

How to do Research When You Have No Time

by David Lasocki

Editor's note: this is a talk that David gave at Indiana University Librarians' Day, IU-Kokomo, on May 13, 1999.

I was supposed to give a lecture this afternoon entitled "How to Do Research When You Have No Time." But I haven't had time to prepare it. Just kidding. Actually, it's a perennial topic for me--two perennial topics, really: finding the time for research, and giving lectures on finding the time for research. When I started preparing today's lecture, I went back and looked at a similar lecture I gave in 1990 for a research workshop hosted by the Bloomington Library Faculty Council and InULA. I was pleasantly surprised by how much good advice I gave at that time, but I've moved on from there, so I'm going to give you at least partly different advice today.

Since I first started doing research for publication at the age of 19 I've struggled continually to find enough time for it. During those past thirty-three years, I've been, in turn, an undergraduate student in England; a graduate student, a university instructor, a record store manager, a secretary, and a natural foods coop manager in America; a foundation administrator, a secretary again, and a library staff member in England; and a graduate student and a music librarian in America. I've published a steady stream of books, articles, and editions of music. During the periods when I had the most spare time, I had little energy or opportunity for research. And I certainly wasted lots of time, perhaps taking too seriously the advice of one of my professors to waste time while I could, because I certainly wouldn't be able to later in life. One thing I've discovered: there is no "later," only "now." "If not now, when?"

At other times, I've had only a few hours a week for research but been quite productive. My Ph.D. dissertation, for example, was researched during three years of lunch times when I was working full-time as a secretary, then a staff member in a business library in London. I tailored my research as much as possible to libraries and archives within easy walking distance of my workplace, and I was able to stretch out my lunch hour to two hours as often as not. Finding the time to write up that research in those pre-word processing days was much harder--so hard, in fact, that I had to move my family back to America and go back to school in order to get some large blocks of time.

After graduating in music and attending library school, I fondly imagined that working as a music librarian, surrounded by my sources and having to be abreast of them in order to help users, would make research easier to do. In my first such job, however, librarians were not encouraged to do research. I once again had only lunch times for research, a strict hour in which I had to eat my lunch too and I spent two painful years researching and writing only three articles.

As a result of these experiences, I've learned two important lessons. First, that the research climate in one's job can make all the difference. In my last job, as I've said, research was next to, but not quite, impossible. I don't see much point in fighting such a situation; better to pack up and find a more supportive one. In the Indiana University Libraries we're fortunate in having a fair amount of research support: tangible support in the shape of postage, photocopying,

telephone calls, interlibrary loan, computers, and research leaves; and moral and intellectual, er, "encouragement" in the shape of promotion and tenure expectations.

The second lesson is that the amount of time I have is not nearly as significant as how I make use of that time. Some librarians seem to think that you have to have a leave of several months in order to do research. But then they have a research leave and find they don't get much done. That's also true for the teaching faculty. A productive music history professor of my acquaintance told me, after a sabbatical leave, that he had spent most of his time taking it easy, and he thought he got more done during the normal school year when he has to work hard to fit research into a dozen other duties. I had a similar experience myself when I had a sabbatical semester a couple of years ago. I was so used to having only short periods of time for research, that I found it hard to concentrate on that one thing for eight hours a day.

Since the age of 19, I've had a passion for research. I'm happy when doing it, miserable or at least uncomfortable when not. I've listened to people who've tried to get me to do more ostensibly "creative" things in my life, such as painting or pottery, or who have told me, "You're such a good writer, why don't you write novels and make some money." But, though I love looking at painting, handling pottery, and reading novels, I have no inclination or talent for those worthy pursuits. Others have told me that I'm such an ardent researcher because I'm trying to compensate for some failing of character or physique. That I have less answer for, except that I've worked on developing my character and coming to terms with my physique, and still I want to do research.

