5. How to Navigate Your Field

Finding your Problem Collective is difficult. Finding your Field is simple. Your Field finds you.

The main reason for that is because fields are typically connected to topics, in the broadest sense, and those categories make a claim on you. Your Field pulls you back into Topic Land.

Fields have their own journals, professional associations, newsletters, and myriad other institutional apparatuses that call out to interested parties. Universities are organized into departments, most of which are named after fields, like chemistry, economics, computer science, classics, English, or Asian studies. A School of Population Studies or an Institute of Gender Studies might be organized by collective, but these modes of organization are more rare in most institutional settings. The field-collective dynamic is part of the ongoing push and pull of intellectual life in the modern academy.

A field is different from a Problem Collective in that it is defined by a scope of activity or research targets. A collective is defined by a shared intellectual agenda or array of concerns. If your research project is on the history of the cuckoo clock, you are unavoidably part of the field of Germanic studies, given that timepiece's connections to the Black Forest, but your Problem Collective might be scholars of material culture or the history of technology.

Or let's say you're in a Department of Art History and you want to write about the contemporary artist Xu Bing, known for his installation *Book from the Sky*, made up of

scrolls printed with over 4,000 "fake" Chinese characters. You might find yourself talking to linguists, curators, calligraphers, graphic artists, computer scientists, historians of woodblock printing technology, scholars of script cultures, or scholars of "nonsense" poetry. Among them, your intellectual kindred might be people curious about how and why artists use familiar cultural forms to challenge expectations about aesthetics and intelligibility.

Your Collective is like your friends: you share interests and you choose to spend time with them. Finding your Collective is a process of self-affiliation. Your Field is more like your family: the senior members existed before you did, they claim you as one of their own, and—like it or not—you live with them and have to spend a lot of time in their company. Your membership in a field is not entirely a matter of choice, as it's partly assigned to you. You can of course renounce your Field, spurn its values and conventions, but people might still remark upon the resemblance.

People tend to view their families through their own identities. Some never realize that their family members have other identities too—*as members of other collectives*. Children don't always think about their parents' engagement with their profession; they take it for granted that a parent goes to work and then comes home to play with them or pick them up from school. But the parent may spend many or most of their waking hours working on problems that have nothing to do with their child. They may participate in institutional cultures, associations, voluntary affiliations, advocacy groups, or other organizations whose reason for being is to solve a problem the child might not even be aware of. When we discover that our parents have been spending so much time working on something else, besides raising us, we see them in a new light and ask: *Who are these people, really?*

One of the central question of this chapter is this: How do you deal with the differing problems and interests of members of your Field?

Why, when they do their own research, do members of your Field not necessarily write for you? As you now realize, they are likely writing for their Problem Collective. If you wish that your Field would strive to know you on your own terms — to know what *your* Problem is — stop to ask yourself: What's *their* Problem? After all, for institutions it is the *field* that comes first. And yet, for the scholars who make up any specific field, it is their *Problems* that come first. This is one of the internal contradictions that make fields both dynamic and frustrating places to be.

Your Collective helps you to *get to you*.

Your Field helps you to *outgrow yourself*.

Identify the different Problem Collectives within your Field and you'll understand better how your Field works, and how to make your Field work for you. Being a member of a field isn't just getting a membership card and becoming a passive conduit of its values and conventions. You get a role in helping the field to evolve.

Find the Problems within Your Field

Fields have multiple advantages, including topical coherence, and various institutional structures such as journals, conferences, associations, bibliographies, and funding bodies that support research and learning in a particular area. These institutional structures make it easier to find sources, facts, and other researchers connected to a topic. They continually produce and codify knowledge, establish and refine conventions, and perform quality control on the research output of their members through peer review. Problem Collectives lack these supports, and that is one of the reasons they are so much harder to identify and connect with.

Fields also have limitations whose effects on the researcher range in severity from inconvenient to debilitating.

As they develop conventions, they also grow blind spots. Received wisdom can devolve into cant and discourage innovation. Doctrines can emerge, due to undue deference to — or self-promotion by — authority. Junior researchers may feel like they have to follow the herd, and reflexively suppress their own interests and ideas.

Much of the work you did in part 1 of this book to become a self-centered researcher has prepared you to overcome or avoid these common pitfalls. Again and again, whether working with a single source, an array of search results, or just pen and paper, you have been listening to yourself and been honest about when you feel that visceral current of electricity.

In this chapter, we offer several ideas and methods for the following:

- Navigating a vast field of knowledge efficiently, while never losing sight of your Problem
- Making best use of the resources of your Field, especially members of your Field who are *also* members of your Problem Collective
- Avoiding common traps — conceptual and methodological — that researchers fall into in interacting with their field

Among those mistakes is to view a field as a topic that is merely a collection of subfields, or subtopics, that are more specific and thus have less to do with one another. Again and again, we have seen students think to themselves: *I just need to "narrow down" my topic — then I'll have a project.* But, as we said before: *You cannot narrow your way out of Topic Land.* (And Subtopic Land is worse.)

This is why we encourage you to view your Field not as a collection of subfields but rather an assortment of Problem Collectives. Adopting this mindset allows you to look beyond the specific *cases* to see the *problems* shared by researchers

working on radically different topics. You will learn to take advantage of the incredible resources of a field without getting trapped in Topic Land.

Make this mental shift, and you will fundamentally alter your relationship with your Field.

Read Your Field for *Their* Problems: Reimagining the "Literature Review"

Let's start by rethinking a common way of navigating a field: the "literature review."

The "lit review," as it's often known, is a required component of academic theses, articles, dissertations, and books. This is the section near the front of a thesis or article where the author asks and answers the question "How did we get here, to the problem at hand?" ("State of the field" articles have a similar agenda: to synthesize ideas and analyze their research implications.) A literature review establishes your authority to conduct a study by demonstrating that you have read all of the relevant studies on a particular topic or problem. You trace the threads of an intellectual genealogy, identifying the debates, theories, revelations, and transformative ideas necessary for a reader to appreciate the agenda of *your* study. You are not just compiling a chronology or a list of publications. You are making an argument that your research extends from or builds on those earlier efforts and addresses a new part of the problem.

