RESEARCH STARTS WITH A THESIS STATEMENT

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Our collective belief in the importance of definite answers impacts many areas of our lives, including how we understand the process and purpose of research. Specifically, it leads to a *thesis-first* research model in which research is only used to verify our existing ideas or theses. (Alison Witte discusses this bad idea in a previous chapter.) In this model, there is no room for doubt or ambiguity. We assume we need to know the answers to our problems or ques- tions before the process gets underway, before we consult and eval- uate what others have said.

Research can be productively used in this way to verify assumptions and arguments. Sometimes what we need is just a little support for an idea, a confirmation of the best approach to a problem, or the answer to simple questions. For example, we might believe the new iPhone is the best smartphone on the market, and use research on the phone's specs to prove we're right. This kind of thesis-first approach to research becomes harmful, however, when we assume that it is *the only* or *the most valuable* way to conduct research. Evidence of this widespread assumption is easy to find. A simple search for the research process on Google will yield multiple hits hosted by academic institutions that suggest a researcher needs a thesis early in the research process. For instance, the University of Maryland University College's *Online Guide to Writing and Research* suggests that a thesis should be developed as soon as source collection gets underway, though that thesis may change over time. In the book, *A Writing Process,* author Vinetta Bell suggests that the thesis-writing process begins during the "preliminary research" stage. This strategy is endorsed by multiple research library websites, such as the University of Minnesota.

And yet, genuine inquiry—the kind of research that often leads to new ideas and important choices—tends to begin with unsettled problems and questions, rather than with thesis state- ments and predetermined answers. Wernher von Braun, an engi- neer whose inventions advanced the U.S. space program in the mid-21st century, famously describes research as, "What I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing." The understanding of research as discovery is echoed in the recent "Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education," a document authored by the Association of College and Research Librarians (ACRL). They write that research often begins with open-ended questions that are "based on information gaps or reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information." In other words, research isn't just for backing up our hunches. It can, and should, also be used as a method of investigating areas of uncertainty, curiosity, conflict, and multiple perspectives.

As the ACRL's framework also emphasizes, when research- ers review published source material around their topic, points of disagreement will be discovered; these points are expected as scholars propose ideas to address complicated issues. When we are open to selecting and engaging with these multiple published perspectives in our research, we're also forced to consider how they extend or challenge our beliefs and ideas about a topic. Considering all sides, we can then make a more informed decision about our questions or topics.

Another potential harm of the thesis-first model of research is the attendant assumption that the research process is linear. In a thesis-guided research process, a question is posed, an answer is generated, and sources are found that match up with that answer. Truthfully, research rarely progresses on an uncluttered path toward a clear solution. Instead, research is a recursive process that involves many diversions, bumps, and missteps. Clark College's library website describes the research process as a daisy, rather than a line. Like a daisy's petals, research is described as *cyclical* and *fluid*. As we research, we may find ourselves returning to and changing our question, or we may near the end of a project and think we're done but discover we need to go back to find more or better sources. The messiness of research requires us to be flexible, often modifying our approaches along the way. When we enter the research process with a narrow and rigid focus on our thesis, we can become discouraged and inclined to abandon our ideas when the research process does not unfold neatly.

In place of a thesis-first model, we would be better served to begin research with a question or a statement of a problem. We should conduct research not just to back up our pre-exist- ing assumptions and prove we're right about something, but also when we feel curious or confused and do not have answers. *Why is something the way it is? Why doesn't the data quite add up? How could something be changed for the better?*

When we understand research as a process of discovery rather than a process of proof, we open ourselves up to be changed by our research—to better our lives, our decisions, and our world. We acknowledge that we do not have the only or the best answer to every question, and that we might learn something from considering the ideas of others. While research definitely has the power to impact our lives and beliefs, research doesn't always have to be life altering. But in a thesis-first model where our only goal is just to prove we're right, there is no possibility of being changed by our research. Here's a practical example of the difference. Just imag- ine the results of a research process beginning with a thesis like "Human trafficking should have harsher legal penalties" versus one that starts with an open-ended question like "Why does human trafficking persist in the democratic nation of the United States?" In the thesis-first model, a researcher would likely only encounter sources that argue for her pre-existing belief: that harsher penalties are needed. She would probably never be exposed to multi- ple perspectives on this complex issue, and the result would just be confirmation of her earlier beliefs. However, a researcher who begins with an open-ended question motivated by curiosity, whose goal is not to *prove* anything, but to discover salient ideas about a human rights issue, has the chance to explore different thoughts about human trafficking and come to her own conclusions as she researches why it's a problem and what ought to be done to stop it, not just create stronger consequences for it.

