Reducing Research Anxiety and Researching Effectively

By Stephen Axtell

"Publishing is the gold standard for developing your reputation," is a refrain that anyone who receives our emails should be familiar with by now. Publishing allows an expert to showcase their understanding and insights in a way that may change the professional conversation. A researcher's name will become synonymous with the facts and analysis they present. But that is part of the anxiety of publication too. If a writer does not research well, they will be tying their reputation to bad information.

This anxiety is a realistic and reasonable one. However, allowing that anxiety to stop a professional only leaves a professional advantage on the table.

To relieve this research anxiety, consider the three largest concerns in effective research: thoroughness, reliability, and research navigation. This article will focus on secondary research. Primary research will benefit from these precepts, but there are other concerns that affect data management and research design that need to be considered separately.

Thoroughness in Research

Every research project, by nature, will be different each time. This makes it difficult to know how to achieve precision in literature review, data collection, and authoritative-perspective consideration. While projects will vary, there are categories of sources that should always be considered in every research project. To be sure that understanding of a

topic is thorough by the time the researcher is ready to write, consider finding a source in each of the following categories. One source may occupy multiple categories.

Clarifying sources: These sources do a particularly good job of clarifying terms and concepts for the target audience. Especially useful early in the research process, as these sources can identify an element of the topic that the researcher may not have considered.

Branching sources: These sources have a wide variety of sources upon which to base their assertions. These sources are an excellent source of additional reading to add to a researcher's breadth of knowledge. These are primarily useful in the early stages of research. However, it is always worthy of note which sources tend to produce this kind of material to help streamline later research.

Rated sources: The source categories that follow should be rated on a document to allow for a researcher to quickly and easily identify weaknesses in their research.

Trending sources: Trends exist in the scientific and medical worlds as much as in any other field. Researchers should consider trends to also present as the contemporary perspective on any one subject. Beyond keeping the researcher abreast of the changing landscape, which will allow the researcher to plan for later work, addressing trending sources and issues will equip the researcher to answer the most common questions their audience will be contemplating as they read the work.

High-Authority Sources: These sources allow for the researcher to add authority to their work by tapping into the authority of another. This category should never be ignored, even if the research in question doesn't seem to call for it.

High-Data Sources: These sources present a great deal of data, preferably in the form of quantitative data. Having access to this data allows the researcher to put proper emphasis on a particular aspect of the topic, or shift the trend of discussion. This is another category that should never be ignored.

Dissenting Sources: Identifying dissent is an uncomfortable but powerful part of any research. It may occur that the only dissent that can be found is unreliable. Identifying the dissent, even if the source isn't used in the final draft of the research, is crucial. If another researcher dissents, it is likely that a reader will too. Being prepared to speak to that concern, even momentarily, will strengthen any publication.

Research Reliability

Cataloging the right kinds of sources is only part of the issue; if the sources that are consulted aren't reliable, those sources will damage the final work instead of improving it. Ergo, the reliability of sources should also be categorized and rated.

Authority

The authority used to substantiate a work creates an upper limit of authority it can speak with.

- Who is the author?
- Who is the author affiliated with?
- Have they written elsewhere on the topic?
- Is there a way to contact the author or association for challenges or clarification?

Currency

Timeliness is critical to staying current and authoritative.

- How recent is this source?
- Have there been any major changes to the industry or field since this source was created?
- Is the site or publication a regularly updated source?

Audience Level/Target

The audience target of a source affects the way in which the data and information is presented. Everything from the mode of speech to the focus and depth will be affected by this consideration.

- Is this a medical, scientific, or industrial source?
- Consider the depth of the publication. Books require, and feature, greater depth and breadth than periodicals.

Accuracy and/or Replicability

Accuracy and replicability is a topic that would take books to cover. However, as an overview:

- How much of the data is quantitative or qualitative?
- Is the author's language free of bias as outlined in the 7th edition of the APA manual?
- Does the association that publishes the material have submission guidelines that can be accessed? Alternatively, an academic/scientific/journalistic standard that can be requested?
- Are the cited sources numerous and broad enough in variety to cover the scholarship on the subject?

Research Navigation

Filtering

The element that will often cost the greatest amount of time and effort is effectively using databases to find sources. Nearly all databases have filters that can be applied to every search. Using every available filter should be standard practice for all researchers. However, this is only part of the toolset available for navigating databases.

Boolean Operators

Boolean operators are a series of mechanisms that are included in nearly every database search engine. These operators can refine a search with more accuracy than filters or well-considered search terminology can alone. Operators actually change how the search engine sorts and understands the results of a query. Each operator, and their function, are detailed below. All of these operators can be mixed in queries to take advantage of multiple effects at once.

And is used between search terms will force the search engine to only provide results that contain all terms that are connected via "and."

For example: searching for ethics and committee and cloning will return only the results that feature all of those terms. Which will likely be ethics boards considering cloning. This is different from the later "" operator in that this method will include both "cloning ethics board" and "ethics board on cloning."

Or is used between terms that may or may not be a part of the results a researcher is seeking.

For example, searching for ethics or committee or cloning could result in "cloning board," "ethics board," and "cloning ethics."

Not will exclude items from a search result.

For example, searching for ethics and board not cloning will exclude items such as: "cloning board," "cloning ethics," and "cloning ethics board."

"" quotation marks enclosing a term will force the engine to return only items that feature that term exactly as entered.

For example, searching for "cloning ethics board" will return items like: "Arizona cloning ethics board." It will not include: "Arizona board of cloning ethics."

* the asterisk is used as a wildcard in searches allowing the search engine to find results with anything in the place of that wildcard.

For example, searching for Arizona * board will return results such as "Arizona municipal water board," "Arizona zoning board," and "ethics board of Arizona."

Conclusion

Research anxiety is a natural reaction to the challenges of researching effectively. None of these strategies are complete, these tips should help to address the concerns that cause research anxiety and help in the creation of an effective research strategy.

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