In chapter 2 we advised against justifying your project by claiming that it fills a "gap in the field." Now we will show you how not to be a gap filler. A field, after all, is not a leaky dam that needs a hole plugged to keep it from collapsing, or a garment that needs mending. It is more like an ongoing conversation at a party that you have just joined, and no one will be impressed if you just take up space. What they want from you is ideas, expressed in an engaging fashion, that will help improve their own ideas.

Literature reviews are notorious for being a boring slog. They're hard to write and sometimes even harder to read. And for you, they might now be even harder. Having just read several studies by other members of your Collective—works that inspire you because they speak directly to the core of your Problem—you might feel less than excited to read across an entire field, including parts of it that are remote from your project. It can feel like the intellectual equivalent of doing one's taxes—a duty, rather than a pleasure.

Fortunately, there is a simple way to remedy this feeling. Given that every field is made up of researchers from different Problem Collectives, your job in the lit review is to listen to these other collectives, to acknowledge how members of other collectives bring their own agendas and values to bear on your topic, and to consider their findings in the light of *their* Problems (not yours).

Interacting with other collectives gives you a better sense of your own values. You learn to respect other collectives, and to avoid the mistake of thinking that if someone is asking different questions about the same topic that they're simply wrong. It may be that they just have a different agenda and are trying to solve a different problem.

Consider this scenario: you're at a conference for your Field and you are watching a presentation that pertains to your topic of research—and you find it boring.

A thought immediately crosses your mind: *This colleague is dealing with my Problem, but poorly.*

This is a "selfish" response, not a self-centered one. For a self-centered researcher who is aware of Problem Collectives, the response instead would be, *This colleague seems to be dealing with the same topic as me, but through the lens of a very different problem than mine. I wonder what their Problem is?*

A new set of questions emerges: *How might their work, and their Problem, help me and mine—and vice versa? Are there things they're seeing that I'm not?*

The advantages of the latter approach are obvious: you'll be better able to harness the productive friction between field and collective to create new energy, and to change them both.

These are the processes that can enliven the blandly titled "literature review." Your job in navigating your Field is to bring together scholars, some who are just entering the profession and others who are long dead, into conversation with one another about a set of questions and concerns that together add up to a survey of the most compelling and important research on your Problem.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when evaluating sources, which apply equally to those written by members of your Field and your Collective:

- **Be skeptical.** Just because something was published in a peer-reviewed journal or a book doesn't mean it's watertight. You shouldn't be groundlessly contrarian, but neither should you take the words of experts at face value.
- **Be fair.** Represent every source's merits and shortcomings accurately.
- **Focus on the author's concerns, not your own.** When you write an evaluation of a particular piece of writing, focus on the points of greatest salience to the author, not to you. In other words, focus on what they were trying to achieve in writing this study instead of selfishly scavenging it for parts. There is nothing quite so unfair as a review that heaps criticism on points that were, in fact, of minor significance to the author's main goals.

Think of your Field as less a set of commandments to be followed uncritically than a set of propositions to be tested, refined, modified, reordered, and added to. This is where you come in.

Be skeptical, but avoid the rookie mistake of scoffing at

the authorities just for the thrill of it. The satirical weekly *The Onion* captured this tendency with the title of a fictional book: Wendel Spencer's *Schools Are* Not *Failing Our Children: How We Took a Commonly Held Opinion and Declared the Opposite*. Your Field does not need more posers.

Likewise, a field does not (or should not) tolerate people who bully or harangue their colleagues. In contests of ideas, it's the ideas that matter, not their proponents. When you are evaluating a source, keep your focus on the research, not on the researcher. Doing so will help keep you unprejudiced, and you'll have no qualms about giving praise or censure where it's due. It's always incumbent on you to represent other people's ideas in good faith.

TRY THIS NOW:
Start Your Own "What's Your Problem?" Bookstore (aka Organize Your Field into Problem Collectives)

The goal: *To sort studies in your Field by the problems that motivate instead of the topic they are "about," by arranging a small number of secondary sources into "problem sections."*

In chapter 4, we asked you to imagine a bookstore where the shelves are organized according to the problems that propel each of the authors' books, not the "topics" each book is about. Instead of a section named, let's say, Philosophy—with books about German philosophers on one shelf, Greek philosophers on another, Indian philosophers on a third, and so on—this "Problem Bookstore" would have sections called (again, let's say) *How can humans authenticate religious scripture or other works from antiquity?* Or perhaps *How to make sense of evil?* Or maybe *How can we teach ourselves and others to act morally?*

Well, the time for hypotheticals is over. Now your job is make this bookstore a reality (albeit on a small scale) using the books you plan to read for your research. Here are the steps:

1. Choose six to eight short secondary sources (articles or book chapters—not entire books) in your Field related to your topic. By this point in your research, you have compiled a preliminary bibliography of studies on your topic. Your Sounding Board has probably made some suggestions as well. Don't fret too much over the selection of studies. As long as they are serious works of scholarship, and as long as they are "about" your topic, that's all you need. You can always add more later.

2. Using table 9 as a model, write down the *topic* of the first study in your list. Here is the place where you can write generalities, such as "ancient Greek philosophy" or "Buddhism." This should be pretty straightforward. You should be able to identify the topic even before reading the study, using the introduction of the article or chapter (or even just the title).

3. Now write down the specific *case* that the study focuses on. Perhaps it's a study of medieval Buddhist architecture in Japan, or a specific element of ancient Stoic philosophy. Again, this should be pretty simple, since the case will likely be mentioned in the title or the opening pages of the study.

4. List the specific questions that the study poses. Here is where things get more precise, and where your close reading skills will pay off. Just as you did earlier with your own research—where you

brainstormed and refined a host of small- and medium-scale questions that together started to "add up" to a broader project—here is where you try to identify the small- and medium-scale questions that comprise the study you're reading. If you're lucky, the researcher will articulate their questions clearly and explicitly. But you might have to "reverse engineer" the author's questions, based on the explanations they are providing, and the claims they are making. Identify as many questions as you can, striving to find *at least* ten.

