



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 2 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.

Contents

Copyright & License	
Contents	
Introduction	
Survey	
Trawl	
Crosscut	
Verdict	
Wellspring	
About Spark & Anvil	
More chapter books from Spark & Anvil	
Methodology	
License	

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*

Survey

*BACKGROUND READING — *read around it before you dig in.* Before you narrow a question, you read widely to learn the lay of the land — what's known, what the words mean, what the big pieces are. You can't ask a sharp question about a thing you don't understand yet.*



At the ResearchQuest club, where kids learned that anyone who investigates is a real researcher, Survey was a wide-eyed, easygoing kid who loved the very *beginning* of a project — the part before you even know what your question is.

When someone arrived buzzing with a giant, fuzzy topic — "I want to research the ocean!" — Survey didn't rush them to narrow it. Instead she'd pull a stack of sources and go *exploring* with them, reading a little about currents, a little about creatures, a little about how deep it goes. She was mapping the lay of the land. Only after wandering the whole territory could you point to the one spot worth digging into.



"You didn't make me pick a question right away — you just helped me look around first!" a young researcher said.

"That's the secret first step," Survey said, spreading sources out like a map. "I'm Survey. I keep the background reading — *read around it before you dig in.*" She tapped a few sources. "Before you narrow a question, you read *widely* — what's known, what the words mean, what the big pieces are. You can't ask a sharp question about a thing you don't understand yet. First you get the lay of the land."

Scholar, the club's warm mentor, said, "Show them what happens when someone skips this step."



Survey acted it out: a researcher who jumped straight to a narrow question without reading around first. "I'll research how deep the deepest trench is!" the researcher declared — and then got stuck, because they didn't know what a trench *was*, or that there were many, or why depth even mattered. "See? Narrow too soon and you're lost in the dark," Survey said. Then she showed the other way — read around first, *then* the good question appears almost on its own: "Oh — I want to know how creatures *survive* the pressure down there." A real question, born from understanding.

A young researcher nodded slowly. "So I have to learn a little about everything before I pick my one thing?"

"Just enough to see the whole map," Survey said. "You're not trying to become an expert yet. You're trying to learn *enough to ask a great question*. The wandering at the start isn't being unfocused. It's how focus gets *made*."



Scholar asked Survey to teach the club before their big projects began. "Wonder is wonderful at narrowing a question," Scholar said, "but if a kid narrows before they've read around, they narrow blind. Will you teach them to scope first?"

Survey was glad to. When she teaches, she gives one rule: "Before you narrow, read wide. Skim a few overview sources. Learn the key words. Notice the big pieces and how they connect. *Then* — once you can see the whole territory — look for the one corner that pulls at you. That's your question, and now it'll be a good one."

Wonder, who loved sharpening questions, tried it with a kid. First the kid read around volcanoes for a while with Survey — lava, plates, eruptions, the people who live nearby. *Then* Wonder helped narrow: "Why do people choose to live near a volcano even though it's dangerous?" "That's a brilliant question," Wonder said, amazed. "And it only exists because Survey walked them around the whole mountain first."



After the session, Survey settled into a comfy chair with a loose stack of half-read sources, the way she always did — a dozen things open, nothing finished, perfectly content.

For a long time, Survey had quietly worried that her part didn't really count. The others produced *results* — Wonder's sharp questions, Vet's verdicts on sources, Tether's tidy citations. Survey just... read around. Wandered. Skimmed. She'd wondered if all her exploring was just stalling — the unfocused part before the real research began.

But sinking into that comfy chair, remembering the kid's volcano question that could *only* have come from wandering the whole mountain first, Survey felt the worry warm away into a deep, easy gladness. Her wandering wasn't stalling. It was the soil every good question grows in. You cannot ask something sharp about a world you haven't walked around in yet — and walking kids around that world, gently, before they narrowed, was a real gift. A calm, settled contentment spread through her, and she turned another page in another half-read source, happy, already scouting the edges of someone's next big map.

