

What should I include in my Methodology Section?

The basic principle of a methodology chapter is that you say what you did to collect the data and why you did it this way. You should give enough detail so that somebody could repeat your study almost exactly in order to compare their results to yours. So leave out details that would be unlikely to affect the outcome (e.g. 'it was a sunny day') but include anything that could possibly affect your results. This should cover: **who, what, when, where and how.**

This is a suggested list of subsections and things to include if you have collected your own data. It does not include everything, and is only a starting point. Refer to guidelines from your tutor and dissertation module specifications, as well as methodological literature in your subject to get more input and advice. You **are** expected to use references in this section. For the purposes of the quick guide, this focuses on primary research with people (human subjects) and mainly on interviews and questionnaires, but the same principles will apply to other data collection techniques (e.g. documentary analysis, observations, etc.).

Section	Points to cover
Aims and objectives	Re-state your aims and objectives here from the introduction. Link the rest of the discussion to them, to show why your decisions make sense in reference to your objectives.
Approach	What is your philosophical standpoint e.g. interpretivist? What type of data are you collecting and why? [Refer to methodological texts to define and understand approaches and justifications in the abstract]
Strategy / research design	How have you planned the research and why? Are you collecting data as a one-off or over time? Why? Are you doing a case study, an ethnography, etc.? Why? Give a brief summary here and more detail later.
Setting	Where will you do this research (don't give away anonymity)? Describe it. Why and how have you chosen this place? Is the timing relevant? (e.g. time of year in a school)
Participants / sample / subjects	Who is your study about (research population)? Who is giving you data (sample)? How many (sample size)? How are you accessing them? How are you selecting them (sampling approach)? Are there any ethical issues?
Materials / Instruments	What are you using to collect data, e.g. interview questions or questionnaires? How are you designing these? What principles or previous research are you drawing on? Will you pilot it?
Procedure	Describe how you will conduct the interview or administer the survey, in as much detail as possible. E.g. will you print it or do

	it electronically? Will you email it or put it online? How long will it be live? What if you don't get enough responses?
Data analysis	<p>How will you make sense of the data? Will you have to process it (e.g. transcribe or input into software)? What statistical tests or analytical techniques will you use and why are these appropriate? Will you use software? If so, which one, why and how?</p> <p>Caution: software does not do the analysis for you – you still need to tell it what to do, so the most important question is what analytical techniques will you use.</p>
Challenges	<p>What problems can you predict? How can you adapt your plans to deal with them?</p> <p>(NB make sure this is consistent with what you wrote earlier – i.e. if you mention that you might get a low response rate and suggest another way to recruit participants, this second way should be covered in the sample section already. Use this section to explain why you have put in certain back-up plans.)</p>
Ethics	<p>Are your participants vulnerable in any way? Could your research cause them any personal or professional problems? What can you do to make sure you do no harm? Are any of the issues in your research sensitive or personal? How can you deal with this? How will you deal with informed consent and data protection?</p> <p>(NB this may be a separate section, or you may incorporate different elements into earlier sections)</p>
Limitations	<p>If everything goes perfectly and you collect all the data you anticipated, what will you still NOT be able to conclude because of your strategy and approach?</p> <p>E.g. in a case study, you will not be able to generalise the results. Do not mention anything that you could have changed in your materials or procedures, only intrinsic issues with particular research approaches.</p> <p>(NB this section may make more sense in the results or discussion section in some dissertations)</p>

Advice:

- Some of these elements may be more or less relevant to your topic. They can be combined, re-organised and emphasis can be given to different sections.
- The advice here has deliberately been written to apply as broadly as possible to as many subjects as possible; your supervisor knows best what is appropriate in your particular subject (e.g. your discipline may require the use of particular subheadings in your method section), so use this advice AND their guidance.
- Be as precise and specific as possible.
- Give concise justifications for every decision you have made.

- Draw on literature throughout:
 - Use textbooks to show you understand the principles of research design
 - Use primary research in journal articles which have done similar styles of study. Use these articles to establish good research practice in your area, or learn from their mistakes.
- Can be written before or after doing the research; if before, will need changing to reflect the reality of what actually happened.
- Write it in the past tense.
- Try your best to follow through on your plans, but accept that they will change in the process of collecting and analysing your data.
- Keep a research diary to keep track of the decisions as you make them and note your reasons at the time.
- Update the methodology at the end of your data analysis to reflect the reality of what you actually end up doing.
- Sometimes there is a confusion over the difference between 'methods' and 'methodology'.
 - **Methods** means the practical activities that you have done to collect your data e.g. interviews, surveys etc.
 - **Methodology** means the philosophy and theory behind what you've done.
 - Typically, you would include both of these as indicated above. If you haven't discussed the theory and philosophy, don't call it a 'methodology'! Call it a 'methods' chapter.

Further reading:

Bell, J. (2010) *Doing your research project: a guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social science*. 5th ed. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press.

McCarthy, M. (2008) *Academic vocabulary in use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2012) *Research methods for business students*. Harlow: Pearson.