

Book Review

The Bedford Guide to the Research Process,

Jean Johnson

(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 380 pages).

by

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The Bedford Guide to the Research Process does what no other research guide I have used does: it presents research as an exciting process of exploration and discovery. The preface sets the tone by referring to research as a quest, likening it to Sir Galahad's search for the Holy Grail and Ahab's for Moby Dick.

Then the first chapter provides an overview of the searching, re-searching, and writing process with emphasis on keeping two kinds of records: source notes (the usual notecard material) and search notes — a journal recording where the researcher has looked, what has been discovered, and who was interviewed, along with the problems encountered and successful strategies.

Ideally suited to its intended audience, undergraduates in any discipline, this book would serve well as the main text in a writing course which focused primarily on teaching the research paper. Or, with its cross-curricular focus, it would serve equally well as an auxiliary text in any other college course which required students to write a research report. There are four full-length examples of student papers using three different documentation systems, along with an annotated bibliography of basic resources in over 25 different subject areas.

Professor Johnson produces a uniquely up-to-date research guide by dealing with three areas in particular: use of computers and databases, non-library sources, and graphic aids.

Word processing is presented as a tool for locating and gathering information as well as writing and revising the paper. The author explains the advantages of using an on-line database and provides an extensive example. She even includes a guide for the student to follow when consulting a librarian to do the actual search.

The author explains that the library houses mainly information about the past, and that for the most current information researchers must move outside the library to conduct interviews and written surveys; look through government records as well as letters, diaries, and journals; and possibly

conduct experiments themselves. The book includes tips on preparing for, conducting, and following up on the interview; there are also tips and cautions on designing a survey questionnaire; and the author tells the student who to see at the courthouse when looking through public records. In this section on primary sources it is particularly evident that Professor Johnson has conscientiously written this book with the inexperienced student's needs in mind.

The feature which most strikingly sets this research guide apart from others is its treatment of graphic aids. Students are encouraged to use them for any paper, not just those in science or engineering where graphic aids are most common. The text explains how information lends itself to presentation in the various forms: tables, charts, graphs, diagrams, and photographs; seven sample figures are provided.

In addition to these areas which other research guides fail to deal with adequately, *The Bedford Guide* does a better job than others of addressing three areas of special difficulty my students always seem to face: finding a topic, planning their time, and avoiding plagiarism while integrating information from secondary sources with their own ideas and interpretations. In discussing topic selection, Professor Johnson emphasizes the evolutionary process of choosing a topic, including adjusting to the various constraints (such as time and available resources) that all researchers struggle with. Students are shown how to come up with a topic that they are interested in—even when the subject is assigned. And the importance of making a timetable is emphasized, with examples provided so students have some assistance in estimating how long each stage of the process is likely to require. This text also skillfully uses examples to define plagiarism and teach students how to use and acknowledge sources properly so as to avoid inadvertent plagiarism.

Given everything the book covers, one might expect it to be unwieldy, but that is not the case. The book is only 380 pages long with an attractive cover, and its size (6" x 9") makes it easy to handle.

So much is packed into a relatively small space because the author doesn't waste any words. Because the book is succinctly written, the user does have to pay close attention when reading. Yet it's eminently readable because of Professor Johnson's tone, which reflects respect for her reader and enthusiasm for her subject. I recommend the *The Bedford Guide to the Research Process* for use in any college class which requires the student to produce a research paper.