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Jacques Barzun & Henry F. Graff

the modern researcher

An instructive and urbane manual on how to gather and organize facts, check their accuracy, and report the findings simply, clearly, and gracefully



A HARBINGER BOOK



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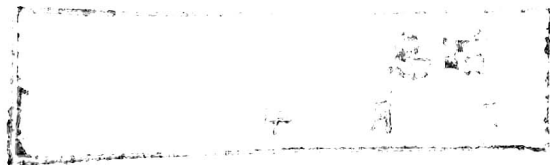
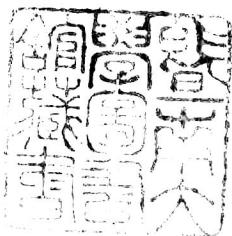
The Modern Researcher

Jacques Barzun

and

Henry F. Graff

Columbia University



A Harbinger Book

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Every one of you gentlemen, every thinking man generally, is a seeker after sources and a pragmatic historian. You have to be both in order to understand any event that takes place before your eyes. Every business man who handles a complicated transaction, every lawyer who studies a case, is a seeker after sources and a pragmatic historian.

—Theodor Mommsen
Rectorial Address at the
University of Berlin, 1874.

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FOREWORD

This book is for anyone who is or will be engaged in research and report writing, regardless of his field of interest. The work is planned on unconventional lines because the authors have found in their experience as teachers and editors that the needs of writers and researchers—whether in college or graduate school, in business or the professions—are met neither by the usual “Introduction to Research” nor by the usual “How to Write” books. Rather, the need is for a new view of the single subject, Research-and-Report, which these conventional manuals falsely split apart. In academic life, the fallacy of the split is expressed in the impatient outcry: “Why doesn’t the English Department teach them how to write!”

The authors are historians who sympathize equally with the English Department, with the universal demand for better writing, and with all those who, soon or late in their education, are trying to master at once the techniques of research and the art of expression. What such persons need, clearly, is a manual of combined operations. It must be designed to give not so much a set of rules as an insight into what the mind is about when it seeks for facts in library books and prepares a report on its findings for the inspection of other men.

To carry out its purpose, this book concentrates on principles of thought and the analysis of difficulties. It illustrates both theory and

practice by examples from many fields, and it shows how methods of work, that is, devices of investigation and expression, follow from the characteristic features of typical problems. These devices, it need hardly be said, are the general ones of scholarship, not the particular ones of statistical or mathematical work, nor the field or laboratory techniques of testing or interviewing. The present work, in short, aims at fundamentals, in the belief that students and instructors alike can make a finer adjustment of sound principles to unforeseeable cases than can a pair of authors at a distance.

The scheme of the book is accordingly simple. Any researcher's first question is: what kinds of aids—indexes, bibliographies, dictionaries, catalogues, monographs—are there available to me? And how can I make them yield just so much of their information as I want? The technique for achieving this is universal and it is teachable. Its rudiments are set forth here with examples and graphic illustrations.

The digging and delving once done, the next step is to verify one's data. This soon takes one from the mechanical part of research to the intellectual. On that plane, questions arise that are too important as well as too interesting to be disregarded: What is the nature of the "story" we recover from records? How far can we trust it? What is the effect of bias? the mechanism of causation? the value of the great philosophic systems? If every researcher produces a different picture from the same sources, and if on large subjects rival interpretations continue to flourish, how can the reader of any account of facts escape confusion and ultimate skepticism?

Such ideas as these may not cross the mind of the researcher as he works at a limited project for an immediate purpose—a report on the operation of a business or an army camp, a study of divorce statistics or of consumer tastes. But at some time or other the query "What is truth?" will occur to the fact finder or will be put to the man who reports: "This is what happened, I can tell you how and why."

Well before such a writer or speaker is challenged he will have run into the problem of exposition. The facts *never* "speak for themselves." They must be selected, marshaled, linked together, and given a voice. Moreover, research is not an end in itself. The day comes when the pleasures of the detective hunt are over and the report must

be written. At that point, fit expression no longer appears as a mere frill added to one's accumulation of knowledge. The expression *is* the knowledge. What is not properly presented is simply *not present*—and its purely potential existence is quite useless.

