

8.2 Social and cultural research methods

During the study of both the Preliminary and the HSC courses, students are required to develop knowledge and understanding of a variety of the methods used to conduct research. Students will also need to develop skills in:

- planning research tasks, including developing appropriate research methods
- applying research methods ethically
- compiling and organising collected information
- analysing, synthesising and interpreting the findings
- writing up and editing their conclusions in ways appropriate to different audiences.

The term 'method' refers to the specific tools of the investigation, or the ways that data can be collected and analysed – for example, a questionnaire.

Two main approaches for research are quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative methods enable the collection of very specific data from a sample of the relevant population. The findings may then be extrapolated for the whole population under study. With a quantitative method, information is collected by counting, and is able to be collated into percentages and then represented by tables and graphs.

While the ease of collating data gathered through quantitative methods has its advantages for the researcher, it must be remembered that quantitative methods:

- do not allow the researcher to interact closely or personally with those being questioned; the process is impersonal and as objective as possible
- rely heavily on the researcher's ability to develop a non-biased set of research questions or items in order to record data within the selected sample.

Qualitative methods rely on the researcher's interpretive skills to understand the often complex and detailed data gathered.

Qualitative research is useful:

- for studies at the individual or small group level
- for finding out, in depth, how and what people are thinking and feeling.

Analysis of qualitative data can be more challenging than analysis of the numbers collected through a quantitative method.

Analysis of qualitative data requires sorting responses to open-ended questions and interviews into broad themes or categories before the researcher is able to draw meaning or conclusions from the data.

Research methods such as questionnaire and interview can produce both quantitative and qualitative information, depending on how the questions are structured.

Closed questions that require only a 'yes' or 'no' answer, or questions that allow only a limited choice of responses, produce easily quantified and tabulated data.

Open-ended questions, on the other hand, produce descriptive responses that are qualitative in nature and therefore require categorising and analysing before any understanding can be gained.

It is important to remember that research methods exist on a continuum from quantitative to qualitative – that is, from methods that easily measure and quantify data to those that collect detailed and less measurable and, therefore, less quantifiable data. Many methods contain aspects of both – that is, they include quantitative and qualitative elements.

Distinguishing the two broad approaches to social research	Quantitative methods Researchers collect data that can be measured, counted or quantified, resulting in a statistical report. The focus of quantitative research is WHAT and HOW MANY.	Qualitative methods Researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of an issue by way of open-ended questioning, non-statistical research techniques, or value-based observations. A qualitative investigation focuses on WHY and HOW.
Main features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large and randomly selected sample of respondents who represent the particular population of interest • Structured data collection instrument, with closed-ended or rating-scale questions • Quantities and trends identified; comparisons can be made • Researcher is not necessarily known to the participants • Participant characteristics can be hidden from the research • Lack of direct contact with the sample assists detachment of the researcher; however, care still needs to be taken in construction of the instrument to ensure that the researcher is aware of potential bias that may be built into the questions • Quantifies the findings in numerical data, tables, graphs and diagrams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually a small sample and not randomly selected • Interactive process • Participants' characteristics may be known to the researcher • Narrative report with conceptual description of behaviour, values, attitudes and beliefs • Contains direct quotations from research participants • Invaluable for the exploration of subjective experiences • Relies heavily on the researcher's interpretive skills to understand the complexities of findings • Direct quotations from documents and from participants can be utilised

Research methods

Quantitative methods of research	Qualitative methods of research
<p>Questionnaire with closed-ended questions or rating scale questions where the findings can be counted and observed as statistics – the data collected can be quantified.</p> <p>Content analysis is used in quantitative research to detect and count, and the data collected in this way can be quantified.</p> <p>Statistical analysis examines statistics to make generalisations and extrapolate trends.</p> <p>Observation that detects and counts and where the data collected can be quantified.</p>	<p>Questionnaire with open-ended questions gathers opinions and therefore is qualitative in nature.</p> <p>Content analysis as a qualitative method is used to analyse and interpret themes, words and images from documents, film, art, music and other cultural artefacts and media. After coding the responses, the researcher analyses, interprets and makes qualitative judgements about meanings of the content.</p> <p>Interview with open-ended questions is qualitative in nature.</p> <p>Focus group entails the collection of data from an in-depth planned discussion of a defined topic held by a small group of people brought together by a moderator.</p> <p>Secondary research involves accessing data already produced by other researchers. The researcher makes a subjective judgement about what material is useful and what is not for the purpose of the research process. Summaries and syntheses are made of the research findings.</p> <p>Personal reflection is the use of, and evaluation of, personal experiences and values to demonstrate analysis and interpretation of data in the context of the research focus.</p> <p>Participant observation is where the researcher is immersed in the action being observed and his or her role as researcher is not obvious. Non-participant observation is where the researcher observes the interactions taking place without actively engaging in them. The researcher draws meaning from what is being observed, rather than simply counting specific actions as in a quantitative observational study. Both participant and non-participant observation can be covert or overt.</p> <p>Case study involves the in-depth study of a cultural group, which can be any group of individuals who share a common social experience and/or location. Case study is considered a methodology when it combines two or more research methods, such as ‘observation, interview and documentary evidence’, to gather the data.</p>

Ethical research

Social and cultural researchers are expected to conduct research in an ethical manner.

Following the principles of ethical research is important because:

- this promotes trust that the information collected will be used responsibly and will be treated with respect and confidentiality
- if the respondents feel comfortable with the ethical research process, they are much more likely to offer replies to questions and therefore genuine knowledge can be gained by the researcher.

