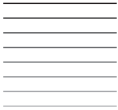


CHAPTER

1



# Learn to love, not dread, research

---

## **OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES**

---

This chapter goes through what research actually is (answering interesting questions), rather than what we usually *feel* it is (agonizing work). We'll discuss how to think about your research and your topic, as well as how to find research questions and choose methods. We'll expand on topics and research questions in the next chapter, but this is the general overview of how to do it without panicking. Using examples of sample topics drawn from a recent class, along with their possible research questions and possible methods, we give you a brief overview of the various kinds of methods you could choose from and that are highlighted in depth in later chapters.

Starting a research project always sounds a lot harder than it actually is. Most people would rather hide under their desks (or beds, the choice is yours) and hope it goes away than begin a new project. The thought of starting something big, whether a report for your boss, a term paper in a class, or a new book, is often terrifying. We understand that, and we want you to understand *why* it's so scary. Research is scary because there's a whole big wide world out there, and for every piece of that world there are dozens, if not hundreds, of ways to study it. What's going to work? What will people understand? What won't drive me crazy to study? What's interesting about this project, or (scarier) what's *new* about this project? We're getting nervous just thinking about it.

Calm down. That's step one. The good news is that while research is hard, it's also a lot easier to start than you might think. Because there is so *much* to study, and in so many different *ways*, you should be able to find something that interests you, that's possible to accomplish, and that isn't completely repeating someone else's work. That might not seem very reassuring, but it should be. For instance, when Ted began his dissertation for his PhD (not much is scarier than that, we can assure you), he went to a professor with a twelve-chapter book outline that he was really excited about. It studied twelve different media examples (from graffiti to internet memes to *The Simpsons*). The professor took one look at him, shook his head, and said "you're insane." It was true. The project would have taken years and been thousands of pages long if it was done right. So Ted went home, really thought about it, and decided to choose *one* chapter, the one on *South Park*, to be the focus for his dissertation and then his first book. This is the question we want you to ask yourself: What can I study that I don't think will bore me and my readers, or make me hate it? Never start a project because you think it'll be easy; if you do it right, it won't be. Start a project because you're fascinated by it, and then figure out how to make it possible to do in whatever timeframe you have been given.

## **IRL: A BOSS THAT WANTS THE WORLD**

It's Thursday afternoon and your boss has just come back from a meeting with *her* boss. She asks to chat with you for a second, which is always scary, and tells you she needs a comprehensive report on how your company is doing around the world. And she needs it tomorrow. At this point you're more than nervous; you're worried about keeping your job if you can't complete an impossible task. So here's what you do (or what one of *us* did, since this is a real story): First, ask what your boss really needs to know. In other words, if she just wants numbers that you can find on a company database, that's not so bad. If she wants those numbers along with detailed information about customer satisfaction, you've got a big problem. Second, ask who she needs the research for, and why they want it. If the CEO just wants to be able to show the Board of Directors that you've got stores in 20 countries as one tiny part of a presentation, no problem. If they're evaluating where to invest in new marketing campaigns and where to hire staff to support an international branch, it's going to be a long, long night and you still won't finish. Remember that research is a process, and there is always room for more depth or more reach. You have to know what questions you need to answer, and why, before you can do it well. Be careful, because you can get in over your head really fast.

Time is an important factor in research because, in theory, all research projects could go on forever. Every topic is like a huge room that you can't see into, and each research project just adds

a little peephole in the wall that you can look through. Maybe eventually you'll be able to see everything, but it's going to take you a while, and you'll have to shift your perspective, depth of focus, and sight angle to see much. And that's *if* nothing in the room changes. Good luck with that. People, media, minds, culture, politics – everything is changing all the time. The trick is to get a perspective on what's happening in a way that meets your goals as well as your timeline. Sometimes that's a matter of how *much* you study, and sometimes it's a matter of how *deeply* you study it. But time, like money, is never infinite.

Once you've chosen a general topic, you need to figure out *how* you want to do the study (see Figure 1.1). Researchers often split our work into three categories or perspectives, or what we call “paradigms”: the Empirical, the Interpretive, and the Critical. Empirical scholars tend to believe that the topic they're studying is discoverable, and often through measurable data with numbers. They want certainty, and so they tend to focus on large amounts of data that they can extract and analyze in a very methodical way that leaves little room for variation. In other words, they're looking for a snapshot through that keyhole without drawing conclusions about anything they can't see. For example, in a project Josh conducted on healthcare, he wanted to know how often patients did what their doctors told them to do. He decided to study whether or not the amount of time doctors spent with patients (the *independent variable*, or what we use to explain changes) predicted how satisfied the patient was with the experience (the *dependent variable*, or what actually changes). There are several ways to tackle how time affects patient satisfaction, but for his study, he decided that the length of time and degree of satisfaction told the best story.

