

## 17. Two Rules for Researching

Christopher Perkins

At this point, we're all familiar with the concept of research. In our time, information is widely available on almost every topic, and conducting what would've been a lifetime of research a century ago can be accomplished in an afternoon on the couch. However, while "research" is now a common part of life online and off, we are not necessarily always doing good, academic research when we simply Google an actor's name or refresh our memory on something we've forgotten from elementary school. When we do these kinds of simple "research," we're just trying to answer a quick question—normally a question that has a clear answer—or remind ourselves of something. That's not the kind of research we're concerned with in this class.

When we do academic research, we're seeking thorough understanding of complex issues. The readings you've done in this book are examples of this. We started with questions that don't necessarily have simple, clear answers: "what makes you laugh?" and "why do we laugh?" In order to get some answers to those questions, we read widely in the field of humor studies, going back in time and working our way to the present to get a sense of the big ideas. No doubt, you've found some answers to our questions, but most likely you've realized that there are many ways to answer them, and you've no doubt even started to develop more questions. At this point, we've made it through the first three steps of the five-step course map presented in the first chapter of this book

### **Step 1: Identify Prior Knowledge**

What do you know already about the subject?

What opinions do you have about the subject and why?

### **Step 2: Inquiry and Analysis**

What do you want or need to know next?

What key terms or essential ideas need to be defined to understand the subject?

What works exist about the subject already?

What does that work add to my knowledge?

### **Step 3: Practical/Real-World Application**

What examples of the subject do you encounter in everyday life?

How does the subject relate to you, your life, your job, your major, etc.?

Now that you know a little more (from step 2), what new questions do you have?

Along with learning a lot about humor, at this point in the course, you've also practiced the first steps of doing good academic research and developing an expertise on a subject. Now, it's time to move on to the final steps of

the process and think a little bit about how we develop our own independent research projects. This will help us complete the steps in the course map.

#### **Step 4: Research and Information Synthesis**

Gather all relevant information.

What scholarship exists on the subject?

What conversations exist and what are they saying?

How do the various texts you find come together to enhance and complicate your understanding of the subject?

#### **Step 5: Develop Your Idea and Argument**

Having identified the subject and defined it, what do you want to say about it?

Having identified the conversation surrounding the subject, what can you add to it?

How does the subject relate to and enhance you and your interests?

First, we need to be sure we understand some things about research. To do that, let's focus on two statements that will help you develop a good research mindset:

1. Let the research guide you
2. There's always more research to be done.

### Let the Research Guide You

Not all research is good research. If you spend any time online or on social media, you know that sometimes people claim to be "doing their own research" when what they really mean is that they found something online that confirmed their opinion and decided that that made it a fact. Obviously, this is not what we do in an academic setting. If it were, we would have stopped thinking about humor once you found something that explained your specific sense of humor and left it at that. But that's not what we've done at all, and that's not how good research works.

Instead, to do good research, we must always approach the research process with both curiosity and humility. To do good research, you must consider all avenues of thought. You must seek out not just the information that supports your ideas, but also information that challenges you. You must be willing to be wrong and to change your mind when confronted with evidence. To do good research is to approach research as learning.

To do this, remember to always "let the research guide you." You may think you know what you will find when you start a research project (and sometimes you'll be right!), but you have to be willing and able to follow the research where it leads you. Don't try to force the research into your path; take the paths that the research opens up for you and see what you find there!

### There's Always More Research to be Done

People often attribute to Socrates some version of the following quotation: "All I know is that I know nothing." The idea behind this, of course, is that for Socrates the root of knowledge is knowing that you have much more to learn. Research is part of this process, and so we should always accept that there will be more research to be done. Every answer leads to more questions. Every source leads to another source.

This can be daunting and overwhelming, but it's also exciting! Just think, you can always learn more! If we accept this, and let the research we're doing guide us in our thinking, the research projects we develop will always be thorough, nuanced, and original.

But of course, there is a contradiction to all this. We want to let our research guide us and we know it will guide us to more research, but in an academic setting we're generally doing research with an essay due. So how do we know when it's time to stop following the research and start writing a paper? That all depends on the research questions we develop at the beginning our process and the answers that our research allows us to develop. When we start our research with good questions, we set ourselves up to do good research that will guide us to a clear thesis and help us develop an essay around that.

The next chapter will give you some tips for developing good research questions and templates for writing research questions.