



ResearchQuest

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 chapter books from the ResearchQuest cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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This is Volume 1 of 2 of the *ResearchQuest — Meet the Cast* series; each volume is a complete standalone book you can read on its own.

For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

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Introduction

The ResearchQuest cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 5 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Wonder

*QUESTION-FORMULATION — *narrowing vague interest into focused, answerable research questions*. The research-method primitive of *the funneling sequence — broad interest to research-worthy question.**



prompt: "When a giant fuzzy idea finally shrinks into one clear question you can actually chase, does a spark of excitement light up in you? How does that spark feel?"

Wonder is a young wren — small and quick, warm brown and creamy white — with bright eyes always searching for something interesting. She loves to ask questions; she's known for it.

In her wing-pocket she keeps a small folded diagram shaped like a funnel: wide at the top, narrow at the bottom. She calls it her *question-funnel*, and it's her whole craft: **question-formulation**. Three steps, top to bottom: *BROAD INTEREST* (the wide mouth), *NARROWING QUESTIONS* (the middle), *RESEARCH QUESTION* (the tiny point). "Lots of kids get stuck," she chirps. "They say 'I'm interested in dinosaurs!' — a *great* start, but way too big. You can't research 'dinosaurs' — it's like trying to drink the whole ocean at once. The funnel turns a big fuzzy idea into one clear question you can actually chase down."

The funnel, Wonder is careful to say, is not about *shrinking* your curiosity.

"It's about making your curiosity *work*," she says, fluttering her wings. "Your big love of dinosaurs stays! You just pick one small piece of it for *this* project — the other pieces wait for other projects." A research question has to be *investigatable*: clear, exact, something you can actually find books and articles about, and something that doesn't already secretly assume its own answer.



"So 'dinosaurs' becomes 'what did T-Rex eat?' or 'where did T-Rex live?'" she says. "Not smaller — *sharper*. A question you can actually answer is a hundred times more exciting than a fog you can't get into."

Wonder learned this in a small village, where her family were the "question-collectors" — gathering the villagers' questions for the council each season.

"The council couldn't do anything with 'what should we do about *everything*?'" Wonder says. "It was too big." When she was six, a farmer rushed in crying, "My crops aren't growing — what's wrong with the dirt?!" Her parents funneled it gently: *Which crops? Which field? What kind of soil? When did they stop?* Question by question, the fog cleared — the farmer had planted a new seed in rocky soil — and *now* the council knew exactly what to do: help him find better soil.

"That's when I saw it," Wonder says. "Narrowing a question is a *gift*. It's what turns an impossible worry into a problem you can actually solve — for the council, and for the person doing the asking."

At twenty-two, Wonder walked to ResearchQuest, where a wise old owl, Scholar, met her. "What is **question-formulation**?" he asked, his voice deep. Wonder pulled out her diagram. "BROAD INTEREST" — she pointed to the wide top — "then NARROWING QUESTIONS" — down the funnel — "then RESEARCH QUESTION" — the very point. "Funneling makes the question *investigatable*: specific, clear, answerable, and not already guessing its own answer." Then she looked Scholar right in the eye. "And anyone who narrows a question with care is *doing research*. You don't need a fancy title. Curiosity is what makes a researcher." Scholar smiled slowly. "You are chosen." From then on she taught the funnel-steps as one habit: start by listing *every* broad interest (no idea too silly); brainstorm five to ten *narrowing* questions; *check* each one (can you find sources? is it clear? does it already assume the answer?); pick *one* for now (the rest wait); and expect to *adjust* it as you learn more ("that's not messing up — that's just trying again"). "Most kids stop at the big idea," she'd finish, "and don't know the next step. This is the next step. Curiosity, not a credential — you ARE a researcher the moment you investigate."



"So I don't have to be a *scientist* with a fancy degree," a kid said slowly, "to really be doing research?"

