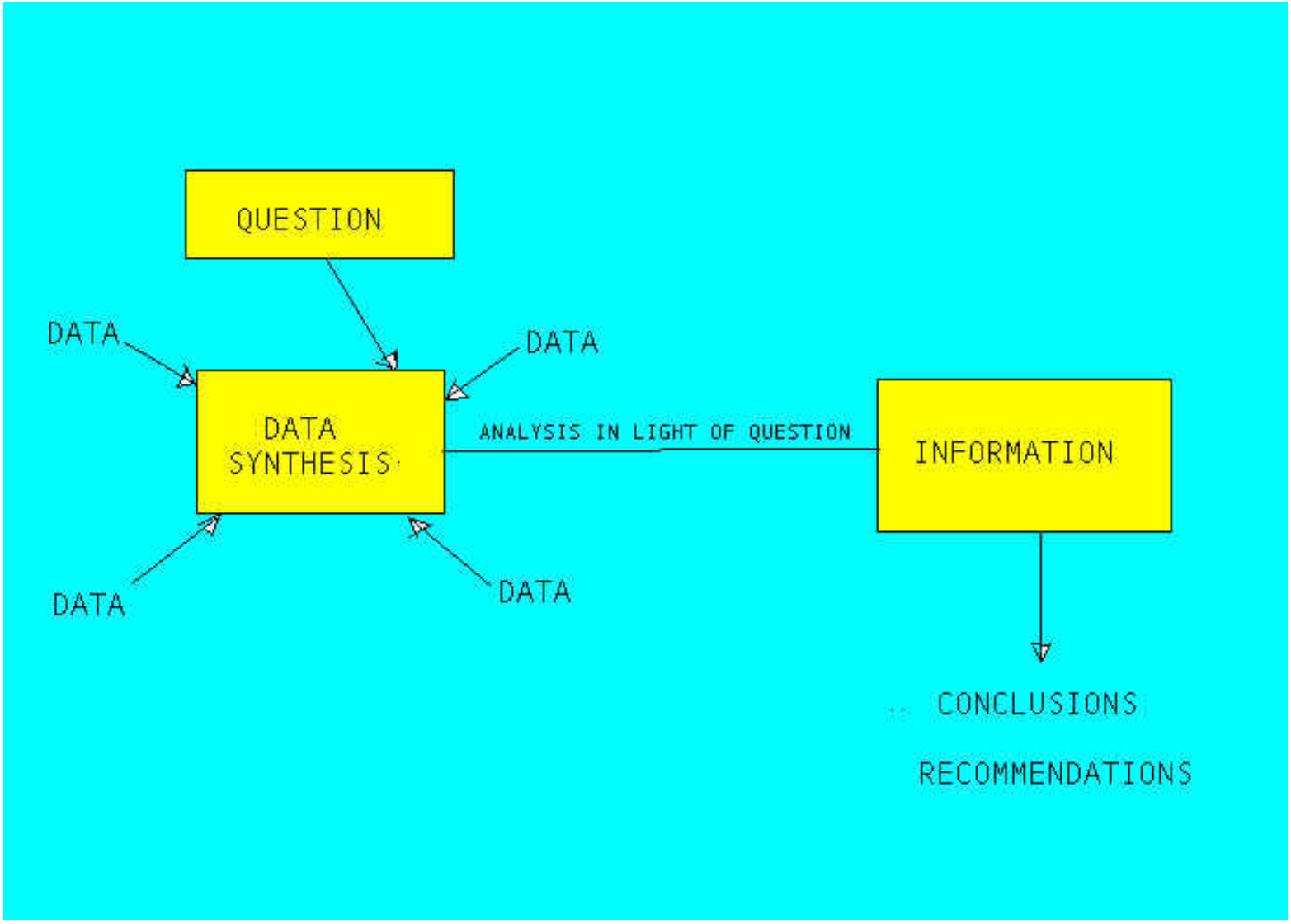
Assume, third, that you're going to have to negotiate with the one who gave you the project. You need to know that what you propose is going to fly with the person ultimately responsible for your fate. But cheer up – professors are generally thrilled with some tiny evidence of creativity in their students. Go to your professor and ask politely, "Would you mind if I pursued *this* issue raised by the Lollards? It looks really interesting."

Your professor's heart will turn to mush and he or she will say quietly, "Yes, all right," while inside he or she is shouting, "A new approach! I'm getting a new approach!"