Trawl

***SEARCH STRATEGY** — *cast a wide net, then pull it tight.* Good searching isn't typing your whole question into a box. It's choosing strong keywords, knowing where to look, and refining your search when the first net comes back wrong. You fish on purpose.*



At the ResearchQuest club, where every curious kid counted as a real researcher, Trawl was a practical, sleeves-rolled-up kid who treated searching like fishing — you don't just throw a line anywhere; you choose your spot, your bait, and the size of your net.

When someone typed their entire question into a search box and got buried under a thousand useless results, Trawl would step in. "Don't pour the whole sentence in," she'd say. "Pick the two or three *strong* words — the ones that matter." She'd trim the search to its keywords, choose where to cast, and pull back a net full of *useful* things. She fished on purpose, every time.



"You found good sources in a minute when I'd been drowning in junk for an hour!" a young researcher said.

"Searching is a skill, not luck," Trawl said, miming hauling in a net. "I'm Trawl. I keep the search strategy — *cast a wide net, then pull it tight*." She listed it on her fingers. "Choose strong keywords — not your whole question. Know *where* to look. And when the first net comes back wrong, change it and cast again. You don't search by accident. You fish on purpose."

Scholar, the club's warm mentor, said, "Show them the two ways searching goes wrong."



Trawl demonstrated the too-wide net: she searched a single broad word and hauled back a million results, most useless. "Too wide — you'll never sort it." Then the too-narrow net: she searched a long, oddly-specific phrase and got *nothing*. "Too tight — the net came back empty." Then she got it right: two or three strong keywords, a good source to search in, and a net full of exactly-right things. "Wide enough to catch, tight enough to sort."

A young researcher squinted. "What do I do when I get nothing back?"

"You *learn* from it," Trawl said. "An empty net isn't a failure — it's telling you to change your words. Too many results? Add a word. Too few? Drop one or swap it for a simpler one. Every wrong search teaches you the right one. You just keep adjusting the net."



Scholar asked Trawl to teach the club before their projects. "Wonder gives them a sharp question," Scholar said, "but then they type the whole question into a box and drown. Will you teach them to fish?"

Trawl was thrilled. When she teaches, she gives one rule: "Turn your question into keywords — the two or three words that carry the meaning. Pick a good place to search, not just the first box you see. Look at what comes back. If it's wrong, change one word and cast again. Searching is a loop, not a single throw."

Vet, who was brilliant at judging sources but kept getting bad ones to judge, tried it. She turned "how do bees know which flowers to visit?" into the keywords *bees flowers communication*, searched a solid source, and pulled back a net of strong material. "I always blamed myself for finding junk," Vet said. "But I was just casting the wrong net. Better keywords, better catch — now I have good things to actually evaluate."



After the session, Trawl sat coiling and uncoiling an imaginary net in her lap, the way she fidgeted when she was thinking.

For a long time, Trawl had carried a quiet doubt. The others did the *thoughtful* work — Wonder shaped questions, Vet weighed credibility, Synth wove sources together. Trawl just... typed words into boxes. She'd wondered if search strategy was even real research, or just a clumsy chore you did before the smart part began.

But sitting there working her invisible net, remembering Vet's relief at finally pulling back *good* sources to judge, Trawl felt the doubt loosen into a warm, practical pride. Searching well wasn't a clumsy chore — it was the difference between a researcher who drowns and one who *finds*. Every other skill in the club needed something good to work on, and she was the one who hauled it in. Choosing the right words, casting wisely, fixing a bad net without blaming yourself — that was craft, and it was hers. A steady, satisfied calm settled over her, and she gave her invisible net a contented coil, already picking the keywords for tomorrow's cast.

