

Managing Research

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Managing research is a big topic, but if we take it step by step, have a plan, and go at it in an organized manner, it can be a most enjoyable and fruitful experience. The research process is not limited to academics: it is one that we regularly undertake in everyday life. For instance, we can relate the process to that which we follow if we decide to buy a car. After the decision is made, we begin by recognizing our desires and then narrowing these down to our actual requirements. We then move to details, such as the timeframe involved, how much we will spend, where the money will come from, etc., formulating the plan and beginning the search. We start opening our eyes to possibilities and talking about our project to everyone we come into contact with, asking for advice and information, defining the parameters within which we will work towards our goal. As you can see, the process of research is nothing to be intimidated by – it is one that you have followed many times in your daily life.

I am writing to you about this subject because it is one that I enjoy, and it is a great part of my life. I believe that research is (or most certainly *should* be) the name of the game in teaching, especially in teaching English as a foreign or second language. I would like to help you see that although research is hard work, it is tremendously rewarding and does not have to be terribly daunting if you go about it happily, with a plan. I have done numerous and varied formal research projects, and have taught Research Methodology at the Master's level. My thesis for the Master's Degree in Teaching Social Science was centered on bibliographical research methodology, resulting not only in the acquisition of my Degree, but the analysis and presentation of the data collected is the basis for the recently published book *El Mito del Rito*. Currently, I am studying for my Doctoral Degree in Language Studies, this time employing action research methodology. I would like to share some of my experiences with you, and offer some brief ideas for coming to terms with research.

There are several methodologies that can be undertaken in research, including a purely bibliographical one. However, bibliographical research is an essential factor in *all* types of research. The process of bibliographical research begins as soon as the decision to do research has been made. You must determine whether your hypothesis has already been proved or disproved, and if you can in fact make a contribution to the field. This beginning also helps you to clearly identify your hypothesis and narrow it down to a definite point. This is imperative, as you must get to the very essence of your hypothesis so that you can describe and develop it from its root.

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Your hypothesis is the canvas for your art. With your original idea you should have a pretty good sense of what you want to paint (research). From that point you start thinking about the picture itself (your final presentation). The next step is to decide how you are going to go about producing your work of art – how are you going to “prove” or substantiate your hypothesis? Is your research going to be entirely bibliographical, or will you also collect ethnographical, sociological and/or other types of data? Are you going to test your hypothesis in action? Once you have answered these basic questions you can decide on how you are going to go about doing your actual research. With this base things become more concrete, and you will find that your picture is becoming clearer in your mind. At this point you should be able to actually think out the chapters you will write up to present your research, and your imagination really starts kicking into gear. Now you can begin making your working plan.

One of the most important parts in doing any kind of research is the planning stage. Once you have your hypothesis well defined, a general, overall plan of how to progress is necessary. The pattern of the steps taken in the progression of the research process resembles a great spiral that starts out big and works down to a point. But this point is not the completion of the process. (The concept of ‘completion’ is a fictitious one in the case of research, as there is no *end* to research.) When this point has been reached, the work then proceeds back up the spiral through the writing and presentation of the data collected and its analysis for the final product. (Again, a ‘final product’ is a bit of a misnomer, as there is rarely a ‘final’ in either research or writing.)

I have broken the research process down into five general areas. Although I have made these divisions, please remember that the research process is a whole and these areas frequently overlap -there are always several things going on at the same time! Every research project is different, but I hope these suggestions will inspire you, help you get started, and make the going a little easier.

Scheduling

Scheduling for research must be recognized as an integral part of the planning of the research project. One must have a timetable in order to get a job done, otherwise it could go on forever! One must formulate research goals in a progressive, step-by-step manner, and have a schedule to meet them all along the way. A research project does not just flow along and suddenly come to an end. There are many steps that must be taken, and the steps should be progressively staged.

Once one has defined the project and the methods that will be implemented to carry it out, a schedule can be developed. The school or authority requesting the research usually delineates the beginning and ending of the schedule, and from there one can proportion the time allotted according to the needs of the research process. The first stage should be set aside for reading. This gives the researcher background information and an ever more definite idea of what he or she is attempting, and will also offer much information

on *how* to go on. Be careful and do not cut yourself short on this step, because if you do, you will find the going much more difficult later on. Decide how much time you can set aside for reading *on a daily basis*, and stick to it!

The next stage for scheduling should be that for designing the instruments to be used in the research, such as questionnaires, tests, classes, etc. Plan time for this because it does take time and will provide the actual data for your research. From there one can plan the timing for the application of the instruments, not forgetting that *others* are involved at this point, and *their* scheduling must also be considered. It is a good idea to pad your timing on this part of the plan for unexpected delays. When you are setting up the schedule for this stage, do not forget to figure in time for personal journal entry sessions, if you plan on keeping one.

