

How to Research Your Issue

I. Brief History of Citizen Research in North America

Research into issues of concern for citizens has a long history. Many people trace modern research techniques to the early 1900's and the activities of American "muckrakers" such as Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell. Through their exposés of the meatpacking industry, the oil barons and other industries, these researchers brought to light abuses which led to many regulatory reforms.

In the 1930's, the consumer movement in North America came to life in many books that documented the atrocities of the marketplace. The exposés were now leading to demands and action on the part of many citizen groups. Involved in the struggle were women's groups, labor unions, some business groups, cooperatives, consumer rating agencies, educational groups, religious groups, professional groups and settlement houses.

In the 1960's, the movement extended to include students and the effects were felt on the education system itself. Courses began to be offered that were more critical of society and that were concerned with understanding and solving social problems and satisfying real human needs.

In the social sciences this led to the development of the concept of "research as social criticism," also called "Science for the People," "radical science," or "action research." The responsibility and duty of the social scientist were to go beyond a mere observation of the social world - they had to try to explain, interpret and change it.

In the physical sciences there was renewed interest in a critique of the uses and abuses of science and technology. This new approach research became instituted within the educational system as teachers and students protested research that was taking place and urged that it be replaced by research into other issues.

II. Why Research Your Issue?

Researching your issue helps you do the following things:

- expose problems;
- document how bad the problem actually is;
- reveal the actual causes of the problems (as opposed to symptoms of the problem or indirect causes of the problems);
- develop effective strategies that address the actual causes of the problems;
- connect with other individuals and groups interested in solving the problem;
- find barriers to solving the problem (e.g. individuals, groups, politicians, laws, policies etc.); and
- find other related issues that you may want to address in the future.

III. How to Research Your Issue

(a) Characteristics of Effective Research

Effective research into issues of concern for citizens generally has the following characteristics:

- it involves gathering reliable, accurate information (facts and figures)
- it also involves gathering information about the experiences, opinions, feelings and understandings of people involved -- how the problem being researched connects with their lives;
- the information is presented in a way that is easy to understand;
- the analysis of the information is presented in a way that is easy to understand;
- the analysis of the information is based upon the information, not upon biased or pre-determined goals;
- the analysis of the information is based upon the response of citizens to the information, not upon the response of politicians, corporate leaders or experts

- (so if citizens think the information is important, it is important whether or not others think it is important);
- the analysis of the information realistically assesses the risks to citizens revealed by the information, and does not ignore those risks or assume that nothing bad can happen;
 - the analysis of the information reveals actual, root causes of problems -- the "why?" behind the facts and figures and experiences -- including problems with political, social, economic structures and systems; and
 - the presentation and publication of the research attempts to motivate people to work for positive change.

(b) How to Gather Reliable Facts and Figures

The main techniques citizen groups use for gather reliable facts and figures on any topic/problem are as follows, in order from easiest to most difficult:

- contact citizen groups to find research reports and experts on the topic/problem;
- contact local, provincial and federal governments to find research reports and experts on the topic/problem;
- contact teachers at local high schools, colleges and universities to find experts on the topic/problem;
- ask librarian at local library to help research the topic/problem;
- use search sites on the Internet to search for reports and experts on the topic/problem;
- contact corporations or review the publications of corporations (for example, magazines that cover various industries) to find research reports on the topic/problem;
- contact survey/polling companies to find out if surveys/polls have been done on the topic/problem;
- contact citizen groups or governments in other countries to find research reports and experts on the topic/problem (the fact that many groups and governments have websites on the Internet makes this technique much easier than it used to be);
- contact teachers at local high schools, colleges and universities to have students do research on the topic/problem; and
- conduct survey on topic/problem.

(c) How to Analyze Facts and Figures

As a wise person once said, "Figures don't lie, but liars often figure." Facts and figures are used by individuals, citizen groups, corporations and other organizations, and governments to support their proposals and actions.

If you look closely, however, facts and figures are sometimes not as truthful as they seem. Some key questions to ask about facts and figures are the following:

- who did the research?
- what biases does the person/organization doing the research have?
- was the person/organization paid to do the research? by whom? what biases does the person/organization paying for the research have?
- what were the research questions? were the questions fair and objective, or designed to point to a specific, pre-determined conclusion?
- for surveys and polls, how many people were surveyed? were they randomly selected? is the analysis of the survey based on all the people surveyed, or smaller sub-groups of people? what is the margin of error of the survey?
- what questions were not asked by the researchers?