

# RESEARCH IN BUSINESS

## Module 1: Starting Your Research

### What is Research?

The term “research” refers both to the process of research and to the body of information collected through research. The process of research solves a problem or addresses an opportunity by examining a situation, determining a research problem, solving for that problem, and determining a valid course of action. Research in business results in a deliverable. For the purposes of this module, the deliverable is a document, such as a report or proposal.

The research process begins with identifying a problem, planning how to solve that problem, and beginning to research.

### Identifying a Problem

Research starts with a **practical problem** (or an opportunity).

*We’re being asked to justify the usefulness of the writing center.*

This leads to a **research question**.

*How do we determine if students are benefiting from the writing center?*

The research question may spur other questions that help to explore the various aspects of the question. Posing questions and seeking answers are the heart of the research process.

*How many students came to see us last semester?  
Are the students who visit us improving their grades?  
Are teachers noticing a difference in students who come to visit us?*

Once the research question is defined, a **research problem** can be outlined.

*We need a way to track our student data so that we can see the numbers and types of students who visit our center.*

**Significance:**

*This information will show how much students are using the writing center and justify the usefulness of the center. We may be able to use this data later to compare with other sources of information of student success.*

You should identify the significance of the research problem from the beginning. Clearly defining the importance of the research ensures that the solution will be valuable.

Once you define a research problem, you begin to plan how to answer that problem. The solution to the research problem can then be used to answer the practical problem.

### Scope of the Research

You have to determine what information is feasible to study and obtain. In this example, tracking student grades in relation to writing center visits would have required a database of student visits anyway. So the writing center focused on a more manageable task, with the possibility of exploring other research areas in the future.

## Planning to Solve the Research Problem

Planning the research requires considering two different questions:

What information do I already know?

What information do I need to obtain?

These two essential questions will be applied to contextual and content elements, which intertwine with and build on each other. In doing so, you begin to collect information for your research and identify those areas requiring further research.

Contextual Elements	Content Elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Audience</li><li>• Purpose</li><li>• Format</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Background</li><li>• Problem or opportunity</li><li>• Methodology</li><li>• Evidence</li><li>• Significance or value</li><li>• Actions to take</li></ul>

The next few sections examine these elements in greater depth.

## Contextual Elements

Contextual elements form the underlying context for the research and shape the look and feel of the final deliverable.

### Audience

Your research is not done in a bubble. You will be sharing the work and ideas with others, and a deliverable tailored to the particular audience is ultimately more persuasive. Understanding your audience additionally helps to frame the goals of the research. Below are some questions that explore the defining features of the audience.

Who is my audience?	What does my audience expect?	How will I reach my audience?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Primary audience</li><li>• Other possible audiences</li><li>• Audience characteristics:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Education</li><li>○ Professional experience</li><li>○ Job responsibility</li><li>○ Personal character</li><li>○ Personal preferences</li><li>○ Cultural characteristics</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learning expectations</li><li>• Attitude or expectations toward subject</li><li>• Attitude or expectations toward me</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Effective format or medium</li><li>• Appropriate tone and vocabulary</li><li>• Level of detail</li><li>• Convincing supporting evidence</li></ul>

## Purpose

A well-defined purpose leads to a clearly expressed purpose. The questions below explore the goals and the significance of the project.

What is my message?	Why would my audience want to read this?	How do I want readers to respond?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information of interest</li><li>• Solution to problem</li><li>• Answer to important question</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Value</li><li>• Interests</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Action verb</li></ul>

After identifying the purpose of the research, you should keep the purpose in mind as you continue planning and researching. Use it to judge the pertinence of information and evidence, and be sure to state the purpose explicitly in the final deliverable.

## Format

Formats are frequently pre-determined. Even so, you should briefly consider the expectations and effectiveness of four essential elements—packaging, scope, data presentation, visuals or multimedia—in order to engage the format more mindfully.

	Expectation	Effectiveness
Packaging*		
Scope		
Data Presentation		
Visuals or Multimedia		

\*When the deliverable is a document, packaging applies to the type of document (*e.g.*, memo, report, or proposal) as well as the style (*i.e.*, font, layout, and included sections).

## Content Elements

Content elements are the various pieces that form the final deliverable. Well-written documents evidence consideration of all these elements. The inclusion of these elements in the final document can vary depending on the type of deliverable and the purpose. For example, a business plan requires very specific content elements that are different from a work process proposal.

The next sections explore each content element based on the three contextual elements: audience, purpose, and format.

