

RESEARCH PROCESS AND METHODS



RESEARCH PROCESS:

1. Identify a problem or an area of study.

When you do your research gather all the information you can about it, particularly existing research. This is secondary evidence. Tip: make sure you keep a record of where, who and when the information came from.

2. Develop a hypothesis and a list of research questions.

In the case of your assignment it is not enough to say 'I want to look at protesting'. This is not a testable hypothesis. You need to make a statement that is testable or provable such as 'I would argue that peaceful protesting doesn't cause change'. It is then possible to see if there is a relationship or link.

3. Choose methods of study that are appropriate to the area in which you are interested.

As you will find out shortly there are a variety of research methods, some being more suited to particular areas of study. A bit like tools, a screwdriver is more suitable for inserting screws than a hammer! For example if you are conducting research into violent crime, you may be unable to get a person who is willing to be an interviewee.

4. Collect the relevant data.

File all your findings together, secondary and primary research. Make sure the information you have collected is relevant to the topic you have chosen.

5. Analyse the data.

You will need to draw conclusions and make decisions about what you have gathered. For example if you are using secondary evidence you will need to assess whether it is biased or not. If you have conducted a survey you will need to draw conclusions about the findings.

6. Report the findings and conclusions.

You must follow the research process, meet all short term deadlines, and use your check list to make sure you have met all criteria.

7. Publish the results.

You are now free to present your findings in whatever manner you prefer, as shown on your instructions.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

HINT: YOU CAN USE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES WHEN WRITING UP YOUR EVALUATION OF YOUR RESEARCH METHODS.

Primary sources of information:

New information, gathered by you (the researcher), is known as primary data. The information will have been **gathered directly by the researcher** or an interviewer employed by the researcher to do that job. Primary data is **new information** gathered **first hand** by the researcher. In Modern Studies, government statistics are considered to be a primary source since they have been gathered directly by researchers employed to do that job. The Internet is an excellent source of statistics, including the many government web sites.

Advantages

- The researcher can control the way in which the information is gathered.
- The research process can be designed to provide the exact information that the researcher wants. For example, asking the right kinds of question of the groups of people in society that the researcher wants to find out about.
- The researcher can check and modify the primary research process to achieve the desired information
- The researcher should be more aware of any bias or limitations which affect the research.

Disadvantages

- It takes more time, and costs more money, to do primary research than it does to use secondary data.

Secondary sources of information:

Secondary sources include **information that already exists** and has been **produced by people other than you (the researcher.)** These sources have been produced usually for another purpose that may be very different from that of the researcher. Such sources include, for example, newspapers, journals, news magazines and documentary or current affairs TV and radio programmes.

Advantages

- Can save time and money.
- Can provide information not available in other forms, for example, confidential processes.

Disadvantages

- Difficult to check the accuracy of information.
- The information may be biased.
- Information collected for different purposes may use criteria and definitions different from those that would be preferred by the researcher.

TYPES OF RESEARCH METHODS:

POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE/ EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Key features

- It is a primary source of data.
- It will produce quantitative data.
- It usually involves a list of questions that is sent out to individuals, who then complete it and returns it to the researchers. Closed questions are normally used in questionnaires. This means that they can choose from a range of possible answers given on the questionnaire; for example, 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes'. The questions often involve giving numerical information; for example, how often do you go to the cinema? They may ask respondents to express an opinion or attitude; for example, what is your attitude to fox hunting – strongly in favour, in favour, neutral, against, strongly against? The questions below are **examples.**

YES NO TYPE QUESTIONS:

In 2011 did you vote in the election for the Scottish Parliament?

In 2010 did you vote in the election for the Westminster Parliament?

QUESTIONS WITH A RANGE OF OPTIONS

In the future, how likely are you to vote in the referendum on independence?

VERY

LIKELY

QUITE

LIKELY UNLIKELY

VERY

UNLIKELY

Would any of the following make you more or less likely to vote?

MORE LIKELY NO

DIFFERENCE

LESS LIKELY

- Elections held at weekends
- Voting booths in public places
- Poor weather
- Longer voting hours
- Proportional representation
- Compulsory voting
- Electronic voting

Advantages

- Cheap to conduct because it simply involves the cost of postage, the production of the questionnaire and the processing of the returned questionnaires. Or email is free.
- Possible to cover a large number of people for relatively small costs.
- Easy to cover a large and wide sample by selecting from the post code areas.
- Little time required from the researcher, only the time required to produce the questionnaire, post/email them and process the returns.
- If closed questions are used, as you can see from the examples, they are easy to draw conclusions from.
- Respondents may be more honest when completing a postal questionnaire than they would be in a face to face interview.
- Standardised questions mean there is little opportunity for interviewer to influence the respondent. So the results should be unbiased
- Seen as reliable because it can be repeated by other researchers and checked.

Disadvantages

- There is no way to explore issues raised by the questions in greater depth.
- With postal questionnaires the questions need to be kept relatively short and simple otherwise people may be put off from completing the questionnaire.
- Poor response rate, because respondents either forget or cannot be bothered to complete and return the questionnaire.
- Respondents are unable to clarify questions that they find confusing.
- The process does rely on the respondents' ability to read and write.
- The respondents may not understand the questions.

Examples of use

- Attitude surveys e.g. fear of crime; for or against European Union; attitude to fox hunting; attitudes to the Euro.
- Factual surveys, e.g. victim survey, car use survey.

STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Key features

- Involves a face to face interview based on the respondent answering a pre-set list of questions, or questionnaire.
- Produces quantitative data.
- It is a primary source of data.
- Closed questions are usually used requiring a short response.

