

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Asking Questions,
Finding Answers

JOANN KEYTON

Communication Research

ASKING QUESTIONS,
FINDING ANSWERS

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PREFACE

This book began nearly seven years ago when I was forced to think about research methods in a new way. Approached by an organization to help them assess their human resources policy and training, I was overwhelmed by the task of identifying the problems and discovering and developing practical, yet theoretically based solutions. I eagerly agreed to help the organization because their problem—how to create a workplace in which respect and dignity were the core values—was an opportunity to test my skills and abilities as a researcher. I knew that I first needed to develop content expertise. After conducting library and electronic database searches, I realized that the information I obtained was incomplete and at times conflicting. Yet, this information allowed me to develop an initial response that included policy, training, and reporting procedures. I could have stopped there, presented the information to the organization, and considered myself done with the task. Yet, conducting research within the organization was a unique research opportunity allowing me to both contribute to the organizational communication literature base and create a more tailored response for the organization.

Moving further into this process, I conducted focus groups with employees at all levels to gain insight into their personal experiences in the organization. Policy and training would not be as effective if they did not address the needs of employees and management. Data from the focus groups revealed that employees identified a few managers whom they believed to be effective in dealing with employee issues. I conducted field interviews with these individuals. Data from those interviews revealed that inconsistencies among the organization's current policies, training, and reporting procedures were a significant problem. Next, I conducted a content analysis of the organization's policies to examine how the or-

ganization defined and formalized the relationship between managers and employees.

Again, I could have stopped there, presented the information to the organization, and considered myself done with the task. But a new research opportunity presented itself—to test employee and management acceptance of the policy and training I proposed. After designing and conducting survey and experimental studies, I was able to tailor the messages the organization wanted to send in a way that was acceptable to and understandable by employees.

The point to this story is that research is a process. In some cases, library research from the vast store of communication literature may answer our research question. In other cases, the researcher must design studies to answer the initial question. Too many times, I hear students describe research as dull and boring with little relevance to their lives. But, when the research process is designed to answer questions about communication issues that are important to students, it provides them with a new perspective. Rather than considering research to be a boring and laborious chore, they recognize that research is the most effective means for answering meaningful questions in their lives.

The other point to my story is that far too often, I hear students and professors make claims such as "I'm a quantitative researcher" or "I'm an ethnographer." In reality, researchers must have a broad understanding and appreciation of all methodologies—quantitative and qualitative—in order to conduct their research effectively. I've written this book to emphasize three important points:

1. All research starts with an initial research question or problem.
2. Research is a process in which the researcher

makes important decisions at crucial points about what to do and how to do it. This is in contrast to viewing research simply as a series of steps to be completed.

3. To answer the varied nature of questions about communication, one must be familiar with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies as a researcher and as a consumer.

Communication Research: Asking Questions, Finding Answers covers basic research issues and both quantitative and qualitative approaches appropriate for communication students with no previous research methods experience. The text's guiding principle is that methodological choices are made from one's research questions and/or hypotheses. This avoids the pitfall in which students learn one methodology or one methodological skill and then force that method to answer all types of questions.

Features

The primary purpose of this textbook is to introduce students to communication research methods by meeting two objectives. The first objective is to help students become better consumers of the communication research literature by emphasizing effective methods for finding, consuming, and analyzing communication research. This objective is important because students are resident consumers of the communication literature through their participation in other content- or context-specific communication courses. The second objective is to provide a path for students who wish to develop and conduct research projects. To those ends, this book provides coverage of the entire research process: how one conceptualizes a research idea, turns it into an interesting and researchable question, selects a methodology, conducts the study, and writes up the study's findings. I believe that better consumers will be more effective researchers if and when they decide to take on those activities. Reciprocally, students who learn to become researchers will be better consumers of research. Regardless of the role in which students use their research knowledge, they must be able to read and understand the communication research literature.

Emphasis on the Student as Consumer To help students become better consumers of the communication research literature, the book incorporates three kinds of boxes, placed throughout the book. The first, *Consumer Alert*, identifies basic questions students should ask of the research they read. The second type of box, *An Ethical Issue*, identifies issues of ethics and integrity about research practices of concern to both consumers and researchers. The third type of box, *Using the Internet*, points to how research and Web technology can be integrated, and both its potential promise and problems.

Emphasis on the Student as Researcher To help develop research skills, this book provides numerous examples drawn from real research for students who wish to develop and conduct basic research projects. The examples are drawn from current journal articles, which are available in most university and college libraries. Using examples from the breadth of the discipline (for example, persuasion, interpersonal, group, organizational, mass communication, and public relations) lessens the ambiguity between information presented in the book and students' potential application of the information.

