

Craft of Research (CoR): Chapter 1 – Thinking in Print

The 10 salient sentence strings presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

1. Without trustworthy published research, we all would be locked in the opinions of the moment, prisoners of what we alone experience or dupes to whatever we're told.
2. Yet mistaken ideas, even dangerous ones, flourish because too many people accept too many opinions based on too little evidence. And as recent events have shown, those who act on unreliable evidence can lead us – indeed have led us – into disaster.
3. It is no exaggeration to say that, maybe not today or tomorrow but one day, the research you do and the arguments you make using it can improve if not the whole world, then at least your corner of it.
4. A second reason for writing is to see larger patterns in what you read. When you arrange and rearrange the results of your research in new ways, you discover new implications, connections, and complications.
5. A third reason to write is to get your thoughts out of your head and onto paper, where you'll see what you really can think. Just about all of us, students and professionals alike, believe our ideas are more compelling in the dark of our minds than they turn out to be in the cold light of print. You can't know how good your ideas are until you separate them from the swift and muddy flow of thought and fix them in an organized form that you – and your readers – can study.
6. By the time you fix your ideas in writing, they are so familiar to you that you need help to see them not for what you want them to be but what they really are.
7. The traditional forms that readers expect are more than just empty vessels into which you must pour your ideas. They also help writers think and communicate in ways they might not otherwise, and they embody the shared values of a research community.
8. Writing up your research is, finally, thinking with and for your readers. When you write for others, you disentangle your ideas from your memories and wishes, so that you – and others – can explore, expand, combine, and understand them more fully. Thinking for others is more careful, more sustained, more insightful – in short, more thoughtful – than just about any other kind of thinking.
9. If instead you find a topic that you care about, ask a question that you want to answer, then pursue that answer as best you can, your project can have the fascination of a mystery whose solution richly rewards your efforts.
10. Nothing contributes more to successful research than your commitment to it, and nothing teaches you more about how to think than making a successful (or even unsuccessful) argument using it.