Advantages

- Good for gaining factual information.
- If closed questions are used the results are easy to quantify.
- A good response rate is ensured because the questions have to be answered there and then.
- Respondents can take part in the study even if they are unable to read and write.
- If respondents find a question unclear they can ask for clarification.
- Standardised questions mean there is little opportunity for interviewer to influence the respondent and thus impose their bias upon the research.
- Seen as reliable because it can be repeated by other researchers and checked.

Disadvantages

- They can involve the use of trained interviewers and that is expensive.
- The process of conducting the interviews can be time consuming.
- When pre-set questions are used, issues cannot be explored to greater depth if required.
- In a face to face interview people may not be honest. They may be too embarrassed or they may try to impress or please the interviewer by giving the answer that they think the interviewer wants to hear.

Examples of use

- Surveys of political attitudes, attitudes to capital punishment.

SURVEYS

Survey methods

The survey method is probably one of the most widely used of the social science methods. Market research, political opinion polls, attitude surveys, victim surveys and self-report studies are all examples of social surveys.

Advantages

- Cheap to conduct because it simply involves the cost of producing the questionnaire and the processing of the completed questionnaires.
- Get an immediate response.
- If closed questions are used, as you can see from the examples, they are easy to draw conclusions from.
- Standardised questions mean there is little opportunity for interviewer to influence the respondent. So the results should be unbiased. However, they could be swayed by the behaviour of the researcher.
- Seen as reliable because it can be repeated by other researchers and checked.
- Respondent can seek clarification on questions, if they don't understand them.
- The process does not rely on the respondents' ability to read and write.

Disadvantages

- Significant time required from the researcher. It takes time to produce questionnaire, conduct survey and process the returns.

- Respondents may be less honest when completing a face to face survey. They may want to impress the researcher.
- It may be difficult to convince people to stop for the survey. Questions would have to be short, so they don't take up much time.
- The respondents may not understand the questions.

UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Key features

- Provides qualitative data.
- Is a primary source of information.
- The interview is face to face.
- The questions are not pre-set.
- The researcher has a number of broad topic areas to cover.
- The questions are 'open', the person being interviewed can discuss points in depth or make new points.

Example

The questions below were prepared prior to an interview with a Council leader in order to ensure coverage of the main issue being researched, namely the representation of women in politics, and were supplemented by further questions during the interview.

Question 1

What measures in your opinion, should be taken to ensure women become involved in politics?

Question 2

Why do you think women remain so poorly represented in Parliament?

Question 3

Why are more women involved in politics at a local level?

Advantages

- Good response rate.
- Can look at meaning, motivation, opinions and attitudes rather than just factual information
- Researcher is not restricted to a set of pre-set questions
- Researcher can get in-depth information.
- Researcher can clarify points and explore particular points further if desired.
- The respondent has the opportunity to provide new information that the researcher had not considered.

Disadvantages

- Can be hard to maintain the focus of the interview.
- Very easy for the interviewer to influence the respondent's replies, thus very open to bias.
- Because the questions are not standardised, it would be difficult to repeat and check the research so the method is not reliable.
- Deep and varied information can be very difficult to draw conclusions from.
- Can be time consuming.
- Interviewer needs to be experienced to maintain focus and objectivity.

Examples of use

In-depth studies of:

- the effects of strikes on people's political attitudes
- the backgrounds and motives of criminals.

OBSERVATION

Key features

- A primary source of information.
- The researcher covertly observes the behaviour of others without participating.
- The researcher has to take what is seen at face value and use their own resources to interpret the behaviour observed.
- Information may be both qualitative and quantitative. For example the research may involve video-taping the behaviour of shoplifters in a shop, counting particular types of body and eye movement.

Advantages

- If video data is collected the research/analysis can be repeated and checked by others, it is therefore a reliable method.
- There is no opportunity for the researcher to influence the behaviour of those being studied so the method is relatively objective.

Disadvantages

- Bias can intrude when the researcher analyses and interprets the meaning of the behaviour observed.
- Covert observations may raise ethical problems.
- Can be time consuming and expensive.
- May be difficult to establish the true meaning of the behaviour that is observed.

Examples of use

- Social behaviour in public places
- Studies of aggression in social relations.

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Key features

- Official statistics are considered a primary source of information in Modern Studies.
- Official statistics are quantitative data.
- Statistics used are gathered by government or state organisations such as the Registrar General's **National Census**, police records of crime, health statistics, and unemployment statistics. These statistics are based on total populations rather than samples and provide information that would be too time consuming and expensive to collect in any other way.

Advantages

- Cheap and quick as the information has already been gathered by others.
- A good indicator of broad trends in social behaviour.
- Most official statistics are gathered from the total population.
- Ideal for quantitative comparisons over time and from place to place.

Disadvantages

- Officials may use different criteria to those preferred by the researchers. For example, the government may not class someone as poor but you would.
- Official statistics may be incomplete. For example, crime statistic only include those known to the police – a fraction of the crime that actually takes place.

Examples of use

- Trends in crime.
- Comparative studies into crime, suicide, divorce, life chances.

TYPES OF INFORMATION:

Quantitative Information:

This type of information is based on numbers and relies heavily upon statistical methods – for example experiments, surveys and using official statistics. In other words it often identifies *how many*, so it will often be numbers. For example, how many people vote?

Qualitative Information:

The alternative to the quantitative approach is the qualitative approach. This approach gathers quality information rather than quantity. For example it will look at people's opinions on issues rather than how many people agree on an issue. So in a survey or an interview you might ask *open* questions to try and gather opinions rather than simply just bare facts.