Better Balance of Quantitative and Qualitative Research While providing a solid foundation for students to understand the basics of quantitative research, this book acknowledges the increasing use and acceptance of qualitative methodologies in communication research by presenting it as a primary option for researchers depending on the type and nature of the question asked.

There are several chapters devoted exclusively to qualitative methodology and research processes. Qualitative research has its own introductory chapter, two research design chapters, and a chapter to help students find the most appropriate writing style for completing their qualitative research projects. In other chapters in the book (for example, the ethics chapter) qualitative research and examples are presented.

Active Pedagogy In all of the chapters, *Try This!* boxes describe short research activities students can perform individually or with other students. Thus, the book provides a connection for stu-

dents between what they know and are familiar with from other communication courses with what they need to learn about research methods.

- **End-of-chapter checklists** provide a summary of information presented in each chapter. When appropriate, these checklists can be used as a means for distinguishing between information a consumer should know about the research process and what methodological steps students should know if they wish to conduct research.
- **Key terms** are boldfaced within the text and their definitions can be found in the glossary at the back of the book.

Organization

The book is divided into three sections. In the first section, *Research Basics*, students are introduced to the research process, its basic principles, both quantitative and qualitative research, and research ethics before specific methodological techniques are addressed. This organization emphasizes that research is a process, not just one type of method or research skill. Chapters 1 and 2 are introductory to research in general and are neutral with respect to methodology. The issues raised in these initial chapters are issues that both quantitative and qualitative researchers must address. Then Chapters 3 and 4 provide introductions to both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This arrangement encourages students to consider both methodologies and to gain a foundation in each before proceeding to detailed information in subsequent chapters on how specific methods within each work. Chapter 5 is devoted to issues of research ethics—issues students must consider as both consumers and researchers, regardless of which methodology they choose.

The second section of the book, *The Specifics of Research Methods*, provides detailed coverage on how research is conducted with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Chapters 6 through 9 explain measurement concepts, sampling procedures, hypothesis testing, and experimental, quasi-experimental, non-experimental, and survey research designs. Chapters 10 through 12 explain descriptive statistics and statistical

tests of differences and relationships, with a special emphasis on interpreting the results of these tests. Chapter 13 explores three methods—two quantitative and one qualitative—for analyzing message content. Chapters 14 and 15 focus on design issues associated with qualitative methodologies and describe field interviewing, focus groups, narratives, and ethnography as qualitative methods. Each of these chapters focuses on enhancing students' understanding of the research process in both roles of consumer and researcher.

The third section of the book, *Reading and Writing Research Reports*, provides separate chapters for concluding the research process. These chapters demystify the end stage of the research process for both student researchers and consumers. Researchers relying on tradition and customary practices are able and adept consumers of the research literature. Alternately, students confront the research literature with little understanding of how and why finished research reports look the way they do. By having access to this “insider” information, students will be able to prepare their final projects in the traditions of the discipline as well as be able to better decode the research literature.

In talking with colleagues who also teach research methods, I have found that instructors differ greatly in their treatment of statistical concepts. To accommodate these differences in pedagogical style, this book presents the conceptual foundation of each test supported with examples of the test from the research literature. Each test is discussed from the point of view of a student who finds this test in the literature. Questions used to develop these chapters include: How should I read the results of any particular test? How do I connect these results to the research questions and hypotheses the authors proposed? Alternately, for those students who wish to design and conduct quantitative research projects, the statistical formulas (with worked examples as models for each test) appear in an appendix.

Teaching Supplements

A detailed instructor's manual accompanies the book. This manual includes sample syllabi, teaching tips, chapter and course assignments,

exercises for each chapter, and a test bank. This manual also includes worksheets for each chapter. Typically one or two pages in length, worksheets can be used as a homework or in-class assignment for students to review their knowledge and understanding about the material presented. Question types include objective (for example, fill in the blank), comprehension (for example, explain how academic research differs from proprietary research), and behavioral (for example, given a set of variables the student is asked to write research questions and hypotheses). For those chapters that cover statistics or the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, additional worksheets are available, which provide students with the opportunity to work several examples from raw data through to interpretation.

Finally, PowerPoint outlines for each chapter will be available from a Web site devoted exclusively to this book. The Web site will also include links to other Internet-based resources and provide a way to update the URLs listed in the book. The Web site will also list, by chapter, the most contemporary examples of communication research. The address for the book-specific Web site is <http://www/mayfieldpub/keyton/methods/>.

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In writing this book, I have benefited from the generosity of researchers, scientists, and scholars from many disciplines around the world. Unlike many other bodies of knowledge, the World Wide Web has become a cornucopia of information about research methods and statistics. When contacted by e-mail, these colleagues were both prompt and generous.

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