



How We Know What We Know and How We Know We Know

Chapter Summary

Knowledge is defined as a description of the state or operation of some aspect of the universe upon which people or groups are prepared to act. Knowledge is a product of social processes and is both a product and the property of social groups. Knowledge production usually begins with the public, governments, or groups of experts who recognize that the state of knowledge in a particular area is inadequate.

Many students ask themselves, “Why should I care about research?” The answer involves the reality that almost every professional job involves research in some capacity. Our day-to-day lives involve finding answers to questions we have about things we need to know. This requires us to do research. Whatever the question we are researching, we are faced with two options: do the research ourselves or consult an **authority**. People can have two types of authority: authority based on position or authority based on knowledge. On what basis do we select authorities? We need to understand the **research process** in order to evaluate the opinions of authorities.

Research is done to settle disputes about the nature and operation of some aspect of the universe. In other words, research is a way of knowing. The research process is guided by rules and principles for making confident statements about knowledge of the world based on our observations. The research process must be learned and studied in order to make informed inquiries and judgements of authorities. The research process is not an activity that we know intuitively and can just go and do on our own. The skills learned in research methods classes can be applied in both careers and everyday life. Many organizations and groups—such as universities, corporations, social workers, professionals, and government agencies—make use of research on a daily basis. If the subject of the research is controversial, it will come under considerable scrutiny and the researchers will be challenged to provide solid and carefully collected evidence. Also featured in this chapter is a list of tips to help determine the credibility of data and information found on the web—this is particularly important when beginning literature reviews (explored in more detail in Chapter 3). The research process is a disciplined way of coming to know something about our world and about ourselves.

Key Terms

Authority Those we consult for answers to questions about the nature and operation of the world—particularly the social, biological, and physical world. There are two kinds of authority: based on position and based on knowledge. (p. 5)

Knowledge A description of the state or operation of some aspect of the universe upon which people or groups are prepared to act. (p. 3)

Research A means by which we can understand the nature and operation of some aspect of the universe. (p. 4)

Research process A disciplined way of coming to know something about our world and ourselves. The research process is guided by rules and principles for making confident statements about knowledge of the world based on our observation. (p. 6)

Study Questions

Scroll down for answers.

1. What type of authority is most useful for answering questions about the nature and operation of the world? What are the features of this authority?
2. What type of problems might one encounter when consulting authorities?
3. How does an understanding of the research process help us to evaluate the opinions of authorities?
4. In terms of using the World Wide Web as a source of information, what are three methods that could be used to determine the authenticity of information found on the web?
5. In what ways is culture important in evaluating, accepting, and discrediting information?
6. Why should students “care about research” if they are not planning on becoming a researcher or a professor?

Video Resource

Palmer, Nathan. 2014. *Is it really a small world?* [4:07]

This video is a great example of a researcher’s curiosity in action: a sociologist who lost a camera and had it returned to him looks to a history of sociological research to help him go beyond the aphorism, “it’s a small world.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPJya_NiHrM&feature=youtu.be

Answers to Study Questions

1. Authority derived from knowledge is the most useful. Their knowledge is reflected in the kinds of research they have done. Authority based on a person's position, popularity, or appearance is the least useful for answering our questions. This kind of authority is no more useful than the opinion of anyone else. This suggests that authority that does not have a background in research is the kind of authority we should not trust. (p. 5)
2. We might encounter the following problems when consulting authorities:
 - On what basis do we select an authority to answer our questions?
 - What should we do when the words of authorities may be nothing more than mere opinions?
 - What should we do when authorities disagree?
 - What if the expressions and opinions of authorities are not convincing? (p. 5)
3. Understanding the research process enables us to make informed inquiries and judgments as to whether authorities use the appropriate research method. We can determine whether all the stages of the research have been conducted properly, assess the extent to which the research addresses the relevant aspects of the research question, determine whether the researcher has provided a valid interpretation of the findings, and learn to appreciate the limitations of the research. (p. 5)
4. Your answer may relate to the following tips:
 - Use only data from websites of reputable companies, academics, or universities.
 - Corroborate data with other sources.
 - Look for sources and/or references on the webpage.
 - Be careful when using newspaper sources; check multiple sources for the same story to check for accuracy.
 - Be cautious when using Wikipedia. When in doubt, do not use Wikipedia at all. (pp. 7–8)
5. We learn what is acceptable and unacceptable through our culture. The way we see, interact with, and learn about one another is greatly influenced by our culture. It is important understand there is more than one way of knowing. (p. 7)
6. Almost every professional job involves research in some capacity—either doing research as a direct part of their job or reading other people's research and making judgements about its quality and validity. (p. 4)