CHAPTER 5

ORGANIZING THE RESEARCH PROCESS

5.1 GAINING CONTROL OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research paper is where all your skills as an interpreter of details, an organizer of facts and theories, and a writer of clear prose come together. Building logical arguments with facts and hypotheses is the way things get done in sociology, and the most successful social scientists are those who master the art of research.

Students new to writing research papers sometimes find themselves intimidated. After all, the research paper adds what seems to be an extra set of complexities to the writing process. As any other expository or persuasive paper does, a research paper must present an original thesis using a carefully organized and logical argument. But a research paper often investigates a topic that is outside the writer's own experience. This means that the writer must locate and evaluate information that is new to him, in effect educating himself as he explores his topic. A beginning researcher sometimes feels overwhelmed by the basic requirements of the assignment or by the authority of the source material.

In the beginning it may be difficult to establish a sense of control over the different tasks you are undertaking in your research project. You may have little notion which direction to take in searching for a thesis, or even where the most helpful sources of information might be located. If you fail to monitor your own work habits carefully, you may unwittingly abdicate responsibility for the paper's argument by borrowing it wholesale from one or more of your sources.

Who is in control of your paper? The answer must be you—not the instructor who assigned you the paper, and certainly not the published writers whose opinions you solicit. If all your paper does is paste together the opinions of others, it has little use. It is up to you to synthesize an original idea through the evaluation of your source material. At the beginning of your research project, there will be many elements of your paper about which you are unsure—you will probably not yet have a definitive thesis sentence, for example, or even much understanding

of the shape of your argument. You can establish a measure of control over the process you will go through to complete the paper. And if you work regularly and systematically, keeping yourself open to new ideas as they present themselves, your sense of control will grow. The following are some suggestions to help you establish and maintain control of your paper.

5.1.1 Understand Your Assignment

A research assignment can fall short simply because the writer did not read the assignment carefully. Considering how much time and effort you are about to put into your project, it is a very good idea to make sure you have a clear understanding of what it is you are to do. Be sure to ask your instructor about any aspect of the assignment that is unclear to you—but only after you have thought about it carefully. Recopying the assignment instructions in your own handwriting is a good way to start, even though your instructor may have given them to you in writing.

5.1.2 Establish Your Topic

It may be that the assignment gives you a great deal of specific information about your topic, or that you are allowed considerable freedom in establishing one for yourself. In a social problems class in which you are studying issues affecting American society, your professor might give you a very specific assignment—for example, a paper examining the difficulties of establishing viable community policy in the wake of significant changes in the urban family structure—or she may allow you to choose for yourself the issue that your paper will address. You need to understand the terms, set up in the assignment, by which you will design your project.

5.1.3 Ascertain Your Purpose

Whatever the degree of latitude you are given in the matter of your topic, pay close attention to the way in which your instructor has phrased the assignment. Is your primary job to describe a current social issue or to take a stand on it? Are you to compare social systems, and if so, to what end? Are you to classify, persuade, survey, or analyze? Look for such descriptive terms in the assignment directions to determine the purpose of the project.

5.1.4 Understand Who Your Audience Is

Your own orientation to the paper is profoundly affected by your conception of the audience for whom you are writing. Granted, your number-one reader is your instructor, but who else would be interested in your paper? Are you writing for the citizens of a community? A group of professionals? A city council? A paper that describes the complex changes in the urban family may justifiably contain

much more technical jargon for an audience of sociology professionals than for a citizens group made up of local business and civic leaders.

5.1.5 *Determine the Kind of Research You Are Doing*

In your paper you will do one or both of two kinds of research, primary and secondary. Primary research requires you to discover information firsthand, often by conducting interviews, surveys, or polls. In primary research, you are collecting and sifting through raw data—data that have not already been interpreted by researchers—that you will study, select, arrange, and speculate on. This raw data may be the opinions of experts or people on the street, historical documents, the theoretical speculations of a famous sociologist, or material collected from other researchers. It is important to carefully set up the method(s) by which you collect your data. Your aim is to gather the most accurate information possible, from which sound observations may be made later, either by you or by other writers using the material you have uncovered.

Secondary research makes use of secondary sources—that is, published accounts of primary materials. Although the primary researcher might poll a community for its opinion on the outcome of a recent bond election, the secondary researcher will use the material from the poll to support a particular thesis. In other words, secondary research focuses on interpretations of raw data. Most of your college papers will be based on your use of secondary sources.

