

BOOK REVIEW

Flick, Uwe. 2011. *Introducing Research Methodology: A Beginner's Guide to Doing a Research Project*. Los Angeles: Sage.

As Asian universities are becoming more international, with programs getting research-driven and students aiming to further their studies in postgraduate programs abroad, the teaching of research skills is assuming an increasingly central role. Since acquiring and applying these skills is extremely hard for people whose earlier education did not primarily focus on originality and critical analysis, teachers of research writing and methodology – like me – are constantly searching for books that might help, guide, and inspire the first-time researcher (and his or her instructor). The arrival of *Introducing Research Methodology*, a work that stresses repeatedly – on the back cover, in the subtitle, in the introduction – that it was written specifically for beginners, is therefore a most welcome event.

The author, a German academic who has taught in various countries and published extensively on qualitative research, is without question an expert on the subject. His book was originally published in German under the title *Sozialforschung* (“Social Research”; Sage is silent on who the translator is), and this already hints at a potential problem: Flick only deals with the rather specific methodology of the social sciences (data gathering and analysis figure prominently). Students that encounter research as part of their linguistics or sociology major can rejoice. For courses that teach first-time research the way it is done at most American universities, however—as part of

composition classes and general studies, where topics can be from diverse disciplines and rhetoric is a major concern – the work is much less useful. This is of course neither Flick’s fault nor a problem in itself, but Sage’s marketing of the English-language version as a “beginner’s guide” to “the basics of research” and “doing a research project,” apparently aimed at precisely those people that might not profit from the book, is not helpful.

If one ignores this for a moment and judges *Introducing Research Methodology* as a book on social science research, the first thing that needs to be mentioned is the admirable focus on the research question as the heart of every project. Flick knows and emphasizes its central importance and does a fine job in identifying clear and usable criteria to separate good from bad questions (though he does not quite match the brilliance of Wayne Booth et al. in their *Craft of Research*: Flick does not distinguish questions and problems, and does not refer to the concept of rationales, which has proven useful to explain to students how to determine the significance of a question). The only odd thing is that in Flick’s world, research questions primarily grow out of “everyday life” (21) and personal experience or interests, not the literature: chapter 3 seems to suggest reading should begin **after** the question has been selected. While topics inspired by own observations are certainly possible, ignoring the research community and gaps in the literature when defining projects does not only lead to reinventing the wheel and contributing to overexposed or dead debates (not good for a book that claims to help with doctoral and masters theses [xvii]), but also fails to take some of the most important new findings of research on teaching research into account: recent

works like *Entering the Academic Conversation: Strategies for Research* by John Goshert or Irene Clark's *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Entering the Conversation* show that the key to understanding and appreciating one's role as a researcher in academia is to regard oneself as a participant in an ongoing discussion.

There are further indicators that Flick, who likes to cite himself, would have profited from studying work on research writing outside the confines of the social sciences: Some of the issues that trouble "beginners ... doing a research project" most are not addressed at all (outlining, drafting, revising) or too briefly (citation styles, writing a literature review). One might argue that a rather short guide on research **methodology** does not technically need to include these things, but the omission of anything regarding how to write and the treatment of the writing process as the last, quasi-automatic step that begins after everything else is finished reinforce the idea, long identified as leading to severe writer's block in many people, that research projects can be divided into neat, separate segments, and that each of these segments needs to be perfect before one can move to the next one. Modern guides generally insist writing needs to begin at the planning stage already and accompany all other processes. Kjell Rudestam, in a social science research guide also published by Sage, was ahead of Flick in this sense already 10 years ago, when he included writing tips from experts on drafting and revising.

Nevertheless, Flick's book has a lot going for it as well. Each chapter discusses quantitative and qualitative approaches in comparison; *Introducing* is the best work I know of in terms of putting these two in

context within a discussion of all the facets of the research process. Also, the many tables, checklists, chapter overviews and clearly stated objectives, in the typical Sage layout and reminiscent of Nicholas Walliman's *Your Research Project*, are extremely helpful and well-done. Equally illustrative are the concrete examples—i.e. possible or actual research projects by respected scholars—the author brings up and effortlessly summarizes to clarify methods and concepts. Lastly, and importantly, Flick writes in an accessible and jargon-free style while still introducing all necessary key terms (his comprehensive glossary is a great feature).

Overall, *Introducing* is a book that, despite the flaws mentioned above, social science majors that do not need to be motivated and that are good writers will find useful. It is even better for humanities scholars who would like to enter the world of empirical research and are looking for a no-nonsense overview and guide. Students and teachers of research writing or research as rhetoric should look elsewhere.

Reviewed by
Ingo Peters
Department of English
Chulalongkorn University