5. Try to identify *patterns* among those questions. Once again, this part of the process is exactly the same exercise that you did before, only this time you're focusing on someone else's work, rather than your own. Analyze the list of the ten-plus questions you've found, and ask yourself: *If I had to venture a guess, what does this author seem to be concerned about or preoccupied with? What seems to be driving them?* Pay attention as well to the questions that the author *doesn't* seem to be asking—questions which, for you, seem like obvious ones, but which don't seem to be addressed in the study. All of this is "self-evidence"—remember that?—only this time, the "self" in question is not you, but *them*.

6. Try to identify the *problem*. Now that you've created an inventory of questions, and analyzed the patterns that comprise those questions, you're ready for the hardest but most rewarding part of this exercise: to try and see *past* the author's case study, and identify the deeper-seated problem. Write down a one-sentence description of this problem *in as general terms as possible*. It goes

without saying, we hope, but be sure to avoid conflating the author's *case* with their *Problem*.

7. Repeat steps 1 through 6 for the other studies in your list.

8. Once you have completed this process for most or all of your studies, try to identify any themes or patterns that connect the different authors' Problems. Do any of the different problems you've identified seem related somehow? If not, don't try to force things. It's OK if there are "one-of-a-kind" questions. But if there are ones that seem to share something in common, try to group them together. Now try to give a name to these broader Problem Collectives (you may need to adjust your description, broadening or abstracting it a bit, which is OK). The groups you end up creating— and the names you give to them—will become the sections of your Problem Bookstore. Once you have them, you're ready to open your shop and welcome fellow seekers!

TABLE 9. ORGANIZE YOUR FIELD INTO PROBLEM COLLECTIVES

SOURCE #	STUDY TITLE	TOPIC	CASE	PROBLEM	PROBLEM COLLECTIVE
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					

The point of this exercise is twofold. First, as you learn to sort your Field into different Problem Collectives, you will become far more efficient at navigating your Field, and far better at understanding (and remembering) the arguments and facts you've read. When you know the problem that motivates someone's work, not only do you gain clarity about *how* you should be reading that work (e.g., discerning which parts are key to a person's argument, and which parts are mere side notes), but you also have a much clearer sense of where in your own brain you should be storing and organizing all of the arguments and information you're encountering. A scholar's problem is the architecture of their argument, the skeletal structure, the grid. Without it, reading even the most rigorous work of scholarship can sometimes feel like being overwhelmed by a tsunami of facts and arguments.

There's a second reason, as well: you'll develop a kind of magical power, the ability to connect with fellow researchers on a deeper, more meaningful level, by seeing what they are *really* working on, rather than just the place, time period, and so on where their research in based. What you are going to find is that two genealogical studies of (let's say) the exact same Middle Eastern royal family, or three sociological studies of the exact same favela in Rio de Janeiro, may be motivated by *entirely different problems*. Similarly, one study about Rio may be propelled by the *exact same problem* as one about a Middle Eastern royal family. Cases and problems are *not* the same thing.

To be clear, as your list of secondary sources grows for your project, we are not advocating that you make an exhaustive catalogue or a comprehensive re-sorting of every study in your field. (You're not *really* starting a bookstore.) But we do believe that this mindset leads to a much more effective (and, frankly, enjoyable) research process. Simply

put, knowing the problem at stake, whether in your own work or in the work of another, makes navigating the ocean of studies easier.

TRY THIS NOW: **Change *Their* Variables**

The goals: *To gain an understanding of how topics, problems, and* cases *of problems work for other researchers. To learn about the research problem of a mentor, Sounding Board, or peer by interviewing them using the "Change One Variable" exercise from above.*

Distinguishing between the problem and the case that exemplifies the problem can be difficult. You've probably discovered this while doing the previous exercises. You'll also have realized why seeing beyond the case to the problem is so valuable, and why it is helpful to have multiple strategies for doing so.

This exercise turns the tables on "Change One Variable." In chapter 4, you changed one variable at a time in your *own* research question to see what this revealed about your Problem. Now, you are going to ask another researcher—a mentor, Sounding Board, or peer—to do the same thing aloud with you so that you can learn more about their topic, their case, and their Problem.

If that person is in your Field, great—you'll learn about how the topic-problem-case dynamic affects someone else working on similar subject matter. But this is purely optional. The key thing is to learn how to pinpoint the

driving problems in the research world outside your own mind. This process should be empowering, and strengthen the bond between you and a fellow researcher.

Here's what to do:

1. Give yourself a refresher on how the "Change One Variable" (COV) exercise works. You've covered a lot since you did it yourself, so reread that part of chapter 4.

2. Introduce the exercise to your chosen interviewee in a way that presumes no prior knowledge on their part of how the COV exercise works. You can describe the goal and the procedure to them yourself, or just give them an opportunity to read it in the book. Explain that, having gone through COV yourself, you'd now like to interview them about their research, using the same technique. Explain that this interview is part of your own self-training. In addition to learning more about their research, you also want to practice distinguishing topics from cases from problems in other people's research. Make it clear that this conversation is confidential, and that you will be taking notes only for yourself.

3. Prepare for an informal and nonjudgmental conversation. Your job is to listen, to ask clarification questions, and to write things down. You're already experienced with writing self-evidence; now you'll be the stenographer writing down the self-evidence of someone else. Bring pens and notepads and—don't forget—the list on page 131 to keep track of which variables changed and how your interviewee responded to each change.