Interpretive researchers, on the other hand, look at their research slightly differently. They're not looking for a snapshot, they're looking for what's moving. More specifically, they're looking at how things might be portrayed, received, understood,

<b>Topic 1: Cognitive disabilities in the media</b>	<b>Topic 2: Quality healthcare</b>	<b>Topic 3: Fighting hunger in the USA</b>
Focus: Portrayal of autism and dementia in the media (critical paradigm)	Focus: Doctor/patient interaction (interpretive paradigm)	Focus: Nonprofit organizations' use of social media to communicate (critical/empirical paradigm)
RQ1: How do plays portray/include people with different ways of thinking?	RQ1: How do doctors communicate with patients about health issues?	RQ1: Who do nonprofits tend to target in their social media, and how? How often? With what response from viewers?
RQ2: How do portrayals of autism in children and dementia in the elderly differ?	RQ2: How do patients connect their interaction with doctors to their perception of the quality of care?	RQ2: What stories do nonprofits tell, and what visuals do they use to tell those stories? How often? With what response from viewers?
RQ3: What kinds of problems and solutions do the plays focus on, and who causes/solves those problems?	RQ3: What might be improved in setting expectations and establishing effective ways of communicating during interactions?	RQ3: How might approaches by various nonprofits differ, and how do they align with industry "best practices" for effective website development?

**Figure 1.1** From topic to paper

<p>Method: Textual analysis of two scenes from two plays (first introduction to a character with cognitive disability, climax of conflict within the play)</p>	<p>Method: Observations of twenty interactions and post-observation interviews with twenty patients</p>	<p>Method: Content analysis of twenty websites, looking at specific categories of visuals, storytelling, structure, and other types of content drawn from industry and scholarly sources on effective websites</p>
--	---	--

**Figure 1.1** Continued

and reacted to by the people in that room. For example, you might study how an organization's staff decides which content to put on their website or social media, or how various groups of people feel about that content. Interpretive scholars are often more concerned about how we think and feel, the unique factors of what drives our behaviors and reaction, than they are about measuring finite patterns and outcomes. For them, the world is full of complex concepts, variables, and variations, and numbers just can't represent what's really happening.

Critical scholars simply add a layer to empirical and interpretive research by asking *why* things are happening in relation to the world more broadly. They're concerned with relationships involving power, ethics, and institutions (including their own power and influence), and are constantly questioning even their own analyses. They wonder why the room is closed off, who is trapped or allowed to go inside, and what it means, not just to them but also to society (or other groups, or the planet, etc.) as a whole.

Choosing a paradigm is important because it allows you to start forming some research questions (RQs). This is useful, even if your questions start off vague. What do you want to know? What questions can be answered by other scholars, and what questions do *you* specifically need to be able to answer through *your* research? Part of that means choosing a method, of course, and that method is in part dependent on your paradigm. For instance, most people start hearing about the “scientific method” in elementary school; you Observe, Question, Hypothesize, Experiment, Analyze, and Conclude. This is no different, except we suggest you keep hypotheses to a minimum; focus on the questions. What’s important is *how* you’re going to do that experiment (method), and this is completely dependent on your resources (time, money, and people to help), perspective (paradigm), and questions. Figure 1.2 gives you an overview of various kinds of methods, and the questions they might try to answer. We’re going to talk you through many of those throughout this book, so don’t freak out.

We suggest that before you choose a method, start with some questions. What do you want to know? If you want to know how something is portrayed, discussed in the media, and/or made part of an organization or institution, you might want to choose a text-centered method. You would analyze the message, artifacts, and context that surround them. If you want to see how people respond to something, are influenced by something, or discuss something among themselves, you might want to go with a people-centered method. If you want to determine reactions that people might have to a specific stimulus (specific enough that it can be both repeated and contained in a controlled environment), then you’re probably going for an experiment-centered method.

Once you know which *type* of method you’re probably going to use, you can think about number and depth. Because resources are limited, you need to go back to the research questions. What do you want to know? If you need to see how a large number of

- Textual analysis (in-depth reading of one or a few texts, with emphasis on their physical structure, e.g., shooting and editing for film, layout for design, rhetoric for a speech)
  - o Number: low
  - o Depth: high
  - o Sample: intentional
  
- Content analysis (brief reading of a large number of the same sorts of texts, usually with the aid of explicit “coding,” in which commonalities and differences are examined across all texts and charted, usually in part for statistical significance)
  - o Number: medium
  - o Depth: medium
  - o Sample: intentional but systematic; coding is as comprehensive as possible
  
- Discourse analysis (brief reading of a large number of usually different kinds of texts in order to discuss the ideological landscape surrounding a central topic, including journalism, popular media, educational systems, state institutions, family systems, etc.)
  - o Number: high
  - o Depth: low
  - o Sample: Intentional but wide ranging, surrounding a topic/focus
  
