
Reviewed by Douglas Downs, University of Utah

There are two major weaknesses in the teaching of research in first-year composition, at least as research is described in most of the research handbooks first-year composition students use. Too often students are taught research
methods suitable only to student writing, not reflective of the methods their teachers themselves actually use. And too often those who write and speak about research aren’t willing to tell their own stories and show the people behind the “sources” students are taught to “consult.” Which is to say, what’s missing in the majority of our undergraduate research pedagogy is teaching that actually reflects not what we believe “students” are supposed to do, but what we as researchers actually do.

Wendy Bishop and Pavel Zemliansky’s *The Subject Is Research: Processes and Practices*, a collection of 17 essays on research, goes a long way toward addressing these traditional weaknesses. Like the other two books in Bishop’s *The Subject Is . . .* series, the essays in *The Subject Is Research* show actual writers at work: in this case, doing actual research, speaking from experience and conversing with the reader. Instead of cold instruction lists, the book’s advice to student researchers is couched in stories, rationales, and humor. Along the way, a different kind of book is produced: one that reflects the polyvocality and personality often present in the scholarship of composition, one that (usually) successfully imagines the subject student, and one that sees and treats its readers as simply less experienced players in the same scene as the scholars. This approach is long overdue.

The field of composition is known for collaboration, story-telling, and research-supported theory mixed with experience-supported lore. Some of its best works are anthologies of articles and edited collections of original essays. Yet students in writing courses rarely see this side of composition (discounting the ubiquitous reader). Textbooks are single- or, at most, co-authored, and speak with one often authoritarian voice, a tone quite unlike much of composition’s best scholarship. In *The Subject Is Research*, Bishop and Zemliansky have built a text that actually resembles scholarship in the field.

One of the best examples is the first chapter, Jennie Nelson’s “The Scandalous Research Paper and Exorcising Ghosts.” Nelson, who has done the most research of any contemporary composition scholar on how students actually do research-paper assignments, summarizes her work in a chapter that, while voiced for students, refuses to talk down to them:

What is worrisome for me as a teacher and researcher is that so few first-year college students seem to view the research writing process in this open-ended and recursive way, perhaps because too few of them have had the opportunity to experience research this way. For too many college students, as for Ann, described earlier, the research paper remains “dumb busy work” because they see their main job as “regurgitating information that the teacher already knows.” . . .

My goal is to help you see that all writers bring a legacy (often tacit) of past writing experiences with them and that these legacies, especially those related to the research paper, can guide a writer’s choices in unproductive, limited ways. (10-11).

Nelson weaves into her account details of how she has performed her own research, demonstrating to readers how different “real” research is from the sort she deplores in the chapter.

Chapters by Richard Fulkerson (“Making the Research Paper Worth Your Time”) and Bruce Ballenger (“Learning to Trust the Twelfth Picture on the Roll”) similarly reveal the same form we’re familiar with seeing in their scholarly writing. Fulkerson, as we would expect, succinctly explains research projects as argument and demonstrates the sorts of approaches that promise success—and failure. Ballenger (author not only of the research text *The Curious Researcher* but also of the monograph *Beyond Note Cards: Rethinking the Freshman Research Paper*, which theorizes a social-expressive approach to research pedagogy) gives readers an essay on exploring one’s way to a topic by slowly zooming in or tightening one’s focus on the interesting details in a broader scene.

The *Subject Is Research* reflects not only the form of scholarship in the field of composition, but also the methods and theory of such scholarship. There is no presumption that students should think, research, or write in any way other than how these writers themselves do. Fulkerson encourages students to use research to develop rich arguments that complicate issues and allow for careful position-making, rather than oversimplified side-taking. Zemliansky, in his chapter on “Using Your Preexisting Knowledge During Research,” and Cindy Moore, in her chapter on “Finding the Voices of Others Without Losing Your Own,” encourage students to be constantly assessing what they already know about topics, issues, and questions that interest them. Stuart Greene’s exceptional chapter on “Argument as Conversation: The Role of Inquiry in Writing a Researched Argument” casts the purpose of researched writing in a Burkean parlor that represents the dialogic construction of knowledge. “If you see inquiry as a means of entering conversations,” Greene concludes, “then you will understand research as a social process” (155). Georgia Rhodes and Lynn Moss Sanders’s chapter addresses methods of primary research, casting it exactly as scholars think of it: “Creating Knowledge Through Primary Research” (emphasis mine). One impressive detail is the wealth of composition scholarship that these authors cite—books and articles by Doug Brent, Richard Larson, Ken Macrorie, Toby Fulwiler, Sandra Stotsky, Robert Weiss, Tom Romano, and Robert Davis and Mark Shadle, to name a few. There is no sign of the too-frequent textbook dodge of burying sources in fine print at the back of the book.

Unfortunately, the book also provides a contrary pedagogy in Freddy Thomas’s chapter, “From Idea To Argument To Research Using Primary Sources.” Thomas tells students that “the argument-oriented research paper reviews the research of others on a particular topic or issue and uses the findings to support a position, pro or con” (49)—a position which must be “firm” prior to in-depth research on the issue (50). He appears to imagine students as *tabula rasa*, instructing them that “Once you have selected a topic for your
research, the next step is to start locating sources” (52), leaving no quarter for reflection on what they might already know about the issue, and how that knowledge might guide their research. The notion of engagement in conversations never seems to occur to Thomas; for him, the argumentative research paper “provides access to discussions” (47), but not a place for students to contribute to discussions. On the whole, this approach casts primary research strictly as a check on student ignorance, not creation of knowledge. Thomas quotes only textbooks—good textbooks, certainly, but the difference between inviting students into our own scholarship and holding them at the arm’s length of textbooks is a significant one. Finally, while most composition scholars share the conviction that all writing is situated, interested, and slanted, Thomas nevertheless encourages students to favor the “unbiased” source, “one written by a researcher who has no vested interest other than to find an answer or a solution to a particular problem” (52).

