What Preliminary Research Writing Involves and How It Is Executed

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The beginning is half of the whole (Plato)

Abstract

This paper focuses on the preliminary processes of conducting a research work. Its target readers are those students who are new to research area. Given this fact, the fundamental objective of this paper is to familiarize them with the basic definitions and important elements of research. This article collects insights by employing two methods. First, it draws upon the experience of its author as a teacher and researcher. This personal resource renders the article reflective and employs the personal pronoun I. Second, it resorts to documents pertinent to research and academic writings. The paper assigns no separate section for reviewing the past works. Instead, to aid smooth transition and readership, they have been invoked and interlarded in the main body during the discussion. Because the intended readers of this paper are neophytes, simplified version of research terminologies has been used for easy comprehension.

Keywords: research, knowledge, beginner, research questions, gap,

Introduction

In any academic context, students and scholars confront a predicament: either publish or perish. This situation reveals the value and importance of research

publications. A truly conducted research project not only ensures promotion and successful academic career, it also fosters novel perspectives on a given field of inquiry. A research is defined "as the deliberate study of other people for the purposes of increasing, understanding and /or adding to knowledge" (Dawson ix). It aims at "advancing the frontiers of knowledge" (Nicholas Walliman 7). A quick hindsight reflection will reveal that every successive epoch of human civilization is the result of the constant investigation and rigorous curiosity of the previous generations. This unique human activity has continued to unpack a whole range of completely new realms of wonders and marvels over the centuries. Upon this human endeavor has depended the evolution, maturity and happiness of the entire human being. If motivated by the goal of benevolence, a humane research work serves human society with no discrimination and presents a scientific perspective on the entire cosmology.

Although this little background cannot wholly serve to establish the significance for doing a research, it should at least support the statement that every nascent researcher, before embarking on conducting a research work, should first be acquainted with its broad aim and objective. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to delineate a history and philosophy of research, in what follows, I provide an overview of the elements, characteristics, and techniques required of those beginners who are currently or in future planning to pursue an academic project at home or abroad.

Rationale

Writing a sustained and long research essay is an extremely intricate and intriguing academic pursuit. Wayne C. Booth et. al. aptly explain the reason: "research follows a crooked path, taking unexpected turns, sometimes up blind alleys, even looping back on itself" (5). This subtlety explains why a research work is at times off-putting and even frustrating. To write on a single topic at a prescribed length with little personal freedom is no less a challenge. It is equally bewildering how swiftly and unambiguously a researcher, particularly a new one, can navigate through the maze of presentational aspects and writing mechanics. As a teacher and researcher myself, I have found that the majority of the fledgling researchers have struggled with this particular area. Why is this so? The present paper answers this question.

Discussions

Assignments, term papers, report writings, and research projects unnerve most of the students at colleges and universities. One of the reasons why these activities have earned more detractors than admirers is because they are the tasks that involve "complex" (Ellison 8) processes. However, if properly guided, students can also find "a research project… fascinating, rewarding and exciting" (Dawson x). In the following paragraphs, I guide general students right through preliminary states to completion by providing them a general framework of the main tasks required in conducting a research project.

Creating a Space

A researcher needs justification to establish the significance of his study. Given M. Lisa maintains, "[r]esearch justification refers to the rationale for the research or the reason why the research is being conducted," (780). This aspect is related to the issue of originality. It is generally expected that an original work is the one that makes some new contributions to the existing body of learning. For every researcher, whether the seasoned or the novice, finding a rationale is a time-consuming, protracted and complicated process.

It is crucial that a researcher find a space for his research. This initial process decisively places the research into a distinctive territory. Of paramount importance here is how compelling and researchable the topic in question is. Once the researcher finds a novel area or issue, he is well ahead into making "claims for the centrality or significance of the research in question" (Paltridge and Starfield 82).Thus, it is reasonable to reflect on the rationale of the research and what is there to be known or explored.