Except in the rare cases where formulas and graphs can stand alone, the sole carriers of information are words, and these, as everybody knows, are difficult creatures to manage. Not only is it difficult to make words agreeable to read and impressive enough to remember; it is also difficult to make them reveal the exact contours of the facts and thoughts one has unearthed—to make them, quite simply, say what one means.

This book does not profess to make good writers by rule and precept, but it does attempt to show how the art of expression is connected throughout with the technique of research and the art of thought. Understanding a text and taking notes on it require the same attention to words and meanings as preparing and polishing a report. Whoever attains skill at the one and is a good researcher can develop skill at the other and become a good report writer. Having in the early chapters shown how the critical mind works on sources, the book ends by detailing systematic ways in which anyone—the student, the government expert, the lawyer, the journalist, the business executive, the editorial assistant, the club secretary, the man of science—in a word, the professional scholar or the scholar-in-spite-of-himself—can criticize and improve his writing and make his report come closer to the reality he has discovered by research.

J. B.

H. F. G.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

December 15, 1956

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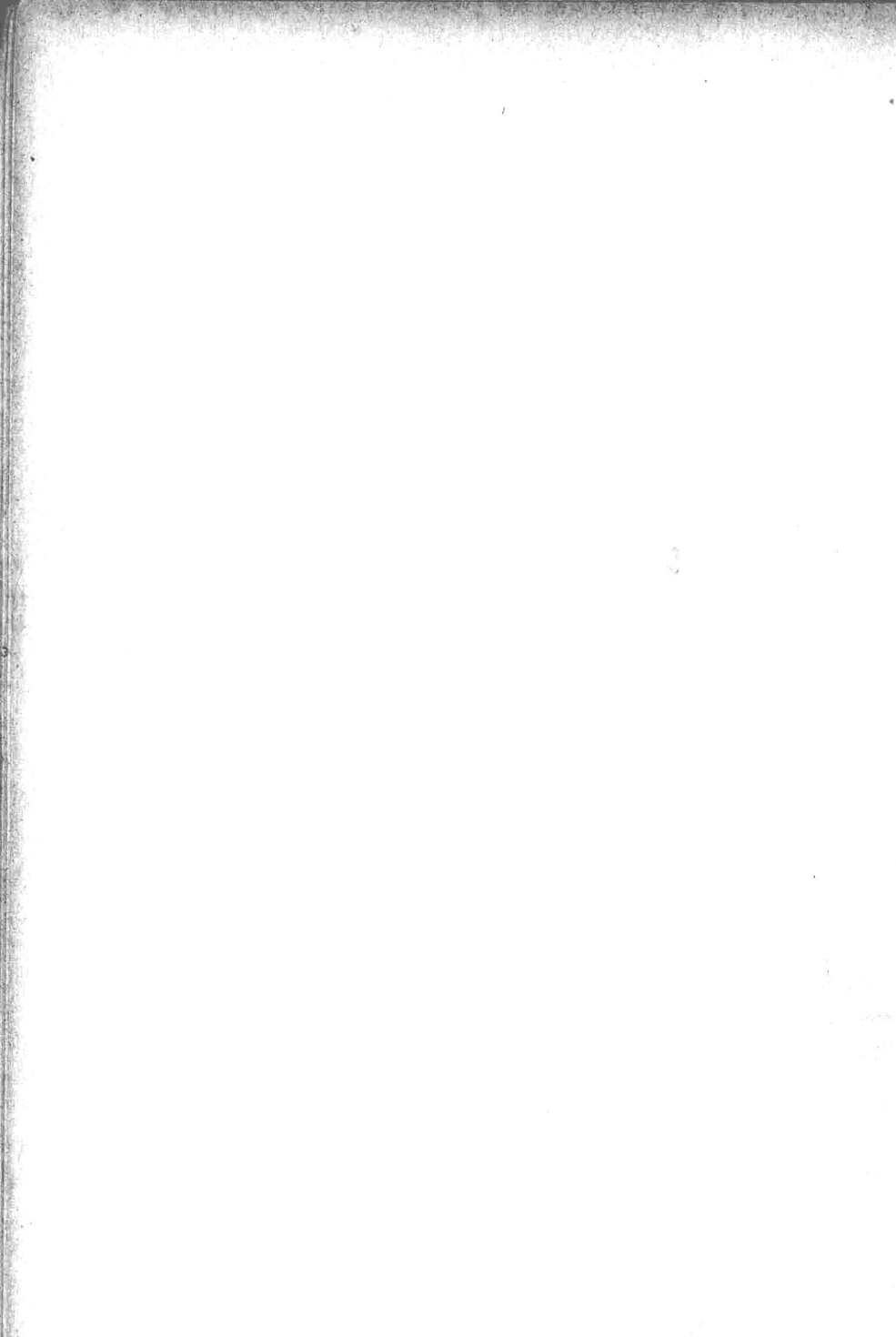
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PART I