Caution: Don’t ever say, "May I write on the Albigenses instead?" This signals the professor that you don’t like the Lollards, and you most certainly will end up having to write on the Lollards anyway.

A Model for Research

What, then, is research all about? Here’s a model:



Explanation? You begin with a question, you collect data, you synthesize it, you analyze it in light of the question (leading to information), and then you come up with conclusions and recommendations.

Getting Started in Research

Getting a Working Knowledge through Reference Sources

Before you run off in all directions at once (like a draw-and-quarter competition at the local jousting match), get a grip on yourself. As I librarian, I see the same painful experience repeated day after day – students walking fearfully into our book stacks area, then stopping, frozen to the ground.

I know what's buzzing through their battered minds – "I'm here, I'm actually here in the library, about to start researching my topic, and I don't have a ***clue*** what to do. Time has stopped, and people are staring at me. Why can't I move my limbs? Why is my head so numb? Maybe I'll die here, rooted to the floor, and they'll bronze me as a monument to the unknown student."

Take heart – it doesn't have to be like this. Let me give you the first step so that you be free from bondage. It's simple – ***Get a working knowledge of your topic***.

Right, so what's a working knowledge? Here's a basic definition: ***You have a working knowledge of a topic when you can talk about it for one minute without repeating yourself.***

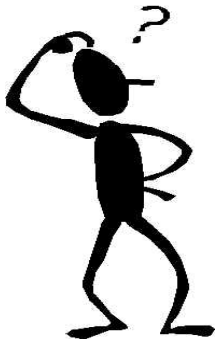
To start research, all you need to do is acquire one minute's knowledge. "One minute?" you say. "I've been told I have to present a fifteen page research paper with a dozen footnotes including appropriate periodical literature (whatever that is). Why talk to me about one minute of working knowledge?"

You need a working knowledge for the same reason that you take a flashlight with you when you have to stumble around in the dark. A working knowledge gives you the basics of a topic, enough light so that you won't hurt yourself as you move on into heavier materials. It isn't complete knowledge, but it's enough to tell you what the topic entails, what its boundaries are, even what some of its controversies and mysteries might be.

So where do you get a working knowledge? You could simply go on the Internet, where virtually anything is explained by some site or other. But, if you don't know much about the topic to begin with, the Net may be a dubious source. How will you be able to tell that the information is reliable? (We'll cover that issue in Chapter Five).

You would do better to investigate authoritative ***reference sources*** first. All academic libraries, and even many sites on the Internet, have reference tools that provide short, concise and authoritative information on virtually any topic you might think of.

Reference books will generally appear in the form of dictionaries or encyclopedias on general or specific topics. As well, handbooks, atlases – in fact, any tool that involves looking up brief information – may be found in a reference collection. Increasingly, reference sources are also appearing in computer form, allowing for greater flexibility in searching. [The second paper edition has a note on electronic reference sources.]



So you're wondering how to find a reference book that will give you information on marriage customs of the Kurdish people. You could wander the shelves of the reference collection, but there's an easier way to find what you want. ***Think of the broad subject within which your topic lies***. In this case, you are looking at customs of a particular culture. Thus you could look up in your library's catalogue a subject heading like MANNERS AND CUSTOMS—ENCYCLOPEDIAS to find a reference source like *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life.* Then just look up "Kurds."

Let's try an example. You've been dying to find out who the Lollards were (or are), admit it. Let me give you a clue – they were a group of religious people who flourished in the late middle ages and early reformation period. What sort of a reference source would you use for Lollards? How about a dictionary of church history? I check a couple of such dictionaries and, following the famous 5 W's of inquiry, I discover the following:

Who?

The Lollards were followers of John Wycliffe; more generally, the term was used of any serious critic of the church. Key figures in the movement were Nicholas of Hereford, William Swinderby, and John Purvey.

What?

Their teachings, summed up by the Twelve Conclusions of 1395, included personal faith, divine election, and the Bible as the sole authority in religion. They demanded that every person have the individual right to read and interpret the Bible.

Where?

The movement existed primarily in England and Scotland.

When?

It began in the 1380s (AD) and went underground after 1431 due to persecution. It declined in the mid-1400s but revived about 1490. It figured prominently in the congregational dissent of the seventeenth century and the rise of the Hussites in Bohemia.

Why?

The Lollards claimed to be a reaction to the control over human life and spirituality exercised by the Church of the time.