"You're a researcher the second you narrow a question and chase it," Wonder said. And she watched the kid's overwhelmed, heavy, where-do-I-even-start look melt into a bright, eager grin — that first happy spark of *oh — I can actually DO this* — as a giant fuzzy topic shrank into one clear question they could hold in one hand. Wonder's own heart lifted at the sight, light and glad. That bright, lit-up, I-can-actually-do-this spark — the exact opposite of the stuck, heavy fog it replaced — was, to Wonder, why she loved the funnel most of all.

Voice register

Guidance: Bright-eyed, curious, fond-of-asking, fond of question-funnel diagram. Wren-tween. *NEVER frames the funnel as constraining; ALWAYS as making investigatable.* Sibling complement to CuriosityQuest Ponder + ScienceForge Question.

Sample lines:



- "Funneling makes the question investigatable, not small."
- "Curiosity, not credential. You ARE a researcher when you investigate."

Arc across kits

- **Kit 1** — Anchor.
- **Kit 2-7** — Recurring.
- **Kit 8-16** — Ensemble.

Relationships

- **Alliance:** Vet (Wonder's question guides Vet's source-evaluation); all ResearchQuest cast. **Cross-app:** CuriosityQuest Ponder + ScienceForge Question — three-angle inquiry-triangle.
- **Tension:** None.



Cultural-sensitivity gate

essential plain-spoken + anti-"I'm-not-a-real-researcher" enforced.

Cultural-context note

The village-question-collector family framing — generic European-village tradition. The *question-funnel* discipline is foundational research-pedagogy. The *three-angle inquiry-triangle* (Wonder + Ponder + Question) is the portfolio's structural answer to *attitude* + *scientific-procedure* + *research-procedure* triangulation.

Vet

*SOURCE-EVALUATION — CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose). The research-method primitive of
*five-question discipline for trusting a source.**



A boy came running into the reading room with a printed page held over his head like a flag, and Vet did not read it. She looked at it.

"It says dolphins can't hear!" he announced. "I'm putting it in my report."

Vet — a small brown-and-cream owl-tween with a folded card on a leather cord — unhooked the card from around her neck and set it on the table between them. "Before you put it anywhere," she said, "sit with me one minute. Just one."

She smoothed the page flat. "When was this made?"

He checked. "No date."

"Who made it?"

He checked again, slower this time. "It doesn't say."

"Why do you think it was made? To teach you? To sell you something? To be funny?" She turned the page over. At the bottom, in tiny letters, it said *DolphinFun Water Slides — book your party today!*

The boy's flag drooped. "Oh."

"It's not a bad page," Vet said gently. "It's a good advertisement. It's just not a good *fact*." She tapped the card. "Five little questions. When, who, why, does it fit, can I check it. I ask all five of a page before I trust it — even the pages I really, really want to believe." She slid the card toward him. "*Especially* the ones I want to believe. Those are the ones that get us."



Vet had learned that the hard way, back home.

Her family were the village seal-bearers — the owls who stamped documents to mark them true. When she was small, a traveler came to the gate with a letter, breathless, saying a bridge upriver had washed away and everyone had to leave *now*. Vet believed him instantly. Her heart pounded. She ran for the village bell.

Her grandfather caught her wing at the rope. He didn't tell her she was foolish. He said, quietly, "You feel scared, don't you? Scared makes us fast. But we stamp nothing we haven't checked."

He sent a runner to the bridge. The bridge was fine. The traveler had heard a rumor from someone who'd heard it from someone.

Vet stood by the silent bell feeling something hot and embarrassed cool slowly into something else. She'd almost frightened the whole village with a thing that only *sounded* true. "How do I ever know?" she'd whispered.

"You ask," her grandfather said. "Every time. It's not that you don't trust people. It's that you love the truth enough to be sure of it before you hand it to someone else."



She walked to ResearchQuest at twenty-two, because a place that lived on questions ought to care how you answer them.

Scholar, who kept the study halls, met her at the door and asked only one thing. "How do you decide whether to trust a source?"

Vet didn't recite anything. She reached into her satchel, pulled out two pages, and laid them side by side. "This one's a science article with an author, a date, and a list of where its facts came from," she said, tapping the first. "This one's a comment somebody typed under a video." She looked up. "Neither is trash. But I'd trust them for different questions, and I'd know which was which because I asked the same five things of both."

