

HOW TO DO YOUR
**RESEARCH
PROJECT**
A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

**5TH
EDITION**

**GARY
THOMAS**

S Sage



1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks
California 91320

10th Floor, Emaar Capital Tower 2
MG Road, Sikanderpur, Sector 26
Gurugram, Haryana – 122002
India

8 Marina View Suite 43-053
Asia Square Tower 1
Singapore 018960

Editor: Kate Keers
Assistant editor: Becky Oliver
Production editor: Victoria Nicholas
Marketing manager: Fauzia Eastwood
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

© Gary Thomas 2026

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research, private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publisher.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025935808

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-03-621534-7
ISBN 978-1-03-621533-0 (pbk)

CONTENTS

<i>About the author</i>	xiii
<i>Preface to the 5th edition</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii

1 Your Introduction 1

Begin at the beginning: The introduction	2
Who cares? What is the <i>point</i> of this research?	4
Thinking of a research idea	6
Research questions	7
A thesis statement	8
Four kinds of question	8
The four kinds of question – and some nutshell-sized studies	9
Does your question demand a descriptive or an explanatory answer?	13
Is it feasible? Problems with research questions	15
Is it precise?	15
Is it doable?	15
Prima facie questions	16
Kinds of evidence and kinds of answer	17
Being critical about evidence – thinking critically	21
A title	21
What research is – and what it isn't	22
Overview	23
Further reading	23
Checklist	25

2 Project Management, Ethics and Getting Clearance 27

Understanding the structure of your dissertation or thesis	28
Drawing a timeline	30
Just look at those fingernails! Time management	32
Make a schedule	33
Little and often	33
Negotiate time	33
Set yourself targets	34
Decide on a time period	34
If you still can't find the time	34

Stresses in doing research	34
Isolation	34
Things going wrong	34
Access	35
Working with your supervisor	35
Ethics	37
The importance of being ethical	37
Getting clearance – ethical review	40
Levels of risk	40
Risk assessment	41
Risk management	43
Guides on ethics	44
Undergraduate-level ethical clearance	44
Postgraduate-level ethical clearance	46
What to think about in considering ethics	46
Ethics and the use of social media in research	53
Care for your participants – and for yourself	53
Where do I put discussion about ethics in my dissertation?	54
Overview	54
Further reading	55
Checklist	56
3 The Literature Review, Part 1: Searching	57
What are we searching <i>for</i> ?	58
Primary and secondary sources	60
Quality of sources	62
Critical awareness: Be questioning about the literature you find	63
Why is this lying bastard lying to me?	63
Speed reading and taking notes	65
Saving and storing with reference managers	65
Searching with Google Scholar	66
Using Google Scholar to organise your references	67
Other ways of using Google Scholar	68
Snowballing	69
Artificial intelligence (AI) tools	70
What are AI tools good (and not so good) for?	71
Use your library	72
Keywords	72
Some useful library portals and platforms	73
Specific subject databases	75
Other sources of information	76
Official statistics	76
Theses	77

Images and videos	77
Inter-library loan	78
Understanding how sources are cited: The Harvard and APA referencing systems	78
Overview	80
Further reading	81
Checklist	83
4 The Literature Review, Part 2: Developing a Narrative	85
Your literature review should tell a story – it should not be a list	86
First, scoping	88
Draw a mindmap	89
Scaffold your review	90
Systematic literature reviews	92
How much detail should I use in discussing the literature?	93
Reframe your research question (if necessary)	95
Your final question	96
Overview	98
Further reading	98
Checklist	99
5 Methodology, Part 1: Deciding on an Approach	101
Research design and methodology	102
Practical issues concerning research design	102
Research approach	103
Scientist or spy?	103
Frameworks for thinking about the social world: Paradigms	104
Positivism	106
Interpretivism	107
Paradigms and research approach	110
What planet are you on?	111
Writing about paradigms	111
But is it science?	113
The Q words: Qualitative and quantitative	114
Thinking critically: How the ‘ologies’ help	116
Ontology	117
Epistemology	118
Critical awareness (again)	120
From purposes to questions, to approaches, to data gathering	121
Designing research: An example	124
Overview	126
Further reading	126
Checklist	128

6	Methodology, Part 2: Designing Your Research	129
	What is research design?	130
	Fixed and emergent designs	130
	Some general issues in design	131
	Sampling	132
	Variables	135
	Reliability	135
	Validity	136
	Experimenter effects	139
	Generalisation and generalisability	140
	Positionality	141
	Triangulation	142
	How to structure and write your methodology chapter	143
	Overview	145
	Further reading	145
	Checklist	147
7	Methodology, Part 3: The Design Frames	149
	Action research	150
	Case study	153
	Choosing a case study subject	154
	What kind of case study?	155
	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	158
	Ethnography	160
	Taking field notes in ethnography	163
	Ethnomethodology	165
	Dramaturgy and narrative research	165
	Autoethnography	167
	Evaluation	167
	Experiment	170
	Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies – and surveys	174
	Longitudinal study	174
	Cross-sectional study	176
	Survey	178
	Comparative study	180
	No design frame	182
	Can I mix design frames and methods?	184
	Postmodernism	185
	Overview	187
	Further reading	187
	Action research	187

