

Documentary analysis

You may be expected to analyse documents as part of an assignment for a module, or as part of an independent research project like a dissertation. In the case of an assignment, you might be given only a part of a document. Similarly, in the case of an independent research project you may sample parts of documents.

The first section of this guide offers a framework of questions for you to use to help analyse documents. They include finding out about:

- [The context in which the document was created](#)
- [The content of the document](#)

The second section covers how to make your [analysis into a coherent argument](#) (essential for both assignments and independent research).

The third section covers additional things to consider specifically [for independent research projects](#), including:

Definition

Documentary analysis is a popular method in a wide range of social sciences, as well as the arts. In essence, it means taking a systematic approach to understanding and interpreting documents. It can be used as a research method in history, looking at archives of soldiers' diaries, for example. It can be used in politics, looking at patterns of politicians speeches about immigration. This type of analysis can include images, as well as text. The key point about documentary analysis is not to take the surface meaning for granted, but to read into it.

We talk a lot about '**inferring**' from the text: this means understanding what is meant, but not stated. For example, if someone asks an acquaintance "Do you fancy a drink", the listener will infer meaning depending on context. If both people are mutually attracted and romantically available, it could mean "would you like to go on a romantic date with me". Or if both people are good friends who talk about their problems over a drink, it could mean "I've had a really bad day and I need to talk about it". Even the meaning of "drink" can vary depending on context: it might mean alcohol, or it might mean coffee.

Getting started

These questions can be used as a starting point for your documentary analysis, but to do a really good job, you will need to do some further reading: the following questions are enough to get you started but not to get you finished!

What is the document? Is it an article, letter, memo, report...?

- What would you normally expect to find included in such a document? Consider typical headings, conventions of beginning and ending, and so on.

What is the **context** of the document?

Audience: who was it intended for? Was it written for public or private use?

- If it was published, who published it? How would it be published (e.g. leaked to a blog, or published as memoirs in a book)? How was it publicised or disseminated (e.g. was it actively promoted or not)?
- Could it have been edited or redacted? How would you establish if this had happened or infer it?

Time: when it was written / created? What was happening at that time that might have influenced the author, the content or the tone?

- NB: this may appear to be a purely historical question, but it is also very important in other subjects. For example, in politics, events move very quickly and even if you are looking at a speech delivered last year, it may have been influenced by what was happening then which is now no longer relevant.

Author: who wrote it? What was their role or social network or status? Did they have any particularly strong views or beliefs or identification with social movements that might influence what they write?

- This is really key: knowing the name of the author is not sufficient. You need to know what their position was to know why they wrote the document, and what or who might have influenced them.

Purpose: what was it written for? Is there a specific aim that this document was written to achieve?

- This may not be explicitly stated OR there may be an explicit aim which is not the whole story. For example, many policy documents are written with the stated aim that they are "solving a problem". However, in a good documentary analysis, you do not need to accept "the problem" at face value. Instead, you can ask who wins by solving or appearing to solve or describing a problem. What do they gain by it? This may be a covert or hidden purpose.

Impact: what happened as a result of the document?

- Here again you may need to separate the impact that is claimed for the document, and the impact which can be demonstrably linked to a document. For example, a government order sending military troops overseas can be clearly linked to the troops being sent. However, it may also have had other impacts, such as a change in relationships with other countries, which may not be mentioned.

Now start to read the document in detail, critically. You will need to refer back to the context questions to inform your analysis of the content.

Content

What are the key points? What does the document say? What is being represented in the text and/or image?

- This is a fundamentally descriptive question, which is an essential part of establishing an analysis. But do this relatively briefly, and move on to the next questions.
- If you've been given an extract from a text, try to find the original. Look at the extract in context and see if it changes the meaning.
- Could this document be understood in different ways? The answer to this question is always yes! No document is ever read and understood in exactly the same way by everybody.

How are they saying it? Are they using emotional language? Is there a bias? Think about the style and use of language here.

- Consider the historical time period. Styles of writing and speaking change considerably and something that might be offensive today may have been completely acceptable 70 years ago.
- Link this in to what type of document it is and the style that this type of document is usually written in. If the document is not written in the usual style, consider why and whether you think this is significant or not.

What are they not saying? What information is left out? Why do you think this was not said?

- This means you need to be reading around the document, and finding out what else is going on at the time that might have been considered.

What are they leading their audience to infer?

- Sometimes information is left out, but the reader is led towards a conclusion or led to guess at a reason which is not mentioned.
- What other inferences could potentially be made?