5.1.6 *Keep Your Perspective*

Whichever type of research you perform, you must keep your results in perspective. There is no way in which you, as a primary researcher, can be completely objective in your findings. It is not possible to design a questionnaire that will net you absolute truth, nor can you be sure that the opinions you gather in interviews reflect the accurate and unchanging opinions of the people you question. Likewise, if you are conducting secondary research, you must remember that the articles and journals you are reading are shaped by the aims of their writers, who are interpreting primary materials for their own ends. The farther you get from a primary source, the greater the possibility for distortion. Your job as a researcher is to be as accurate as possible, and that means keeping in view the limitations of your methods and their ends.

5.2 EFFECTIVE RESEARCH METHODS

5.2.1 *Establish Effective Procedures*

In any research project there will be moments of confusion, but establishing effective procedures can prevent confusion from overwhelming you. You need to design a schedule for the project that is as systematic as possible, yet flexible

enough so that you do not feel trapped by it. A schedule will help keep you from running into dead-ends by always showing you what to do next. At the same time, it will help you to retain the presence of mind necessary to spot new ideas and new strategies as you work.

5.2.2 *Give Yourself Plenty of Time*

There may be reasons why you feel like putting off research: unfamiliarity with the library, the pressure of other tasks, or a deadline that seems comfortably far away. Do not allow such factors to deter you. Research takes time. Working in a library often seems to speed up the clock, so that the hour you expected it to take to find certain sources becomes two hours. You should allow yourself time not only to find material, but to read, assimilate, and set it in context with your own thoughts.

The schedule that follows lists the steps of a research project in the order in which they are generally accomplished. Remember that each step is dependent on the others, and that it is quite possible to revise earlier decisions in light of later discoveries. After some background reading, for example, your notion of the paper's purpose may change, which may, in turn, alter other steps. One of the strengths of a good schedule is its flexibility. The general schedule lists tasks for both primary and secondary research; you should use only those steps that are relevant to your project.

Research Schedule

Task	Date of Completion
Determine topic, purpose, and audience	________
Do background reading in reference books	________
Narrow your topic; establish a tentative hypothesis	________
Develop a working bibliography	________
Consult alternative sources of information, if necessary	________
Read and evaluate written sources, taking notes	________
Determine whether to conduct interviews or surveys	________
Draft a thesis and outline	________
Write a first draft	________
Obtain feedback (show draft to instructor, if possible)	________
Do more research, if necessary	________
Revise draft	________
Correct bibliographical format of paper	________
Prepare final draft	________
Proofread	________
Proofread again, looking for characteristic errors	________
Deadline for final draft	________

5.2.3 Do Background Reading

Whether you are doing primary or secondary research, you need to know what kinds of work have already been done in your field of study. A good way to start is by consulting general reference works, though you do not want to overdo it (see the following paragraph). Chapter 6 lists specialized reference works focusing on topics of interest to sociologists. You might find help in such volumes even for specific, local problems, such as how to restructure a juvenile treatment program or plan an antidrug campaign aimed at area schools.

Be very careful not to rely too exclusively on material taken from general encyclopedias. You may wish to consult one for an overview of a topic with which you are unfamiliar, but students new to research are often tempted to import large sections—if not entire articles—from such volumes, and this practice is not good scholarship. One major reason that your instructor has required a research paper from you is to have you experience the kinds of books and journals in which the discourse of sociology is conducted. General reference encyclopedias, such as *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or *Colliers Encyclopedia,* are good places for instant introductions to subjects; some encyclopedias even include bibliographies of reference works at the ends of their articles. But you will need much more detailed information about your subject to write a useful paper. Once you have gotten some general background information from an encyclopedia, move on.

A primary rule of source hunting is to use your imagination. Determine which topics relevant to your study might be covered in general reference works. For example, if you are looking for introductory readings to help you with the aforementioned research paper on antidrug campaign planning, you might look into such specialized reference tools as the *Encyclopedia of Social Work.* Remember to check articles in such works for lists of references to specialized books and essays.

5.2.4 Narrow Your Topic and Establish a Working Thesis

Before beginning to explore outside sources, it would be a good idea for you to examine what you already know or think about your topic, a job that can only be accomplished well in writing. You might wish to use one or more of the prewriting strategies described in Chapter 1. You might be surprised by what you know—or don't know—about the topic. This kind of self-questioning can help you discover a profitable direction for your research.

For a research paper on a course in social problems, Emily Faucet was given the general topic of studying grassroots attempts to legislate morality in American society. She chose the topic of textbook censorship. Here is the path her thinking took as she looked for ways to limit the topic effectively and find a thesis:

General Topic	**Textbook Censorship**
Potential topics	How a local censorship campaign gets started Funding censorship campaigns Reasons behind textbook censorship Results of censorship campaigns
Working thesis	It is disconcertingly easy in our part of the state to launch a textbook censorship campaign.

