

# The modern researcher



Both authors, Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff are historians and are faculty members of Columbia University. They finished this book by year 1969.

THE BOOK- Summary and Purpose:

This book is primarily intended to “ guide and instruct students in the arts of research and writing”(note on the revised edition), with special emphasis on historiography.

The book is divided into three parts, with the titles: The First Principles, Research and Writing .

The idea for the first principles is to lay down the necessary frame of thought, the attitudes and qualifications of a (modern) “ researcher”- apparently, to distinguish him from an antiquated one.

It combines both the technique of research and writing. Unlike common writing/research manuals that concentrate only on the “ how to’s” , Barzun & Graff, offered all the necessary ingredients for excellent history writing that is based on fastidious effort to search for “ the truth”.

It is a book on historiography that develops the idea that “ facts alone do not constitute history” but that these need to be interpreted and ably written. Writing should consist an effort on the writer to communicate as close as possible his own ideas to the reader.

It gives a very convenient outline summary for all the great philosophical systems that influenced historians and their writings. This background could further enhance an understanding of historians’ very human tendency to reduce patterns into ‘ laws’ in order to make them coherent and unified.

However, such laws overly simplify phenomenon and , if possible, should be avoided by the writer.

Barzun convincingly provides strong bases for his ‘ principles’ through excellent choice of examples. An anecdote on how a historian was able to establish the authorship of the “ Diary of a Public Man” is such a good example on how one investigates and verifies his data. This historian was able to come up with a probable answer to his problem through trial and error that took him more than thirty years- visiting libraries, interviewing key people mentioned in the diary, verifying documents written during the period in question (Lincoln Administration).

In the end the historian found out that the author employed both fact and fiction in his diary entry and therefore this (diary) would not be useful as a historical document. Another is about a researcher who investigated the origin of the motto: “ In God We Trust” written on dollar currencies. He noticed that there was a period when such a motto was absent, and he wanted to investigate, first -its origin and then, the reason for its absence; then, its revival in the present currencies.

Through painstaking investigation he found out that it was Stuart Chase, the Secretary of Treasury who , being a clergyman, mandated its inclusion on all currencies during his incumbency. When his term expired, his successor had this motto deleted only to reappear later when the American Congress saw the wisdom of restoring it. Such examples on the process of research reinforces the idea that research is a worthy endeavor and is indeed exciting.

Moreover, the book stresses on the importance of having the proper perspective in writing history, i. e. “ Book concentrates on principles of thought and analysis of difficulties and aims at imparting the fundamentals of informed exposition.” The authors repeatedly expounds on these throughout the book.

Another important tenet which Barzun convinces his reader is that it is by way of probability that all scholars, including scientists can claim the truthfulness of their work.

Thus, patterning in history is intended not to arrive at “ laws” or generalizations that are “ unbreakable” and immutable but rather to serve as guidepost that may give coherence to an , otherwise, confusing motley of data. They are therefore made for convenience, just as periodizations in history are.

The menacing issue on subjectivity and objectivity in historical writing was given adequate attention by Barzun. He avers that these words apply “ not to persons and opinions but rather to sensations and judgments” and are better avoided by historians and their critics. “ An objective judgment is one made by testing in all ways possible one’s subjective impressions, so as to arrive at a knowledge of subjects.” A corollary principle will be that “ competence, not majority opinion, is decisive. There have been collective hallucinations that deceived large majorities” (p. 166). This obviously happens, specially with political issues and with politicians who exploit public opinion to suit their ends.

Analysis:

Barzun & Graff's *Modern Researcher* is, indeed, not an ordinary manual on research and writing. But I have only one comment, why did they entitle the book "The Modern Researcher"? Nowhere in this book did they explain the title. Does the word "modern" means a historical period? Or a frame of mind? I would assume that the work being about historiography may connote a historical period. But it could also be a frame of mind, i. e. progressive and liberal.