



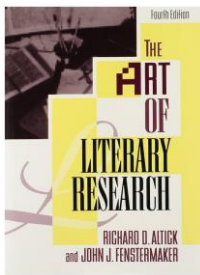
## *The Art of Literary Research: Key Insights for a Literary Investigation*

Sameena Tabassum

Maulana Azad National Urdu University

Email:sam.tabu@manuu.edu.in

doi: [10.33329/elt.12.5.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.12.5.1)



### ABSTRACT

*The Art of Literary Research* (1993) by Richard D. Atlick and John J. Fenstermaker is widely regarded as a foundational textbook for PhD students in literary studies. It serves as a comprehensive guide for researchers, particularly in the field of literature. This paper aims to highlight the key insights from the book making the content more accessible to scholars. It sums up the core ideas of the book and outlines the significant takeaways for researchers, offering valuable guidance. The paper shows how the book sheds light on various aspects of rigorous research, that remain relevant and useful for scholars across generations.

**Keywords:** authorship, John J. Fenstermaker, Richard D. Atlick, *The Art of Literary Research*, literary investigation, literary research, research scholar

### Introduction

*The Art of Literary Research* by Richard D. Atlick and John J. Fenstermaker, is a complete guide for literary investigation. Its first edition was published in 1963. The fourth edition, published in 1993, is divided into the following chapters:

1. Vocation
2. The Spirit of Scholarship
3. Some Scholarly Occupations
4. The Task
5. Finding Materials
6. Libraries
7. Making Notes
8. The Philosophy of Composition
9. The Scholar's Life

The book focuses on the key requisites of being a research scholar and guides how the scholars must plan and progress in their research to ensure an effective research outcome. The paper presents the main ideas from the book and highlights the key takeaways from the different chapters in the book.



The paper facilitates and fosters a comprehensive understanding of the book which is a landmark in literary research.

### **The Research Scholar**

The first chapter, "Vocation," begins with the truism, "All literary students are dedicated to the same task, the discovery of truth" (p. 3). The writers assert that every good student of literature combines the roles of both a scholar and a critic. They define vocation as an occupation or a profession requiring dedication. According to them, literature is a human product- a humane and a compassionate art. Literature has to be understood in human context with socio-historical science. While critics study the literary work, and its structure, style, and content, the scholars study the literary work's origin and its subsequent history. Literary history focuses on the interaction of literary works. The center of interest for both the critic and the scholar is the literary work. The literary work is the "raison d'être": the most important reason for existence.

A research scholar persists in his quest for truth in places outside the literary work. External data is vital to the accurate and adequate understanding of a text. External circumstances enrich the meaning of the work. The author's character, personality, and experiences must be understood to comprehend the meaning of the text. An author is the product of time and place. They allude to T. S. Eliot comment in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that an author's significance lies in comparison with his contemporaries.

Literature is an eloquent and artistic document of mankind's journey; it is the journey of the soul of the human race. A genuine scholar has keen curiosity and a strong urge to learn and teach. According to Morris Bishop, research is not done for promotion of any cause but for the writer's joy. Researchers must do apprenticeships in two professions: Law and Journalism. With Law, they learn the significance of evidence and accuracy of details. With Journalism, they learn where to go for information and how to obtain it. Researchers must love literature for its own sake as an art. They must have a vivid sense of history too.

### **The Critical Spirit**

The Chapter 2 called, "The Spirit of Scholarship" is divided into three parts:

- (i) Error: Its Prevalence, Progress, and Persistence
- (ii) Examining the Evidence
- (iii) Two Applications of the Critical Spirit: Fixing Dates and Testing Genuiness

The writers claim that even an iota of error in criticism can render it as absolute waste. They refer to F. R. Leavis's "The Great Tradition" and Henry James's first novel, "Roderick Hudson" published in 1876. They observe that a scholar's work is both constructive and constructively destructive. It is constructive as it contributes to knowledge; and it is constructively destructive as it exposes and dispels the mistakes. Art and artists are resistant to superficial categorizing. Good researchers are skeptics. They doubt the capacity for truth- in others and also in themselves. Their skepticism begins with the self as self-knowledge is the foundation of all knowledge. A scholar's profession follows the most rigid standards. Although error is indispensable, the researchers strive their best to avoid errors. Errors could happen due to slip in memory, exaggeration, human error, bias, etc. Falsehood persists despite exposure because it is picturesque and appeals to the romanticism in



humans. There are two opposed inclinations in a scholar: a scientist's devotion to austere fact and an artist's sense of superior beauty. Therefore, a scholar must choose the most reliable sources for research. Sometimes, there are biographical ghosts found in research: books, though listed in research, never existed.

