How to Research Without Falling Down a Time-Sucking Rabbit Hole

Whenever I meet new clients, about a quarter of them tell me that research is their biggest writing problem. They don't know how much to do, so they do too much of it. They are *fascinated* by their topic and can't stop themselves from reading about it — even the trivia they know will never appear in any of their writing. They want to become experts.

Others admit to me, with some embarrassment, that they loathe writing, and spending time researching allows them to feel they're taking their project forward, even though they're not writing a word. They are procrastinating and they know it. But they can't seem to stop themselves.

Whatever your reasons for getting lost down the research rabbit hole, understand that you can take some simple steps to prevent this unfortunate tumble. Or, if you're already there, you can get yourself out, quickly. Here are five tips:

1. Know your state of knowingness

What do I mean by that opaque comment? Well, let me give you an example. If you asked me to write a paper about writing, I'd need to do almost no research. After all, I've been studying writing for the last 40 years. I've already read all the well-known books on the subject, and many of the lesser-known ones, too. I've also written two books about writing and coached thousands of writers, many of whom have gone on to successfully publish their own books.

But imagine you asked me to write a paper about quantum physics. I don't even know what the term quantum physics really *means*. It's just something I've heard about on the internet. Put on a 10-point scale, my knowingness about writing is a 9.5, and my knowingness about quantum physics is a zero.

Obviously, I'd need to do a lot more research about quantum physics than I would about writing. Our state of knowingness is the biggest predictor of how much time we're going to need to spend researching, which is why I can't give you any sort of formula.

So, here's where things get a bit tricky. If you're going to be writing about something like quantum physics (or any topic you're totally unfamiliar with), don't ever begin with Google. To give you an idea of why, I just entered "quantum physics" into the search engine and turned up 302 million hits in less than a second. Even if I restricted myself to the first hundred of them, my research would take many hours.

If your knowingness is low, you can waste a lot of time splashing around Google without really learning much. For people with *a lot* to learn, it's far better to get a textbook, probably early college level, to learn about quantum physics in an orderly and contained way. The staff at your local library might also be able to point you in the direction of some good resources. Or, if you happen to have any physicist friends, take them out for coffee or a beer and ask them to explain it to you.

If your knowingness is high, on the other hand, you may be ready to take the plunge off the high diving board, deep into the waters of Google. Your knowingness will help you construct smarter, more finely tuned search terms.

Only by assessing your current level of knowledge and tailoring your research plan to meet it will you be able to stop yourself falling down the research rabbit hole.

2. Develop your thesis, argument or point of view *before* you start researching

I know this sounds bizarre. After all, don't you need to do the research *first*, before you can determine the point you want to make? How can you have an opinion when you don't even fully understand the subject? What if you get it *wrong*?

In poker, this strategy is called bluffing. You pretend to have a royal flush even if all you have is a pair of twos. But the difference between your writing bluff and the poker one is vast. Not only will it be impossible for you to lose any money, you'll also save yourself a lot of time.

Let me illustrate this for you. Let's say you're writing a paper on sugar and weight gain. There are three basic arguments you can make:

- Sugar is a leading cause of weight gain
- Sugar has a moderate impact on weight gain
- Sugar has little or no impact on weight gain

Spoiler alert: I can tell you that virtually no one accepts the third premise, but leading experts argue vehemently about the first two. So, if you pick one of the first two "sides", you'll dramatically reduce the volume of research you need to do, and your research will have significantly more *focus*.

But how do you pick a side? It doesn't matter. Really. Just pick one — arbitrarily if necessary — and do your research from there. And if you discover you picked the "wrong" side, then switch. You can always change your mind later. Either way, your research will be better because you have greater focus.

3. Have ONE place for storing all your research

When I meet with writers and ask them where they store their research, I get all sorts of answers. Most people have *at least* three different places (their hard drive, Google Docs, OneNote and a host of other spots as well), and some even print everything out, forcing themselves to haul around gigantic binders filled with papers from peer-reviewed journals. Ugh! That's way too hard on your back. And too inefficient as well.