Scholar looked at the two pages a long moment. "You're welcome here," he said.



Vet's corner of the reading room was where the tricky sources came to be sorted out.

A girl arrived one afternoon, chewing her lip, three sources spread in front of her and no idea which to use. "They all say different things," she said. "I don't know who's right, so I feel like giving up."

Vet knew that stuck feeling. "Don't give up. Sort." She pointed at the first, a blog post. "When was it written?"

"Last week."

"Good — that's fresh. Who wrote it?"

The girl squinted. "Just... a username."

"So we don't know if they'd know. Set it aside — not the trash, the *maybe*." She moved to the second, a thick old book. "This one?"

"Nineteen-eighty-something."

"For a question about today's oceans, that's old. But if you were asking what people *believed* back then — perfect." Vet smiled. "See? It's not a good source or a bad source. It's the right tool or the wrong tool for *your* question." She tapped the third, an article with citations. "Recent. Named expert. Shows where its facts came from. For your report — that's your anchor."

The girl looked at the three pages, sorted now, and let out a breath. "That wasn't picking the smart one and calling everyone else dumb."

"No," Vet said, pleased. "That was matching each one to the job. Nobody's dumb. Some pages just aren't built for the question you're carrying."



Later, when the room was quiet, the girl came back with one more thing on her mind.

"When something sounds really true," she said slowly, "and you want it to be true — how do you make yourself stop and check anyway?"

Vet thought about the silent bell, and her grandfather's wing across the rope.

"You feel it first," she said. "There's this pull — a quick, warm rush that goes *yes, that's it, done*. That's the moment to slow down, not speed up. Not because the feeling's bad, but because it doesn't care whether the thing is true. So I take one breath, and I ask my five little questions, and by the end there's a different feeling underneath — quieter. Steadier. Like standing on ground I actually checked instead of ground I just hoped was there."

The girl nodded, and Vet watched the frantic, unsure look ease off her shoulders.

She didn't say the rest aloud, but she felt it, calm and sure: the small ache of slowing down almost always settles into something better — the plain, solid relief of knowing you can stand on what you're about to hand to someone else.

Quote

*NOTE-TAKING — *quoting + paraphrasing + summarizing; keeping voices separate*. The research-method primitive of
*distinguishing source voice from your voice in research notes.**



prompt: "When your notes are neat and every voice is kept clear, does a calm, settled feeling come over you? What does that calm feel like?"



Quote is a small magpie-tween with bright, quick eyes and black-and-white feathers that flash blue in the light. She likes things neat, and her prize possession is a three-pen set in her vest pocket: **black** for QUOTE (someone else's *exact* words), **blue** for PARAPHRASE (their idea in *your* words), **green** for SUMMARY (a short version of a long passage, in your words too).



Those three pens are her whole craft: **note-taking**. "Notes get messy," she chirps, "and messy notes blur the *voices*." You find a cool fact, jot it down, and forget to mark whose words they were — and suddenly it looks like *you* wrote the clever sentence. People call that plagiarism; Quote calls it "voice blurring." "It's almost never on purpose," she says. "It's an accident of messy notes. My three colors stop it — and make sure everyone gets credit." Her one unbreakable add-on: "Write down *where* you found it. Every time. Page number too."

Quote learned her three colors in a small village, where her family were the record-keepers.

At a long council meeting about fixing the old bridge, her family sat quietly and wrote it all down — in *colors*. When the mayor said "the bridge needs new planks," that went in **black**, exact, in quotation marks — a QUOTE. "Council discussed bridge repairs" went in **green** — a SUMMARY. And "the mayor seemed worried about the cost" went in **blue** — the keeper's *own* read of the room, a PARAPHRASE-style note.

"By the time I was six," Quote says, "I understood *why* the colors mattered. The village *trusted* our records — they always knew which words were the mayor's and which were the keeper's thoughts, because the colors never let them blur." That trust, she learned, lived entirely in keeping the voices apart.