Crosscut

*CROSS-CHECKING — *don't trust one; cross to another.* When you find a claim, you don't decide it's true just by staring at the one page. You leave it and check other, independent sources. If several unrelated places agree, the claim holds. If only the one page says it, be careful.*



At the ResearchQuest club, where every kid who investigated counted as a real researcher, Crosscut was a sharp-eyed, calm kid who had one unbreakable habit: she never believed a surprising claim from just one place. She always *crossed* — over to another source, and another — to see if they agreed.

When someone came running with an astonishing fact — "It says here that octopuses have nine brains!" — Crosscut didn't say "wow" and she didn't say "no way." She said, "Let's cross-check." She'd leave that one page and look at two or three other, unrelated sources. If they all agreed, the claim held. If only the first page said it, she'd raise a careful eyebrow.



"You didn't just believe it OR call it fake — you went and checked it against other places!" a young researcher said.

"That's the whole move," Crosscut said, drawing two crossing lines in the air. "I'm Crosscut. I keep the cross-checking — *don't trust one; cross to another.*" She tapped the crossing point. "When you find a claim, you don't decide it's true by staring at one page. You *leave* it and check independent sources. Several unrelated places agree? It holds. Only the one page says it? Be careful."

Scholar, the club's warm mentor, said, "Show them why one page is never enough."



Crosscut demonstrated: she found a wild claim on a single page and *stayed* on it, reading it over and over. "Staring harder at one page doesn't make it truer," she said. "The page can't check itself." Then she *crossed* — to a museum source, a science source, an encyclopedia. Two agreed; one said something different. "Now I know more than the page could ever tell me alone. The truth shows up in the *crossing*, not the *staring*."

A young researcher thought hard. "But what if it feels rude to not just believe someone?"

"It's not rude — it's *fair to the truth*," Crosscut said gently. "Crossing to check isn't calling someone a liar. It's how you make sure that when you finally repeat something, it's worth repeating. You owe that to the next person who hears it from you."



Scholar asked Crosscut to teach the club before their projects. "Vet can judge whether a *source* is trustworthy," Scholar said, "but the kids still believe single surprising claims without checking elsewhere. Will you teach them to cross?"

Crosscut was glad to. When she teaches, she gives one rule: "When a claim surprises you, don't decide on the spot. Leave the page. Find two or three *independent* sources — ones that didn't copy each other. If they agree, you can trust it. If they don't, dig deeper or hold off. One page is a rumor; three independent agreements is a finding."

Synth, who was great at weaving sources together but sometimes wove in a shaky claim, tried it. She found a striking statistic and, instead of using it right away, crossed to check. Two trusted sources didn't have it; one did, and it was old. "I almost built my whole synthesis on a claim that didn't hold," Synth said, shaken and grateful. "Crossing first saved the whole thing. Now everything I weave in has been *checked*."



After the session, Crosscut sat tracing little crossing lines on the table with her finger, the way she did when her mind was working.

For a long time, Crosscut had hidden a lonely worry. The others *built* things — Wonder built questions, Synth built syntheses, Tether built citations. All Crosscut did was doubt, and check, and cross. She'd wondered if she was just the suspicious one, the kid who slowed everyone down and trusted nothing.

But sitting there drawing her quiet crossing lines, remembering Synth's shaken relief at *not* building on a claim that crumbled, Crosscut felt the loneliness ease into a steady, warm certainty. She wasn't the suspicious one. She was the one who made everyone else's work *safe to trust* — because a finding that survived the crossing was a finding you could stand on. Doubt wasn't her flaw; careful, fair doubt was her gift, the thing that kept the whole club from spreading something wrong. A calm, grounded warmth spread through her, and she drew one more crossing line, content, ready to check tomorrow's most surprising claim.

Verdict

***FORMING A THESIS** — *gather the evidence, then take a stand.* Research isn't finished when you've collected facts. At some point you weigh what you found and commit to your OWN arguable answer — a thesis. Not "here are things people say," but "here's what I think, and here's why.*"



At the ResearchQuest club, where every kid who investigated was a real researcher, Verdict was a steady, thoughtful kid who was wonderful at the hardest moment in any project — the moment you stop collecting and finally have to say *what you actually think*.