The Part 2 of the Chapter 2 is called "Examining the Evidence." The writers recommend that if the scholar suspects any error in historical transmission, the sources and the documents must be verified. They question the reliability of the autobiographical narrative. There could be different versions of the same text. Every person views every other person in any event through a unique set of mental lenses. A researcher must question in the manner of a lawyer interrogating a witness. Just as Robert Browning mentioned, "a large muddy blob of error may well contain a precious grain of truth."

Atlick and Fenstermaker observe that we become accomplices in passing the error further if we include that information in our table and we could have known the mistake if we had checked carefully. They further explain that in the letters exchanged between the intimates, only the recipient knows what were the special implications and connotations of the writer's words.

In the last Part of the Second chapter, "Two Applications of the Critical Spirit: Fixing Dates and Testing Authenticity," the writers insist that even in the case of the slightest doubt, a researcher must check the dates and other facts very carefully. A researcher must use critical spirit in two tasks: to establish accurate chronology and to verify a document's authenticity. Indeed, the price of truth is eternal vigilance and eternal skepticism.

### **Authorship**

The third chapter, "Some Scholarly Occupations," begins with an extract from Walter Scott's "Antiquary" which talks of the obsession with accuracy with regard to dates, names, and other facts. The writers mention that this chapter could as well be called "Further Applications of the Critical Spirit." They assert that the literary investigation has several interdependent branches such as "the establishment of a dependable text, the determination of authorship, source study, the tracing of reputation and influence, and, finally, the contiguous fields of history in which the literary student often travels" (p. 61). Skillful interpretation of evidence is required to evaluate the accuracy of a text, its authorship, influence of the predecessors, or its impact on a successor.

In the Part 1 of this chapter called, "Textual Study," Atlick and Fenstermaker explain that during the 1940s and 1950s, as a result of "New Criticism," there emerged an increased focus on the author's actual words. Beginning with a detailed narration of how incorrect chapterisation of Henry James's "The Ambassadors" continued for some time, the writers give several such instances where minor or major errors crept into the literary texts. In Melville's "The White Jacket," the word actually used was "coiled fish" but due to a printing error, it became "soiled fish." Similar examples are cited from Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Hardy, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edward Fitzgerald, William Butler Yeats, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Henry James, and James Joyce, where the critics analyzed certain texts with some misprinted words, and minor printing errors changed the meaning of the passage. The literary study of any text must begin only after the assurance that the text is the original text, with words written by the author. A textual scholar or a textual critic plays an important role in reconstructing the history of a literary text from its origin in



manuscript to its printed form, “the copy text.” It is difficult to know the author’s intention only through the words in the text.

According to Postmodern Criticism, meaning is not contained only in the language used. Textual Criticism in English Literature emerged during the Renaissance but gained prominence in the American Literary scene only in the 1980s. The textual study is significant in two ways: firstly, it establishes an authoritative text which is necessary for literary criticism, and secondly, it establishes the text as an event in time, evolving through several stages during the process of literary creation. A basic knowledge of the textual study is crucial for literary scholars to understand how this field of study operates.

The Part 2 of this chapter is rightly called, “Problems of Authorship.” The writers recall that

I. A. Richards, in his “Practical Criticism” (1929), argued that a reader’s understanding of the text is determined by his knowledge of the author and his background. The research that adds to the knowledge of authorship has three objectives:

- (i) To identify the author
- (ii) To decide which part of the work written by two authors, belongs to each writer
- (iii) To remove from the received list of works whatever pieces are not the writer’s, thereby, purifying the canon.

Before the Renaissance period, the text was more important than the writer; however, after the Renaissance, the human personality behind the work became as important as the author.

The writers give a plethora of examples where the attribution of authorship faced some challenges. Interesting anecdotes from the lives of renowned literary figures such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Donne, William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, Lord Alfred Tennyson and a few others prove how the correct attribution of authorship is of utmost importance and a demanding task. Stylometrics do, to a great extent, facilitate the process. Moreover, a scholar’s experience and expertise can help accept or reject the text as a particular author’s work on the basis of his knowledge and understanding of that author and his style. Evidence regarding technical biography also helps establish authorship.