Next comes the scheduling of your revision and analysis of data gathered. This again is something that you should really *plan* for because it is not a “given”, it does not happen just because you have done the work, even if you have been truly conscious of organization. You must analyze and synthesize your information, and this takes time. You must remember to include thinking time too!

Then, time must be scheduled for writing. Hopefully you will be doing *some* of this all along, at least making notes on specific ideas you want to discuss and explain. In any case, writing time *must* be scheduled. Once again, do not cut yourself short here. Although you should have a firm schedule for writing every day (as you did with reading), sometimes you will be in front of a blank piece of paper, and it will just stare back at you and stubbornly insist on staying blank. The muse is a capricious character; she will not come every time you call her, but she surely will not visit you if you do not invite her and make time for her! Also keep in mind that nothing is written right off. You will make many drafts of every single page before you get to anything even *approximating* a real presentation of your work, so plan time for this.

The Bibliographical Facet

As stated above, the core of any research is the bibliographical work, which is an on-going, constant process. If you already have your hypothesis, then you have probably already started this part of your project, because ideas rarely simply fall into our minds. Reading must be a daily part of the life of a researcher. Always keep your eyes and ears open for possible resources, because you will be surprised at the places they can turn up. Bibliographical research is essential in the research process and in any academic writing. Here we will look at the general process involved.

You will need to set aside time from the very beginning of your research for reading in order to get a good firm grasp of what research has already been done before you get going. You cannot read, or even *find, everything* that has ever been written about your subject, but you must do your dead level best. When I begin doing bibliographical research I like to begin with the earliest published works; the “fathers” of thought on the

subject. I feel that this historical research is a necessary step because knowledge is *built* – it is rarely *discovered*, and we build knowledge from studying what others have done. Once I feel that I have a firm foundation laid, I begin to search for more recent publications. For my current project, I decided that I would pretty much limit myself to nothing published before 1970. Well, I found that there was so much information that I needed further limitation and drew the line at nothing published before 1980. I again found the timeframe to be too broad and have finally placed my starting line at 1995! Of course there are and will be exceptions to a timeframe limitation, but one must have a basic framework within which to function.

It is not enough to read and learn, because eventually you must write, and you will use information gathered from your reading to substantiate and even show contradiction to what you have to say, and of course you must give credit to the author for helping you. You must start your bibliography from the very first book and form the habit of updating it with every book you read.

Keep your bibliography in one place. This is much easier if you have a computer, but it is important to carefully maintain records even if you are doing everything by hand. Do not try to keep scraps of paper or think that you will remember to take the bibliographical data at a later date, because not only is this double work, many times it is impossible to remember where you found something. Before you start your project, make a plan for how you are going to keep your bibliography current, and stick with it. It is a good idea to find out from the very start what bibliographical format is expected by those for whom you are doing the research. Once you have made this format a matter of habit, it will be a matter of course, and you will not have to go back later and arduously redesign your bibliography.

It is a good idea to keep an additional bibliography, one that I call “Books Needed.” In your reading you will constantly encounter other sources that could help in your research. In fact, this is actually how one goes about bibliographical research. You start with one book, and from its references you start your journey. You need to keep track of this information so that when you have the chance to go to a bookstore or library, you can look for the sources that you know are pertinent to your study so you will not be floundering around. Some floundering around in the search is good, because as I have said, you never know where you will turn up really good material, but it takes a lot of time that we usually do not have. The authors, books and other references that have attracted your attention and that you have culled from your reading are part of your research, gems that you have mined that you should not misplace or forget.

Note-Keeping

Another plan to be formulated from the beginning of your bibliographical research is the keeping of notes. While you are reading, you will be marking the text in some way to remember salient ideas. Mark your reading with a highlighter and make notes in the margins, communicating with the author and the ideas. This will make your reading

active rather than passive. Make it a habit that once you have finished the reading, copy these ideas verbatim in some form. Do not think that you will keep the book, copy, article, or whatever and will remember the ideas and where they were and come back to it all later. This will be most improbable at the time of writing-up. Not only will the sheer quantity of reading make this infeasible, but it is very difficult (if not impossible!) to try to go back and search for some idea or information that you remember having seen *somewhere*. You are on a search-and-find mission and must treat your findings as the valuable treasures they are. It is a good idea to include a note of where the book or information is or where you got it from, which library or wherever, because you may need to go back and recheck and will need to know exactly where the original information can be located.