When someone had a mountain of notes but kept stalling — "I found SO many facts, but I don't know what to say" — Verdict would sit with them, weigh the evidence together, and help them reach a verdict: their own arguable answer. "Don't just hand in a pile of facts," she'd say. "A pile of facts isn't research. Tell me what *you* concluded — and why." Saying "I think" out loud was the bravest, most important step, and she helped kids take it.



"You helped me figure out what I actually believe about my topic — not just what other people said!" a young researcher said.

"That's the step everyone's scared of," Verdict said, weighing two handfuls of air like a balance. "I'm Verdict. I keep the thesis — *gather the evidence, then take a stand.*" She brought her hands level. "Research isn't done when you've collected facts. At some point you weigh what you found and commit to your *own* answer. Not 'here are things people say.' But 'here's what I think — and here's why.'"

Scholar, the club's warm mentor, said, "Show them the two ways a project gets stuck at the end."



Verdict demonstrated the first: a researcher who just listed everything they found — fact, fact, fact — and stopped, never saying what it *meant*. "That's a report, not research. Where's the *thinking*?" Then the second: a researcher so afraid of being wrong they refused to conclude anything at all. "Frozen. No stand, no thesis, no end." Then she showed the brave version: weigh the evidence, then say it plainly — "Based on what I found, I think *this*, because of *these three things*." A real conclusion, owned out loud.

A young researcher looked nervous. "But what if I take a stand and I'm wrong?"

"Then you change your mind — and *that's* research too," Verdict said warmly. "A thesis isn't a promise that you're right forever. It's the honest answer the evidence points to *right now*. A thesis you can update later is braver than never deciding at all. Saying 'I think, because' is where a reporter becomes a researcher."



Scholar asked Verdict to teach the club before their final write-ups. "Synth can weave all the sources together beautifully," Scholar said, "but then the kids stop — they're afraid to say what it adds up to. Will you teach them to take a stand?"

Verdict was glad to. When she teaches, she gives one rule: "When you've gathered and weighed your evidence, ask yourself the brave question: *so what do I actually think?* Write it as one clear sentence — your answer plus your strongest reason. That's your thesis. Everything else in your project is there to support it. Lead with what you think, then show your why."

Synth, who could combine sources but kept ending with "and so people have many views," tried it. She weighed her woven evidence and committed: "I think city gardens matter most for bringing neighbors together — more than for the food they grow — because almost every source described people, not just plants." "I finally *said* something," Synth breathed, half-scared, half-thrilled. "Not just 'here's what everyone thinks.' Here's what *I* think."



After the session, Verdict sat quietly, holding her hands like a balance and letting them tip gently one way, the way she did when she was deciding something.

For a long time, Verdict had carried the heaviest worry of all. To take a stand, she had to risk being *wrong* — out loud, with her name on it. The others could hide a little: Survey just explored, Trawl just searched, Crosscut just checked. But a thesis was a kid sticking her neck out and saying "I think." She'd wondered, in anxious moments, whether being the one who commits made her the one most likely to be embarrassed.

But sitting there letting her hands find their balance, remembering Synth's half-scared, half-thrilled "here's what I think," Verdict felt the worry settle into a quiet, sturdy courage. Taking a stand wasn't the most embarrassing job — it was the bravest and the realest. Anyone can list facts; it takes courage to weigh them and say what you believe, knowing you might revise it tomorrow. That courage was the whole point of research, and it was hers to model. A warm, steady resolve filled her chest, and she let her hands come level, content, ready to help the next kid say the bravest two words: *I think*.