Why do I mention my passion for research? Because I want to ask you about yours. Some librarians say to me things such as, "I'd like to do some research. I did do one article once to get promotion. But since then I haven't gotten around to it." I don't detect one ounce of passion there--half an ounce, perhaps, but that's not enough. I believe that to do research on top of a full-time job and all the other demands of adult life, perhaps including family and community service, you must have at least an ounce of passion. Otherwise, why bother? As an IU librarian, you don't have to do research. You can put most of your eggs in the service basket and fulfill your "Research, Professional Development, and Creativity" quota by taking some classes in a relevant field. If you don't have any passion, I don't want to waste our time talking to you. Please leave the room.

Since nobody left the room, I assume you're with me so far. The important question now is: How do you use your passion to sustain you through the trials and tribulations of research in your busy life? I've found a two-part answer to that question, first, in taking some small but regular amounts of time for research; second, in making the best possible use of those times.

Let's deal with finding time in general. Do you plan your day, your week, your year, your life at all? Or do you just wing it, relying on your memory or some hastily scribbled bits of paper to remind you what you have to do, and being pushed off course by whatever seemingly urgent demands come knocking on your door? I suspect that most of us do more winging than planning. I was amazed to discover that one of my colleagues doesn't write anything down. She makes no lists; she has no date book. She told me that now the complexity of her life was increasing, she might have to break down and buy a date book.

I'm several stages beyond that. I've been making lists for years and had a date book all my adult life. The problem with these simple tools is that they don't give you enough control. You meet the appointments you've made with others, but the rest of your time is chaos. The lists tend to multiply and become overwhelming.

The next stage is to add priorities and goals. You may already write down tasks to do each day, marking them ABC, or high/medium/low priority. Yet most of the tasks stay undone. Goal: to find the time for research. Obviously, those goals don't meet themselves. How to get beyond this stage?

Some of you may know Stephen R. Covey's book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and a companion book by him, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca Merrill called *First Things First*. They've been popular for over a decade now, and of course there's a covey of spinoffs, such as *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*, *Living the Seven Habits*, *The Seven Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *Principle Centered Leadership*, and so on. There are so many useful ideas in these books that I can give you the gist of only a few of them today. Covey and the Merrills suggest that the next stage in "time management" is to turn it into "self management" by bearing in mind the purpose of your activities. As they see it, the basis of all your planning should be a "personal mission statement," a considered written record of what you really want to do with your life. Obviously, research is part of what I want to do with mine. Then you figure out what roles you play in your life--up to seven roles, of course.

Covey and the Merrills further suggest that you plan your week around those roles and goals. At the beginning of each week, you take a little time to write down your roles, figure out up to three important goals for the week in each role, then write them into your date book, as specified blocks of time or as "high priorities" for a particular day. Then add your appointments, project deadlines, and anything else you think you can fit in. This way, at least you're planning to include in your week what's important to you. Review your plan every day, adding, subtracting, modifying, in the light of what comes up.

As you plan, week by week, day by day, say Covey and the Merrills, something else to keep in mind is the distinction between what's important and what's urgent. Things that are both important and urgent obviously have to be done, and done soon. Your boss asks you to draft an urgent memo to the Dean; the library roof starts leaking; an angry user demands satisfaction now--you know the kind of thing. After those activities are taken care of, because of the pressures imposed by others in their life, most people then switch to the urgent but not important activities. Or else they throw in the towel and switch to not urgent and not important, such as reading their junk mail, reading their e-mail while pretending to work, surfing the Web while pretending to work, or complaining to colleagues about their hard lives.

Research is full of important but not urgent activities. To begin with, unless you've been foolish enough to line up a series of urgent deadlines with publishers or editors of journals (as I do all the time), your research projects have no deadline, unless it's that uncomfortable date, a year or two or three hence, when you come up for promotion or tenure. In the absence of an externally imposed deadline, it's all too easy not to do the work. But research demands that, in planning your weeks and your days, you set aside regular amounts of time. These don't have to be large

amounts, just regular amounts. Research and writing are like playing a musical instrument: you must practice regularly every day if possible. If you don't, you'll be rusty when you sit down to do your work.

"But I really have no time," you say. "My job is so demanding, it's more than one person can ever handle. I can't even do the day-to-day tasks. How can I possibly fit in regular amounts of time for research?" The answer is: by planning as I've outlined above. Ask yourself every week, every day, every moment of every day what is important for me to do now?