4. Start things off by asking questions that prompt your interviewer to identify their topic, and then produce a question *containing all of the relevant variables* that they think best encapsulate their core problem. For example:
   • What do you work on? (Topic) (NOTE: If their response is "I work on lots of things!" just have them choose one representative project for starters.)
   • If you had to put what you work on into a question, what would that be? (NOTE: If they produce a *nonquestion* ["I work on the question of poverty"—see page 47], tell them that this exercise requires a real question. Give them an example from COV, if necessary, or ask them to choose a question from one of their studies.)
5. Write down their description of their topic and their full research question. Take your time here— read the question back to them and ask if it's complete. Remind them that the rules of the game require the question to be as comprehensive as possible, and include all of the relevant variables. It does not have to be elegant.
6. Once they confirm that the question is complete, *you* start changing variables for them, one by one, and writing down the results. *How did this variable change affect your EKG—your level of excitement? If you had to guess, why?* This is the meat of the exercise, which will take the most time and—in order to work—require that you let *nothing* slip past your Noticing radar. Again, be nonjudgmental, but interrupt and politely ask for clarification if you hear any of the following:
   • Abstract, high-level, theoretical, or vague

language (*You mentioned Concept X. What does that refer to, specifically, for this particular case?*)

- Jargon, insider-speak, or acronyms (*I didn't understand that term. Is there a more common version?*)
- New words spilling out when you ask them why that changed variable made them feel more or less excited than before. *DO NOT LET THESE PASS BY UNREMARKED.* Call them out. This is the moment when people feel some pressure to justify their choices, and when revelations might occur without their realizing it. This is also where an attentive listener is a researcher's best friend. You're the Sounding Board now. Play what they said back to them, and prompt them to greater precision. (*You just said a word that isn't in your research question. Is that a key variable in your study? If so, how would you rephrase your research question?*)

7. When you feel like the interviewee's responses to the variable changing are getting you both closer to the problem, shift gears. Share with them what you noticed and ask them to speculate about the problem that might explain the pattern in their excitement. (*Here are your responses to these variable changes. You said that these variables could be changed, meaning that you'd be interested in those cases too, and these other variables couldn't, meaning that they are somehow central to your agenda. If you had to guess, what would you say is the underlying problem that you are concerned with in this research project?*)

8. Hopefully your conversation will be an insightful and enjoyable one. In any event, be sure to thank your interviewee for their time!

Through the exercises you have just completed, you have accomplished a major mental leap. You have separated the field-specific *case*—with all its specificity and field jargon—from the generalized *problem*, which cuts across the grain of one field and extends into other fields. This mental change liberates you from the narrow view of a field as mere Topic

Land, which mistakenly believes that studies are relevant to one another only if they share a topic. You now have techniques to determine what really matters to different researchers in your field and how to diagnose the problem within a study that might or might not articulate it clearly. (Of course, you might encounter studies that lack a problem and remain stuck in Topic Land, but you can make these useful to you too.) You have gained a better appreciation for the problem that motivates the research of your Sounding Board or another researcher you trust. And for your own research explorations, you now know why you need not — and should not — just stay "on topic."

Beyond your current project, you have gained a more fluid approach to navigating a field, one that is sensitive to the concerns of other Problem Collectives within it. You have acquired multiple techniques for figuring out which parts of it are most useful to you, while remaining centered.

You'll never be done with this process once and for all because your Field is not static. It keeps adding and shedding members. New publications keep appearing. And, if you look, you will continue to uncover earlier studies that you didn't know existed.

Now, having sorted out your Field by Problem Collective, you need to figure out how to talk to the members of your Field.

TRY THIS NOW: Rewrite for Your Field

The goal: *Informed by your Problem Collective, to learn to write about your Problem in a way that your Field will understand, and to see your Problem with "Field eyes."*

In chapter 4, you wrote for your Collective. Writing for your Collective required you to eliminate all of the insider language (or jargon) and secret codes that might be easily

understandable to those in your Field, but which needed to be rephrased in order to be meaningful to members of your Collective.

Now it's time to switch audiences and repeat the process, but with a couple of new goals. Your Field, as mentioned above, is populated mostly by people who are not part of your Problem Collective and are uninterested in your Problem. Why write for them? Put another way, what might be the value of looking at your Problem with Field eyes?

When you have to explain your project to someone who doesn't care about your Problem (or thinks they don't), several good things might happen. You might, of course, change their minds about the relevance of your Problem. People are not static; they can be persuaded by arguments and evidence, and you might create a new ally. You might help Collective members within your Field find one another through your work. Even if they don't become members of your Collective, you may deepen their questions for other explorations. In any case, you will change your Field.

Our goal is to make sure that what you've written is comprehensible. Look over the first draft of your proposal description and highlight any terms that people in your Field are unlikely to know or be familiar with. These might include the following:

- Concepts and theories
- Key authors relevant to the "Problem Collective" dimensions of your research
- Key debates or arguments among members of your Collective
- Personal names
- Names of institutions or organizations

- Titles
- Acronyms
- Periodizations
- Topics

Highlight your enthusiasms (and other scholars'), just as you did your insider language when writing for your Collective.

Other benefits to rewriting for your Field are personal. In chapter 1, we mentioned that boredom can be a wonderful teacher in the early phases of a project, and gave examples of the ways it can help you to articulate and conceptualize your concerns. We also spoke about the importance of facing up to your own boredoms without judgment. If, upon telling someone about your concern with X, you are terribly bored by every association—A, B, C, and D—they make with X, you should not judge yourself. Don't force yourself to be interested in anything, even if it's Important (with a capital *I*).

Boredom is back, but this time to help you in a different way. When you rewrite for your Field, as opposed to your Collective, you will, alas, need to venture into what you consider to be the less compelling features or logical associations with your core questions and problems. These will not be encounters with boredom that help you grasp more clearly who you are as a thinker, and what your Problem truly is—they will simply be topics and questions that you are already fully aware of, but just find painfully dull.

This is an essential process, for a number of reasons. Here are two:

1. **Engaged readers make better researchers.** By engaging seriously and in good faith with such areas and questions, you are engaging seriously and respectfully with your Field mates *as members*

of Problem Collectives other than your own. You have to contend with other agendas. They don't find these aspects of your work "boring"—for them, this is likely the reason they picked up your work, came to hear you speak, or are bothering to engage with you at all. They find these problems disturbing, fascinating, and worthy of long-term (even career-long) engagement. To dismiss these aspects of your work as uninteresting or unworthy of contemplation, as you can imagine, is no small insult. For some, it would be the same thing as dismissing as insignificant a problem that keeps them up at night, and for some, their whole reason for becoming a researcher in the first place. It is deeply personal. By contrast, a good-faith engagement with these questions is your way of acknowledging and taking seriously that your Field mates may belong to Problem Collectives entirely different from your own.