- In-depth interviews (structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, interviews are often done with fewer participants but at a high level of depth, usually from

**Figure 1.2** Choosing a method



1–2 hours in length, and try to get participants to tell stories and explore concepts in detail, often with follow-up questions or examples)

- o Number: low
  - o Depth: high
  - o Sample: intentional
- Focus groups (small groups of individuals that are targeted to gain specific information about a topic; usually random groups or groups that are intended to get a range of opinions, focus groups are widely used in industry studies of media, like whether a new TV show will be popular, or in social sciences to gain perspectives on things like body image, etc.; focus groups are great because you can use a semi-structured interview guide but encourage conversation among individuals, which you record and then analyze; however, they can also result in “groupthink” or silenced voices)
    - o Number: medium
    - o Depth: medium
    - o Sample: intentional
  - Surveys (a questionnaire given to a sample of individuals to gain their perspective on a topic)
    - o Number: high
    - o Depth: low
    - o Sample: varies from “convenience” to “snowball” to “random”
  - Ethnography (observation and investigation of the discourses, events, rituals, and communications within

**Figure 1.2** Continued

a community or a (set of) individual(s) within that community; although auto-ethnography is absolutely valid as a method, it must be chosen with great care and attention to the method as appropriate for the sort of impact and evidence necessary for the project)

- o Number: low
  - o Depth: high
  - o Sample: intentional but wide ranging to encompass many variables
- Metasynthesis (brings together a bunch of scholarly sources to examine their results all together, almost like a qualitative content analysis of scholarship)
    - o Number: high
    - o Depth: low
    - o Sample: impartial and wide ranging; comprehensive if possible
  - Experiment (within a controlled environment, manipulating variables in one group in order to determine changes)
    - o Number: low
    - o Depth: high
    - o Sample: intentional with a control group

### **Figure 1.2** Continued

people think about or react to something, you need a high N (the population size being analyzed). You'll probably need a survey in that case. If you are more concerned with the nuances of how people think or feel about something, you will need them to tell stories or discuss the topic in detail with you. In that case you

might want to do interviews with a high D (depth) that could take several hours each. If you're shooting for something in the middle, maybe how a group of people will respond to a new advertisement or feel about their romantic partner one year after getting married, then focus groups are better bets. The same thing goes for text-based and experiment-based methods; in general, the higher the N, the lower the D (see Figure 1.2). That doesn't mean that high-N methods don't have depth. It just means that with limited resources you'll have to focus on one over the other.

Be careful, when choosing the sample that you're going to study (which texts, which people, which places, etc.), to avoid what we call "cherry-picking." Cherry-picking means limiting your sample to the sources that will support your argument, which can be avoided by focusing on questions rather than answers. For instance, one of Ted's students had a problem last semester with studying body image on Instagram. A good topic, certainly, but when she tried to study it through a content analysis, she pulled images from celebrities and focused on their "sexy" photos. What if some or all of those celebrities posted just a *few* sexy photos, but more often posted pictures of normal life: without makeup and in ugly pajamas, pictures of their pets and kids, and random pictures of food? Her research would be skewed because she just chose primary sources that suited what she *thought* were going to be the answers to her questions, rather than letting the data speak for itself.

The thing to remember is that you don't have to do any of this alone. Other scholars have struggled with finding a topic, creating research questions, and choosing methods since . . . well, since people started doing research. And because analyzing the world around us is fundamental to the human experience, if not life itself, that's a long, long time. Reading other scholars is one way to keep yourself from getting overwhelmed. But so is talking to people, including your friends, your family, your professor, your colleagues, your boss, and of course, your friendly neighborhood librarian.

## **A NOTE FROM YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD LIBRARIAN:**

Librarians know that your first (or tenth!) research project can be a really daunting process. Every semester, Maridath works with dozens of students who are overwhelmed by even beginning their research assignments. Often, your professor will spend a great deal of time explaining the requirements, but they often forget how hard it is to come up with a good topic. We can help! Unlike the boss that wants to know *everything* about “how satisfied the customers are,” we want to help you both with the broad questions and with how to do the research without driving yourself crazy. We take you through the process step by step, from getting to know you and your interests, to creating and focusing a topic and the research questions suitable to your project, to actually finding the resources to make sure you’re successful. We’re great at helping you find sources for your research assignments, but we really enjoy the process of helping you find a topic that’s interesting to you so you won’t get bored and hate us and your professor (or boss) later. You may not realize that we also work closely with your faculty and often have the inside scoop on what they’re looking for. It’s important to also come to your session with your librarian with any work you’ve already completed on the assignment, including preliminary sources, ideas around your topic and focus, and, of course, the assignment prompt itself.