DOING RESEARCH

Jone Rymer, Column Editor
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"Doing Research," a new column sponsored by the ABC Research Committee, focuses on issues that normally are excluded in formal research reports and articles. This column will present "disciplinary talk," the knowledge we typically learn through casual discussions, conversations, e-mail, and occasionally through conference presentations. Each column will be edited by a guest scholar and will focus on a single practical issue, often presenting several different perspectives.

The Research Committee invites your participation to help make "Doing Research" a provocative, helpful column. Please contact me to suggest topics for future columns, offer to edit a column, or recommend editors and writers. (Until June 30, phone 310-545-4402; e-mail: jrymer@agsm.ucla.edu; fax: 310-206-2002. After July 1, phone 313-577-4522; e-mail: jrymer@cms.cc.wayne.edu; fax: 313-577-5486.)

—JR

How Researchers Gain Access to Organizations

Priscilla S. Rogers, Guest Editor
University of Michigan

In the 1980s, pivotal scholarly works such as *The Rhetoric of Economics* (McCloskey, 1985) and *Functional Approaches to Writing: Research Perspectives* (Couture, 1986) brought new attention to the interplay between context and discourse. Such research provided the impetus for a growing number of field studies examining written and spoken messages as they occur in organizations (Brown & Herndl, 1986; Paradis, Dobrin & Miller, 1985). Like the pieces of a puzzle, such studies provide a clearer picture of "what's going on out there"—a picture that allows us to better understand the organizational environments for which we prepare students to communicate.

Yet, while researchers are enthusiastic about on-site investigations, organizations may greet such proposals with cool skepticism or even outright rejection. Given the increasingly global and competitive market, to say nothing of the paranoia that seems to surface during uncertain economic times, organizations may be hesitant to allow outsiders access to the written and spoken messages around which their organizations revolve. Like the "visiting" character in a Harold Pinter play, the researcher intrudes upon the organization, even when the relationship is cordial. The researcher by definition must remain to some extent an outsider, even as a participant observer. How, then, does a researcher negotiate those tricky issues of ownership and confidentiality that are fundamental to establishing a trusting relationship that is mutually beneficial? How does a researcher gain access?

This column, based on a panel discussion at the 1992 Midwest Regional ABC Conference in Lexington, Kentucky, presents the experiences of four researchers who successfully gained access to organizations. The four panelists were asked to explain how they learned about the organization and gained access to it, the approval process they went through, and any limitations imposed by the organization on publishing the research. In the narratives that follow, each researcher recounts his or her discovery of the "organizational story" and the contacts and contracts that eventually allowed the researcher to tell it.

Gaining Access to a Research and Development Laboratory

Vincent J. Brown
The Ohio State University

In late 1990, I conducted an ethnographic case study of a team of engineers and managers writing a technical report at a contract research and development laboratory. I wanted to learn how the authors conceived of their audience as they planned, wrote, and revised a report for an outside client. My research methods included participant observations; background, retrospective, and discourse-based interviews; and text