Narrowing a Topic

In every research work, researchers are required to develop a viable topic. This crucial task involves focusing on one specific aspect of the intended area of inquiry. This aspect of research is, however, not as simple as it sounds. Although no subjects are ruled off-limits in research, it is almost impracticable for a single person to deal with every component of a topic that exists under the sun. Normally, the general trend shows that a student who is new to conducting a research at first comes out with an extremely vast subject. It is, therefore, prudent to resolve this issue early on. Mario Klarer explains what defines a workable topic. According to him, "it is crucial to narrow down the topic in a sensible and practicable way. Good scholarly papers are characterized by a clearly and

convincingly focused topic" (109). If a researcher is interested to examine Nepal's relationship with India or China, his study should focus on one aspect only. For example, the title Nepal's Relationship With India would be an unmanageable topic and too general to tackle. No single person can handle every dimension of this issue in a single research project. A viable area in this case would be the one that would focus on Nepal's trade relationship, or cultural relationship or political relationship. Depending upon the length of the research paper, they can be broken down further, focusing on even more precise aspects or issues.

Ideally, a researcher should consider a great deal in terms of selecting a topic and if confused, it is prudent to discuss it with his teacher or supervisor or classmates. Only a clearly defined topic will lead the researcher logically into other aspects of research. Focusing on specific aspect will lead the researcher to "answer favorite questions" (Chin 6) that he has about the topic. Therefore, a research work should home in on one specific issue in depth.

Asking Questions

Once a preliminary study about a topic has been completed, it is time for the researcher to know what he does not know about the topic. Posing a right question only will provide information about an unsolved issue. This is an important component of writing a research work. As a systematic and controlled pursuit, research is a project that answers a curiosity. It aims at solving a puzzle. If there is nothing to baffle or puzzle us, there is no research at all. So, W. Lawrence Neuman states that a research "is a way going about finding answers to questions" (2). While laying out questions, it is, however, crucial to know what specific information is to be sought about the problem to be addressed. Questions are designed accordingly. There are specific processes to formulate questions. Depending on the topic, area of inquiry, and the purpose of conducting research writing, a researcher can ask questions using as many wh-words as viable. These include who, what, when, where, why and how. For example, if somebody wants to consider the Covid-19 outbreak as an area of inquiry, the researcher could consider asking some or all of the following questions:

1.   How has this pandemic affected the economic system of Nepal?

2.   Who suffered the most?

3.   Why was it so devastating?

4.   What lesson did people learn?

5.   What measures should be taken to tackle any such catastrophe in the future?

6.   How have the post-pandemic sufferings and struggles been rendered through stories?

These questions compel the researcher to examine relevant sources for the right answers. In short, questions are the pulse of a research work, and if designed incorrectly or carelessly, they will definitely give a bumpy ride for the researcher.

Looking Back

Research is a recursive process. It takes the researcher back and forth during the whole period of research work. Booth et al capture this scenario as a complex process: "Real research loops back and forth, moving forward a step or two, going back and moving ahead again, anticipating stages not yet begun" (xi). A crucial component of this looping back and forth is to dovetail the research with a broad and large scholarly context on the related topic. This is called a review of literature. According to Klarer, this research activity "open[s] a new perspective, cast[s] light on a hitherto neglected aspect of a text, and establish[es] a connection with the state of current research in the field" (103). This means that a research is built upon a huge bulk of the previous body of literature. Before embarking on doing a research work, it is essential to be familiar with what current state of knowledge exists in the chosen field of investigation. The scouring of the past works provides a solid foundation for the research project. By examining previous works, the researcher can make an assessment of where his own research will fit into the existing body of knowledge. This assessment will lead him to claim that what he is proposing was not researched before.

Among many others, a review of literature serves two key functions. One, it allows the researcher to survey what has been researched or not researched; and second, how the research has been carried out. The former provides information about the content covered and the latter about the methodology and techniques. The insights drawn this way enable the researcher to establish his stance vis a vis his own research. Thus, a review of literature hooks the work in question to what has already been done on the related topic.

Reviewing involves more than just cataloguing the past works and should move beyond the tracking down of information. This act requires the researcher to take a critical stance on what to regard as valid or redundant and prepares him to determine the quality of research information. Apart from allowing for an objective evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of a source, the process of doing a review of literature also involves judging its relevance for the research work under consideration.

Another important aspect of doing a review of literature is to examine the credibility of the information accessed. There are a number of sources available in various places. While the easy availability of information is an obvious advantage, the problem lies in determining its reliability and validity. For an experienced researcher, this task is relatively less daunting. The novice, however, seems to be struggling considerably. In this case, he will save himself from getting into trouble by consulting his supervisor or senior students.