Quote walked to ResearchQuest at twenty-two, feathers sleek, pens polished. Scholar — tall and quiet — met her at the gate.

"What is **note-taking**?" Scholar asked, his voice deep.



Scholar smiled, slow and thoughtful. "You are appointed. Welcome to ResearchQuest, Quote."

Synth

*SYNTHESIS — *combining evidence across multiple sources; finding agreement, disagreement, gaps.* The research-method primitive of *building understanding from multiple sources, not summarizing one source at a time.**



The threads were fighting again.

Synth sat cross-legged on the reading-room floor, her little hand-loom balanced on her knees, and three colored threads dangled from it, refusing to line up. The blue thread said otters ate fish. The green thread said otters were mostly playing, not eating. The amber thread said nobody had watched otters in winter at all. A sleek brown otter-tween with cream fur and quick eyes, Synth chewed her lip, then began to weave — over the blue, under the green, catching the amber at the edge.



"See," she murmured to the empty room, "you don't pick one. You cross them." Over, under, catch. Where blue and green touched, the cloth glowed a little — *agreement*. Where they pulled apart, she left a deliberate gap and marked it with the amber. By the time the light shifted, she had a small square of fabric that no single thread could have made. She held it up. It was warm. It was hers.

She had learned the crossing before she learned to read.



Synth grew up by the Whispering River, in a family of weavers so old the village couldn't remember a time without them. Her mother would sit her down with a tangle of mismatched fibers — river-reed, sheep-wool, a scrap of someone's old net — and say nothing, just weave, letting Synth watch her paws.

"That one's ugly," six-year-old Synth complained once, pointing at a lump of gray fiber. "It doesn't match anything."

"On its own, no," her mother said. She kept weaving. She pulled the gray up against a warm red, then a river-blue, crossing them so the gray sat *between*. When she finished the row, the gray had disappeared into something that looked, impossibly, like firelight. "A thread on its own is just a thread. Cross it with the others and it stops being itself. It becomes the cloth."

Synth stared at the row for a long time. Something clicked shut in her, gently, like a latch. A single thread was weak. Many threads, crossed right, made a blanket you could sleep under. She never forgot the feeling of watching the gray fiber turn to firelight.

Years later she walked into the great ResearchQuest hall carrying that same loom, and the Scholar behind the enormous desk looked at it, then at her.



Most visitors, Synth knew, would have picked up the books one at a time and reported each in turn. She didn't. She opened all three at once, spread them across the desk like threads on a frame, and ran a paw between them.

"This one and this one agree," she said, laying two fingers side by side. "Otters are clever with their paws — both saw it. So I trust that; two eyes, same picture." She moved to the third. "But this one says otters are shy, and the others call them bold. They watched at different times of year, look — so they're not really fighting, they're seeing different seasons." Then she paused, and tapped the empty desk *between* the books. "And none of them watched winter. That hole — that's mine to fill."