Case study	187
Interpretative phenomenological analysis	188
Ethnography	188
Evaluation	188
Experiment	188
Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies	189
Comparative research	189
Mixing methods	189
Postmodernism	189
Checklist	190

8 Data Gathering 191

What are data-gathering tools?	192
Be creative	192
Data-gathering tools – mainly for use with words	193
Interviews	193
Accounts	199
Diaries	199
Keeping a reflective journal	202
Group interviews and focus groups	204
Document interrogation	206
Using social media to gather data and to collaborate with other researchers and participants	207
Data-gathering tools – for use with words and/or numbers	208
Questionnaires	208
Observation	216
Gathering image-based data	220
Data-gathering tools – mainly for use with numbers	222
Measurements and tests	223
Official statistics	224
Overview	225
Further reading	225
Interviews and accounts	225
Diaries	226
Reflective journals	226
Focus groups	226
Questionnaires	226
Observation	226
Image-based methods	227
Tests	227
Official statistics	227
Checklist	228

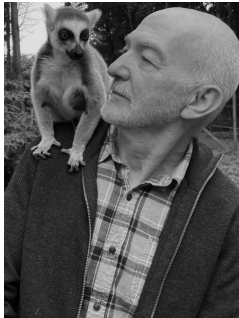
9	How to Analyse and Discuss the Information You Gather	229
	Analysing words	230
	Constant comparative method and coding	230
	Network analysis	233
	Construct mapping and theme mapping	235
	Grounded theory	235
	Thick description	238
	Discourse and content analysis	239
	Computers and verbal data analysis	241
	Sociograms	242
	In-betweens: Words to numbers and developing a coding frame	244
	Analysing numbers	245
	Kinds of numbers	246
	Eyeballing	247
	Using Excel to do your data analysis	247
	Statistics that describe	248
	Statistics that help you understand a relationship between two variables	250
	Statistics that help you to deduce (or infer)	252
	Reviewing your options on analysis	262
	Discussing your analysis	263
	Synthesis (and analysis)	264
	Theorising	265
	Organising your discussion – alongside or after the analysis?	272
	Overview	273
	Further reading	274
	Analysing words	274
	Analysing numbers	274
	Checklist	275
10	Concluding and Writing Up	277
	Writing a conclusion	278
	Writing up	279
	Writing an abstract and finalising the title	280
	The final shape	281
	General points about writing and presentation	282
	Communicating your findings	282
	The ‘territory’ of your writing	283
	Finding your voice	283
	Writing in the right style	284
	Considerations about inclusivity in your writing and thinking	285
	Plagiarism	286
	AI and plagiarism	286

CONTENTS | xi

Presentation	287
Editing	287
What it looks like on the page	290
Coda	290
Further reading	291
Checklist	292
 <i>Glossary</i>	 293
<i>References</i>	307
<i>Index</i>	313



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Being of a nervous disposition as a child, Gary Thomas (on the right) failed to write anything on his 11-plus examination paper, which inaction took him to secondary modern school. His subsequent zigzag through the education system gave him broad experience of its good and bad sides.

He eventually became a teacher, then an educational psychologist, then a professor of education at the University of Birmingham, where his teaching, research and writing have focused on inclusive education and the methods used in social science research. He has led a wide range of research projects and has received research funding from the AHRC, the ESRC, the Nuffield Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust, the Department for Education, charities such as Barnardo's, local authorities and a range of other organisations. He has written or edited 20 books and lots of boring academic articles. He was the editor of journals such as the *British Educational Research Journal* and *Educational Review*.

He has two grown-up daughters, one smaller daughter and two grandchildren. He likes, in alphabetical order, birds, chess, cycling, dogs, his family, gardening, reading and writing.

Despite supporting Aston Villa football club, he maintains an optimistic outlook on life.



PREFACE TO THE 5TH EDITION

In this fifth edition of *How to Do Your Research Project*, I have – as with previous new editions – tried to respond to colleagues’, students’ and reviewers’ comments on things they would like more (or less) of in the book. As well as updating throughout, I’ve added a lot of new and revised material, including the following:

Table FM.1 New and revised material

New material	More detail
New DIY activities	Each chapter has a revised DIY activity for students to complete
Information and discussion of the place of AI	New material on the place of AI – where it can be helpful, and where it can be unhelpful and/or misleading
Organising a literature review	More information on the scaffold that can structure a literature review, and guidance on the different forms a literature review may take to form a compelling narrative
Using AI tools to search the literature	Detailed advice on the AI literature search tools that are available and how to use them
Clearer chapter breaks	Chapters 3 and 4 are reorganised to accommodate new information on AI tools, and to give more guidance on literature review organisation. Chapter 6 from previous editions is now divided into two chapters – the first about general issues in design, and the second about design frames.

I’ve kept to my maxim that I will try to keep things straightforward, to use a conversational approach and, where there was a choice between a simple word and a hard one, to use the simple one.