It is unlikely that you will come up with a satisfactory thesis at the beginning of your project. You need to guide yourself through the early stages of research toward a main idea in a way that is both useful and manageable. Having in mind a working thesis—a preliminary statement of your purpose—can help you select material that is of greatest interest to you as you examine potential sources. The working thesis will probably evolve as your research progresses, and you need to be ready to accept such change. You should not fix on a thesis too early in the research process, or you may miss opportunities to refine it.

5.2.5 Develop a Working Bibliography

As you begin your research, you will look for published sources—essays, books, articles, and interviews with experts in the field—that may help you with your project. This list of potentially useful sources is your working bibliography. There are many ways to discover items for the bibliography. You can search the cataloging system in your library, as well as the specialized published bibliographies in your field, for titles. (Some of these bibliographies are listed in Chapter 6.) The general reference works you consulted for your background reading may also list such sources, and each specialized book or essay you find will have a bibliography of sources its writer used that may be useful to you.

From your working bibliography you can select items for the final bibliography, which will appear in the final draft of your paper. Early in your research you may not know which sources will help you and which will not. It is important to keep an accurate description of each entry in your working bibliography to tell clearly which items you have investigated, which you will need to consult again, and which you will discard. Building the working bibliography also allows you to practice using the required bibliographical format for the final draft. As you list potential sources, include all the information about each source needed for your format, and place the information in the correct order, using the proper punctuation.

The American Sociological Association's bibliographical format—the one most often required for sociology papers—is described in detail in Chapter 4 of this manual.

5.2.6 Consult Alternative Sources of Information

In the course of your research you may need to consult a source that is not immediately available to you. For example, while working on the antidrug campaign paper, you might find that a packet of potentially useful information is available from a government agency or a public interest group at the state or federal level. Maybe an essential book is not held by your university library or by any other local library. Or perhaps a successful antidrug program has been implemented in the school system of a city comparable in size to yours but located in another state.

In such situations, it may be tempting to disregard potential sources because of the difficulty of obtaining them. If you ignore the existence of material important to your project, however, you are not doing your job.

It is vital that you take steps to acquire the needed material. In the first situation, you can simply write to the agency or public interest group; in the second, you may use your library's interlibrary loan procedure to obtain a copy of the book; in the third, you can track down the council that manages the antidrug campaign, by e-mail, mail, or phone, to ask for information. Remember that many businesses and government agencies want to share their information with interested citizens; some even have employees or entire departments whose job is to facilitate communication with the public. Be as specific as possible when asking for information by mail. It is a good idea to briefly outline your project—in no more than a few sentences—in order to help the respondent determine the type of information you need. Also, be sure to begin the job of locating and acquiring long-distance source material as soon as possible, to allow for the various delays that often occur while conducting a search at a distance.

5.2.7 *Evaluate Written Sources*

Few research experiences are more frustrating than half-remembering something worth using from a source that you can no longer identify. Establish an efficient method of examining and evaluating the sources listed in your working bibliography that will leave you with an accurate written record of your examination. The following are some suggestions for using written sources.

Determine quickly the potential usefulness of a source. For books, you can read through the prefatory material (the introduction, foreword, and preface), looking for the author's thesis; you can also examine chapter headings, dust jackets, and indexes. A journal article should announce its intention in its abstract or introduction, which in most cases will be a page or less in length. This preliminary examination should tell you whether a more intensive examination is worthwhile. Note that whatever you decide about the source, you should photocopy the title page of the book or journal article, making sure that all important publication information (including title, date, author, volume number, and page numbers) is included. Write on the photocopied page any necessary information that is not printed there. Without such a record, later in your research you might forget that you had looked at that text, and you may find yourself examining it again.

When you have determined that a potential source is worth closer inspection, explore it carefully. If it is a book, determine whether you should invest the time it will take to read it in its entirety. Whatever the source, make sure you understand not only its overall thesis, but also each part of the argument that the writer sets up to illustrate or prove the thesis. Get a feel for the shape of the writer's argument, for how the subtopics mesh to form a logical defense of her main point. What do you think of her logic? Her examples? Coming to an accurate appraisal may take more than one reading.

As you read, try to get a feel for the larger argument in which this source takes its place. References to other writers will give you an indication of where else to look for source material as well as of the general shape of scholarly opinion concerning your subject. If you can see the article you are reading as only one element of an ongoing dialogue instead of an attempt to have the last word on the subject, then you can place the argument of the paper in perspective. The same goes for book-length treatments.