Believe it or not, you need to plan for note-keeping. There are many ways of going about it, and you should think about which method will be best suited for your personal work style before you get started, because it is difficult to change systems in the middle of the stream. Some people keep a notebook especially for this while others prefer to keep cards. Be sure that you include the bibliographical information with the notes that you have taken so that you will know who said what. I have used the card system, and it has worked very well for me. I used the big cards and noted the bibliographical information at the top of the card and then took down word for word each and every part of the reading that applied to what I was working on. (Do not forget to note the page number!) Sometimes the notes were long and required more than one card, so if there was more than one I stapled them together. When it came time to write, I could easily go through my notes, separate them according to the chapter or section where I would use them, and proceed from there.

I now have a computer, so my plan for keeping up my bibliography and notes is much easier. I input the complete bibliographical entry and follow it with the notes (including the page number!) from the reading. I then copy the bibliographical entry itself and paste it into its place in my bibliography. (By the way, I not only keep the work on the hard drive of my computer, but I also keep two diskettes updated with all this work.) After I define my chapters and subheadings, I then go back through my notes and separate them out, cutting and pasting them into the sections to which they apply.

Accountability

With the bibliographical work begins the accountability factor of the research project, as there are other factors of accountability involved. How are you going to provide the accountability necessary in a valid research project? What type of accounting you must follow depends on what type of research you are doing and for whom and for what reason you are doing it. Note-keeping is essential here too, and it needs to be specific. You must keep track of everything: time, place, names, etc., because when you are analyzing your data you may need information that you considered irrelevant at the time of the work. Be thorough as a habit, from the very beginning, even if it seems inconsequential and overly

time-consuming, because you will find details difficult to remember in retrospect. Come to like and be friends with note-keeping, and you will find that it is your insight into your work, your defining tool, rather than a tedious task to be endured.

As with your bibliographical data and bibliography, organization is imperative for the accountability process. Keep your notes in an orderly fashion, because when it comes time to write it will make the work much easier, even a pleasure! You do not have to pressure yourself in the beginning to be putting everything into a concrete concept order as you are in the gathering stage, but do keep everything together in one place. You will find that orderliness will not only aid you immensely in your research but that it will be an invaluable asset for the accountability factor that will have to be met at all stages along your research process.

The Write-Up

The write-up is the upward passage of your research spiral. All the steps we have talked about so far lead up to and are part of the structure of writing. If you are doing research, sometimes the concept of 'thesis' is thought of as having two perspectives; that of the beginning idea and that of the final work. But we must remember that the beginning idea is the *hypothesis*, and the prefix "hypo-" means under, beneath, below or subordinated to. At the beginning of a research project one starts with a *hypothesis*, an idea which may be very clear to oneself, but needs background and substance to justify its being and for proving (or disproving) its validity. This is research. When the actual research work has been completed to the satisfaction of the researcher (because remember, research is never really *finished*), analysis of the findings is made. The final product, or thesis, is the written work: an idea is nothing if it cannot be shared.

This brings us to the secret of writing – you must 'just do it', as a famous advertising campaign says. Writing-up research can (and should) be done throughout the research process. Do not feel that you have to start with the introduction and work in a straight line through to the conclusion. You can do this if you like, but it does not matter *where* you begin writing. There is no law that says you must begin with the Introduction, and in fact it is sometimes better to save this until last. You can begin with the second or fourth or ninth chapter if you like! The only real limitation is of course that your conclusion will be written when the research has been completed and analyzed, but even then it is a good idea to keep notes of ideas and suggestions for the conclusion as you go along. Remember that you are going to be doing a lot of rewriting, so do not feel that things once written cannot be changed. The hardest part about writing (or anything else!) is getting started. Do not feel that you have to wait until the end of your research to begin writing. It is much better if you are writing all along, as part of the process. Start as soon as you feel you have something to say!

There are many styles of writing, and academic writing is a specific style. The structure of academic writing must follow a logical path. The easier it is for the reader to follow the steps and thought processes of the author, the better. The point is for others to

be able to grasp and understand what is being explained, and making things seem more difficult or involved than necessary does not impress anyone, but rather puts the reader off to the point that she or he may not even bother trying.

The first part of academic written structure is the definition of the hypothesis, opening with an introduction that explains the rationale behind the research, a brief description of its development and an overview of the presentation. Then follows an explanation of *why* the researcher has opted to do the study. Thereafter, the findings drawn from all sources encountered regarding the research, bibliographical and otherwise, are made, supporting the need for the particular subject of research. The process followed in the research is disclosed and outlined. Particular points of the research are discussed. A concluding chapter unites the information and defines the conclusions of the researcher. The concluding chapter should be presented in a summary form, establishing the validity of the hypothesis (or proving it false), and should complete the full circle back to the introduction.

Happy Researching!

Doing research is exhilarating. However, it can be intimidating and really frustrating if you do not have a clear-cut plan from the outset. One can become lost or embroiled in interesting but irrelevant wanderings if a plan has not been made and followed. Research is a process of logical, interrelated steps to be taken with patience and foresight. Take the first step, make a plan, and let your imagination soar!