## Background

The background shapes the context for the project and provides a foundation for the significance of the project. The greatest challenge is choosing relevant information and determining the amount of detail.

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Format</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What does the audience already know about this topic?</li><li>• What further information does the audience need?</li><li>• How much information do they need?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is the purpose of this project?</li><li>• What information explains the purpose?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where in the document do I present this information?</li></ul>

## Problem or Opportunity

Research in business addresses a problem or an opportunity (and sometimes both). The problem or opportunity must be clearly identified, both prior to research and within the deliverable—the significance of the research hinges on this element.

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Format</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Will the audience see this as a problem or opportunity?</li><li>• What will make this problem or opportunity seem urgent to them?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How does the purpose relate to the problem or opportunity?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where in the document do I present this information?</li></ul>

## Methodology

The methodology is how you go about finding the evidence needed to support the message that you wish to communicate. This term can also apply to how you find contextual information for the project. Be careful not to assume that the choice of methodology is obvious; even if pre-determined for you, consider why a particular methodology is the best choice for the project.

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Format</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What methodologies does the audience consider legitimate?</li><li>• What methodology will provide the type of evidence that the audience values?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What methodology will lead to the information and results that I need?</li><li>• What methodology is feasible for the purpose and scope of the project?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How much information do I need to provide about the methodology?</li><li>• What format should I use to describe the methodology clearly?</li></ul>

When writing about the methodology, you should both describe the methodology and explain why that methodology was chosen. The next module, “Designing Your Research,” goes into more detail on this subject.

## Evidence

“Evidence” refers to the information or data that result from your research. The term also refers to the information and data that you use to argue your primary message.

Audience	Purpose	Format
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What type of evidence does the audience value?</li><li>• How much evidence will the audience need to be convinced?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What type of evidence will best support the purpose and message?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How much evidence do I need to present?</li><li>• What is the best format to present the evidence to the audience?</li></ul>

The module on “Presenting Your Research” covers the presentation of evidence in much more detail.

## Significance or Value

The project has significance and value to your audience and to the larger general public. For your research to be convincing, you must clearly argue the value of the project. Research also generates costs and benefits. A well-rounded deliverable considers both and presents them to the audience.

Audience	Purpose	Format
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is the value of this project to the audience?</li><li>• Why should the audience care about this research?</li><li>• What information do they need to understand this value?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is the significance of this research to the purpose of this project?</li><li>• What are the costs?</li><li>• What are the benefits?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where in the document do I present this information?</li><li>• What information should I include?</li><li>• How should I organize the information?</li></ul>

## Actions to Take

Research in business should lead to an action. You should specify the action you think your audience should take based on the information that you present in your deliverable. Define the recommended action with a verb: *implement a process, reduce hours, provide incentives*, and so on.

Audience	Purpose	Format
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What actions do I want the audience to take?</li><li>• What actions would the audience be able to take?</li><li>• What actions would the audience be willing to take?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What actions would achieve the purpose?</li><li>• What actions are most feasible for the purpose and the goals of this research?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where in the document do I present this information?</li><li>• In what format should I organize the actions to take?</li></ul>

## Researching for Information and Evidence

The previous section defined two conceptual questions:

- What information do I already know?
- What information do I need to obtain?

After working through the contextual and content elements, you should have a clearer sense of what information you already know and what further information you need. Now you are ready to jump into the literature to fill in the gaps of your information (secondary research) and to collect the evidence needed to support your primary message (primary research).

### Secondary Research

During secondary research, you will use various media resources to learn about the topic in broader terms, identify methodologies to use, and more deeply understand the context. For this purpose, secondary sources can be used. These sources discuss information, including information that may be found in other places.

**Types:** Trade magazines, journals, discussion boards, blogs and podcasts, company Web sites, periodical indexes.

### Primary Research

For supporting evidence and information, primary research is essential. Use primary sources for this level of research. Primary sources are the original sources of data and information. Business research often requires creating a primary source, such as an interview, an experiment, or a variance analysis. Occasionally, the needs of a project (such as the methodology and evidence) allow for primary sources found elsewhere.

