Making a Difference to Policies and Programs

A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS
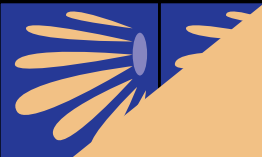
Making a Difference to

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Acknowledgments

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Foreword

This booklet is a guide for researchers who aim to have an impact on policy and program decisions. It is intended for researchers attached to government services and researchers located in academic institutions, as well as researchers working as consultants in the private sector.

The approach presented here is designed to help seasoned researchers to achieve greater impact from their own work. The Guide also can be used as a teaching tool with students and younger colleagues. In addition, the Guide should help relatively new researchers to select research questions and conduct studies with program and policy relevance. Although the examples used for illustration purposes are drawn mainly from the health sector in Africa, we hope that researchers working in other sectors and in other regions of the world will find useful ideas in the Guide.

There is a clear need for good quality research in order to improve policies and programs in all sectors. It is sometimes thought that lack of funding is the main constraint to truly useful research. However, a closer look reveals a more complex problem. Money and energy is being spent on research that is not relevant to practical decisions, and even when research is relevant, it is often ignored by decision makers. The waste involved cannot be afforded by most countries.

As illustrated in the figure on the following page, the basic premise of this Guide is that research informs policies and programs most effectively when there is an extended, three-way process of communication linking researchers, decision makers, and those most affected by whatever issues are under consideration. The traditional audience for most researchers is other researchers. Yet to have an impact outside our own research communities we have to learn other points of view and other ways of communicating. Better communication can increase the relevance of research to potential users and improve the chances that research findings will be heard and acted upon.

Research most effectively informs policy and program management when there is a three-way process of communication linking researchers, decision makers, and those most

Most of the considerations that follow have been treated by others elsewhere, yet they are widely scattered throughout the literature of several disciplines. This booklet simply brings many of these ideas to-

"Most research findings do not reach the population they are intended to benefit.... Many researchers tend to work in isolation and to remain unaware of the issues and priority problems. Health managers rarely read dissertations or research reports. Thus the potential users of research findings remain unaware of recommendations."

Dr. S. S. Ndeki, 1996. From a recent assessment of the teaching and practice of research in several African countries.

Stage 1:   Defining the Research Question

KEY STEPS

Research will be relevant to policies and programs if, in defining the research question, the researcher takes the following steps to involve the potential users, or stakeholders:

a. Reviews published and unpublished literature on the research topic;

b. Identifies the potential users of the research;

c. Makes connections with these potential users;

d. Finds out how they define the issues;

e. Engages them directly in helping to define the research question.

"Defining the research question" has to do with choosing what to study and how to talk about the research concerns. If research is to

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To ensure that research is on target—relevant, helpful, and practical—it is important to begin to communicate with stakeholders when the researcher is beginning to think seriously about research issues and questions. If, for example, the resulting research products are to be useful to health system managers and decision makers, their information needs must be part of the research from the start. This is when the process of communication between researchers and decision makers should begin.

There may have been an ENHR (Essential National Health Research) priority-setting process in the country of study. If so, the documents pertaining to this process should be extremely useful in laying out the points of view of different groups on priority research issues. These will, of course, be most useful if they have been defined or updated recently.

The first step in defining the research question is to look at the issues relevant to the topic that currently concern decision makers at different levels.

ENHR (Essential National Health Research)

In a growing number of African countries, organized attempts to formulate a broad health research agenda are already under way. The Essential National Health Research movement is bringing health researchers, policy and program managers, health care providers, and community

Identifing the potential users of the research

"Potential users" can be anyone in a position to make a decision or alter policies and activities in response to new information. Users can be at different levels of the health system, and range from policy makers and managers to program implementors and community leaders. Categories of users will depend on the topics studied and the location of the research.

To identify potential users, it is important to be systematic in mapping out who these individuals and groups are. This will entail identifying those at different levels of the health system involved in decision making and implementation, as well as those at the community level who may be affected by decisions within the topic area.

The following questions will help to identify the key "users":

t What organizations are working in the topic area?

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> t Who would be involved in implementing any changes at the program level?

> t Which communities or individuals are most affected and/or concerned by the issue?

> t What are the relationships between relevant organizations and individuals?

Though it may not be possible to contact all the people identified as potential users of the research, this process should give a clear idea of who is involved in the topic area. Then the researcher can locate, interest, and interact with them directly whenever possible.

Making connections

It is probably easiest to start with immediate professional colleagues, and to ask them for referrals to relevant others. Begin with individual researchers, field workers, community members, program managers, and decision makers and then move outwards to groups directly affected by issues to be raised in the study. In some instances this exercise may forge new connections. In other cases established networks may be tapped.