If one of your roles is research, you've already taken account of it in planning the week. You've blocked out some times for research throughout the week. When you arrive at one of those times and another urgent and possibly important task rears its ugly head, ask yourself: "Which is more important for me to do now--my research or this ugly task?" Sometimes you'll capitulate to the urgent; after all, maybe it really is important. But, at other times increasingly, I hope you'll stick with the research.

Your regular time for research should, if at all possible, be a time free of interruptions. Do you have a door? Close it. Do you have a phone at your side? Unplug it. Do you have colleagues you just know want to talk to you about something? Be assertive and arrange other times to talk to them. If all else fails, and you want to be alone, go outside and sit under a tree, preferably some distance from the library. I've spent many a productive lunch time that way. In fact that's how I survived my unsupportive last job. Thank goodness the campus was heavily wooded.

My small but regular amounts of time at the moment consist of (1) a half hour or hour at the beginning or end of as many days as possible, and (2) Sunday mornings, when I finally have a larger block of time. Of course, every day when the alarm goes off, I have to ask myself: "Is it important for me to get up and do my research?" When I get the answer, "No," I just chalk it up to "taking care of myself" and happily go back to sleep.

I should in fact stress taking care of yourself. It's not worth making any amount of time for research if you're in no shape to use it. Are you fuzzy-headed from lack of sleep? Do you subsist on junk food and caffeine? Are you stiff in body and soul? Yea, verily, all this will show up in your research time. Plan--and take--regular time for good meals, exercise, relaxation, and recreation.

What to do with your research time

If you have regular amounts of time for research, what do you do in them? I suspect that when many librarians say they have no time for research, they're really saying they don't know how to go about organizing a research project. Let's discuss how to do this and to make the best possible use of your time at each stage.

First, research means coming with a topic; better yet, in the long run, coming up with a field or fields you can make your own. Once you work in the field, your research will develop its own momentum. I've been working in my field for over thirty years. At the moment I have a list of some sixty projects I'm working on or intend to work on, in this lifetime alone. Before I've

finished a project, two or three more spring up to take its place. But getting started in a field is much harder.

One suggestion I have is to go back to those research papers you wrote in library school or graduate school. You may be horrified at how primitive they look now. But perhaps the topic still looks interesting and there's a core of material you can re-research and improve on. A second suggestion: I think that nearly all of us have thought at one time or another, "Why doesn't *someone* do some research on such and such a topic?" Why not, indeed, and why not you? Take some time to recollect those researchable topics you let slip. Otherwise, you'll have to browse in current periodicals and books as well as databases to get some feel for what kind of research is being done these days, and what remains to be done.

Second, research means developing the habit of evaluation. This is something I teach in my music bibliography class. What are the important sources in your field, and why? Are the latest ideas in your field really useful, or merely trendy? Don't believe everything you read. Continually ask yourself whether research claims being made by yourself and others are warranted or unwarranted. Warrant, by the way, is the link between claims and evidence. For more on this important subject, read *The Craft of Research*, by Booth, Colomb, and Williams, which I use as a textbook for my class.

Third, research means keeping up with your field. We all know about the "information explosion," and it's no joke. In all fields, books and journal articles pour off the presses at an alarming rate, and nowadays there are all those Web sites, some of which must be relevant, don't you think? Here you can put your library skills to good use. Identify relevant bibliographies and lists of current publications; make use of indexes and databases. Moreover, the IU Libraries, as I mentioned above, provide support in the shape of table of contents services and interlibrary loan for books, dissertations, and articles you've identified.

Fourth, research means getting access to sources. The source could be in your own backyard, coming straight out of your work as a librarian. Or it might be what others are doing in their work, so you might send them a survey. Or it might be historical, in which case you have to visit other libraries or archives, so you have to plan ways and means, and of course time, to get there. Unless you have a sabbatical leave, or use your vacations for research, you'll have to tailor your projects to the sources within your grasp.