Where to find the right information and relevant sources depends upon the subject chosen. There are places that researchers have trusted for long. For them, the first choice is the college or university library. There are departmental libraries also that contain documents on specific subjects. Apart from this, other common information centers include museums, galleries, people, and the internet.

Detecting and Addressing a Gap

A research is conducted to address what is lacking in the existing body of related subject. In simple terms, there arises a need to carry out an inquiry into an issue because it is incomplete in some respects. Awareness to this incompleteness underpins the argument that a research study is worth doing. Finding a gap requires a detailed analysis of relevant subjects. This part necessitates a researcher to "trawl through all the available information sources in order to track down the latest knowledge, and to assess it for relevance, quality, controversy and gaps" (Walliman 52). In other words, a thorough study of previous works uncovers where the lack lies and by addressing this issue, the researcher can take a decisive step in lending a novelty to his work. The ability to spot a lacuna provides a solid point of departure for the researcher. It is a skill that has, however, to be gained through consistent practices and reading.

Although the reading of previous works is crucial for discovering a gap and situating the research in a broad context, this task, however, entails a complex process and

can at times be frustrating unless it is known how to spot the gap as well as what to look for. A researcher can tailor his search for the gap according to his specific area of inquiry and the purpose of conducting the research. However, in general, the two significant areas that researchers can target to show a new contribution include the method and the content. For example, if a researcher considers to study Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poem *The Lunatic,* first, he has to assess previous works for what Nicholas Walliman states that every past works should contain: "relevance, quality, controversy and gaps" (52). This previous reading will allow him to make an assessment of the books reviewed, to identify what has not been researched about the poem and then pave the way for the basis of the research question(s). To illustrate, let's take up the hypothetical situation that a good number of people have analyzed *The Lunatic* from the linguistic perspective or from the point of view of prosodic features. If the new researcher adopts the same perspective, his paper will only be scratching the surface, making no original contribution. However, if during his review of literature, he detects that no previous work has touched upon its contextual aspect or philosophical aspect or rhetorical aspect, and he examines the poem from one of these approaches, then he spots a gap and the study made this way will make a substantial contribution to the existing documents on that poem. Herein lies the worth that really raises the stake of a work of research. So, finding out a gap and addressing it is an important aspect of a research work. Beginners should take this crucial fact in mind.

So what

In every step of a research work, researchers have to face a deadly, cold question of so what. Indeed, every researcher should be wary of and be prepared for this predictable situation. Supervisors are most likely to raise this question with their student-researchers through their written comments or orally during a viva voce. The question of so what is based on the argument that analysis is not just for the sake of analysis only. Beyond the platitudes of analysis, there is a whole lot of the world that exists outside the research text. The analysis should point to that outside world. Since a research is about a phenomenon, it should say something about that phenomenon when it is completed. Otherwise, if the research is limited to analysis only and says nothing, then what is the worth of doing a work which results from constant industry and diligence?

Let's take up the earlier poem again, Devkota's *The Lunatic.* Suppose a researcher has approached the poem from philosophical aspect, made an exhaustive reviewing of previous opinions, addressed the gap faithfully, but has failed to make connections

between the text and the outside world, then his work will have little impact despite his painstaking work. Therefore, the task of a researcher, through the process of analysis, is to move beyond the text and communicate to his readers a message about what he has done.

Showing Integrity

A research is a cumulative endeavor. Every successive document is built upon previous sources and information. For every single piece of information consulted and borrowed, every researcher owes to their predecessors. According to the conventions of writing academic papers, others' ideas should be acknowledged with respect. Passing off others' views without proper acknowledgement is considered "the worst offense against the honesty" (Nicholas 44). This intellectual property crime is called plagiarism, and depending upon the gravity of the offense, the plagiarist can face a variety of penalties, ranging from a flunking grade, an expulsion from college or university to the disqualification from carrying out any academic activity in future.

A researcher who is new to the convention of research writing is likely to commit plagiarism wittingly or unwittingly. There are, however, two commonly adopted methods to avoid "the worst offense" (Nicholas 44). One is paraphrasing. This method involves presenting the original ideas through synonyms and in different syntactic structures. The other is direct quotation. The ideas quoted are placed within double inverted commas, as in the above. Brief information about the source is presented in the body of the text, a process called in-text citation and the details are provided at the end of the research paper under the category of Works-cited.

