

The Bedford Guide to the Research Process

Jean Johnson



The Bedford Guide to the Research Process

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Preface

The love of the search seems deeply rooted in our culture. It is reflected in the great search stories of our literature such as Sir Galahad's quest for the Holy Grail and Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick. We celebrate the great European explorers who quested for treasure, the pioneers who went west looking for land and gold, and the modern space travelers seeking new horizons. This book helps students harness that basic enthusiasm as a motivating force while doing research. It also helps them see that research is not an esoteric activity conducted only by scholars in libraries and prescribed only in schools but a necessary and constant function of everyday life. What students already know about this process can aid them in their current research project; in turn, what they learn here can be applied to the acquisition of knowledge anywhere. Students will also be able to see that the skills they have learned in other writing classes can be used and developed further in writing the research paper.

The Bedford Guide to the Research Process will serve students in two ways: first, as a step-by-step guide to the research process for a course in which a research paper is assigned and, second, as a reference for writing papers both in college and after graduation. Researchers in any subject will find what they need in this book. At each stage in the process, examples from student writing in a wide range of subjects from engineering, biology, psychology, and geology to computer science, history, music, and literature provide scholars with a sense of how others have worked in areas related to their own. Besides illustrating each stage of the process, these examples serve as a background chorus of fellow researchers—human voices in what can at times seem like a wilderness of books, periodicals, notes, and drafts.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the research process and explains the three main stages of that process—searching, re-searching, and revising. Chapter 2 helps students choose a topic; after following the guidelines here, few students will say that they can't think of anything to write about. Planning the research project and designing a search strategy are discussed and illustrated in Chapter 3. In the chapters that follow, I have provided not only step-by-step guidelines for using the library card catalog and sources in the reference room but di-

rections for developing a questionnaire, conducting an interview, recording oral history, locating data in court documents, and obtaining information from current federal files. For those who want to use graphic aids, specific instructions and examples are provided. At each stage I have given helpful suggestions for users of computers and word processors.

Chapter 7 shows students how to analyze and organize the information they have collected before they begin writing. In Chapters 8, 9, and 10, I provide a detailed guide to the process of converting information into a paper designed for a particular audience. And because inexperienced researchers often focus primarily on the first draft, I show them how to give equal care to revising their papers and preparing a final draft. Four complete student papers in the last three chapters illustrate writing and documentation styles in three major disciplinary areas: two papers in the humanities (including one in literature) using the parenthetical citation format recommended by the Modern Language Association; a paper in the social sciences using the format recommended by the American Psychological Association; and a paper in the sciences using a number system. Complete instructions and illustrations for these styles precede the papers themselves. The format for using footnotes or endnotes is also explained and illustrated for those who prefer to use them.

To help students focus on the process they are using, I encourage them to record in a search log how and where they obtained their data as well as problems they have encountered and solutions they have found. Specific advice for keeping the log is given in the text and in the exercises at the end of chapters. Students can use these accounts to compare ideas and techniques with one another and to measure their own progress. Instructors will find the logs helpful in detecting student difficulties before they become problems. The search log is presented as an option. Instructors who want to teach the research process without the use of a log can easily do so.

In Appendix 1, students will find an annotated list of reference sources for over twenty-five academic subjects. General reference works, such as encyclopedias and dictionaries, appear first, followed by a list of reference works for primary disciplines (humanities, social sciences, and sciences) and then by a list of references and professional journals arranged by subject area. This annotated list helps students locate and make choices among the many reference sources available in most libraries.

Appendix 2 lists style manuals and handbooks for over twenty-five disciplines. Students who are writing for technically knowledgeable audiences or advanced students who may wish to publish their work will find this bibliography especially useful.

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