

Preface

Writing is often heralded as one of the most—if not the most—important skills one can hone in higher education. But we—three teacher-scholars in Writing Studies—argue that it’s not just writing that matters. Composition is about thinking alongside others, about problem-solving, about experimentation, about the excitement, curiosity, and unsureness that comes with seeking questions to which we don’t know the answer. Composing asks us to approach problems that are confusing, use tools we haven’t before, invent genres for new rhetorical needs, and make texts using textual, audio, visual, and digital tools. Composition is about knowledge-making, not just writing about knowledge. This text invites students and faculty to approach composing at all levels with an openness and a willingness to be wrong and/or to discover something new and exciting.

There seems to be much agreement that writing also means researching. Whenever we compose, we draw on both what we know and what we don’t know to seek answers. Yet, sometimes we get stuck in a rut, circling around the known, only using secondary textual research to answer our questions. In fact, “the research paper” is a stalwart of most writing classes, but we suggest that often, research papers don’t invite students and faculty to the exciting work of not knowing, coming across new information, accessing primary data, and selecting research methods beyond secondary-source research. Research projects should be primarily exploratory, sometimes conclusive, but more often than not an opening-up of new unknowns, new spaces, and new questions. Of course, we have to share findings at some point, but research is almost always in progress, incomplete. In this text we offer multiple interdisciplinary methods—often used in research in the field, but rarely drawn upon in undergraduate courses—and suggest them for use at all levels. Such an approach to composition has energized our own research and teaching.

In *Try This: Research Methods for Writers*, we ask students and faculty to approach writing and researching differently than before. We invite you to revel with us in the unknown, in liminality, in the excitement of primary research. This shifts the approach from a standard model of knowledge delivery to a

pedagogy of knowledge-making, from a standard model of research writing as solitary to an acknowledgement of research writing as collective, overlapping, and distributed. We offer methods for working with words, with people, with artifacts, with places, and with visuals. We start out with what we expect is more familiar in English Studies—rhetorical analysis, secondary source use, surveys, and interviews—and we move to methods that we think might be less familiar, though just as useful and engaging—discourse analysis, map-making, and using worknets for invention. Of course, you can work through the book in whatever way matches your writing and research needs, but we do encourage you to spend some time reading, thinking, and talking about the nature of research (Chapter 1) and how to develop ethical research (Chapter 2) as you begin your work together.

Each chapter is organized around methods to approach a particular kind of primary data—texts, artifacts, places, and images. Because reading about writing and research is never enough, there are “Try This” invention projects peppered throughout each chapter—these projects are designed to invite readers to “try” the ideas we have introduced. Some of these projects are designed to try during class time and take 5-15 minutes. Some require time and space and will take hours to accomplish. Some are extensive and will take days to accomplish. Each research writing opportunity introduced in a “Try This” invention project is designed to scaffold a research project. In addition to introducing different methods and “Try This” research writing opportunities, chapters also offer different culminating genres that allow research to circulate and to connect meaningfully with audiences. For instance, in addition to textual genres, we address scaffolding for digital research posters, data visualizations, and short-form presentations.

Try This emphasizes the centrality of curiosity and discovery, invention, and process to researching writers. We know that along the way, students and instructors may find this a messy process! It is our hope that in engaging with the richness that all research offers—whether working closely with texts, talking with people, observing locations, generating and analyzing visuals, and producing written texts—you will use this book as a guide through the most challenging and rewarding moments of your research practices.