Fifth, research may mean finding funds. Despite the support of the IU Libraries, you may need extra money for supplies and materials or for office help. You'll almost certainly need money for traveling to libraries any distance from home. Take the time to find out about potential sources of money and to apply for them. [*Editor's note: InULA accepts applications for Research Incentive Fund grants four times a year.*] In some fields (music is one of them), you can actually get paid for writing articles, and you may want to plow some or all of that money back into the research business. I have a steady side income from writing that sustained me through all the low-paying jobs I mentioned above and is now paying back the college loans for my children.

Sixth, research means keeping track of your progress. Make lists of things to do: sources to look up, people to see. If you have to visit several libraries, keep a notebook with separate lists of

things to do at each library, so that when you get there you don't waste time wondering why you came or regretting that you didn't bring that scrap of paper on which you jotted down that essential source. I also keep a computerized log of my research projects with publishers (actual and potential), deadlines for submission, and dates of receipt and return of proofs.

Seventh, research means "relationship building," another of those important but not urgent activities. By now I have a circle of "research friends" in all parts of the globe. (Scientists call this an "invisible college"; others, less politely, call it the "old boy network.") We talk on the phone, correspond by regular and electronic mail, visit when we can, asking each other questions and sending each other drafts of books and articles to read. To some extent, I know about research in my field before it's published. I built up this circle by going to professional meetings, writing to researchers whose work I admired--again, asking questions and sending copies of publications--and serving as an editorial consultant. Publishers and editors of journals are also part of this circle. It develops its own momentum. Be sure to allow regular time to build up your research circle and to keep up with it by phone, by mail, by e-mail, and in person.

A special type of "research friend" is a co-author of a project. It's helpful for an inexperienced researcher to work with a more experienced one, as full co-author or in a more minor role as "sub-author." It's even helpful for more experienced researchers to work with others, as you can pool your knowledge and give each other the best possible feedback on ideas and drafts. I've written five books and several articles this way.

Eighth, research means thinking. I find that once I've started serious work on a project, ideas come to me at odd times--when I'm walking down the street or doing my exercises in the morning. Don't assume these ideas will come back to you. I've learned, from many wasted hours of racking my brain for that great idea I had last week, that it's best to write down ideas immediately on the nearest scrap of paper, then transfer them to your project file as soon as possible. What do I think about? I think about the logical connections in my material. I think about what other sources there might be out there in the big wide world that could relate to my topic, and often I remember ones I've already seen. I think about people who could help me with research problems. Some of my best thinking comes when I'm writing, which leads me to my next category:

Ninth, research means writing and editing. Because I want to say a fair amount about it, I'll come back to it at the end.

Tenth, research means proof-reading. It's easy to forget, once you've sent off an article to a journal in a state of exultation, that a fat package of proofs will arrive sooner or later, usually with a short deadline for return. In other words, it may become an important and urgent activity that you haven't planned for. You can't count on the journal's editor or proof-reader to catch all your mistakes: you must do the work conscientiously for yourself.

Eleventh, research means publicizing. Take time to put your publication in your running file of material for your annual review. Add it to your library's monthly or annual report. Send off a note to *IUL News*. Mail those reprints to your research friends. If you're fortunate enough to win

a prize or award for your research, take the time to go to the ceremony and to write a short but witty speech to deliver there.

As a result of your publicity, you may encounter jealous colleagues who complain behind your back, or even to your face, that you are doing research when you are supposed to be working. I have experienced this myself. Several IU Librarians have told me that they have received particularly harsh complaints from support staff. So, twelfth, research may mean educating your colleagues about the importance of research and the tripartite nature of your job. Good luck!

Writing when you have little time

I promised I'd come back to writing, which is the part of research that often causes people the most anxiety. You've identified some times, both short and longer, for writing up your research. How can you use this time most productively?

Research over the last twenty years has brought to light a misconception that most of us have developed about writing: to imagine that good prose gushes forth as from some magic fountain, with little shaping or rethinking; or, to put it another way, that thoughts must come fully formed in the mind, then be written down. Perhaps some people have the gift of always being able to write perfect first drafts without hesitation. Most of us, however, need to put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboards, in order to think through our material, to get it out into the world, to play with it, and to shape it into its final form. This means, then, that thinking is inseparable from writing. The act of writing teases out thought, then organizes and refines it.

