

Little Red Research Student -- The Dramatized Version
A Research Fable by Jeanne Grace

Narrator: In a cottage on the edge of Scholarship Forest there lived a family whose child showed a precocious interest in research. Interest in research was not, in fact, unusual for any family who lived in the forest -- indeed, the child's grandmother was a primary source. This child's early interest and skill in the area, however, were enough to bring joy to parental hearts. As was the custom for particularly well-read citizens of the forest, the child always wore crimson-hued+ outer clothing: not surprisingly, the child was soon nicknamed Little Red.

One day, Little Red's mother asked the child to take a basket of treats to Grandma, who was ill. Excited to be entrusted with such a pleasant errand, Little Red donned a crimson windbreaker and set off on the path through the woods to Grandma's house. Little Red was barely out of sight of the family cottage when a wolf appeared on the forest path.

The wolf seemed friendly enough and moved aside to make room on the narrow forest path.

Wolf: Hello, Little Red. Where are you going today?

Little Red: I'm going to see my Grandma, who is not feeling well. I'm bringing her a basket of treats to cheer her up!

Narrator: (Little Red had been carefully taught not to talk to strangers, but the wolf was a practically a fixture at the public library, so Little Red did not think of him as a stranger.)

Wolf: And what treats might bring cheer to such a famous and accomplished lady?

Little Red: I'm taking her a loaf of bread, and some chicken soup, and a new data set to analyze, And I cannot stop to talk any longer, or the soup will get cold.

Narrator: With that, Little Red continued deeper into the woods on the forest path.

All the residents of Scholarship Forest were engaged in some sort of intellectual activity, and the wolf was a secondary source, albeit a somewhat lazy and unethical one. He saw the chance encounter on the forest path as an opportunity to help himself to some undeserved recognition. So while Little Red continued along the forest path, the wolf took a short cut, arrived at Grandma's door first, and tricked Grandma into opening the door by pretending to be Little Red. Once inside, the wolf consumed the frail and ailing lady in a single gulp, leaving not so much as a citation or a reference behind.

But the wolf was not yet satisfied. He wanted the data set in Little Red's basket, and knew Little Red would not hand it over to anyone but Grandma. So the wolf put on Grandma's nightgown and thinking cap, settled into Grandma's recliner and pulled Grandma's comforter all the way up to his nose. Before long, there was a knock at the door.

Wolf start using best imitation Grandma voice here: Who is it?,

Little Red Grandma, it's Little Red. I've come to bring you some treats, so you'll feel better.

Wolf: Well come right in. The door is unlatched,

Narrator: Little Red entered, but seemed a bit uncertain. The light in Grandma's cottage was dim, so it was hard to tell, but something seemed a little different about Grandma. Little Red was reading Grandma's face like a book, or maybe a peer-reviewed journal article.

Little Red; Grandma, what strange features you have! Usually, you have distinct sections with labels like Framework, Literature Review, Study Questions, Sample, Method, Findings and Discussion. But today, you seem all jumbled up!

Wolf: I'm not feeling well, dear, and I'm a little disorganized. Now what treats did you bring me?

Narrator: Little Red frowned, and held onto the basket even more tightly.

Little Red: Grandma, what strange data you have! Normally, you base your conclusions on observable data collected and evaluated according to an organized plan, but today you're full of hearsay, anecdotes and tradition-derived opinions.

Wolf: Well, dear, I've simply been dabbling in alternative ways of knowing. What did your wonderful mother send in that basket of yours?

Narrator: With a deepening frown, Little Red moved closer to the door.

Little Red: Grandma, what unusual content you have! You're full of discussions of other people's findings and conclusions, but there's not a thing there describing work you yourself have performed.

Wolf: Little Red, research is a systematic investigation, designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge, and I do my systematic investigations among the publications in the library. Now hand over the treats before Grandma gets cross!

Little Red: YOU'RE NOT MY GRANDMA! My Grandma is a primary source, and you look like a review or clinical opinion article, instead! What have you done with my Grandma? Help! HELP!

Narrator: Little Red ran out of the house, with the wolf chasing her. The wolf was fast, but Little Red was faster. By the time the wolf caught up, Little Red had attracted some protectors: a crew of forest maintenance academics who carried chain saws and looked like they knew how to use them. (Cue forest maintenance academics). Surrounded by mutters of scientific misconduct and the ominous revving of two cycle engines, the wolf burped up Grandma. She was indignant about the wolf's attempt to digest her without citing her properly, but was otherwise not much the worse for the experience.

Thoroughly exposed as an intellectual thief, the wolf raced out of the forest, never to be seen again. But Grandma and the academics were still upset.

Grandma: There's no such thing as a good wolf. All wolves are secondary sources, who read and interpret primary sources like me for others, and not always correctly. I'm tired of students reading about me, but not reading me. Just look at the effect on Little Red!

Narrator: Several of the other forest academics had similar opinions, and in the passion of the moment proposed to drive all wolves -- not just the wicked one -- out of Scholarship Forest. The wolves would surely have been victims of vigilante justice had it not been for the appearance of the local forest ranger, T. Sierra Club. Ranger Club took a report on the rogue wolf and assured the academics that that particular wolf would not be allowed to participate in Scholarship Forest activities for a period of three years, and would be strictly supervised by any employer thereafter. But he steadfastly argued for the place of wolves in the ecosystem of Scholarship Forest and refused to sanction a wholesale ouster.

T. Sierra Club (Ranger): Secondary sources have a legitimate purpose here. Scholarly wolves provide summaries of related research, often with useful critical appraisal. They also create helpful commentaries on how to apply research findings to practice. Their 'state of the science' howls at the moon are a never-to-be-forgotten experience. They also tend to thin the weakest research out of any collection of primary sources.

(Grandma look offended) We have to learn to live together. That means recognizing that primary sources are the most detailed and reliable descriptions of the researcher's work, and that secondary sources -- for better or worse -- always place a second opinion between the original research and the reader. And as for the effect on beginning students, why, even Little Red could tell the difference between Grandma and the wolf!

Narrator: Finally convinced, the forest academics packed up their chainsaws and went home for dinner. And Little Red and Grandma returned to her cottage for bread, and soup, and a wonderfully refreshing analytic romp through the dataset in the basket.