This kind of networking and consultation has a number of important benefits.

> t It provides a more complete map of the 'community' of professionals engaged, in some important way, with the issues.

> t It helps a researcher to understand more clearly the constraints under which potential users are working, and to determine what aspects of policies and programs they have the authority to change.

> t It can point to potential collaborators, sources of funding, and other institutional support.

Health workers and others who are implementing programs know what is happening on the ground, and have an understanding of problems that managers more removed from everyday practice may miss completely.

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The Primary Health Care Operations Research (PRICOR) Project supported workshops in several selected African countries to develop operations research projects. Participants included researchers and the health managers working in the programs where the research would be conducted. The health managers stayed for the first week of the two-week workshop and collaborated in to de05 0 TD₁Tj₁.e₁˝(researchers)

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Stage 2:   Developing the Proposal

Timing can be particularly crucial. Planning and budgeting cycles often demand that many kinds of policy and program decisions
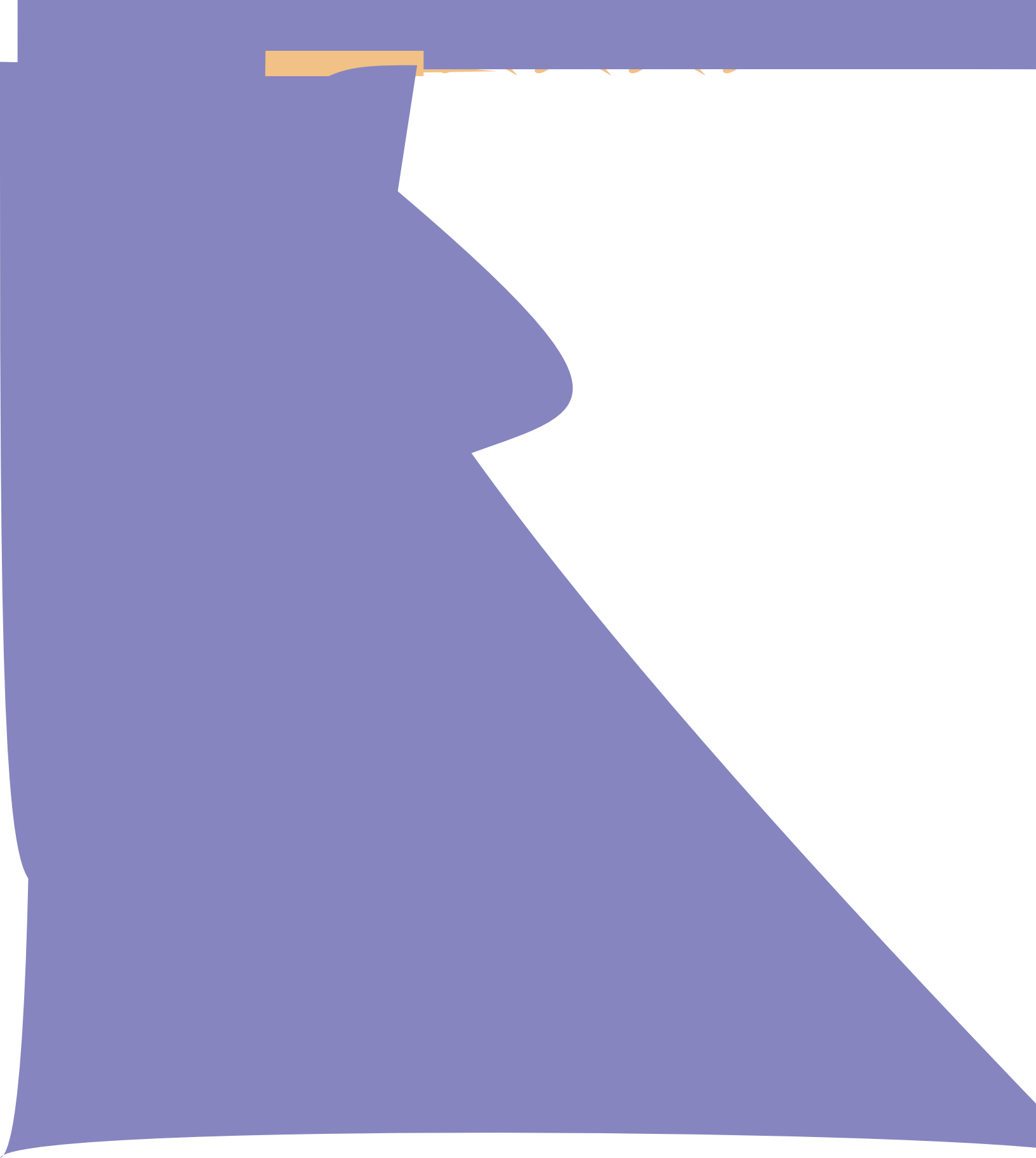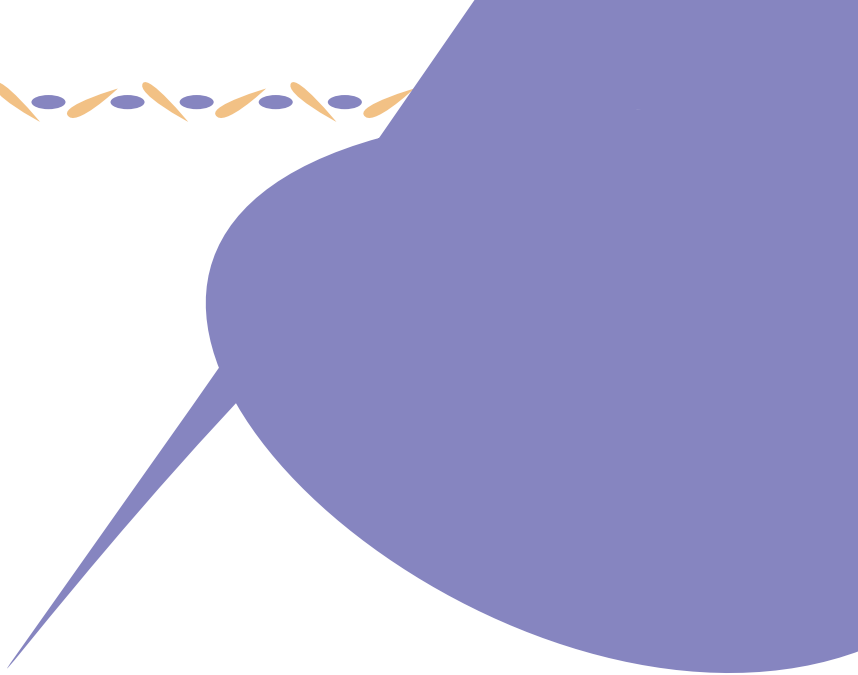
Nonstatistical methods,
particularly those
employed in rapid
appraisals, are more
amenable to active
community
participation.