The Part 3 of this chapter is called, “The Search for Origins.” In this chapter, the writers assert that a literary work may have many sources ranging from direct observation of a person or a place to visual or graphic representation of an event, which influence the content or the style of any literary text. The scholar bases the attribution of authorship on internal (textual cues and allusions) or external evidence (comparison with suspected source). In the Part 4 of this chapter is called, “Tracing Reputation and Influence,” writers compare reputation with influence, and argue that the reputation refers to an author’s or a literary work’s impression on critics and readers, whereas influence implies the author’s or work’s impact on other writers or works. Historical reconstruction has many significant benefits. The reputation-influence study is a chronological one. Tracing an author’s reputation gives a lot of information about the contemporary critical standards and popular literary taste. Tracing his influence offers insight into the subsequent literary trends and taste. Early reception and the number of copies sold offer clues to the reputation of the author’s work, and the number of direct or indirect imitations and allusions prove the influence.



In Part 5 of this chapter called, “Cultivating a Sense of the Past,” Atlick and Fenstermaker argue that literary history helps the critics and the readers place an author in comparison with his contemporary writers. It facilitates the distinction between the conventional and the innovative. Every literary work is a product of an age, both as long as a decade or as short as a month. Most of the time, an awareness of the contemporary social, political, economic, and/or religious conditions becomes indispensable to the appreciation of literature. Moreover, an analysis of the text requires familiarity with the vocabulary of that age, as words could be loaded with varying connotations and denotations. Literature is not authentic history as creativity intervenes experience and expression. Therefore, social history serves as a tool for literary scholarship.

Some commonest perils in literary-historical study include:

- (i) Unwarranted generalization: The scholar must be wary of oversimplification and avoid sweeping statements. He or she must be of the complexity of a phenomenon and its opposing tendencies, verify adequate evidence, and resist stereotyping.
- (i) (II) Unwarranted specification: This occurs with exaggeration, while assigning undue importance to any ordinary aspect.
- (ii) Failure to allow for prejudice and emotional distortion in the sources: The scholar must be historically aware and vigilant about any bias embedded in any literary rendition.
- (iii) Unhistorical or oversimplified reading of language: The scholar must be cognizant of the semantic shifts in varying socio-cultural contexts.
- (iv) The attribution of modern judgments: The writers, Atlick and Fenstermaker, comment,

“The anachronistic fallacy, as it can be called, may take the form either of attributing present-day attitudes to a past society or of reproaching that society for not sharing our values”.

Lastly, the writers rightly remark that books cannot replace the intelligence and keenness the scholar develops with direct observation and experience, with actual watching and living.

### **The Research Process**

In Chapter 4 called, “The Task,” the writers observe that, “The pleasures other than those of absorbing labor and love are dull.” They further add:

- (i) Literary Research is a demonstration which begins with a question and ends with an answer.
- (ii) Incidental errors creep in all sorts of papers, even descriptive or enumerative papers.

As regards the authenticity of the text, the writers talk about hypothesis. They give examples such as: William Langland wrote all three versions of “Piers Plowman;” Hamlet is based on the lost play by Thomas Kyd. The inquiry begins with a question generated by the facts in the literary text or its history or its biography. Facts generate curiosity. These facts are arranged to generate a hypothesis- which proposes a relationship between two things. The hypothesis could be proven or disproven. It implies setting up and testing of a conjectural explanation for certain observed phenomenon. The unknown for a critic is the correct interpretation of the text but the unknown for a literary historian may take many forms such as the truth about a controversial event in the poet's life.

The writers further add that the hypothesis may or may not be true; hypothesis is a working assumption. The researcher must not become emotionally attached to the hypothesis. Hypothesis is a



---

tool, not a cause to be advanced. An inquiry is an exercise of reason, not advocacy. If the supposed explanation cannot be defended, it should be dropped. Once carefully formulated, the hypothesis should be tested against all facts. The likelihood of a hypothesis to be true increases with the quantity and the diversity of independent sources it comes from. Well-structured data can collapse with even a single opposing fact. The researcher must be unbiased. Any contradictory evidence (internal or external) should not be ignored. Besides focusing on Hypothesis X, the scholar must consider the Hypotheses Y and Z also. Hypotheses Y and Z may not seem persuasive at the outset, but may become probable as the supporting evidence increases.