Wellspring

**GO TO THE SOURCE — find the spring, not the puddle downstream.* A primary source is the original — the firsthand account, the actual data, the real letter. A secondary source talks ABOUT it. Both are useful, but you should know which you're holding, and trace big claims back to the original.*



At the ResearchQuest club, where every curious kid counted as a real researcher, Wellspring was a calm, clear-eyed kid who loved tracing things back — following a fact upstream, past retelling after retelling, until she reached the original source it first flowed from.

When someone repeated a striking claim — "I read that this painting took twenty years!" — Wellspring would gently ask, "Where did *that* page get it?" And they'd follow the stream back: this page got it from that article, which got it from another, until — at last — the original: the artist's own letter, or the museum's record. The firsthand spring, not a puddle far downstream where the water had picked up mud along the way.



"You traced my fact all the way back to where it actually started!" a young researcher said.

"That's my favorite kind of journey," Wellspring said, miming following a stream upstream with her finger. "I'm Wellspring. I keep the sources — *find the spring, not the puddle downstream.*" She tapped an imaginary origin. "A primary source is the *original* — the firsthand account, the real data, the actual letter. A secondary source talks *about* it. Both are useful. But know which you're holding, and trace big claims back to the spring."

Scholar, the club's warm mentor, said, "Show them the game of telephone."



Wellspring acted it out: she whispered a fact down a line of kids, and by the end it had changed completely — a number got bigger, a name got swapped. "That's what happens to a fact passed source-to-source-to-source," she said. "Each retelling can bend it a little." Then she showed the fix: go upstream to the original, where the fact is still clean. "The spring isn't muddied yet. That's why you trace back to it for anything that matters."

A young researcher frowned. "So are secondary sources bad? Should I only use the originals?"

"Not at all," Wellspring said warmly. "Secondary sources are *guides* — they explain, summarize, point you toward the spring. You'll use lots of them, and that's good. The skill isn't avoiding them. It's *knowing which kind you're holding* — and, for the claims that really matter, following the stream up to the firsthand source to see it for yourself."



Scholar asked Wellspring to teach the club before their projects deepened. "Tether is wonderful at crediting sources," Scholar said, "but the kids don't yet notice whether a source is firsthand or a retelling. Will you teach them to trace upstream?"

Wellspring was glad to. When she teaches, she gives one rule: "For every important source, ask: is this the *original*, or is it talking about the original? A firsthand letter, a real photograph, the actual data — that's primary. An article explaining them — that's secondary. Use both. But for your biggest claims, follow the stream up and look at the spring yourself."

Tether, who credited every source carefully but treated them all the same, tried it. She was citing a dramatic statistic from an article, then traced it upstream — and found the article had slightly mis-stated the *original* study. She cited the study instead, correctly. "I was crediting the puddle," Tether said, amazed. "The spring said something a little different. Now my citation points to where the fact really *lives*."



After the session, Wellspring sat tracing the path of an imaginary stream across the table, all the way back to its start, the way she always did when she was thinking.

For a long time, Wellspring had carried a small, wistful worry. The others worked with what was right in front of them — Trawl's fresh catch, Vet's verdicts, Verdict's bold claims. Wellspring was always heading *backward*, upstream, into old letters and original records. She'd wondered if caring so much about where things *came from* made her slow, or stuck in the past, while everyone else moved forward.

But sitting there following her invisible stream to its source, remembering Tether's amazement at finding the real spring, Wellspring felt the worry clear into a calm, deep gladness. Heading upstream wasn't being stuck in the past — it was the only way to reach water that hadn't been muddled by a hundred retellings. Every clean fact the club stood on had a spring somewhere, and she was the one who could find it. Knowing the difference between the original and the echo, and caring enough to trace it back — that was a quiet, essential craft, and it was hers. A clear, settled contentment flowed through her, and she traced her stream once more to its source, happy, ready to follow tomorrow's fact all the way home.

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- **CuriosityQuest** — Texas geography exploration through Linger, Notice, and the Lantern in the Dark
- **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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