

# Joshua Project People Group Profile Research and Writing Guide

September 2012, Eric DeGrove

The creation of a People Group Profile requires, 1) understanding the purpose of Joshua Project, 2) using a valid research methodology to gather information 3) writing an informative and appealing profile that communicates to a diverse audience.

## I. The Purpose of the Profile

- A. **The overall purpose of Joshua Project (JP):** *a research initiative seeking to highlight the ethnic people groups of the world with the fewest followers of Christ.*

It is important to hold “research” and “mission” in the balance while creating a profile. Joshua Project is not simply an encyclopedia of information compiled for academic use. Profiles exist to motivate prayer and ministry among the group, but this does not mean acceptable research practices are not important. If your strength is research, you might remind yourself of the mission during the process. If mission is your passion, you might remind yourself to examine your research methodology.

- B. **The purpose of the People Group Profile Text:** *motivating prayer and missions through an accurate picture of the people and need.*

Each Joshua Project Profile consists of visuals, data and narrative text. Typically, numerical data (e.g. % Christian) draws visitors to click to the profile page. Once there, visuals and profile text play a key role in helping users imagine what life is like in the group and envisioning how they could be reached. While basic information (location, religion, etc.) must be included, the text should go further by helping readers understand the most important aspects they need to grasp. For example, “*In order to determine their needs, one needs to understand this or that about the blank people.*”

## II. The Research

- A. **Important introductory remarks:** Many who contribute information to JP are not trained social science or mission researchers. Researchers are trained to find information about a group that is not readily observable. They aim to uncover insight about the entire group population through a prescribed research methodology. Conversely, those immersed in the group are typically good at providing insights gained through their experiences. In reality, both are doing a form of “research” and are important to JP.

Whether or not you are a trained researcher, it is important to keep in mind that JP’s effectiveness at motivating and equipping for mission is dependent on the quality of data and text it receives. Profile writers should seek to use acceptable social science research practices, but also remember that application is more important than scholarly acceptability. Emphasis should be on giving an accurate picture of the entire group that motivates and equips readers for mission.

B. **Cautions and recommendations:**

1. **Research before writing:** While jotting down what you already know about the group is helpful first step, avoid the temptation to begin writing the profile before conducting your research.
2. **A simple research design is better than none at all:** The point is not the sophistication of your “research design”, but simply that you have taken the time to think about; 1) the question you are trying to answer, 2) which sources can reliably answer it. This can be as simple as determining which books, articles and people are reliable sources.
3. **Search for the *why* not just *what*:** A description of the group is essential, but remember that JP is not merely an encyclopedia. Explaining how a group’s current beliefs have been a barrier to their acceptance of Christ (e.g. social pressure, differences in world-view) is more useful than simply listing their beliefs.
4. **Connect history with today:** In addition to explaining the history of the group, try to learn how it has affected how the group lives today. For example, while it is important to mention that Buddhism entered Thailand in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, JP readers will benefit more from understanding the role it plays today in the daily lives of Thai people.
5. **Don’t just search for information on the “people group”:** “*People group research*” is primarily a Christian mission discipline. Your task is to go beyond what the Christian mission community already knows about the group. Look for historical, social science and journalistic resources that cover the people in your group but do not necessarily call them by the *people group* name.

### C. Research steps:

1. **Narrow your topics:** Volumes of great information could be written on each people group. Therefore, you must narrow your topic to the most important aspects for motivating prayer and missions among the group.
  - i. **First**, spend time reading and talking with individuals. Remember; don't limit your search to just information on the group by its JP name. Also, utilize Google translate to read web resources in other languages. Look for:
    - (a) **History:** Read books, scholarly articles and other sources covering the history of the country, region, language, culture and religion the group is in.
    - (b) **Religion:** Read about the beliefs, world-view, history and modern-day practice of the group's religion(s).
    - (c) **Social conditions:** Try to find information about the economic and social condition of the group today and throughout history have affected people's daily lives. Also, how does the group relate to other people groups in the country(s)?
    - (d) **State of the Gospel:** Look for information about the history and current state of the Gospel and Church among the people and the country(s) they live among. Are they unreached because few missionaries have ever been sent to them, or have they heard and largely rejected the Gospel?
  - ii. **Second**, develop and refine a **list** of the most important aspects (topics) that need to be researched and written about to motivate prayer and missions among the group. Every profile should cover the basics, but they should differ by the aspects that the writer has found are most important.
2. **Develop research question(s) based on your topics:** Researching and writing a profile is fundamentally about answering questions. A well spelled-out research question(s) is critical to the ability of your profile motivate prayer and missions.
  - i. **Poor research question:** *“What do the Thai People believe?”*

**Good research question:** *“How does what the Thai people believe affect their overall world-view, daily-life, relationships and understanding of the Gospel and the Christian world-view?”*
  - ii. **Poor research question:** *“What are their (e.g. social, daily.), needs?”*

**Good question:** *“How has health, social and or economic issues affected family and individual earthly well-being?”*

### 3. Determine which sources can adequately answer your research question(s):

Almost all JP profiles depend purely on secondary research and personal experiences. Secondary research differs from primary research in that it seeks to pull together other research (usually published) on the topic to answer its question(s). Primary research utilizes a data collection method (e.g. survey).

Personal experiences are useful, but writers must examine if accounts represent the entire group experience. For example, if the people group is split between rural and urban, experiences from missionaries working in farming villages might not adequately reflect the group's life in the city. In such a case, the profile writer might explain the farming village experience and find other sources to explain urban life.