2. **Engagement can lead you to discover and embrace new research problems.** Engagement of the kind we are encouraging here benefits your own intellectual and personal growth. Sometimes— although by no means always—the labor of seriously engaging with "boring" issues can subtly transform you and change your own perspective. Sometimes, you even begin to catch glimpses of these problems, seeing them as if through the eyes of those collectives who consider these problems fundamental to their identity. Even better, you find your own way of "translating" these problems into your own language, stumbling upon a wording or a phrasing that, in a flash of insight, suddenly

finds *you* disturbed. You realize that, all this time, it wasn't the problem itself that was "boring" to you; it's simply that you had never heard the problem phrased in a way that made sense to you. But now that you have, suddenly you find yourself kept awake at night.

And remember: it is perfectly good and natural if your first draft—even your fifth or sixth—is still inward-looking. The point is that every subsequent edit and draft should move steadily outward, opening up, equipping uninitiated readers, and inviting them into your Problem. Make your Problem their Problem. Disturb them by showing them—in terms *they* will understand—what disturbs you. Your work needs to make arguments, to be sure, but just as much it needs to equip a reader with everything they need to know in order to understand your argument.

SOUNDING BOARD:
Find a Sounding Board in Your Field
A Sounding Board in your Field will bring another perspective to your evolving research project. Consider reaching out to someone who is not at your institution—someone who is not your boss or who has no personally vested interest in the outcome of your study, besides their professional goodwill. They can help you to ensure that your manner of expressing ideas will be comprehensible to your peers. They will help you to identify sources you might have overlooked. They will help you anticipate which questions about your primary source (your cereal

box, so to speak) have been asked and answered by others in your Field. Again, show them your research proposal and solicit their response, whether written or oral. And (you guessed it) make sure to say *Thank you*.

Welcome to Your Field

Membership in a Field can be rewarding. You'll find that in a field, as in a Problem Collective, groups of researchers develop a certain *esprit de corps*. Curiosity, relentlessness, and generosity are the ingredients fueling their productivity and inspiration. One of the benefits of a field is the productive friction between the different Problem Collectives therein. Their disturbance becomes your disturbance, and suddenly your own research achieves a new dimensionality for you. You suddenly see a part of your field in 3D.

You are still a problem. Always keep in mind that the scale, ambition, and brilliance of your question is never limited to the scale of the specific project you end up working on. In fact, just the opposite: the more brilliant and resonant your question, the more it will spill out from the confines of your project, often in ways you haven't anticipated.

6. How to Begin

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You're nearing the end of this book. Are you feeling a little bit relieved? Ceaseless self-examination of the sort you've been doing is no one's idea of a vacation. It's hard work, and it's almost over.

Take a moment to consider the work you've done thus far. You are in conscious possession of a problem, and you've transformed it into the beginnings of a project. You can find sources and generate questions like nobody's business. You know how to stay centered in your Problem as you engage with various research communities. You've found your Collective. You've navigated and engaged your Field. You've written and rewritten about your Problem for both of them.

What's left to do?

To write.

More specifically, to write *from the self-center you have created.* Not from a narrow sense of self, but rather the expansive self that you have been developing and discovering through the course of this book.

Now that you've found your center, it's time to rewrite with centeredness.

Remember: your center is not some kind of military base or fortification designed to repel outsiders and protect insiders. Nor is it a location on a map. Your center is, as a researcher, a center of gravity that keeps you squarely over your own two feet at all times, even as you continue to move forward and change. To be centered is to be comfortable in your own skin.

It is a self-possession you carry with you on your research journey. From time to time, you may get lost on your journey or feel knocked off-balance or momentarily lose your sense of self. But having found the problem at the center of your research, you'll be able to return to it, time and again.

Finding your center is empowering. Being a self-centered researcher is not just about having interests or being interesting. It's about being confident enough to discriminate between the choices you will face throughout the research process, and to make wise decisions about how to spend your time. To know, in your bones, what is really worth doing. Whether you have just one project to finish this month, or a career's worth of research in your future, you'll have to choose between an array of promising ideas and exciting possibilities. Some of these might speak to your core problem, but most won't. Others may praise you for coming up with this or that neat idea, but as a self-centered researcher you will be able to respond to such encouragement by asking yourself: *Yes, this is interesting — but is this part of my Problem*? When you are centered, you are able to say "No, thank you" to scintillating ideas and flashy, passing thoughts, things that your uncentered alter ego would jump at without knowing why. The uncentered researcher feels tempted to chase every good idea that comes along; the centered researcher is discerning.

So, to return to our point above, now that you've done all of this wonderful work on finding your center, your last exercise in this book is to write *from* it.

Don't Worry. It's All Writing.

This final instruction — that now is the time "to write" — might seem like a profound buzzkill. Your fleeting sense of relief gives way to anxiety, even dread. Writing, as we all know, is the "hard part." What is more, it's not as if the exercises in this book have marched you step-by-step through

the expected parts of a traditional thesis. You don't even have an introduction, much less a conclusion. You have hardly any polished prose. You have no footnotes. You don't have anything! *I've done a whole book's worth of exercises and I still have all my writing to do?!*

Well, guess what? *You've been writing this entire time.*

Let's take stock of just how much writing you've produced so far. Assuming you've given yourself time to complete all or most of the exercises, this means that, at this very moment, your notebook or hard drive contains the following:

- A list of search results on your topic that jumped out at you, along with your ruminations about why they did
- A list of search results on the same topic that bored you, along with your thoughts about why they did
- A list of "small" factual questions about a single primary source
- A list of assumptions that make each of these small questions possible (i.e., the "premises" of these questions)
- A list of search results of primary sources, based on a refined search query (using terms from your "small" questions)
- The results of the Cereal Box Challenge, namely a worksheet containing multiple genres of questions about your chosen primary source and plenty of ideas about the next primary sources you might look for
- A bibliography or a list of secondary sources, from both your Problem Collective and your Field
- An extended brainstorm about your envisioned ideal primary sources, how you might use them, and where they might be found
- A decision matrix to help you craft a project that fits your personhood, as well various determinative factors