I urge you to choose ONE piece of software for storing ALL your research. And if you are an academic, make sure the software will *also* prepare citations for you. (Preparing citations is a boring and tedious job better suited to computers than to smart people.) I recommend the following pieces of software for academics:

- Mendeley (free)
- Zotero (free)
- Endnote (about $400, roughly half-price for students)

All of these pieces of software will create citations for you in whatever format your university or publisher requires — APA, Chicago, MLA, Harvard, whatever. Furthermore, each of these pieces of software is entirely web-based, meaning your research will always be available to you as long as you have an internet connection. Finally, each will allow you to "tag" every document you save. Think of a tag as an index entry. You can go through the index and find every document quickly, whenever you need it. As for which of these three pieces of software to choose, speak with colleagues in your field and check with a librarian at your institution. They'll probably be able to advise you.

If you are not an academic, I suggest you look at Evernote. Much like Mendeley, Zotero and Endnote, this software allows you to save and tag your research. (The only thing it doesn't do is create citations.) Evernote is easy to learn, easy to use and is free until you're uploading more than 60 MB worth of documents per month. Many people never end up having to pay for it. I've used Evernote for the last eight years, so much so that I'm happy to call it my "second brain."

4. Keep a research diary

As the name suggests, a research diary allows you to keep a record of what you've done each day and any ideas you want to follow up on.

However, it doesn't include the actual research (which you should store in the software described in Point 3, above). Instead, it focuses on your personal views and opinions of everything you've researched and your analysis of any problems you've noticed. Questions, hunches, thoughts and plans for future actions also belong in this free-flowing document. Make a diary entry *even if you do nothing else* that day. It will help you maintain your motivation and stay connected with your project.

Your research diary is PERSONAL and PRIVATE, so you're free to be as frank and intemperate as you wish. It's a place to express your honest and unvarnished thoughts.

Here are the benefits:

- While you are researching, you'll probably be tempted to do nothing more than collect facts and citations. But this diary — which is meant to record your opinions — will act as a counterweight to that natural tendency. Keep in mind that the world doesn't need many more facts these days. We are already drowning in them. Instead, we need intelligent and thoughtful *interpretations* of facts. We need facts placed into *context*. These statements are especially true if you're working on a thesis or dissertation.

- A research diary will allow you to *maintain* your writing habit even while you're busy researching. It's always dangerous to allow your writing to fall by the wayside. Imagine you're an athlete who suddenly stops training. Or a musician who suddenly stops practicing. When you return to the task — whether it's athletic, musical or related to writing — you'll have to make up for all the practice you've lost, which will be time-consuming. A research diary helps you avoid this problem.

You can keep your research diary wherever you like. It can even be in a Moleskine notebook. Or it can be its own entry in the software where you store your research. But keep it. The work of maintaining a diary will help stop you from slipping into the research rabbit hole.

5. Don't ever research *while* writing

When I wrote my honours thesis many decades ago, I remember having my desk littered with books while I wrote so I could stop at a moment's notice to look up an important fact. (Many of my clients have admitted to me that they do exactly the same thing.) Now, I understand that this behaviour was a mistake. Why? It's way too distracting and stressful. It also undermines one of the most important steps of writing: the thinking.

Writing is like building a house — you need to perform the steps in a specific order. You pour the foundation before doing the framing. You finish the framing before putting up the drywall. And you finish putting up the drywall before you start painting.

For writing, you need to *think* before you start putting words on the page. Your argument is going to come from your thoughts, your mental effort, your figuring out — not from mere facts alone. This is why the research diary will be so crucial to you. It will record your thinking and help you develop the point you want to make.

Do the research first, then get away from your desk and give yourself time to think about what it is you want to write. And if, once you start writing, you discover gaps in your knowledge, just mark them in your text. You can always do additional research later.

Your Next Steps

The rabbit hole, a surreal place first described by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is not a place where you want to spend your precious writing time. You don't need to find a tiny key, take part in a "Caucus-race" or glug from a bottle labelled "Drink me."

Instead, follow the five tips above and you'll be able to spend no more than a reasonable amount of time researching.

To get more ideas, tips and strategies for writing faster, better, visit
www.publicationcoach.com

Happy researching!

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