In practice, ethical research means that:

- any prospective research participants must be fully informed about the procedures and any possible risks involved in the research, and must give their consent to participate
- participants are not put in awkward situations or asked to talk about sensitive topics that may make them feel uncomfortable
- the ethical researcher is open and honest with participants about the topic and scope of the project and the nature of the participation or information expected from them
- the protection of participants' rights to confidentiality and privacy is ensured
- the researcher anticipates any negative effects on the research participants (including the researcher), such as personal danger, police intervention, social embarrassment or harassment – the researcher needs to prevent these
- the researcher is mindful of the special needs of any vulnerable groups, such as children
- there is nothing covert associated with the research.

Once data (information) is collected, the researcher begins the process of analysis, synthesis and deduction. At this point, the ethical researcher needs to be aware of any assumptions or biases that may underlie the research. It is critical that the researcher analyses the data without looking for evidence to support any preconceived ideas about what she or he may find.

Ethical research practices apply to both primary and secondary research – for example, in secondary research, the collection and use of information from books, magazines, the internet, communication technologies and so on. The protection of intellectual property in the writing-up process through the acknowledgement of all information used is critical, not only out of respect for the original author of the information but also to protect the researcher from breach of copyright law. With the availability of film clips, information, images and other content from the many sources accessible to researchers, discernment and care need to be taken in order to avoid material that might be inappropriate or potentially offensive for the audience of the final product.

Plagiarising other people's work is unethical, a breach of copyright law, a misuse of intellectual property, and an untruthful representation of other people's work as the researcher's own. Researchers must never plagiarise!

The process of research

The process of research is important to the core and depth studies, as well as to the Personal Interest Project. Below is a guide to assist with the process of research in Society and Culture.

1. Decide on the topic to be researched. This may require some preliminary reading on the part of the researcher to gather ideas. Curiosity or personal interest may inspire the topic choice.
2. Develop a focus question or hypothesis. The researcher may break this focus question or hypothesis into sub-questions and list them in logical order, so that the research process can develop in a coherent way.
3. Gather background information from all appropriate sources.
4. Design the research. Choose research methods that best support finding answers to the research question or sub-questions. One sub-question may require a different method from another. For example, background reading and information gathering would require the method of 'secondary research'. Gathering information from a section of the population could require a questionnaire. For example, researching how many times a gender-specific sporting event is covered by the mass media would require the method of 'content analysis'.
5. Develop the research methods to be used. The researcher needs to be aware of any biases that might exist and take care to be as detached as possible.
6. Apply the research methods ethically.
7. Once gathered, the information needs to be compiled and organised into manageable amounts so that the researcher can make sense of the findings.
8. These findings then need to be analysed and synthesised. Effective analysis of information (data) gathered through the research methods used is a critical step in any research process. It is not enough simply to state what has been found; the researcher must reflect on what the findings mean and how they relate to the research topic. Conclusions need to be drawn and any suggestions, new theories, recommendations or implications arising from the conclusions need to be established.
9. Writing up the researcher's conclusions is a critical part of the research process. How the researcher chooses to compile the findings and the analysis of these findings will depend on the nature of the topic and the individual preference of the researcher. Whatever format the researcher chooses, effective communication for the appropriate audience is the key to the success of this final stage of the research process. Consistent with ethical research practices, the researcher must acknowledge all sources of information gathered during the research process. This requires noting all bibliographical details of all reference materials used – including books, internet articles, personal interviews and other sources – in a comprehensive reference list. It is highly recommended that the researcher compile these bibliographical details as the materials are consulted, so that the information is readily available at the end of the process. Any information for which bibliographical details cannot be provided in the reference list should not be included in the final copy of the research report.
10. The writing-up process may take two or more drafts before the researcher is satisfied with the final product. Careful editing of language and construction is important so that the researcher's conclusions are made clear. Even if the report is delivered in an oral format, the writing-up process is necessary.

Diagrammatical representation of the process of research

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|---|---|
| <p>1. Decide on the topic to research</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity • Own interest • Prior research • Topic may be given, eg school assignment |
| <p>2. Develop a focus question or hypothesis</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrow or broaden the question • What is known or needs to be known? • Develop sub-questions in logical order so research can develop in a coherent way <p><i>Note: The topic question or hypothesis may need to be further refined during the course of the research process.</i></p> |
| <p>3. Gather background information</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference books • Internet articles • Experts |
| <p>4. Design the research</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose the research methods that best support finding answers to the research question(s) – different sub-questions may require different research methods, eg secondary research and questionnaire • Choose appropriate samples of the population (who, how many, etc) and plan how to access them |
| <p>5. Develop the research methods to be used</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaire(s) • Interview questions, etc |
| <p>6. Apply the research methods ethically</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical research practices are especially important during this stage of the process |
| <p>7. Compile and organise collected information so that it is manageable</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary data responses to questionnaire(s), interview questions, data from content analysis, etc • Secondary information |
| <p>8. Analyse, synthesise and interpret the findings</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop new theories or suggestions depending on the nature of the topic |
| <p>9. Write up the conclusions in an appropriate format, considering the audience for the final product</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include findings, analysis and conclusions • Include recommendations or implications • Include complete reference list |
| <p>10. Check the final product for editing or typing mistakes and ensure that all bibliographical information is included and correct</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writing-up process may take two or more drafts before the researcher is satisfied with the final product. • Careful editing of language and construction is important so that the researcher’s conclusions are made clear. Even if the report is delivered in an oral format, the writing-up process is necessary. |