My two reference sources (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* and *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church)* also yielded a combined bibliography of over 15 sources on the Lollards.

Have I convinced you of the need for a working knowledge? If not, I hope you have lots of luck in your research – You're going to need it. Unless you start with a working knowledge you will inevitably founder the moment you reach deeper waters.

Finding a Good Question

Research is not research until you have focused it around a solid research question. But how do you come up with a question that is going to work?

Narrow your Topic to one aspect of it. One of the biggest reasons why research fails is that the researcher is trying to conquer the world with one project. You simply cannot cover all of the topic of teen suicide or abortion or the causes of World War One or how Martha Stewart can do what she does and still be only one person. You have to choose an aspect that is distinct enough that you can really work with it.

Identify Controversies or Questions related to your narrowed approach. There's no point re-describing what has already been described. To tell me once more who the Lollards were is to do what every reference source on the subject has already done. This is where those excruciatingly boring and superficial "research" papers come from. You must vow never to write another one. Find something worth investigating. In the case of the Lollards, you might want to focus on one of them (narrowing) such as Nicholas of Hereford, and discover what elements of his approach were effective putting forward his Lollard position (which will lead to the research question).

 **[For a page of examples (with explanations) of the types of research questions that won't work, see the 2004 second print edition. The first part of the Appendix has even more examples].**

 **[For information on the development of the preliminary outline, see the 2004 second print edition.]**

How About a Few Good Examples?

"The Thought of Erasmus of Rotterdam"

Your much beloved philosophy professor has assigned you "The Thought of Erasmus of Rotterdam." Having studied a few philosophy dictionaries, you narrow your topic to "The Humanism of Erasmus of Rotterdam." You *could*, at this point, decide to begin your paper with "Erasmus of Rotterdam was born in the year…" You *could* go on to explain what he taught about humanism and then conclude, "It is clear that Erasmus was an important person who deserves more attention.

This method is also called "regurgitating your sources." It establishes a conduit between your books and

your writing hand without ever really engaging your brain. It also makes for a very dull paper. Professors fall asleep over dull papers.

On the other hand, you could be analytical. Having read your sources and affixed your working knowledge firmly in your mind, you could engage your brain in finding a research question. How about asking this: "What is the essential difference between the humanism of Erasmus and that of the modern *Humanist Manifestos I and II*?" This would certainly demand study of Erasmus, but it would go further.

Now your have the makings of an approach that could contribute something fresh and exciting to the topic.

"Homelessness in our Cities"

You are taking a sociology class and are supposed to write a paper on "Homelessness in our Cities." You could regurgitate some statistics, recite a few case studies and conclude, "It is obvious that we need to take action on this issue." Or you might narrow your topic and ask a research question like this one: "Do programs that arrest homeless teens and compel them to accept social worker assistance actually reduce incidence of teen homelessness in the long run?"

"The Causes of the Ecological Crisis"

For a course on environmental issues, you have been assigned, "The Causes of the Ecological Crisis." You narrow this to focus on human values in society that can lead to ecological problems.

A descriptive paper would string together quotations from current leaders in the debate who are decrying our attitudes of wastefulness and greed. Your conclusion could read, "Thus it is clear that we must change our attitudes." You have narrowed your topic, but you've failed to apply a research question to it.

An analytical research paper would go further, perhaps considering the common view that the western Protestant ethic, with its desire for dominion over the earth is at the heart of the environmental trouble we are in. Your research question could be, "Is western Protestantism responsible for the environmental crisis?"

"Behaviorism as a Model for Social Engineering"

You have been given a topic which is fairly narrow but still covers a lot of territory. Why not narrow it down to the behavioristic model of B.F. Skinner? You might now take the easy way and summarize his book *Walden Two* as Skinner's model for social engineering (but easy is the way that leads to destruction).

Or you could ask how Skinner's model in *Walden Two* might need to be revised if basic human depravity were taken into account (something Skinner seemed blissfully unaware of).

One final note of caution: *Always clear your narrowed-down topic and brilliant research question with your professor or supervisor.* Disaster could be awaiting you if you don't.

Of course, some of us like to flirt with disaster. Do you feel lucky?

 **[For practice exercises with a key, and for an assignment related to the material in this chapter, see the 2004 second print edition of this book.]**

TOP OF PAGE

ON TO CHAPTER TWO

Last revised: March 26, 2004