#### i. Useful publications:

- (a) **Government reports:** Research gathered by the country the people group resides in helps understand the big picture. Look for the country's census and which government agency produces it. Then, see if that agency produces any other useful research. Similarly, look for other agencies and reports.
- (b) **Research databases:** Databases of scholarly articles such as Ebscohost are invaluable. As stated earlier, your task is to go beyond what the Christian mission community already knows. The main way to accomplish this is by finding social science research, which has already studied some aspect of the group. Check with your local library or another you have electronic access to.
- (c) **Universities and research groups in country:** Remember, those closest to the people group are most likely to research and write about the group. Most countries have at least one university funding social research. Through a simple Google search for "*social research in Thailand*" the *Mahidol University Institute for Population and Social Research* appears first.
- (d) **The Internet and journalism:** The Internet has spawned a plethora of information that is not necessarily research, but can be useful if cautious. Also, newspapers and magazines often have good information especially on current events.

#### ii. Useful people:

- (a) **Ministers and missionaries:** Those who minister among the group can provide invaluable information. Keep in mind that those who have purposefully studied the group (foreign or national) are typically more objective than those who can only explain their experiences.
- (b) **Other:** Expatriates can be helpful but it is extremely important to remember that their experiences are often very different from the way locals live. The same could be said of foreign military and government employees. National researchers or those simply interested in understanding the big picture of their people are often the best people to talk with.

#### 4. **Bring together the research**

The last aspect of the research step is to bring together what you have learned and answer the question(s). It is common, after consulting sources, to modify your question(s) and topic(s) based on what you have learned are the most important aspects to motivate prayer and mission. The key at this point is to make sure the conclusions included in the profile are supported by adequate sources.

- i. **Outline:** use your list of research questions to develop an outline that will be the basis for your profile. Each question should be a section or sub-section of the profile.
- ii. **Fill in the outline:** begin to write the “answer” to each research question and list the source(s) used to answer that question. It is helpful to use footnotes to site the sources.
- iii. **Begin your writing:** at this point you should be ready to begin writing your profile. If you do not feel you have enough sources to write an adequate profile, go back through the research steps and either search for more sources or narrow your research questions.

### III. The Writing

#### A. Keeping your writing focused on the goal of JP:

With your outline in place, you are now ready to begin writing the profile. Your goal is to write an informative and appealing profile that motivates the diverse JP readers to pray and begin mission among the people group. In order to accomplish this you must move beyond *what* to *why* and sometimes *how*. Also, keep your writing concise; between 800-1,400 words is recommended. Your goal is not to include everything you have learned about the group, or even each research question, but focus on helping readers understand the most important aspects they need to grasp.

#### B. Citations and bibliography:

Citing sources is important for three reasons. First, it is unethical and in many places, unlawful, to include information or analysis about the group without sourcing it, unless it is your own analysis. Second, citations help prove to the reader that your information and analysis can be substantiated. Third, citations give readers sources to learn more about the group. JP does not follow a specific citation format, but author, date published and publication name or person should be included.

1. **In-text citations:** While footnotes are best for in-text citations, the JP website does not currently support this. Until this feature is added to the website, include the author and publication year in parenthesis. Readers can consult your bibliography for the full reference.
2. **Bibliography:** Most JP profiles, especially those more than ten years old, do not include a bibliography. Without its inclusion, readers cannot pursue further study. Please include a bibliography with, at minimum, the author's name, year of publication or when you retrieved the information and name of the publication, website or "personal interview".
3. **Anonymous references:** Often, personal sources (or the profile author) need to remain anonymous for security reasons. This is not a valid reason to exclude a proper reference. In such cases, replace the source's name with "anonymous individual" or other appropriate text.
4. **Reference manage:** Several reference managers can be useful to keep track of sources. *Zotero* ([www.zotero.org](http://www.zotero.org)) is an excellent free manager that works either as a plugin for the Firefox web browser or a stand-alone application. It even includes a plugin to Microsoft Word that automatically adds and correctly formats citations in your document.

### C. Cautions and recommendations:

1. **Remember, things change:** Because the profile will likely reside on the JP for site for 5-15 years, it is important to be sensitive to aspects of the group that can change quickly. Numerical data can be included but should be tied to a date to give readers historical perspective. For example:
  - i. Bad statement: “50% of the group has internet access.”
  - ii. Good statement: “In 2012 nearly 50% of the group had Internet access and this is likely to grow in the coming decade.”
2. **Be cautious of using numbers:** Avoid including numbers that already appear in the JP profile, but outside of the profile text, in order to avoid later contradictions. For example, if the profile text was written when the group was 5% “Christian” but the data has sense changed to 7%, the inclusion of the number in the text would contradict the JP data on the profile page. The exception to this is when it is appropriate to explain a historical change. For example: “The percentage of Evangelicals in the group rose from 5% to 10% between 2000 and 2010.”
3. **Don’t use history to explain the current situation:** Some aspects of a society, cultural or group of people last hundreds of years, while others seem to change overnight. For example, while Confucianism has affected the Chinese world-view for over two thousand years, its place in daily life has greatly changed over the years. Urban vs. rural is likely more important to understanding Chinese people than Confucian vs. Taoist.

## IV. Recommended Resources

Babbie, Earl R. *The practice of social research*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1992.

Vyhmeister, Nancy J. *Your indispensable guide to writing quality research papers : for students of religion and theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 2001.

<http://www.mislinks.org/> (Connecting You With Mission Resources)

<http://www.zotero.org/> (Citation manager)