

Qualitative methods: the essentials

Remember: in qualitative research, results tell you about people's perceptions, not 'reality'. You are responsible for the protection of the people involved in your research and the information they provide to you - consider ethics.

Research strategies

A research strategy is a general plan which sets out a systematic approach to your research. These strategies can be used together e.g. a mixed method case study.

Mixed methods: Using two or more of the below methods and combining the information you collect; can be multi-stage research, i.e. different methods at different points.

Ethnography: A long(ish) period of time participating in a particular group or community; using observations, interviews, document or object analysis, etc.; can be virtual or in real life (work or social contexts).

Insider research: Research in a setting where you already have a role.

Action research: A cycle where the point of the research is to identify and try to solve the problem, and evaluate attempted solutions.

Case study: One or two examples (context, place, individual person or small group of people) explored in depth.

Longitudinal or snapshot: Duration of the research: Longitudinal means over a long period of time; snapshot means once.

Qualitative data collection techniques

Interviews: Intended to get direct information by talking to the people who know most about it.

Survey: Open-ended questionnaires ('how', 'why', 'describe', 'tell me about'), to collect information about opinions, beliefs and feelings from more people than is possible through interviews.

Observations: Watch people engaging in a particular behaviour or in a particular context, and note what you see.

Text / document / image analysis: Systematic analysis of text or image using a particular technique e.g. discourse or content analysis.

Policy analysis: Examining the trajectory, implementation, creation process, changes, content or effectiveness of particular policy, or policy area.

Systematic literature review: Treat the literature as data, and your searching as your method of data collection (i.e. search terms and databases). Results are the studies that you found.

Secondary data analysis/ Archival data: New analysis of raw data collected by someone else.

Refer to the Qualitative Methods Full Guide for more information.