

## 4.6.21: Investing Time in the Research Process

### Learning Objectives

Discuss the steps in the research process

This page discusses a general research process, one that is useful in a variety of organizations to support report writing. We borrow the process largely from social science, where the focus is answering a question or gaining insight about human affairs. The general research process is usually as follows:

1. Determine a problem and define a question to answer.
2. Find general background about your problem/question.
3. Develop a research strategy to address any data, information or knowledge gaps. These gaps may be referred to as “sub-questions.”
4. Conduct research.
5. Collect, read, evaluate and write what you have learned.
6. Cite the information you have found so that others will be able to follow your research trail.

### The Human Fund

Consider Martha’s case as a study or illustration of the above process. Martha is a junior analyst with The Human Fund, a business in Chicago specializing in selling local handicraft goods made by homeless families. The Human Fund supplies raw materials such as yarn, cloth, leather or other items, training homeless participants in their use and then providing a safe place to make clothing, bags, and other items. The organization has experienced fairly consistent growth in their three years of operation and has received excellent local press for its help to the city.

Martha’s boss directs her to study whether their work is benefiting families in the downtown area because the company’s leadership is considering whether to put more resources into that neighborhood. Martha considers her assignment and does the following:

1. She determines her research question: “Is The Human Fund’s work helping homeless families in downtown Chicago?”  
Martha also considers that the business report’s central goal is not necessarily answering **ONLY** whether their organization is benefiting downtown Chicago already, but also whether The Human Fund should do more in downtown Chicago. She decides to proceed with her research question but tells herself to write up the report later in a way that will help the executives make their decision about whether to expand operations downtown.
2. She sets aside about 10–20 hours for general online reading/fact-finding, primarily from major newspapers and social services websites. During her general background reading, she collects various facts, figures and other data. Most of this data is quantifiable data, or data that has numbers associated with it. For example, she learns that various charities and the Chicago city government estimate that around 2,000 people are homeless downtown. There is some mention of The Human Fund in downtown-oriented press, but there’s nothing that shows their specific impact. She identifies various gaps in her data and determines she will need to do further research outside the office.
3. Her largest gap in data is hearing from the downtown homeless themselves. She could not find sources that discussed the downtown homeless experience or had any quotes or other qualitative (non-numeric) data. She decides to visit with several families downtown over the course of a week. She plans to talk to as many families as she can. To frame her interaction, she develops three sub-questions:
  - a. Do you know about The Human Fund and its mission?
  - b. Have you sold goods through The Human Fund?
    - i. If yes, has the The Human Fund helped you?
    - ii. Are you still working with us (The Human Fund)?
  - c. Would you like to sell goods through the Human Fund?

Martha’s technique is a structured interview or survey. She has structured questions that will yield a fairly straightforward and closed (yes/no) type answer. While interviewing, she can make a note of how many people she talks to, how many answer a certain way, and based on other data she found in her general reading—particularly the total number of estimated

homeless in downtown Chicago—she can gain an understanding of The Human Fund’s current impact, and possible expansion.

4. Martha visits with several homeless families downtown, and determines the following:
  - a. 25 percent of her respondents (74 families asked over a week) know about the Human Fund.
  - b. Of the 19 families that have heard of the Human Fund, 10 have made and sold goods with The Human Fund.
    - i. Of the 10 families that have made and sold goods through the Human Fund, 9 said they benefited from the help.
    - ii. Of the 9 that said they benefited from the help, all 9 families plan to continue the interaction.
  - c. Of the 55 families she polled who had not heard of The Human Fund, 25, or 45 percent, expressed an interest in learning more.
5. Martha begins writing up her report. In the report, she clearly outlines her research question, the background reading, the gaps in data she found in the background reading, the field research and sub-questions, and the data gathered from the fieldwork.
6. Martha is careful to cite all of her work. For her background reading, she hyperlinks to various newspapers or other sources, and for her fieldwork, she gives general data on whom she talked to (e.g., “family of four, sleeping on the streets off of Lake Shore Drive, dad’s name is George).

The above process is one possible way to conduct research. It reflects the general approach to social science inquiry, which seeks to answer a specific (as specific as possible) question about a human circumstance. In Martha’s case, she will now need to develop a report that quickly and concisely details what she found. Most importantly, Martha needs to consider what type of informed recommendation she should make to her boss.

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