Eureka Moment

One of the most fulfilling experiences in any researcher's life is to be able to complete the research task undertaken and pull it off. However, a feeling of repugnance on the part of the student for research is also a reality. Anthony C. Winkler and Jo Ray Metherell assert that there are "[m]illions of students" (3) who "hate the research paper" and consider it "an assignment that is both picky and tedious" (3). Yet, in their view, despite the repulsion that the research paper provokes, it "has outlasted generations of its haters" (3). Lovitts, E. Barbara and Ellen L. Wert argue that writing assignment like the research paper is an opportunity for students to carry out "an independent scholarship" (vii). Beverly Ann Chin captures the excitement of a successful researcher: "you'll gain

the experience of taking on a task, seeing it through to the end, and being proud of your accomplishment" (2). So, a researcher's eureka moment comes when he executes his task successfully, which affords him a dignified sense of accomplishment at the end of the day.

Orienting the Reader

An organized piece of writing draws readers' attention quite early on via a short paragraph which is placed at the beginning of the article. This paragraph is called the Abstract. An Abstract is a section that encapsulates what the researcher has presented in his paper. Through this section, readers become familiar with the information and content contained in it. Generally, it is written after the paper has been completed. Although the Abstract is the last part to write in a research paper, readers are most probably to read it first. The main reason is that it provides an overview of what the main part contains.

By reading the Abstract section, readers can immediately feel the pulse of the article and decide whether it deserves a further reading or not. If presented well, this section provides a compelling reason for readers to read the article. This is mainly determined by the novelty of ideas presented. If the ideas are new, readers' curiosity is aroused and they are motivated to find out more about them. A badly written abstract involves the risk of losing the reader. If so, the Abstract is a vitally important part which should be written with considerable care and attention. Paltridge and Starfield provide a five-fold typical structure for writing an Abstract: "overview of the study," "aim of the study," "reason for the study," "methodology used in the study" and "findings of the study" (156). A good abstract is written along this model.

Giving Credit Where It Is Due

In the case of a long piece of research writing like the thesis, researchers provide a section in which they convey their gratitude for the intellectual assistance and moral support that they receive from their supervisors in the completion of their academic undertaking. This part is called the Acknowledgements. This section is short but an important piece of text. Like the Abstract, the Acknowledgements section is written after the researcher has completed his research. Ken Hyland points out that the Acknowledgements contain three distinctive stages. According to him, "students acknowledgements have a three-tier structure consisting of a main "thanking move" framed by optional "Reflecting and Announcing moves" (308). Paltridge and Starfield

simplify these three moves. They explain that the reflecting move "makes some introspective comment on the writer's research experience"; the thanking move "gives credit to individuals and institutions", and the announcing move accepts responsibility for any flaws or errors and dedicates the thesis to an individual or individual/s" (160).

Wrapping UP

After the research has been completed, it is now time to reorient the reader to what has been found out from the materials examined. The section that deals with the findings of the research is called the Conclusion. In the words of Paltridge and Starfield, a conclusion states "the significance of what [the researcher] found out" (151). It follows some specific steps. First, it restates the research topic. Second, it presents findings and points out the limitations. Third, it synthesizes key points. Fourth, it presents a recommendation. However, much depends on the guidance and instruction of the supervisor regarding the importance of these steps.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Research is a systematic and organized project carried out to answer a question. It should be guided by the broad theme of uplifting the condition of human society. Students should be aware that the purpose of research is to expand knowledge. However, it is necessary for them to be familiar with the basics of what a research activity constitutes and how it is conducted. Although this paper provides some useful ideas about the process of conducting a research paper, more still needs to be written and done in this regard. My experience reveals that much less attention is given in the direction of developing what Garde-Hansen and Calvert call "a research culture" (105) among students. An answer to this hiatus in our education system could be the formation of a student-centered research cell in every campus with a research supervisor at the helm. Through such a research body, interested students can form a network of research cohort, hold periodic discussion sessions, arrange orientation classes with research experts, conduct reading sessions on the on-going scholarly activities, and carry out research activities and various writing tasks. This initiative could also be aided by some financial or other material incentives.

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