- A first draft of a research proposal, full of names, acronyms, jargon, and other types of language comprehensible only to members of your Field
- A printout of the research proposal that you have highlighted to identify all instances of insider language
- A revised version of the research proposal in lay language comprehensible to your Problem Collective
- Your worksheets from the "Change One Variable" exercise, including an improved research question, and lists of the fungible vs. non-negotiable elements of that question
- Your worksheets from the "Before and After" exercise, with ideas about how the case you're working on might fit into a bigger story about your Problem
- Notes from your "Change One Variable" interview of a Sounding Board
- Advice from your Sounding Boards from various stages of your project-conceptualization work

What is more, chances are high that, while reading through the primary and secondary sources that spoke to you, you may also have done one or more of the following — *all of which are also forms of writing*:

- Brainstorming
- Outlining
- Emailing
- Underlining, highlighting, and making marginal notes in a book or an article
- Scribbling on napkins, take-out menus, subway schedules
- Text messages
- Social media posts
- Blog entries
- To-do lists
- Audio recordings

All of this is writing. *All of it.*

You've also already begun the process of refining and consolidating your ideas in writing. You wrote a research proposal based solely on the introspection you did in part 1. You rewrote your proposal for your Problem Collective with the aim of reaching a wider community centered on a common problem. You also rewrote for your Field, navigating its various Problem Collectives to explain how your project might have implications for others. In short, you've rewritten your project several times while supposedly still on the starting block.

Wait a minute, you say.

This isn't real *writing! At best, this is "note-taking" or "journaling" or "prewriting." Most of what I have are fragmentary notes, and countless questions. Maybe I do have a few transcribed quotes, a few new facts and sources, and a rough proposal, but I certainly haven't begun writing the study itself.*

You've done more than just "begin." You've prepared yourself for the next phase of research, which — like the next one, and the one after that — requires that you begin yet again.

So start!

Take those fragmentary notes, and transform them into complete sentences and paragraphs.

Place those quotes in your working document, and write down why they matter to your research problem.

Look at the many self-reflections you have produced thus far and identify passages from your notes that you feel capture the underlying "problem" of your work in compelling language. Add them to your proposal or working document.

Take the bibliographic references you've copied and pasted — those that jumped out at you so long ago — and expand them into fully formed footnotes and bibliographic entries.

Steps like these are part of the creative research process. These are the materials out of which research papers, ar-

ticles, and books are made. A film is, put crudely, footage shot and edited. A painting is a series of chromatic brushstrokes on a surface. A book is a collection of words, sentences, paragraphs, notes, and figures. To be sure, you can continually work at making your collection of words more clear, compelling, empirical, rigorous, or elegant. Just keep in mind that, if your goal is "to write," any and every act of putting pen to paper or fingers to keys is part of that process.

Writing is not a pristine, reverent act. It's a messy, scrappy affair.

And so we invite you to look over what you've produced thus far, and appreciate that you've been writing this entire time. While you probably have not been writing in clear, poetic passages all this time, the writing you have produced is a valuable type of raw material. As you sift through all your writings, you will choose what to abandon and what to preserve. You will refine most of what you save, and reword nearly all of it. You will move from all those fragmentary writings you have now to paragraphs of polished, well-structured prose.

So, when we say that now is the time "to write," what we really mean is that now is the time to bring all of the writing you have already done together into one place, and to begin that process of sifting, selecting, structuring, and clarifying.

TRY THIS NOW: Create "Draft 0"

The goal: *To consolidate all of the different types of writing you have produced during the Self-Centered Research process thus far into a single document*.

Create a "Draft 0." Not a "first draft" or "Draft 1" that requires lots of new writing. All you need to do for the moment is to bring together all of your writing thus far into a single digital file.

Here is your checklist of items to compile:

Digital notes. If you've been using your computer, phone, or tablet to take notes, you might have them saved in a variety of files, formats, and locations. Now is the time to copy and paste all of these into your unified Draft 0. This includes the draft research proposal you wrote in chapter 3, as well as those you rewrote for your Collective and your Field. Don't worry about where to paste each item. Dump them anywhere. Structure does not matter at this point.

Handwritten notes. If you've taken notes on loose-leaf paper, in bound journals, or on napkins, transcribe them all *word for word* into Draft 0. Resist the temptation to rewrite just yet.

Underlinings, highlights, and marginalia. Return to any primary or secondary source that you have marked up in one form or another. Transcribe these notes into your digital file. Be sure also to transcribe full bibliographic information as well, to identify the primary or secondary source you marked up.

As you pull these items together in Draft 0, also do the following:

Tidy up (but only if it doesn't bog you down). While transcribing fragmentary notes or thoughts, you might find yourself correcting misspellings in your original digital notes, or expanding fragmentary notes into complete sentences. If you can do this without bogging down the progress of consolidation, go for it. *But you don't have to.* There will be plenty of time to do this later on. If you do find yourself getting slowed down with efforts to reword, copyedit, expand, develop, and perfect, remind yourself that Draft 0 is meant to be a

mindless, mechanical act of consolidation. That's all. Just get your stuff in one place, in one format.

Note down "self-evidence." One important exception to the Do Not Revise Yet rule: during this transcription and consolidation process, stay centered and "in tune" with yourself. You are still hooked up to that EKG machine. Continue to use introspective techniques as you revisit your earlier writings. Pay attention to any new thoughts or questions that surface while your consolidating your existing notes, and write those thoughts down *directly* into the Draft 0 digital file. This cannot bog you down; it is *always* time well spent.

By the end of this process, you will have a single file containing many thousands of words. It will be sloppy, un-grammatical, disjointed, and unstructured. It will be full of gaps and unfounded speculations.

Let it be all of these things.

This is not a final product. In fact, you should go out of your way to be messy and incoherent, because this will help you overcome, in one fell swoop, two of the most powerful inhibitors of the writing process:

1. The fear of judgment
2. The fear of the blank page

By consolidating the messiest Draft 0 possible, you over-come any fear of embarrassment—the fear of writing something incoherent, incorrect, or immature. You over-come it, strangely enough, by creating the most embar-rassingly incoherent document you can imagine. Then you discover that the world didn't end.