Research is a process of elimination method based on principles. The researcher must collect all the internal and external evidence related to the hypothesis, giving importance to both supporting and contradictory evidence. Every piece of information must be scrutinized carefully, regardless of the authority behind it. If one studies literature with an alert creative and critical intelligence, there are many possible research subjects. The scholar should not ask the advisor for the research topic. A good dissertation is a proof that the scholar is ready to enter the scholarly profession. After the scholar and the advisor agree upon a topic, they should explore its feasibility. It is futile if the topic is good but circumstances do not permit its exploration. The scholar must assess the availability of resources. The scholar must be ambitious but be realistic. The research objective must be attainable in a few years. The topic should neither be too ambitious nor too trivial. The scholar must respect what they are doing.

### **Scholarly Writing**

In Chapter Five called, "Finding materials," the writers observe that knowledge is of two types:

(i) what you know and (ii) you know from where to get information. Knowledge is available in two forms: printed and unprinted. The scholar must take utmost advantage of both the printed and the unprinted materials. Our statements must be based on confirmed/sure knowledge.

Knowledge, ingenuity, patience, and persistence are required to locate the right source of information. Atlick and Fenstermaker dwell in detail on the significance of bibliographies and databases. They reiterate that the computers are not the key to all knowledge on any topic, especially in the highly subjective and unquantifiable discipline of art or literature. In computer-assisted research, creative intelligence guides and inspires all scholarship that transcends the mechanical. Technology, no matter how time-saving and effort-saving it is, can never replace human imagination that can discover relationships which are beyond the perceivable mechanical. Technology can facilitate research only to a certain extent. After that, the human mind, the seat of originality, must take over. After using all the databases, the scholar has to use his mind to make sense out of the data, to contribute to the body of genuine knowledge.

In Chapter Six called, "Libraries," Atlick and Fenstermaker maintain that the information present online is less in comparison with the wealth of unsystematized information found in books. The writers hold that science is hypothetical; no Science is perfect. A method is the way of collecting data; methodology is the justification of research methods. In Chapter Seven, "Making Notes," the writers assert that the two goals of making notes for research should be efficiency and accuracy. They share practical suggestions for the scholars on how to take notes efficiently during the research study. While making notes, the scholar must prefer typing to writing to save time. High quality bond paper slips are easy to manage rather than cards. They recommend the use of slips of different sizes- each for a specific



purpose. They urge the scholars to keep direct quotes to a minimum and with absolute accuracy. They assert that computers help in organization but handling notes has its own value. In the Chapter Eight, "The Philosophy of Composition," Atlick and Fenstermaker write, "The hallmark of good scholarly prose is lucidity. It is not easy to achieve (p. 207)." They further add, "if condensing or paraphrasing your author's starts you risk distorting his position, then you have no choice but to quote him verbatim" (p. 210). They urge the scholars to maintain organization in the paper: "Construct your paper as coherently as your thought and language allow" (p. 213). The writers encourage the use of the first person in literary research papers. According to Atlick and Fenstermaker, "The four great requisites of good scholarly writing never change:

- (i) Accuracy of facts
- (ii) Soundness of reasoning
- (iii) Clear explanation of the topic's significance
- (iv) Unaffected, terse, lucid prose (p. 229).

### Conclusion

The last chapter, "The Scholar's Life," begins with the truism, "The scholar never ceases to be a scholar." He can never lock his intellect. A scholar's profession has unwritten ethical standards "sustained by the desirability of fair play, self-respect, and professional morale." (p. 233). Atlick and Fenstermaker maintain that the bond between scholarship and teaching is very strong. They aptly conclude:

They (scholarship and teaching) are simply two phases of one high calling: as a scholar, one advances learning, and when he teaches- or publishes- he shares with the society. Learning without teaching is sterile, and teaching without learning is merely a way of passing time. (p. 237)

The writers claim the book to be "the established guide to the purposes, the methods, and the pleasures of research in English and American literatures." The book's Preface declares that the book serves as *vade mecum*: a handbook for literary researchers. Although the book offers insights into the dos and don'ts for the researchers in Literature, it serves as a guide for researchers in all disciplines. *The Art of Literary Research* by Atlick and Fenstermaker, undoubtedly, stands as one of the most important works on literary research, offering profound insights and practical guidance to scholars across generations. Thus, the book can appropriately be called 'a manual for researchers'.

### References

Atlick, Richard D., & John J. Fenstermaker. (1993). *The art of literary research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.