5.2.8 *Use Photocopies*

Periodicals and most reference works cannot be checked out of the library. Before the widespread placement of photocopy machines, students could use these materials only by sitting in the library, reading sources, and jotting down information on note cards. Although there are advantages to using the note-card method, photocopying saves you time in the library and allows you to take the source information in its original shape home, where you can decide how to use it at your convenience, perhaps shaping the material at your computer keyboard.

If you decide to make copies of source material, you should do the following:

- Follow all copyright laws.
- Have the exact change for the photocopy machines.
- Record all necessary bibliographical information on the photocopy. If you forget to do this, you may find yourself making an extra trip to the library just to get an accurate date of publication or set of page numbers.

Remember that photocopying a source is not the same thing as examining it. You will still have to spend time going over the material, assimilating it in order to use it accurately. It is not enough merely to have the information close at hand or even to read it through once or twice. You should understand it thoroughly. Be sure to give yourself time for this kind of evaluation.

5.2.9 *Determine Whether to Conduct Interviews or Surveys*

If your project calls for primary research, you may need to interview experts on your topic or to conduct a survey of opinions among a select group using a questionnaire. Be sure to prepare yourself as thoroughly as possible for any primary research. Following are some tips for conducting an interview.

Establish a purpose for each interview, bearing in mind the requirements of your working thesis. In what ways might your discussion with the subject benefit your paper? Write down your formulation of the interview's purpose. Estimate the length of time you expect the interview to take and inform your subject. Arrive for your scheduled interview on time and dressed appropriately. Be courteous.

Learn as much as possible about your topic by researching published sources. Use this research to design your questions. If possible, learn something about the people you interview. This knowledge may help you establish rapport

with your subjects and will also help you tailor your questions. Take a list of prepared questions to the interview. However, be ready to depart from your list of questions to follow any potentially useful direction that the interview takes.

Take notes during the interview and bring along extra pens. The use of a tape recorder may inhibit some interviewees. If you wish to use audiotape, ask for permission from your subject. Follow up your interview with a thank-you letter and, if feasible, a copy of the published paper in which the interview is used.

If your research requires a survey or questionnaire, see Chapter 11 for instructions on designing and conducting surveys, polls, and questionnaires.

5.3 ETHICAL USE OF SOURCE MATERIAL

Your goal is to integrate the source material skillfully into the flow of your written argument, using it as effectively as possible. This means that sometimes you will need to quote from a source directly, while at other times you should recast (paraphrase) source information into your own words.

5.3.1 Quoting

When should you quote? You should directly quote from a source when the original language is distinctive enough to enhance your argument, or when rewording the passage would lessen its impact. You should also quote a passage to which your paper will take exception. In the interest of fairness, it is important to let a writer taking an opposing view state his case in his own words. Rarely, however, should you quote a source at great length (longer than two or three paragraphs). Nor should your paper, or any lengthy section of it, be merely a string of quoted passages. The more quotations you take from others, the more disruptive they are to the rhetorical flow of your own language. Too much quoting creates a "cut-and-paste" paper, a choppy patchwork of varying styles and borrowed purposes in which the sense of your own control over the material is lost.

Acknowledge quotations carefully. Failing to signal the presence of a quotation skillfully can lead to confusion or choppiness:

> The U.S. Secretary of Labor believes that worker-retraining programs have failed because of a lack of trust within the American business culture. "The American business community does not visualize the need to invest in its workers" (Winn 1992:11).

The phrasing of the first sentence in this passage seems to suggest that the quote following it comes from the Secretary of Labor. Note how this revision clarifies the attribution:

> According to reporter Fred Winn (1992), the U.S. Secretary of Labor believes that worker-retraining programs have failed because of a lack of trust within the American business culture. Summarizing the Secretary's view, Winn writes, "The American business community does not visualize the need to invest in its workers" (p. 11).

The origin of each quote must be signaled (cited) within your text at the point where the quote occurs, as well as in the list of works cited (references) that follows the text. Chapter 4 describes documentation formats set forth by the American Sociological Association and the *Chicago Manual of Style.*

Quote accurately. If your quotation introduces careless variants of any kind, you are misrepresenting your source. Proofread your quotations very carefully, paying close attention to such surface features as spelling, capitalization, italics, and the use of numerals. Occasionally, either to make a quotation fit smoothly into a passage, to clarify a reference, or to delete unnecessary material from a quotation, you may need to change the original wording slightly. You must signal any such change to your reader by using brackets:

> "Several times in the course of his speech, the attorney general said that his stand [on gun control] remains unchanged" (McAffrey 1995:2).

