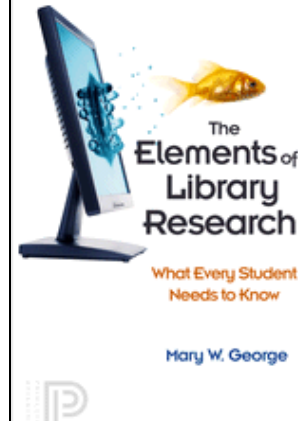


BOOK REVIEW

George, Mary W. *The Elements of Library Research: What Every Student Needs to Know*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Paperback.

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The Elements of Library Research: What Every Student Needs to Know by Mary W. George is a useful compendium for any class that challenges students to learn the ins and outs of library research, especially the modern library (which includes, of course, Google as well as more traditionally vetted library catalogs and resources). While the author, a senior reference librarian at Princeton University Library, is the first to admit that this is not a book about writing, I can easily see this book required for a first-year writing class, either alone or in concert with a rhetoric or handbook. The book is written in a very accessible style, and follows the “usual” topics included in many writing classes, from finding and developing a thesis to using the information student researchers happen upon to move to “insights, evaluation, argument, and beyond” (126). As George explains

The essence of the library research process is the progression from topic selection, to the research questions you articulate when you brainstorm, to a search strategy appropriate for your project involving tools of various sorts, to answers (your sources) others have had to similar research questions, and finally to your own insight from which you can craft your argument. (65)

The book also includes helpful hints, including useful charts and worksheets. Especially useful, I think, is the Research Timeline included in an appendix. Checklists scattered throughout the book are also handy to help students stay on track. One such checklist, for example, “A Self-Orientation Checklist for any Library Building” (25), could easily be used as is or it could be modified for a library-orientation assignment.

The book begins with a general introduction about what research is and what purposes it serves. Chapter One provides a list of reasons for research as well as a list of different types of research (e.g. library research, experimental research, qualitative and quantitative research, longitudinal research, archival research, etc.). In Chapter Two, George moves to creating a research plan, including useful exercises designed to help students move from an assignment to a topic using preliminary research techniques, brainstorming, and brief audience analysis. Chapter Three covers various research strategies and tactics. In addition to a basic eight-step search strategy, this chapter includes a chart, with examples, which describes various “fact tools” (almanacs, handbooks, dictionaries, concordances, etc.). I particularly like that George explains the usefulness of these types of resources, and helps students to understand that these fact tools are not the sole end of research. In my own classroom, I have found that many students think citing information from these types of sources (whether they are online, such as *Wikipedia*, or more traditional print encyclopedias) is all that is required to produce a research paper or project. Thus, in Chapter Four, George moves to finding sources other than these tools, asking students to think about how to answer their research questions and begin to piece together a compelling argument for academic audiences using library catalogs and database searches. “Provided you keep working and thinking,” George says in Chapter Five, “you will have an unpredictable flash of insight that will transform how you view your topic” (126), leading to the all-important “Aha!” moment. While I wouldn’t go so far as George, believing as I do (based on my own and my students’ experiences) that even the best research process can sometimes lead to more questions or, unfortunately, to unpredictable dead ends, rather than miraculous insights, I do agree with George about the importance at this stage

of the process for students to carefully evaluate what they have found thus far, formulate possible answers to their research questions, and pull it all together.

One thing that I don't really like in this book is "Mary's Maxims," a list of 16 catch phrases scattered throughout the book and compiled in an appendix. While the advice they contain is sound, I personally find the language a bit too cute, for example, Mary's Maxim #6: "Those who bail may well fail" (65). If the maxims work as an aid to student learning and memory, however, then I'm all for them. At any rate, they don't seem to detract from the overall usefulness of the book.

Of course, no book of this size can provide a ready map of all the sources available to student researchers in even the most modest of college and university libraries today, whether on-the-shelf or available through interlibrary loan and/or database subscriptions. Even larger, more expensive tomes can not hope to keep up with the ever-changing landscape of available information, and, of course, no two libraries are ever exactly alike. Thus, George admits, her advice is necessarily "generic" (91). Nonetheless, this book does a good job of explaining the different types of resources available to student researchers, how to evaluate these resources, and, finally how to use the information.

The Elements of Library Research is written in very clear and accessible language, making it suitable for beginning as well as more advanced students. George makes extensive use of metaphor, as well, to help students understand the research process in terms of what they already know. For example, to explain what she calls "finding tools" (that is, reference works, databases, etc.), she likens them to "the vitamins and minerals of healthy research: neither you nor your project will thrive without them" (74). While the book is probably most useful for beginning undergraduate researchers, it could be included in upper-level classes as well, especially those for which library research will be an important component, where it could serve as a "gentle reminder" of what students have already learned, or should have learned, in earlier writing classes. As many scholars have pointed out, the content of one class doesn't always translate seamlessly to other classes, so a book like this could be an especially helpful resource even for juniors or seniors across the disciplines, as well as for basic writers. I would recommend this book as a useful research guide for entry-level and basic writing classes or first-year classes that cover library research. Of course, while it may function as a useful ancillary text, it will not replace a more comprehensive rhetoric or writing handbook.