

THE INQUIRY PROCESS IN THE HUMANITIES

The humanities, such as classical and modern languages and literature, history, and philosophy, have as an overall goal the exploration and explanation of the human experience. Some would include the fine arts (music, art, dance, and drama) in the humanities, but others view the arts as a separate category. (We will not discuss the performance of fine arts in this book, but we will touch on the interpretation of fine arts.) In most disciplines in the humanities, written texts are extremely important, particularly in history, philosophy, and literature. Historians attempt a systematic documentation and analysis of past events experienced by a particular people in a particular country or period. Philosophers endeavor to examine coherent, logical systems of human ideas. Literary authors and artists attempt to capture for others their own lived, human experiences and their own understanding of the world. The humanities involve inquiry into consciousness, values, ideas, and ideals in an effort to describe how experience shapes our understanding of the world.

Let's take an example to show how the sciences, social sciences, and humanities all contribute to an understanding of our world. The Mississippi River has played an important role in American history. A scientist—perhaps a biologist—would study the river's wildlife, fish, surrounding vegetation, and ecology in an attempt to objectively describe the river itself. A social scientist—perhaps a sociologist—might study the river's contribution to a riverfront society and that society's dependence on the river for transportation of goods and services. A historian, who often bridges the gap between the social sciences and the humanities, might report on the importance of the Mississippi and other American waterways to westward expansion and the development of the United States. A humanist—for example, a novelist—might write about the actual experiences people had on or near the Mississippi. Mark Twain, for instance, wrote his autobiographical novel *Life on the Mississippi* to share with his readers his experiences as a youth

learning the trade of riverboat pilot on a Mississippi steamboat. Without such a work of imaginative literature, we would have difficulty understanding what it was really like to be working on the river during Twain's time. Such a work of literature contributes to our understanding by putting us in a different time and place from our own, thus broadening our horizons in a manner that is somewhat different from either the natural or social sciences. The sciences attempt to give us the outside, external knowledge of a phenomenon, whereas the humanistic disciplines attempt to give us the inside, internal knowledge of a phenomenon.¹ Both make important contributions to our understanding of the world.

The Importance of Texts in the Humanities

Written texts in the humanities are generally of three types: (1) creative writing (literature, poetry, and drama), (2) interpretive writing (literary and art criticism), and (3) theoretical writing (historical and social theories of literature and art).

Creative writing produces numerous literary texts that provide us with an aesthetic experience and capture new insights into humanity. Creative writing is comparable to other creative, artistic endeavors in that it often has this twofold objective: to be aesthetically pleasing (or emotionally moving) and to be an imaginative reenactment of human experience. We ask a work of art to move us and to mean something to us, to show us a way of looking at ourselves and the world that we may not otherwise have seen.

As we experience creative art and literature as an audience, interpretive questions arise: What sort of work is it? How are we to respond to it? Much of the writing connected with the humanities is interpretive, because the audience tries to understand both the meaning and the significance of a particular creative work. Often, an interpretive critic attempts to disclose the particular intention of the artist: the novelist's attitude toward the heroine, for example, or the intended aesthetic impact of a dance. Interpretive critics research their claims by using the evidence found in the work itself to support the hypothesis, that is, the particular "reading" of the text or work of art.

The third kind of humanistic writing is theoretical. For the theorist, creative art and literature are important insofar as they exemplify more general social and historical principles. The theorist, for example, looks for connections between a particular work of art and its social and historical context or for relationships among different artistic media, such as fresco painting and architecture in medieval Europe. Theorists provide links between our understanding of art and literature and other subjects such as history, sociology, or psychology. Finally, theo-

rists take a step back from a particular work of art or literature in an attempt to get a broader view. In looking at the entire social and historical context, they ask questions like these: How has photography affected portrait painting? What is the role of the devil in the American novel?

Research in the Humanities

The humanist ponders questions of significance, insight, imagination, and the meaning of human experience. What does it mean, then, to research in the humanities? Interpreting and critiquing art and literature is one type of research conducted by humanists. Interpreters and theorists in the humanities attempt to “talk sense” about a work of art or literature to make the audience see what the artist or author meant and to link the work with other, larger human events and experiences. A second kind of humanistic research involves reconstructing humanity’s past—both the ideas (philosophical research) and the events that have occurred over time (historical research). All three types of humanistic research (literary and art criticism, philosophical research, and historical research) contribute to our understanding of the meaning of human experience.

