Six Editions of The Modern Researcher, 1957-2003

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Guidance for assigning books to students comes from personal reading experience, recommendations of colleagues, publishers blandishments, and R.R. Bowker’s multivolume Books in Print.

I read The Modern Researcher (1957) by Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff in 1964. MR introduced me to the fundamentals of historical research, fact checking, and scholarship. Barzun, born in France in 1907, taught at Columbia for decades. He lives in San Antonio, his wife’s hometown. Barzun’s presence in the library is huge. UNO has 56 catalogue entries including the MR 1992 and 2004, UNL, 95, and all MR editions except the most recent. Graff was born in 1921. Students in my Historical Research class read MR until the 6th edition appeared in 2004. It lost its charm; there were fresher choices available.

Some books you keep even when "superseded" by new editions. The Modern Researcher had the hallmarks of a "keeper," my six editions occupy 7 inches of shelf space. Other “keepers” include 16 editions of Chicago Manual of Style, seven editions of Kate L. Turabian’s A Manual for Writers, and five editions of Strunk and White, The Elements of Style, including Maira Kalman’s illustrated 2005 version. They map changes in the writing craft.

Authors and editors conspire to profit by publishing new editions to eliminate resale thus consigning old editions to the shredder and landfill. Resale does not generate author royalties or publisher profits. Justifying the production of new editions, appearing on the average of every 8 years, publishers attempt to freshen the volume, staying apace with pedagogy, technology, methodology, and timely illustrations. A perceptive student compared five editions and noted that the more recent were less condescending; he, him and his were joined by her, she and other gender neutral terms; and Desert Storm replaced Alexander the Great.

Barzun and Graff wrote before the introduction of the ballpoint pen in the 1940s, they now promote the internet. They transition from writing on one side of 3x5 note cards to note taking on laptops. I anticipated new editions with new leadoff cartoons combining current events and Barzun’s French-American heritage, he never disappointed.

The first edition, 16 chapters and 386 pages, appeared in 1957 published by Harcourt Brace World. The visual captioned as "History as a
language of symbols,” featured a Le Figaro illustration of Prime Min-
ister Pierre Mendes-France in iconic French chapeaus and typical arm-
in-vest Napoleonesque stance. The Index included “Typing” and Lionel Trilling with whom Barzun taught Columbia’s Great Books course.

JSTOR produced two scholarly reviews within one second, so much faster than a search in 1957. Stanley Pargellis welcomed assistance because “Every teacher knows that it often takes hours to show a student how to rewrite a single paragraph.”³ Carl Wittke approved MR’s disdain for “talking society” and jargon.⁴

The 1970 Revised edition expanded to 430 pages. The featured 1963 London Evening Standard Vicky cartoon continued its Francophile theme. “Ah, mon ami, the English just don’t fit HISTORICALLY into this new Europe of ours…” De Gaulle vetoed Britain’s application to enter the European Economic Community three times, 1958, 1963, and 1966-67. The Index contained the word “computer.” A reviewer mistakenly opined, “this new edition should replace the first (1957) on library shelves.”⁵


The fifth edition in 1992 contained a Cabalero cartoon of Prime Minis-
ter Margaret Thatcher with a French hat. They introduced “modes of presentation” which included speaking in class. Asterisks replaced numbered footnotes. The Index contained laptop computer and word pro-
cessor. The reviewer noted, “now the uses of the computer are cov-
ered,” though “computer” actually had first appeared in the 1970 2nd edition.⁸

In 2004 Thomson Wadsworth economized the 6⁶th edition by reducing it to 322 pages, though the best test is word count which avoids fussing with margins and font size. The cover announced “completely updated for the Internet age.” This textbook imitated Hollywood movies giving credits to 17 production editors, at least nine of whom were women.

The Trojan Horse cartoon in 2004, an ageless icon, came from the Octo-
er 1989 New Yorker. Barzun and Graff insisted that research starts with the library. The Index added internet and dropped word processor.

Over the 47 year period chapters were eliminated and added, captions and emphasis changed. MR had six publishers, Harcourt Brace World, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Houghton Mifflin, Harbinger, Thomson Wadsworth, and Cengage Learning. The 1957 hardback cost $6.00, the
1962 paperback, $1.95. The 2004 edition costs $103.95, but 279 copies, of which 28 are former library copies, are available from online retailers starting $17.99. Signed copies run $100.

Abebooks.com has over 3,000 titles including the signed typed letter in this exhibit regarding shirt collars. Better World Books, in Mishawaka, Indiana, a beneficiary of library deaccessioning with a stock of 8 million volumes, had 105 Barzun authored books, almost all for less than six dollars, I acquired Visual Outline of English History (1933) for $3.97, shipping included.

Barzun who has been publishing since 1927, in 2000 at the age of 93, published an 814 page opus, From Dawn of Decadence. Luminary scholars are role models keeping pace with changes in the profession. The proclamation on the MR cover, “classic manual” and “classic work” on “research and writing” is warranted. We can only speculate if a cocked hat will appear in the 7th edition commenting on Francois Holland’s defeating President Nicola Sarkozy on May 6, 2012.

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9 The 5th edition 1985 hard cover with dust jacket inscribed, "For Marge and Tom, the full, if not the holy truth. With love from Hank (the ancient researcher)." Inside is a short typed letter signed "Hank" on "Henry F. Graff" stationary relates talking with Lyndon Johnson at the White House about the Vietnam War, the subject of an earlier book.