First Principles



RESEARCH AND REPORT

AS HISTORIAN'S WORK

The Report: A New and Fundamental Form

In a once famous book on the Middle East, the English archaeologist Layard printed a letter in which a Turkish official answered an Englishman's question. It begins:

My Illustrious Friend and Joy of My Liver!

The thing you ask of me is both difficult and useless. Although I have passed all my days in this place, I have neither counted the houses nor have I inquired into the number of the inhabitants; and as to what one person loads on his mules and the other stows away in the bottom of his ship, that is no business of mine. But, above all, as to the previous history of this city, God only knows the amount of dirt and confusion that the infidels may have eaten before the coming of the sword of Islam. It were unprofitable for us to inquire into it. O my soul! O my lamb! Seek not after the things which concern thee not. Thou camest unto us and we welcomed thee: go in peace.¹

This unruffled public servant obviously made no annual report of any kind to anybody—those were the good old days. At the distance of a century it is interesting to note the three things which he so courteously declined to provide. They are: vital statistics, business reports, and history. Modern life as we know it would stop if information of

¹ Austen H. Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* . . . , London, 1853, p. 663.

these three kinds were not readily available on every sort of subject. All over the globe, every moment of the day, someone is being asked to make a search and write a report on some state of fact, or else to read and analyze one, so that action may be taken. It is the way we try to substitute intelligence for routine and knowledge for guesswork.

This characteristic behavior of modern man justifies the conclusion that "the report" is fundamental in the conduct of affairs. It is by now a familiar form, like the business letter or the sonnet.

Every report, moreover, implies previous research, whether by the reporter or by someone else. Thousands of men not connected with academic life are thus turned into more or less able scholars. The Turkish official of today has dropped his hookah, leaped from his cushion, and is busy counting the houses for the Ministry of the Interior. The figures he will report are then published as government statistics, which other researchers will use for still other reports—from the university student writing a paper on modern Turkey to the businessman who wants to raise capital and establish a branch office in that country.

Among the many useful documents that may strictly or loosely be classed as reports there is no essential difference of outlook or method. The student writing a book report for a Freshman English course is doing on a small scale and with a single source the same thing as the president of a corporation who prepares his annual report to the stockholders, or as the President of the United States when, with the aid of all his departments, he reports to the people on the state of the Union. True, scope and purpose differ and this affects the worth of the report as an historical record. But the general form and the devices employed are identical in all three. The reader will readily think of other illustrations of the same truth.

The common element in all these performances is that they present the same problems of investigation and exposition and solve them in similar ways. Moreover, the writers of reports draw upon the same vast reservoir of information. Apart from the special facts which, to pursue the examples above, the treasurer of a corporation or the Secretary of State supply to their respective presidents, the sources for the millions of words uttered in reports are the familiar