What do others say about it? How has this document been interpreted in the past?

- This means looking at academic publications.
- If this particular document has not been analysed in the past, ask why. Then look for relevant theorists or writers who study the same topic, type of document, or time period, as you'll still need to refer to other academic publications.
- You don't have to agree with the interpretation, but you do have to write about what has previously been said.
- You are likely to find multiple interpretations, some of which may fit together and some of which may contradict each other. One of your jobs is to sort out which one is the more convincing interpretation (see below).

Creating an argument

You're expected to come to an overall conclusion about how the document should be interpreted. This might mean coming down on one side of a debate, or explaining why two interpretations could be held at the same time.

You are also expected to have references to back up your interpretation, and to substantiate the details on which your interpretation is based (e.g. reference the historical events happening at that time).

If you are coming down on one side of a debate, you will need to explain what the counter-argument is and give references to this. Then you will need to explain why this is wrong. As evidence, use direct quotes from the document, and interpret them. Then, use information from sources to back up and support your interpretation.

Independent research using documentary analysis

If you are planning a research project, such as a dissertation, using documentary analysis, then you will need to consider these issues as well.

What documents do you need to see? How will you decide what to exclude?

- This depends a lot on your definitions. If you want to examine newspaper reports on the Iraq War, for example, you would need to define what you are considering a newspaper and whether you would include opinion columns or not.

How many do you need to examine?

- This is a bit of a 'how long is a piece of string' question, and will depend on how many there are in the first place.
- You might examine all of the relevant documents. For example, if you doing an analysis of education policy affecting primary schools from 2010-2015, there may only be 10 documents such as white papers and so on. Including them all would therefore be appropriate.
- Or you might use a sample. For example, if you were doing an analysis of newspaper reports about the Iraq War from 2003-2013, then you would need to sample some reports because you couldn't possibly read them all.

If you are going to sample, how will you choose which ones to use? Do you need to establish a fixed selection criteria, or will you simply choose the most relevant or important ones?

- This is important to establish beforehand, because you need to make sure that your interpretation is as objective as possible. If you are choosing the most 'interesting' ones, it may end up as a subjective analysis.
- You could sample on the basis of being representative (e.g. make sure you include documents which accurately represent the whole group of documents), or on the basis of influence (e.g. choose only the documents which are most

widely referred or are the most famous), or on any other basis, as long as you can give a good reason for it.

Where are these documents physically or digitally located? How can you get access to them?

- If you are using publicly available documents, you need to make sure that your analysis is particularly detailed and thoughtful. Because anyone can read them, you need to tell people something new that they couldn't find out for themselves.
- If you are using archival documents, you will need to get permission to access the archives. Find out how you go about doing this and make sure it is possible before you confirm your research.

How are you going to record your analysis?

- Whether you are using digital documents (e.g. web pages) or original documents (e.g. letters in an archive), you will not be able to immediately annotate the documents unless you make copies or printouts or explore software options. So how are you going to make a note of your interpretations? You could create a framework to take notes in for each document. Or you could make copies (if allowed), perhaps a digital photograph, and highlight or annotate these directly.
- Whatever you decide, it's essential to be systematic, to always do the same thing with all documents. If you realise it's not working and you are halfway through your analysis, by all means change what you are doing. But in that case, you will need to go back to what you did before and make sure it aligns with how you are doing it now.

Using questions like the ones above is a viable method of analysis on its own in some disciplines. But you may also consider the following analytical approaches, which emphasise different aspects of text and communication. These are covered in separate guides.

- Discursive analysis, which focuses on the way that language and knowledge create and shape people's understandings of the social world.
- Content analysis, which takes a more systematic approach to defining particular aspects of text.
- Thematic analysis, which looks for similarities and patterns in concepts across a group of documents.
- Look at what is popular or common in your subject. Are they using any of these additional analytical approaches, or is a documentary approach (i.e. questions like the above) more typical?

So, in conclusion, documentary analysis focuses on analysing documents systematically by looking at:

- The author, audience, purpose, impact, time, and context of a document

- The content of a document: what is included, excluded style and language, what is being inferred, and how it has been interpreted by others
- Methodological issues for research around access, selection and further analysis of documents

Further reading:

Denscombe, M. (2014) *The good research guide: for small-scale social research projects*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Chapter 14 covers documentary analysis.

Rapley, T. (2007) *Doing conversation, discourse and document analysis*. London: Sage.