Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing

Mary Sue MacNealy


This book takes a detailed look at the role of empirical research into writing skills and the most suitable strategies for conducting it. MacNealy has conducted several studies herself and also developed fictional studies for teaching research skills to her students. She compiled this book partially from handouts she developed in the classroom so it has the benefit of containing some thoroughly tested elements.

MacNealy supports the view that research in writing is important. She notes that traditionalists in composition are not alone in questioning the need for research, quoting letters in an issue of the STC’s journal Technical Communication which stated that academic papers are useless to technical communicators in the real world. The fact that one-third of the letters in that issue related to details of usage may indicate that overemphasis on usage diverts attention from research into other aspects of writing that facilitate communication.

Without denigrating library-based research at all, this book is devoted to exploring ways in which writing can be the subject of empirical research. This refers to ‘research that carefully describes and/or measures observable phenomena in a systematic way planned in advance of the observation’. This represents a shift from the traditional approach to the study of the humanities towards an interdisciplinary approach that utilises aspects of the scientific method.

The value of Strategies to technical communicators lies in its focus on research in various types of writing environments. Although it covers strategies, methods and analysis, the overall level is somewhat conceptual – or strategic. The book helps researchers consider thorny issues, such as credibility (both of sources and one’s own work) and the balance between the techniques one would like to use and those one has the resources to use.

MacNealy has an approachable style of writing so that, although some of the content is complex and theoretical, the text is generally easy and enjoyable to read. If I have a criticism, it is that the text seems repetitive in places. I suspect this results from the desire to allow chapters or groups of chapters to stand alone, as the author explains in the preface how she envisages readers using different parts of the book.

The book design is attractive, with distinctive chapter titles and headings. More use could be made of graphic elements to break up the text and highlight different kinds of information. Each chapter ends with a list of references for further reading and the book concludes with a good index of eight pages.

This book provides a more detailed treatment of empirical research as it relates to writing than the Open University publications, How to Research and The Good Research Guide. Consequently, it may be more relevant to technical communicators.

About the author

MacNealy teaches at the University of Memphis and has published papers on research in technical communication in the STC’s journal, Technical Communication, and on creativity in literary scholars in Empirical studies of literature.