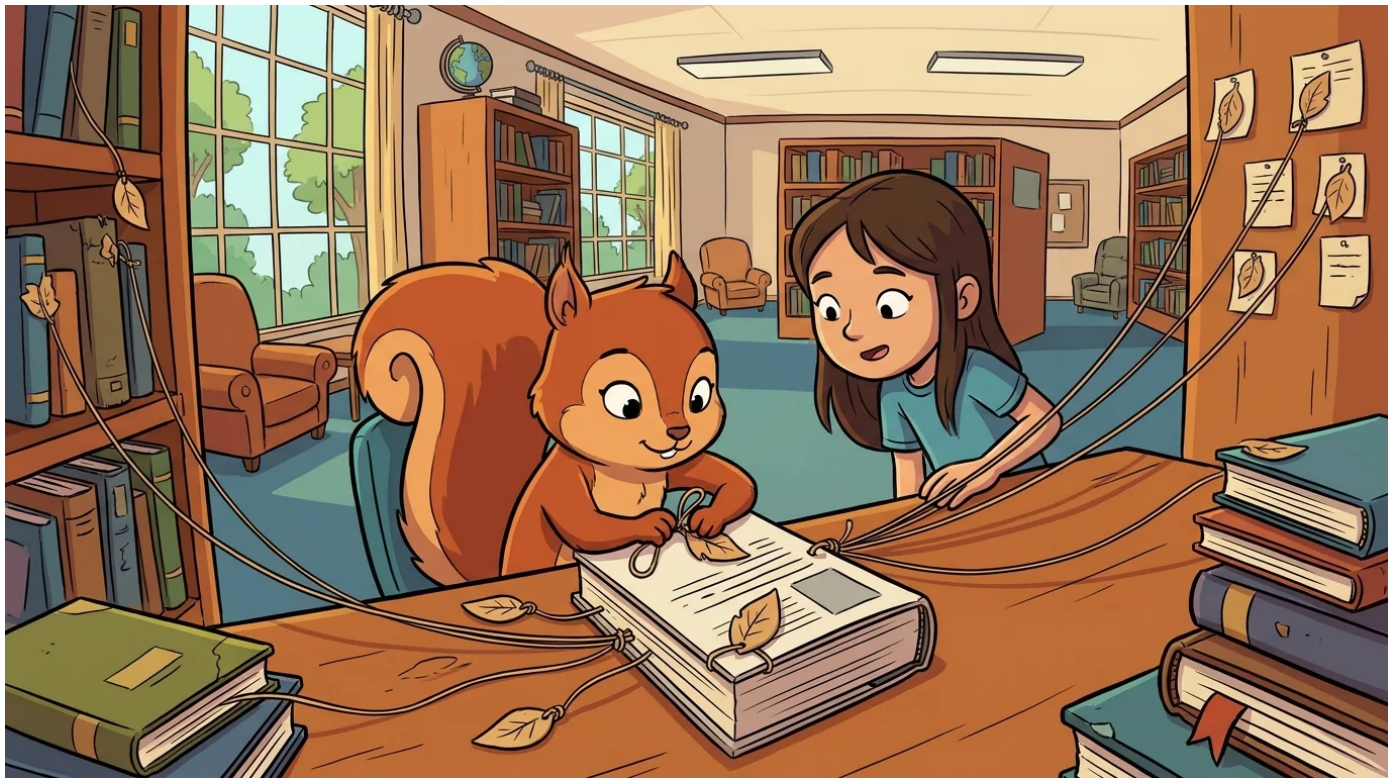


"The book's just where a thread comes from," Synth said. "The cloth is the idea."

He smiled and welcomed her in.

Tether

CITATION — attribution + bibliography; gratitude + map back to sources.



At the edge of the research hall, a squirrel-tween named Tether was tying a small paper tag to the corner of a page.

The tag was no bigger than a leaf. On it, in tiny careful letters, she had written a name, a title, and a number. A thin length of cord ran from the tag, looped once, and pointed — if you followed it with your eye — back toward a battered book on the far shelf.

A girl leaned over to watch. "You're stringing your whole report together with... string?"

"Every claim gets a thread," Tether said, not looking up. "This sentence says wolves can smell a herd two kilometres off. I didn't just know that. Somebody counted it, wrote it down, put it in that book." She patted the tag. "So the thread runs from my sentence back to their book. Anybody who reads this can follow it home."

"Why bother? It's *your* report."

Tether finally looked up, warm-russet tail curling behind her. "It's my report. But it's not all my *finding*. Half of what's true in here, someone found before me." She tugged the cord gently; the tag swung. "This little thread is me saying *thank you*. And it's also a map — so the next reader doesn't have to start from nothing. They can walk the trail I walked."

The girl studied the row of tags fluttering along the margin, each one a tiny tether between a sentence and a source. It looked less like homework and more like a garden of little kites.



Tether had learned about threads long before she learned about reports.

Her family were the village trail-markers. When the good gathering-spots opened each season — the hazel grove, the far creek where the fish ran thick — it was her family who tied the cord-and-tag bundles along the paths so other foragers could find them. She had grown up watching her grandfather kneel in the leaf-litter, fastening a tag to a low branch.