Despite that disappointing break in the overall message, however, The Subject is Research successfully teaches research that is reflective of the methods of scholarship in composition itself. Its multi-author collaboration, conversational tone, and arguments based on a mix of research, narrative, and lore will be refreshing to students and fairly represent how knowledge is actually made in our field. Along with the chapters already mentioned, students will find other chapters dedicated to specific research methodologies, written by specialists. “Revisiting the Library: Old and New Technologies for Effective Research” is written by M. Linda Miller, who teaches communication and rhetoric at the University of Pittsburgh and also holds a master’s degree in library and information science. “Interviewing” is written by Ben Raffo, who directs the writing center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and teaches graduate courses in qualitative research methodologies. “The Internet Can Be a Wonderful Place, But . . .”—a balanced look at advantages and disadvantages of Internet research, and a how-to for online source evaluation—is the work of Charles Lowe, who specializes in computers in writing. None of these writers talk down to students—they demonstrate methods suitable for not just student but professional research.

Of equal importance to the methods covered, and the mode in which they are covered, is these writers’ dedication to speaking from personal experience in personal voices. In the tradition of another excellent research text, The Craft of Research (Booth, Colomb, and Williams), many writers in The Subject is Research tell stories of their own research. Most of them also give their own students voices in these chapters (another hallmark of composition scholarship), including student writing, student responses to surveys, and stories of student experiences. Bishop, for example, actually intertwines her topic, “The Researching Writer at Work; or, Managing Your Data Before It Manages (to Overwhelm) You,” with the story of her writing of the chapter itself, stories of her own students completing such projects, and prompts (“invitations”) to her readers to try her suggested methods of reflection and organization. At one point, Bishop explains her thinking as she begins drafting the chapter:

The night before I began drafting, I worried the abstract idea in my head before I fell asleep and up popped the concepts that became my subheadings (“physical, intellectual, visual organization”). That was enough to let me fall asleep and trust the next day’s work. However, until I did that initial sorting, I was worrying fairly seriously about how I would begin my draft. . . . This project, by the way, had finally come to the top of my to-write list, a list I revise about every two weeks as some projects are completed, as ideas or assignments for new projects come to me, or whenever I feel confused about which piece of writing needs to be addressed first. (94)

How wonderful for students to be able to see the thoughts, worries, and methods of a writer at work, particularly when that writer speaks personally. There is a chance, in writing like this, that students will see real people behind texts, and few realizations would do more to broaden their conception of “texts” and “research.”

One way these writers achieve this personal voice is by putting much of the drier, how-to information in “Hint Sheets” at the back of the book. A recurring feature of Bishop’s The Subject Is... series, the Hint Sheets for students and teachers cover a variety of topics (such as tracking research done in the texts one reads, library research strategies, reading notebooks, conversing with critics, and composing processes) in an efficient and compressed manner that makes them great for quick reference. An unusual strategy for a textbook, it’s one that works well. The Subject is Research is also formally unorthodox. Along with the fact that it looks more like an anthology of composition theory than a textbook, the book contains contributor notes but not an index.

Also noteworthy is Bishop and Zemliansky’s strategy of validating a wide range of purposes for research. The text avoids a narrow focus on academic research, like The Craft of Research, or on exploratory research, like The Curious Researcher, instead including some chapters and writers who address each purpose. In the final section, “Genre and Research,” along with Greene’s chapter on argument as conversation, Wendy Weston McClen’s chapter addresses literary research papers, and Cheryl Johnson and Jayne Moneysmith’s explores multigenre research papers. (If there is one criticism to be leveled here, it is the continued literary bent of discussions on research papers, including multigenre papers. Where are chapters on the “scientific” or “historical” or “engineering” research paper? Why is the literary privileged when so few students will major in literature? Not only does the book limit itself as a resource for students in other majors, but it perpetuates students’ notions of “writing” and “research” as “English” rather than communication.) Melissa Goldwaite, in the final chapter, speaks explicitly to the many non-academic
uses of research: research for inspiration, for digging up details, for enriching and supplementing memories, for learning, and for creative writing.

To read The Subject is Research is to see some of the finest scholars in our field explaining their work to students, directly, personably, and convincingly. In a realm where too many textbooks construct students as Other, or insist that students use impossible methods that we would not dream of using ourselves (e.g., “find unbiased sources”), a book that invites students in and teaches the methods its authors themselves use is a rare find. What sets The Subject is Research a head above other excellent research guides (The Curious Researcher, The Craft of Research, Writing from Sources, and Fieldworking) is the way its multi-author anthology format can combine their best features. A significant bonus is the extent to which students can see the workings of the field of composition in the writings of these avowed composition scholars. In a culture that too frequently misunderstands the goals and methods of writing teachers, texts such as The Subject is Research provide a rare glimpse for students of the people and thinking in the field. Despite an unhelpful chapter, and the apparent literary tilt, I’m glad this book is on my shelf, and those who teach research in composition courses would do well to consider putting it in their classrooms.

Salt Lake City, Utah

WORKS CITED