**Types:** Company records, experiments, field research, interviews and questionnaires, observations.

## Evaluating and Ending Research

You can easily get caught up in the front end of the research process and never get to the finding results and writing about the research. Therefore knowing how to research strategically and efficiently can benefit the research process greatly. Strategic research involves four skills:

- Spending time in advance identifying information to research
- Knowing where to find useful sources
- Recognizing valid sources
- Knowing when to stop researching

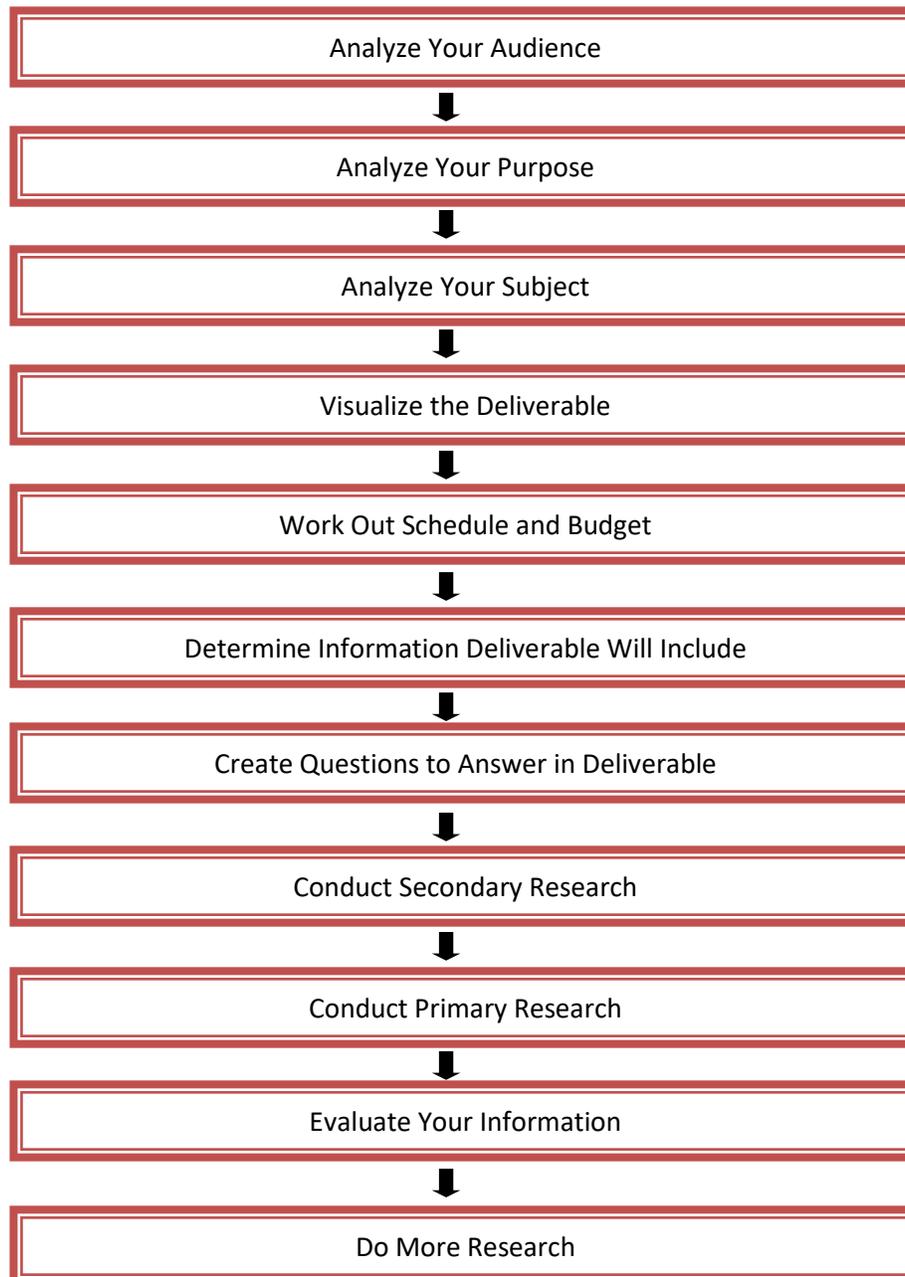
The following chart outlines important aspects of the last two skills.

How do I know if this source is good?	When do I stop researching?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reputation of the author</li><li>• Reputation of the publisher</li><li>• Author's knowledge of the literature</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accurate</li><li>• Unbiased</li><li>• Comprehensive</li></ul>

- Accuracy and verifiability of the information
- Timeliness of the source

- Enough detail
- Current
- Easy to understand

## The Research Process



Research Process flowchart adapted from *Technical Communication*, 10 ed., 2012, M. Markel, pp. 120-122