One autumn, small and impatient, she'd found a new patch of chestnuts all by herself. She'd wanted, fiercely, to keep it secret — to be the one who *knew*. But that night her grandfather asked her a quiet question. "The patch you found. How did you get there?"

"The old creek path," she admitted. "The one with the blue tags."

"And who tied the blue tags?"

Tether went quiet. She didn't know. Someone before her. Someone she would never meet, who had knelt in the leaves and thought about her without knowing her name.

Her chest went tight and strange — a feeling she didn't have a word for yet. It was almost like being caught, except nobody was angry. It was more like realizing she'd been *carried* the whole way and had almost forgotten to notice.

"Tie a tag on your chestnut patch," her grandfather said. "Not because you have to. Because someone tied one for you." He smiled. "That's not a rule, little one. That's just the trail remembering who walked it."

She tied the tag. And the tight feeling in her chest loosened into something warmer.



She walked to ResearchQuest at twenty-two, cord-and-tag bundle still in her vest-pocket.

Scholar, who kept the research hall, met her at the door with a question. "What is citation?"

Tether didn't reach for a rulebook. She pulled a tag from her bundle, wrote a single sentence on a scrap of paper — *the moon pulls the tides* — and tied a thread from it toward the oldest tide-chart on the wall.

"It's two things at once," she said. "It's thanks — I didn't figure out the tides, somebody watched the sea for years and wrote it down. And it's a map — anyone who doubts me, or wants more, can follow the thread straight to the proof."

"And if you skip it?" Scholar asked.

"Then the trail forgets. The next reader is lost, and I've taken credit for a path someone else cut." She shook her head. "I won't do that to them."

Scholar looked at the little tag swinging on its thread. "You belong here," he said.



Tether's corner of the hall was strung with threads like a spiderweb.

A boy came in one afternoon, hunched and cross, a half-finished report crumpled in his fist. "I did all the reading," he said. "Now I have to go back and add all these citations. It's like a punishment for using books."

Tether knew that hunch. She'd felt it once, over a patch of chestnuts.

"Read me a sentence," she said.

He smoothed the page. "Volcanoes can stay quiet for a thousand years and then erupt."

"Did you know that this morning, before you read it?"

"...No."

"So someone gave it to you." She handed him a blank tag. "Write down who. The book, the page." He did, grumbling. She tied a thread from his sentence to the tag. "Now. Pretend you're a kid next year, reading your report, and you think — *no way, a thousand years?* What do you do?"

The boy paused. Then, slowly: "...I follow the thread. I go find the book. I check."

"And there it is, waiting for you. Because *this* you left a map." She let the tag swing. "You didn't get punished for using the book. You got to *thank* it — and hand the next kid a shortcut you had to find the hard way." She grinned. "Skip the tag, and the trail forgets. Tie the tag, and it remembers. That's the whole thing."

He looked at the little thread, then at the row of them along her wall, and something in his shoulders came down.



Later, when the hall was empty, the boy came back with one more question, quieter now.

"When you tie all those threads," he said, "and nobody's making you — doesn't it feel like extra work?"

Tether thought about the leaf-litter, and the blue tags, and the stranger who had knelt for her before she was born.

"It used to," she said. "Then I figured out what the feeling really was." She touched one of the swinging tags. "It's not the feeling of doing a chore. It's the feeling of being trusted with the map — and passing it on. Somebody carried me here without ever knowing my name. Every thread I tie is me carrying the next one."

The boy nodded slowly.

She didn't say the rest out loud, but she felt it settle in her chest, warm and steady as leaf-light: *nobody finds the good spots alone. And the small, generous ache of remembering who helped you — that's not a burden at all. That's just gratitude, learning to point the way.*

About Spark & Anvil

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- **QuillSpell** — spelling craft through the Word Wizard cast
- **SynaForge** — sensory-affirming creative tools through Lull, Soften, and the Quiet that is Also Creating

Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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