In Ukraine: A study using qualitative and quantitative
methods to look at women's health care issues was
conducted for presentation to policylonducte4uolicylondie˝ylonducte4ucondi

t   discussing modifications of research design because of un-
     expected events during the implementation;

t   reviewing preliminary interpretations of research findings;

t   drawing conclusions from the data and making recommen-
     dations for action; and

t   developing approaches to communicate the research re-
     sults and advocate for action.

In Nigeria: HEALTHCOM researchers organized a work-
shop with directors and administrators from primary health
care departments to review preliminary findings from re-
cent studies of ORT and immunization behaviors. First,
district health care managers presented what they knew
about women's ORT usage and immunization coverage
rates. Then the researchers presented their preliminary
findings and participants discussed the findings' implica-
tions in light of their understanding of the local situation.
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t   Community action projects in which researchers' expertise

Stage 4:   Communicating Research Results

KEY STEPS

The likelihood of the research being used will increase if, in communicating the results, the researcher:

a.   Uses a systematic dissemination strategy for reaching different audiences of potential users;

b.   Writes timely reports in direct, non-technical language, using a style appropriate for various potential users;

c.   Gives individual and group briefings as part of the dissemination strategy.

Even the greatest research breakthroughs mean very little unless they are successfully communicated to decision makers. The eventual users of research are often not professional scientists. The researcher's responsibility is to translate the technical results of the research into concepts and language that make sense to the users. Turning findings into compelling narratives that can capture the significant implications of the research is a much better communication strategy than making presentations based primarily on a series of tables and other quantitative displays.
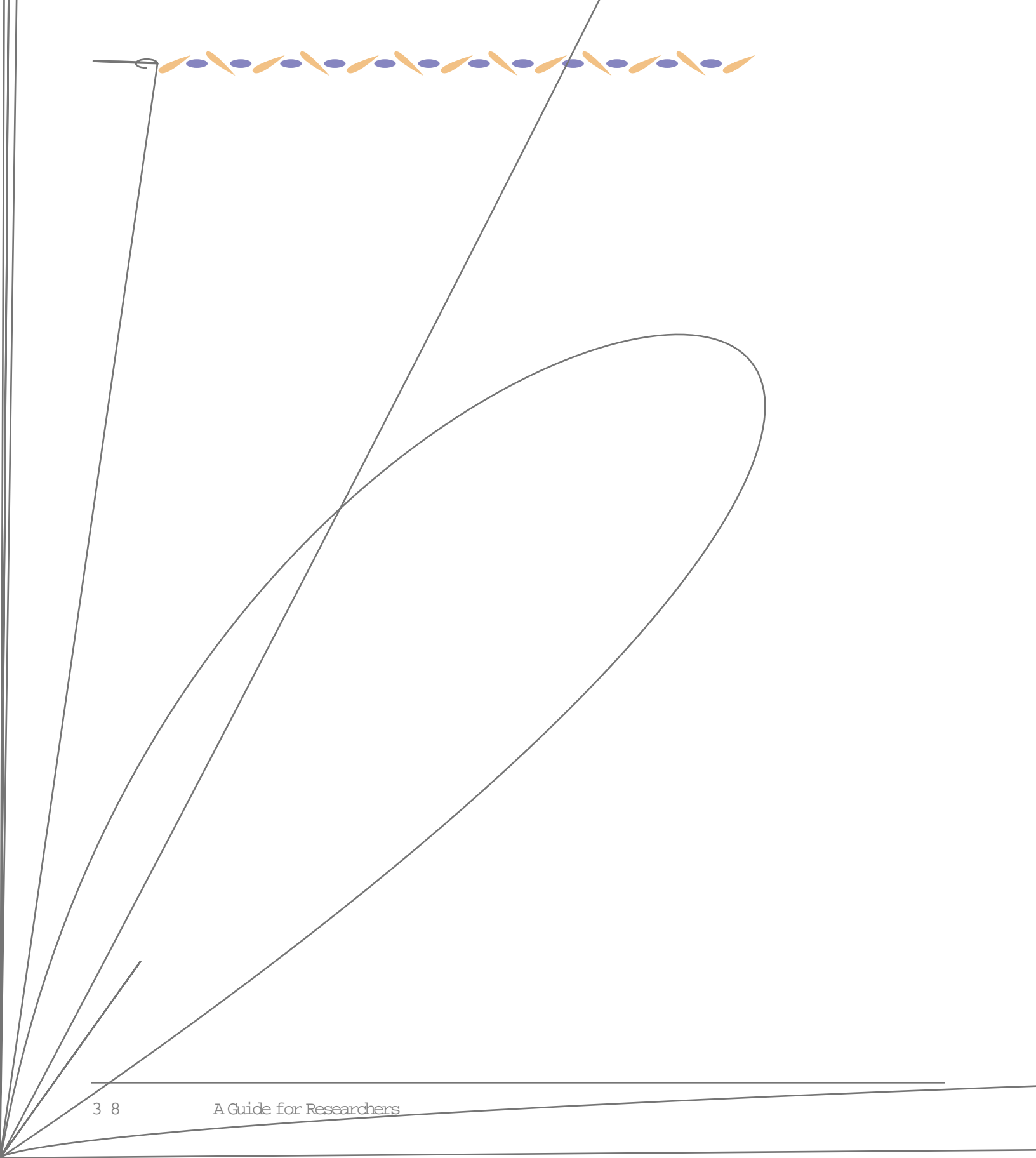
feet away. Visual aids should be concise, with no more than five to seven lines on any one overhead or chart. Each line should be informative in and of itself. Be sure, however, never to display something that will not be explained fully. Everybody attending the briefing should receive a handout to aid in taking notes. Handouts may duplicate larger briefing charts or overheads, but also can display more detailed information.

Simply reading a written report makes it impossible to speak with conviction and enthusiasm and thus inevitably results in a boring presentation.

t   Establish a written agenda for the briefing. Developing a written agenda and distributing it at the start of the briefing helps to establish a structure for the discussion and to ensure that important points are covered in a timely fashion.

t   Practice. The best way to ensure an effective briefing is to practice. The more practice the better. Start with informal briefings to small, supportive audiences. Then practice with larger, neutral audiences. Finally, practice with a critical audience that will point out weaknesses in the presentation.

t   Conduct the briefing. An effective speaking voice, appropriate eye contact, and confidence and poise in handling distractions all influence the audience's perception of the presenter and, by extension, the briefing. Delivery can be all-important—what the audience actually sees and hears determines whether the purpose is accomplished.

s   Use notes to make sure all key points are discussed, but avoid reading from scripts. Simply reading a written report makes it impossible to speak with conviction and enthusiasm and thus inevitably results in a boring presentation. Even an interesting subject fails to attract listeners when it is delivered in a monotone.

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