Likewise, there's simply no time to be afraid of the blank page. You give it no chance to exist. That pristine page

that dares you to produce a thought worthy of it disappears, as your copying and pasting fills the blank page—and then another and another page—with text. Incoherent text, perhaps, but text nonetheless. Draft 0 helps you to overcome your page fright. "What would I do if I *weren't afraid*?" Draft 0 answers that question for you. It won't cure you of all your writerly fears and hang-ups, but it won't give the first big fear you face any time to intervene. As messy as Draft 0 will be, it will also contain the following:

- Critical evidence
- The makings of a robust base of primary and secondary sources
- Quotations that you found in primary and secondary sources
- Key figures
- Questions that are essential to your purpose

As chaotic as it looks, it may also contains moments of brilliance—perhaps more than a few.

See What You Mean: Writing Draft 1

Having produced a consolidated file with all of your writings, the key now is to begin the process of moving from Draft 0 to Draft 1: a process of sorting, grouping, copyediting, sectioning, titling, and other forms of editing. Throughout this process, remember this bit of time-tested wisdom: *the best essays and books aren't written, they're rewritten.*

Sometimes, writing is the manifestation of a preexisting thought — a coherent, ready-to-express idea. Most of the time, it's not. Writing is, in its most fundamental sense, an act of *estrangement*, of *alienation*, of *discovery*. It is a process of literally externalizing your thoughts. You turn what was in your brain and in your body into something unfamil-

iar and new, so that you can see it with fresh eyes and then improve it. To "get it out on the page" means to take something that is within you, and put it in front of you, so that your mind has a fighting chance to think critically about it. You cannot see your own eyes — they are the things that see. You need to put it out in front of you. You can't think your own mind — it is the thing that thinks. You need to put it in front of you, estrange it, look at it. Then you can re-internalize it, then alienate it again, and again, and again. This sounds philosophical, but it's really the key to creating Draft 2, Draft 3, and Draft 4.

This is how writing *really works*.

This is what writing *really does*.

As a self-centered researcher, you are prepared to become your own writing partner. You can offer yourself the same kind of clear advice that is usually so much easier to give to *other* researchers. Just as you can readily see the argument that lies beneath the surface of your colleague's or classmate's or friend's opaque wording, you can do that very same thing for yourself, one draft at a time.

This is not an easy or natural thing to do. It takes work. Repeated and rigorous introspection. By now you are familiar with your subject matter. Critically, you are also familiar with the way you *think* about your subject matter. Now the challenge is to see if there are any gaps or inconsistencies between the two, and, if there are, to decide what to do.

The key to making such decisions is, as always, to *notice what you are noticing about yourself as you review, revise, and expand your project*.

Start by reading your Draft 0 out loud, word for word. As you do, utilize the techniques of self-reflection that you've been developing over the course of this book. *Pay attention to yourself as you read your own work*. Are you getting bored? Lost? Make a note of that. Are you laughing with delight at a certain turn of phrase? Notice that too. As you read this sentence or that paragraph, are you getting a sense

of what you should write next, or what sources you should look for? Write a note at that point in your draft. Do you feel a sense of satisfaction when the author (i.e., you) gets to the point that the evidence supports? Or are you feeling dissatisfied or even annoyed over how long you've been taking to get to the point (even if you get there eventually)? Does the flow of a certain section pivot or segue to a new thought too often, or is there a nice pacing to the argumentation?

Be realistic in your reading. Do the kinds of things that regular readers do when they read a thesis, an article, or a book chapter: take breaks. Stop midway, go read an email, pour yourself a cup of tea or coffee, come back and pick up where you left off. Are you able to find your way back in? Is the flow of ideas clear? How about the language? In short, try to experience your own writing exactly the way a third-party reader would, and then see how your work holds up as a reading experience.

TRY THIS NOW: Move from 0 to 1

The goal: *To create a "Draft 1"—a document with a (very) preliminary sense of structure—by making an initial pass at sorting, grouping, and editing your consolidated writings from Draft 0.*

Here are just some of the steps you can take to accomplish this transformation:

1. **Combine things that obviously go together.** Let's say you've already transcribed three quotes by the same person; but because you did so at different times, these quotes are scattered in different locations in your Draft 0. Cut and paste them into the same place in the document. Likewise, maybe your notes on a particular figure, event, or idea are scattered here and there across your notes

in Draft 0. Bring those together as well. You may discover a good reason to redivide them later on—perhaps you want those three quotes in different parts of your final product—but for the meantime a good rule of thumb is to combine like things.

2. **Move all bibliographic entries to the end of the document.** This is one of the simplest parts of "combining similar things" and involves locating, cutting, and repasting any bibliographic citations you have in your notes at the end of the document (where they will eventually live, in the References, Works Cited, or Bibliography section of your work). Having them all in one place also makes it easier when the time comes to add all necessary in-text citations, footnotes, and/or endnotes.

3. **Experiment with combining things that *might go together.*** Let's say you perceive a possible connection between different parts of your notes, but one that is not obvious or straightforward. Maybe three fragmentary notes seem to orbit around a common theme that you might want to use as a key structural device in your Problem. These might become the focus of a section of your article, or a chapter of your thesis. Cut and paste those things into the same part of the document, and see what happens. Does the grouping feel coherent and compelling? If so, try developing it. Does the connection feel forced? Then maybe try a different thematic grouping, or simply leave it alone for now and come back later when you have more clarity, or have consulted more primary and secondary sources.

4. **Pay attention to "self-evidence" as you rearrange**

chunks of your document. As you explore potential ways to group your notes, what you'll soon find is that your draft is taking on something of a preliminary structure. Things are no longer completely scattered or random. They are starting to take shape. As you get deeper into this process, don't lose sight of self-evidence. Listen for any new thoughts, questions, phrasings, or ideas that crop up while you do this, and make sure to write these ideas into Draft 1. Think about *where* makes the most sense. You could place them near a given thematic cluster that inspired the thoughts; but if you find them hard to place, just put them all in one place at the beginning or the end of Draft 1. Treat that place like a catchall "miscellaneous folder" and worry about how to process those thoughts later.