Viewing research as a process of discovery allows us to accept that not every question is answerable and that questions sometimes lead only to more questions. For instance, the researcher in the previous paragraph exploring the issue of human trafficking might find that there is no clear, single explanation for the prevalence of this human rights violation, and that she's interested to know more about the role of immigration laws and human trafficking—something she never even thought of before she did her research. When researchers do discover answers, they may find those answers are fluid and debatable. What we have at any

time is only a consensus between informed parties, and at any time, new research or insights can cause that agreement to shift. Kenneth Burke, a philosopher and literary critic, explains the constructed nature of knowledge in his *unending conversation* meta- phor. According to Burke, the moment in which a researcher reads and participates in scholarship around the research topic or prob- lem is just a speck on a continuum of conversation that has been ongoing well before the researcher thought of the question, and will continue long after the researcher has walked away from it. As Burke writes, "The discussion is interminable."

So how can we move toward embracing uncertainty? In his book, *A More Beautiful Question,* Warren Berger suggests that parents and those who work with young children can foster curiosity by welcoming questions. Parents also need to learn to be comfort- able with saying "I don't know" in response, rather than search- ing for a simple answer. Berger also recommends that as children go through school, parents and educators can work together to support children's questioning nature, rather than always privileg- ing definite answers. When students graduate and move into the working world, employers can encourage them to ask questions about policies, practices, and workplace content; employees should be given freedom to explore those questions with research, which can potentially lead to more sustainable and current policies, prac- tices, and content. The same goes for civic and community life, where any form of questioning or inquiry is often misconstrued as a challenge to authority. To value questions more than answers in our personal and professional lives requires a cultural shift.

Although our culture would tell us that we have to know every- thing, and that we should even begin a research project by know- ing the answer to our question, there is obvious value in using research as a tool to engage our curiosity and sense of wonder as human beings—perhaps even to improve our lives or the lives of others. If all researchers started the process with preconceived answers, no new findings would ever come to be. In order to truly learn about a topic or issue, especially when it involves important decision making, we need to learn to embrace uncertainty and feel comfortable knowing we might not always have an answer when we begin a research project.

Further Reading

For additional information about the power and purpose of inquiry in our everyday lives, consult Warren Berger's book, *A More*

Beautiful Question (Bloomsbury), which provides an overview of how to engage in authentic inquiry in a variety of settings. Berger offers practical advice for learning to develop research questions that are driven by discovery and innovation. Robert Davis and Mark Shadle also provide a defense of inquiry in their article, "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Art of Seeking" (*College Composition and Communication*).

For more specific information about all of the stages of the research process including formulating a question, Bruce Ballenger's classic guide to research, *The Curious Researcher* (Longman) and Ken Macrorie's canonical text *I Search* (Boynton/Cook), which focuses on research with personal value, may both be useful. Clark College Libraries' website also provides a quick reference chart outlining the research process entitled "The Research Process Daisy." Finally, Wendy Bishop and Pavel Zemliansky's edited collection, *The Subject Is Research: Processes and Practices* (Boynton/Cook), provides perspectives from multiple authors about various research techniques such as interviewing and observation that can be used to engage in the inquiry process.

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Emily Wierszewski has been teaching writing for over ten years, most recently at Seton Hill University outside of Pittsburgh, PA. Her graduate work focused on nonfiction writing, including the study of what makes writing persuasive, as well as how people learn to read and write. As a professor, she's very interested in how her college students understand and have used the research process before coming to her class, including how their precon- ceptions about the purpose and process of research impact their attitudes toward and proficiency with college-level inquiry. She recently wrote a book chapter about how comics can help students more effectively engage with research in the writing classroom. Her Twitter handle is @ewazoo23.