Books on writing often prescribe methods for progressing from the idea stage through drafts to the finished product. Such methods differ considerably in detail, but the essence of them is to distinguish between two main stages of drafting. The first stage makes use of the right brain--the intuitive, imaginative, creative side. Once we get set off on a subject, if we don't get in our own way, the right brain comes up with dozens of ideas about it. We can stay out of our way by jotting down these initial ideas without censoring, classifying, making judgments, or shaping. They come in all shapes and sizes: notes, marginalia, doodles, lists, references, reflections, calculations, diagrams, questions, feelings, attitudes, wishes. Jot them all down. These ideas don't have to be whole sentences or phrases. In fact it's important *not* to concern yourself with the form of the expression at this stage, since that interferes with the generation of ideas.

After your ideas are on paper or screen, it's good to take a break or vacation, being sure to tell yourself that that's what you're doing and giving yourself permission for it. In any case, you'll probably have lots of enforced breaks during all stages of your writing. Don't despair: you can actually use them to your advantage. Relax, affirm to yourself (again and again) that breaks are useful, and let your subconscious mind play with the material you've already worked on. You'll usually find that you have new ideas on your subject and its organization when you return to the workbench or computer. For this reason, working in short bursts can even be more productive than longer sessions.

The second stage in writing is the left-brained part, where reason takes over to organize the ideas generated by the right brain. If you have time, make a "topical" draft by sorting your notes according to topic and labeling paragraphs. Keep your main subject in mind. Add further ideas

separately and quickly, so you're not distracted from the task at hand. Take another break, if possible, then reread the notes. Organize them under large headings and subheadings, discarding any ideas that are irrelevant to your subject. Rewrite the material under your headings, discarding the raw material as you're finished with it or saving it in a separate file, and making small corrections. You now have a first draft.

If you take a natural or enforced break while writing any draft, there are two traditional techniques to help you find the flow of your thoughts again when you continue. First, leave an incomplete sentence and finish it at the beginning of your next session. Second, retype (or rewrite) the last few paragraphs you wrote.

You still haven't worked on the expression of your material. For the next draft, your task is to ponder the format, style, grammar, tone, and accessibility of your material. Keep your audience in mind. It's helpful to have a good block of time so you can maintain your focus. When you've finished, take another break.

This is the time to enlist the help of your research friends, preferably those who know something about writing style. Almost everyone is defensive at first about criticism of their writing, taking each red mark as an attack on their honor, credibility, and self-esteem. Better to train yourself to accept such criticism and find other means to think well of yourself. In practice, you'll probably find that it's hard to find accurate and informed criticism, and in time you'll rejoice when you receive some.

It then remains to write the final draft by making corrections and polishing your prose. If you focus on your topic, you'll often find that you can cut material. Go over the draft several times, eliminating unnecessary words, striving for accuracy as well as poetry of expression.

I advise that you print out your drafts from time to time, preferably at the "break" stages discussed above. Seeing your text on paper gives you a different view of it, figuratively and literally (you can see much bigger blocks of text at a glance). I often carry such drafts around with me, so that I can work on them when I have enforced periods of waiting, or boring meetings. I find a print-out especially useful for proof-reading, since it's harder to catch typos on the screen. Don't forget to carry your red pen at all times.

Finally, I should warn you--you may already know--that the last 10% of research and writing always seems to take about as long as the first 90%. You think you're nearly finished with an article, you have a good draft of it, you may have even shown it to your research friends, and you have only a handful of sources left to look up. Naturally, however, they're the most awkward sources for you to gain access to (which is why you left them until last). And a final, polished draft takes much longer than you might imagine. So leave plenty of time for the end. Above all, don't give up at the 90% stage. Or even the 99.9% stage. I had a music student once who was ready to throw away his entire doctorate because he couldn't get through the editing of the final draft of his dissertation on the day it was due to be handed in. I had to, literally, run after him and sit him down at the computer again. In the words of the *Tao Te Ching*: "People usually fail when they are on the verge of success. So give as much care to the end as to the beginning; then there will be no failure."