Literary and Art Criticism

Critical researchers necessarily use their own interpretations of a work of art or literature in critiquing it. But those subjective interpretations are based on experience and reflective thought, and they are expressed in well-chosen language. Criticism in the humanities is not just a string of personal opinions. The critical researcher builds a solid argument to substantiate his or her interpretation or theory. Such an argument is based on research involving a close reading of the text itself (in literary criticism) or a close analysis of the work of art (in art criticism). The argument also takes into account social and historical factors that bear on the interpretation of the literary text or work of art. It incorporates research on other related texts or works of art by the same author or artist or secondary criticism influencing the critic’s own argument. A piece of good interpretive criticism is both insightful and true to life. A piece of good literary or art criticism is complete and comprehensive; it offers the audience a sound theory that fits with the experience of audience members and that ties together related threads in their understanding. A critical researcher investigates the complex context from which a work of art or literature has come, in order to provide an understanding of how it fits into the larger realm of human experience. In this way, the critical researcher is much like a historical or social science researcher.

One example of a critical researcher who combined techniques of criticism with historical scholarship is John Livingston Lowes, who began with the question of what sources influenced the poetry of Samuel Coleridge, a nineteenth-century English poet and critic.² In an attempt to elucidate Coleridge's poetry, Lowes traced the sources the poet used in writing such poems as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan." Richard Altick calls Lowes's book "the greatest true-detective story ever written."³ Lowes began his research with Coleridge's *Gutch Memorandum Book*, a notebook containing suggestions for reading that Coleridge had jotted down as he looked for ideas to translate into poetry. Next, Lowes looked at the records from the Bristol Library that showed the books Coleridge had borrowed. Following these and many other leads, Lowes was able to virtually reconstruct how certain of Coleridge's greatest poems took shape in the author's mind and took form on the written page.

Philosophical Research

The philosophical researcher investigates the truths and principles of being, knowledge, and human conduct. Alfred North Whitehead, in his book *Process and Reality*, describes the process of research in speculative philosophy:

The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight into the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.⁴

Here Whitehead is describing the general process of inquiry that we have been discussing. In his view, the success of any imaginative speculation is the verification of it through extended application. He sees the work of philosophical research as an attempt to frame a coherent, logical system of the general ideas of humanity. In his work, Whitehead presents a scheme that can be used to interpret or frame the "cosmology." He shows how his philosophical scheme can be used for "the interpretation of the ideas and problems which form the complex texture of civilized thought."⁵ Thus, the philosophical laws are verified in their application to actual philosophical problems encountered in human experience.

Historical Research

Historical researchers proceed in much the same fashion as philosophy researchers, except that historical researchers investigate events as well as ideas. They research the events that have occurred in

a person's life or at a particular time. Then they weave those events and ideas into a narrative that recounts and interprets the past. As in all the humanities, historians attempt to understand and interpret life itself. Historians also use the data gathered by social scientists—the surveys and statistical counts conducted by sociologists, economists, or political scientists. However, historians often present their understanding of the past in a story form intended to give the reader a picture of the past events, describing and recreating what those events were like for the participants. In this way, the study of history bridges the gap between the social sciences and the humanities such as literature and the arts.

The research process used by historians is much like that of the theorists. The historian investigates the facts and data available about an individual or a period of time. Through those facts, carefully verified for their accuracy, the historian recreates the past to capture the truths that reside there. The historian is not reluctant to make individual judgments about the meaning and importance of past events. As in all humanities, the historian verifies those judgments by gauging their ring of truth, their resemblance to what is known intuitively about life, and their explanatory power.

One example of a historical researcher at work is Frank Maloy Anderson.⁶ Anderson was confronted with the problem of who wrote the important “Diary of a Public Man,” a document by an unidentified author that first appeared in 1879 in the *North American Review*. Many historical, little-known facts about Abraham Lincoln were revealed in the diary. Anderson spent nearly thirty-five years trying to identify the document's author, using every historical clue he could find. He searched congressional records, hotel registries, business documents, and newspaper subscriptions. From this extensive search, he posited two hypotheses: (1) the diary was a fiction, or (2) it was a combination of fiction and truth. Anderson decided on the second hypothesis, because he could find nothing that was provably false in the document. He concluded that the probable author was Samuel Ward, a prominent African American orator, abolitionist, and newspaper editor, but could never prove this beyond all doubt. Nevertheless, Anderson's historical case is a good one, based as it is on intuitive speculation combined with factual evidence.