Ellipses may be used to indicate that words have been left out of a quote:

> "The last time voters refused to endorse one of the senator's policies . . . was back in 1982" (Laws 1992:143).

When you integrate quoted material with your own prose, it is unnecessary to begin the quote with ellipses:

> Benton raised eyebrows with his claim that "nobody in the mayor's office knows how to tie a shoe, let alone balance a budget" (Williams 1990:12).

5.3.2 Paraphrasing

Your writing has its own rhetorical attributes, its own rhythms and structural coherence. Inserting too many quotations into a section of your paper can disrupt the patterns you establish in your prose and diminish the effectiveness of your own language. Paraphrasing, or recasting source material in your own words, is one way of avoiding the risk of creating a choppy hodgepodge of quotations. Paraphrasing allows you to communicate ideas and facts from a source in your own prose, thereby keeping intact the rhetorical characteristics that distinguish your writing.

Remember that the salient fact about a paraphrase is that its language is yours. It is not a near copy of the source writer's language. Merely changing a few words of the original does justice to no one's prose and frequently produces stilted passages. This sort of borrowing is actually a form of plagiarism. To fully integrate the material you wish to use into your writing, use your own language.

Paraphrasing may actually increase your comprehension of source material; recasting a passage requires you to think carefully about its meaning—more carefully, perhaps, than you might if you merely copied it word-for-word.

5.3.3 *Avoiding Plagiarism*

Paraphrases require the same sort of documentation that direct quotes do. The words of a paraphrase may be yours, but the idea is someone else's. Failure to give that person credit, in the form of references within the text and in the bibliography, may make you vulnerable to a charge of plagiarism.

What kind of paraphrased material must be acknowledged? Basic material that you find in several sources need not be acknowledged by a reference. For example, it is unnecessary to cite a source for the information that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to a fourth term as President of the United States shortly before his death, because this is a commonly known fact. However, Professor Smith's opinion, published in a recent article, that Roosevelt's winning of a fourth term hastened his death is not a fact, but a theory based on Smith's research and defended by her. If you wish to make use of Smith's opinion in a paraphrase, you need to give her credit for it, as you should the judgments and claims of any other source. Any information that is not widely known, whether factual or open to dispute, should be documented. This includes statistics, graphs, tables, and charts taken from a source other than your own primary research.

Plagiarism is the using of someone else's words or ideas without giving that person credit. Although some plagiarism is deliberate, produced by writers who understand that they are guilty of a kind of academic thievery, much of it is unconscious, committed by writers who are not aware of the varieties of plagiarism or who are careless in recording their borrowings from sources. Plagiarism includes the following:

- Quoting directly without acknowledging the source
- Paraphrasing without acknowledging the source
- Constructing a paraphrase that closely resembles the original in language and syntax

One way to guard against plagiarism is to keep careful records in your notes of when you have quoted source material directly and when you have paraphrased—making sure that the wording of the paraphrase is yours. Make sure that all direct quotes in your final draft are properly set off from your own prose, either with quotation marks or in indented blocks.

CHAPTER 6

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Where we get our information is extremely important. The ability to locate valid and reliable information efficiently is vitally important when you are writing papers in sociology. For most papers written in college, the library is the place to find most—if not all—of the information needed. Mastering effective information gathering will help you to be more productive in your research and writing. Further, effective library research skills enable you to practice lifelong learning using information sources available at most libraries.

This chapter highlights methods of information retrieval for major sources in sociology. To give a specific example, let's assume you have been assigned a paper or want information on the traditional American family. With the materials introduced in this chapter, you should be able to find a concise definition of "traditional family," lists of articles and books written about the topic, theories about its impact upon American society, reviews of books to provide a balanced coverage, and government and other statistical sources that help document historical change of the American family—while associating it with a variety of variables, such as age, geographic region, race, and socioeconomic status.

In some cases, someone in a public agency or private organization has probably already conducted significant research on your topic. If you can find the right person, you may be able to secure much more information in much less time than you can by looking in the local library by yourself.

Did you know, for example, that the members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives constantly use the services of the Congressional Research Service (CRS), and that, upon request to your congressperson or senator, materials from the CRS may be sent to you on the topic of your choice? Further, every agency of government on the local, state, and national levels employs people who are responsible primarily for the purpose of gathering information that is needed to help their managers make decisions. Much of the research that is done by these employees is available upon request.