5. **Where possible, put those chunks into a rough sequence.** If parts of your document seem out of order, reorder them. Let's say that you've just combined three quotes by the same person, all of which are from the 1920s. Then you notice that what directly precedes it in the document is another set of quotations from the 1960s. Just switch the order. You can reorder things later on if necessary, but at this stage, it's a good rule of thumb to keep things chronological. Likewise, if you discover that three of your chunks all deal with a shared theme, try grouping those chunks into their own section—just to see what happens. It might not be obvious what "order" or "sequence" to put them in, and that's fine for now. But don't force it: if one or more chunks don't offer up any

obvious answer for where they "belong," just leave them be.

6. **Add titles to sections of the document.** Remember how we suggested that you give your movie a title before you've shot a single frame? Well, this kind of envisioning is a *continual* part of the research process, and it applies not only to the title of your work in progress, but also to the sections inside of it. So, once you've gotten far enough along in the process of grouping your fragments of text, and then combining those groups into sections, take the next step of naming those sections. Doing so will help you not only to work with your draft more efficiently, but also to structure your thoughts.

7. **Develop your writerly voice.** Are your verbs precise or generic? Is your vocabulary varied or repetitive? Are your claims clear or evasive? Do you notice yourself relying on a narrow set of phrases, clichés, and devices for transitioning between ideas? Draft 1 is a good time to begin thinking about your voice as a writer. Become aware of the way that figurative language commits us to arguments that we might be unaware of. Historians, for example, often resort (sometimes excessively) to biological metaphors like "growth," "seminal moments," "evolution," "stems," and so forth. Novice researchers often pick up such terms quickly in their effort to emulate authorities in their chosen field, but established members sometimes use such terms uncritically too. The important thing to realize is that these terms are not "neutral." They shape thought in profound (if subliminal) ways, and thus the course and outcomes of research.

Check to see if you have been using such language conventions uncritically, and rephrase if you have.

8. **Keep killing your acronyms.** You've now done a couple passes at rewriting for your Collective and your Field, but the process of improving the precision and clarity of your language is far from over. We all miss some jargon during the first cull. More importantly, every time we produce new prose, we easily lapse into using words that obscure rather than clarify our subject matter and purpose. Be vigilant about insider language throughout the rewriting process.

9. **Add footnotes, endnotes, or other necessary citations.** Start the process of tracking your sources of information systematically. If you plan on using any of the direct quotes you transcribed, add the footnote now, and include a full reference. Choose a single formatting style for references that you will use throughout the project, and make sure to apply it uniformly. There is *nothing* more draining than getting to the end of a long research journey and having to spend hours or days cleaning up messy notes.

Perfection Is Boring

We sometimes celebrate "perfection" in books, music, images, works of art. The truth is, if those things were perfect, they would be painfully boring. A "perfect" thing does not need us. Even a powerful microscope would reveal no flaw or foothold on its smooth surface. It would leave us no "way in," nothing to say. There would be no need for anything to exist beyond its own precious self.

The same is true of research and writing. If your work is "perfect" from the moment of completion, you leave us nothing to say. There is nothing to be added or subtracted, struggled with or contemplated. It does not engage. Your work would be waterproof, criticism-proof, improvement-proof, *thought-proof*. Is that really what you want?

If you have ever been fortunate enough to encounter a work of art, scholarship, or creation that strikes you as perfect, you have probably come to this realization: "perfect" things are perfected not by the author, but by *us* as readers, viewers, and listeners.

The goal of research, then, is not to produce a precious artifact for others to admire. It is to create a continual, ever-renewing process of betterment — of improving and *perfecting* things.

Research projects sometimes come to us well built, other times full of holes. Consider the sponge. Before it comes into contact with anything, it is shot through with holes; and yet after coming into contact with the world, it has those gaps suffused and filled with material supplied by something other than itself.

A research project cannot be perfect. But a research project can be built and executed in such a way that, in addition to posing and answering a limited number of specific questions, can take the shape of an intellectual sponge, leaving ample space within its structure for its *audience* to fill it up with their own material: their questions, their Problems, their cases. Leave it to others to perfect your research. Leave them a way in.

As you'll have gathered by now, the goal of the Self-Centered Research process, of all that introspection, is to create the conditions for such perfection to occur. That's why — as we said at the beginning — you are the one who will complete the composition of this book. You are the one who will perfect it.

SOUNDING BOARD: Talk to Yourself

You are now self-centered enough—and you know we mean this in a good way—to be your own Sounding Board. Throughout this book, you've received a lot of advice from us. Hopefully, you have also sought out and received advice from one or more external Sounding Boards. Now is the time to assess which parts of the Self-Centered Research process have been useful for you.

This does not mean that you now reject external advice. On the contrary, by now you should be in regular contact with your Problem Collective and more closely enmeshed in your Field.

Take out your notes. Glance over the table of contents of this book again. Look at your notes and the contents side by side, and think about which parts of the Self-Centered Research process have been most useful to you, and which parts might be useful in the future.

Consider these questions:

- Which exercises do I want to repeat?
- Which exercises might I want to modify in some way, to suit my own purposes?
- Which exercises do I think I can improve on?
- Which bored me, and why?
- Which do I want to share with others? Whom could these exercises help?
- Which ways of thinking about my relation to members of my Field, or people who share my Problem, have been most useful to me?
- Which notes do I want to expand on or revise first?

Welcome to Self-Centered Research

By putting yourself through the Self-Centered Research process you have changed who you are. You are not just the same person with "more skills and more stuff." Yes, you have new skills. Yes, you have a portfolio of all the things you have written thus far. Yes, you have the beginnings of a research project. But, equally importantly, you have now forged a new *disposition* as a self-centered researcher. This mindset frees you from the common misperceptions and phobias and inhibitions and insecurities that hobble so many members of the research community — or that dissuade people from becoming researchers in the first place. You are a centered and mobile unit that can interact with fellow researchers of various fields with confidence, insight, and equanimity. You are not intimidated by other researchers' accomplishments, nor by the knowledge that self-improvement is an ongoing process.

Welcome to a wonderful way of life.