Acceptable Evidence in the Humanities

In the humanities, there is no absolute proof that leads unerringly to a particular interpretation or theory. Rather, the humanist will make a claim and argue for that claim. What is demanded in the humanities is not irrefutable proof but sensitivity and perceptiveness. The way of

knowing required in the humanities can be cultivated by hard work and study.

The evidence that is acceptable in literary and art criticism or interpretation comes from the interpreter's sensibility, from the work of art or literature itself, and from the context. Some interpretations and theories may seem more insightful than others. They cast the work into a new light or integrate it into a wholeness we had not originally perceived. The claim or hypothesis made by a theorist is accepted as valid if it fits the work and helps the audience understand it. Critical and theoretical research can expand our consciousness, deepening and broadening our sensitivity to experiences. We could say, as did William James, that the performance of a piece of violin music is "the scraping of the hair of a horse over the intestines of a cat."⁷ Although the description is true enough, as Meiland points out, it is not all there is to violin music; in fact, the remark leaves out just about everything that is really important in the performance of a violin piece. A valid interpretation illuminates a work in a way that makes it more meaningful to us.

The evidence that is acceptable in historical and philosophical research is that which is based either on verifiable facts or on adequate interpretations that fit known human experience. As Barzun and Graff put it, "The researcher who does historian's work can at least preserve his sense of truth by concentrating on the tangle of his own stubborn facts."⁸ But in addition to those facts, the historian is also "aware of his duty to make individual judgments" regarding the meaning or significance of those facts.⁹ As Whitehead states, the application of his philosophical scheme to life "at once gives meaning to the verbal phrases of the scheme by their use in the discussion, and shows the power of the scheme to put the various elements of our experience into the consistent relation to each other."¹⁰ In both cases, these humanistic researchers insist on the role of the researcher's insight and imagination in elucidating experience and in describing and predicting what human beings are and how they think and act. Acceptable evidence in all the humanities is evidence that supports those imaginative and insightful descriptions and interpretations.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the general goal of inquiry in the humanities?
2. How are written texts used in the humanities? Why are they important?
3. What three kinds of research are common in the humanities? How are they alike or different?
4. What constitutes acceptable evidence in the humanities?

EXERCISES

1. Obtain a copy of a college catalog. In the catalog, find references to the academic disciplines and notice how they are classified. Are there differences between the categories you find in the catalog and those outlined in this chapter? In a paragraph, describe the major divisions of disciplines in the catalog.
2. In the college catalog, look up a discipline you are considering as a major, for example, history or mathematics. In addition to courses in that discipline, what other courses are required (for example, foreign languages, liberal arts, laboratory sciences)? In a paragraph, describe those “core” requirements and speculate on why they are included as a part of an undergraduate education.
3. In high school or college, you have probably studied sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Describe in a short essay how classes in these three areas were similar or different.
4. Obtain a copy of a textbook from a course in the sciences, the social sciences, or the humanities. Read the preface and glance through the table of contents. Does the author mention research? Is there a chapter or section discussing research? What can you infer about the discipline’s approach to research from the textbook? Does it seem to differ from the approach discussed in this text? If so, in what ways? In a paragraph or two, discuss your speculations about the assumptions made about research in the textbook you are examining.
5. For each problematic situation below, propose a solution and suggest in a short report how you would go about verifying that solution.
 - A. You are in charge of collecting the money for a charity or project for your dorm or for a church or other group to which you belong. You must organize the collection drive.
 - B. As president of your student association, you are in charge of getting your fellow students to voluntarily comply with the no-smoking rule in the college cafeteria. Or, as the president of the union local at your place of employment, you are in charge of getting the union rank and file to voluntarily comply with a new safety regulation. Or, as the president of the PTA at your child’s school, you are in charge of getting parent volunteers to help with a new school program.
 - C. A newspaper has assigned you to write an article on pollution and the environment. The editor wants you to report on how students on your campus or co-workers at your place of

employment really feel about pollution and other environmental issues.

6. Interview a friend whose major is different from yours. What kinds of research are required of your friend in his or her courses? Compile your interview notes into a short report.

NOTES

1. Jack Meiland, *College Thinking: How to Get the Best out of College* (New York: Mentor, 1981) 174.
2. John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (1927; reprint ed., London: Pan Books, 1978).
3. Richard Altick, *The Art of Literary Research* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963) 100.
4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1929) 5.
5. Whitehead, xi.
6. Frank Maloy Anderson, *The Mystery of "A Public Man": A Historical Detective Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948).
7. As found in Meiland, 186.
8. Barzun and Graff, 250.
9. Barzun and Graff, 251.
10. Whitehead, xi.