RESEARCH ON COMPOSING: POINTS OF DEPARTURE, edited by
Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, 1978. [National Council of Teachers
of English, 111 Kenyon Road, Urbana Illinois, 61801.]

Research on Composing: Points of Departure is itself a striking
departure from previous literature on composition research. In
their collection of articles, Cooper and Odell break tradition with
the comparison group studies reviewed by Braddock, et al. in
Research in Written Composition (NCTE, 1963). They call for a
radical change in the focus of basic research into the teaching of
writing.

Writing project philosophy has frequently emphasized the
importance of pre-writing and rewriting. Participants have come
to see composing as a process that must be understood if they are
to function constructively as teachers. But there is a great need for
sound research that supports the directions our best teachers are
taking.

Earlier research has paid little attention to process, concerning itself primarily with measuring program
outcomes in an attempt to establish one teaching practice as superior to another. Since the aim of the writing
project is to identify and generate multiple ways of helping the student writer, debates about "what is better:
transformational grammar or traditional usage instruction" are beside the point. Better for what? Better in what
context, in what kind of classroom, with what other opportunities for the student to write? What does "better"
actually mean? What is competency in writing? Are competencies different for different kinds of writing tasks?
What is it that successful writers DO?

These are the sorts of questions addressed by contributors like James Britton, Janet Emig, Richard Young,
Walter Petty. Each writer describes methods of systematic observation and names several sources of data.

Besides his fine analysis of the revision processes in poetry, Gabriel Della-Piana gives us valuable criteria for
judging the theories which should underlie all research efforts.

John Schultz suggests that the implicit assumptions which shape research questions are themselves often
worthy of research — e.g., assumptions about the relation of speech to writing.

Janet Emig and Don Murray call for closer ties with biology and physiology as we study the physical and
mental processes involved in composing. Murray also makes a useful distinction between internal and external
revision.

Loren Britt and Barry Kroll suggest that cognitive-developmental psychology has implications for research on
composing. They argue for a break with the stimulus response theories of behavioral psychology.

Philip Lopate's "Helping Young Children to Write" describes the inner rituals invoked by writers to get
themselves started, and is valuable for teachers and writers as well as researchers.

These are richly suggestive points of departure rather than answers. The resulting collection should be a
powerful stimulus to researchers, theorists, students and teachers of composing at all levels.

Catharine Keech