The expectation for students to do a research project is becoming more and more common in almost every area of applied social science: education, health sciences, social work, criminology, and so on. It is right that this should be the case – that students should be learning by doing research – for the research project teaches skills that no lecture can teach. Not only does it enable learning about the particular topic chosen for research; it also teaches students about working independently, having a questioning disposition, about evidence and the frailty of knowledge, and about methods of research and their strengths and weaknesses. With the skills and awareness that it fosters, research provides an almost tangible platform for personal and professional development.

And the ability of AI has increased exponentially in the last few years. It can now write excellent essays and forge highly credible answers to assignment questions. The temptation for students to avail themselves of the offer that these wondrous machines make is changing the way that coursework is thought about in higher education: what use is a coursework essay if AI can write it in a nanosecond? This makes the research project – where students have to go out into the world and gather and analyse their own information – a workable solution for tutors in surmounting the assessment challenges that AI poses.

On the assumption that the basic ground rules for research are similar at whatever stage, I haven't attempted to pitch this book at one particular group: undergraduate or postgraduate. I've tried to keep it simple and straightforward in a way that I hope will appeal to all students in education and the social sciences, and whether you are an undergraduate or just beginning doctoral work I hope it will be useful.

A word of advice for students: every tutor has different expectations about what a research project should be about and look like. Some prefer the emphasis here, others there. One will want a certain kind of project, another will prefer something different. I've tried always in this book to indicate that there is no absolutely right way, that there are different avenues to follow. However, if I seem to be giving different advice from that given by your tutor (and there are places in social scientific study where there are real differences and unresolved issues, as I make clear in the book), listen to your tutor: your tutor is always right.

Look forward to your research project. When you have completed it, you will have learned so much. You will have learned how to organise a major piece of work, how to get hold of information, and how to analyse and synthesise it. You will have learned sophisticated presentation skills and all the basics and more of the most common data-management and AI tools. It is one of the most significant and productive things you will do in your time at university.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book grew partly out of a seminar series that I led on quality in social research which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). I'd like to thank the ESRC for its support before, during and after the series. I'm grateful to all of those who have taken the time and trouble to write such gratifyingly positive things about the first four editions.

Many thanks to Helen Fairlie, who kept encouraging me to write a book that might be useful to students, rather than an academic one that, as she put it, 'only three people and a dog read'. Many thanks also to Jai Seaman and Kate Keers at Sage for stimulating this fifth edition. Thanks to Becky Oliver for organising me, and to Victoria Nicholas and her colleagues in production at Sage for transforming the presentation of the book for this latest edition. Especial thanks to the book's unbelievably thorough copyeditor, William Baginsky. And thanks to Natasha and Maya for keeping me sane.

Thanks to all my students (some of whom are mentioned in the book) whose ideas I have stolen and some of which have led to the examples used here, and thanks to all those who have helped in the reading of drafts and for encouraging and/or corrective comments of one kind or another. And of course I am grateful to all of those in our wider community of inquiry whose ideas I have borrowed and used. Any errors of fact or judgement, though, are of course entirely down to me.



1 YOUR INTRODUCTION

Your introduction says why you have chosen to do your research project. In it, you explain what you want to inquire into and why you want to do it, and you justify your research question.

This chapter considers:

- What takes you to this research area? Is it personal interest? Or is it your reading of the literature, which makes you feel that there are unanswered questions, uncertainty or ambiguity?
- What is your research question? This is the foundation stone for the whole project. Different kinds of questions will lead you to different kinds of projects.
- What sort of evidence will you seek to answer your research question?



BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING: THE INTRODUCTION

The sequence of chapters in this book broadly corresponds to the sequence of chapters in a dissertation or thesis. So, this current chapter – Chapter 1 – is about your introduction; it's about starting off and asking a sensible question ... and the final chapter is about drawing your conclusion.

Before we look in detail at your introduction, though, let's just step back for a moment and look at what your introduction is an introduction *to*. You can't write a sensible introduction if you don't know what you are introducing. So, you need to know the rough shape of a research project. What does it have to contain? What order should the chapters be in?

Well, research projects can be all shapes and sizes, but usually they follow a particular form, which includes:

- an introduction (that is, where we are now)
- a literature review
- a discussion of the methods being used
- a presentation of the findings
- a discussion of those findings
- a conclusion.

Figure 1.1 shows these elements on a 'road map' where I have flagged up the most important elements and 'staging posts'. Each of these elements maps on to the same numbered chapter in this book.

Your introduction is really important: it needs to set the scene and outline the case for the whole project. While it is relatively short, it sets the tone for the whole write-up of your project. It is probably the part that the people who read and mark your work will read most thoroughly, for they will be looking for the rationale behind the project. As they read it, they will be imagining you doing your research and asking:

- Was this project worth doing? In other words, how well is the case made for research into this issue and why is it interesting or important to know the answers to the questions being posed?
- Has the author (that is to say, you) thought seriously about the questions at the centre of the project – whether they are answerable?

The introduction is a scene-setter. It tells the reader in summary what is likely to be coming and, if it is good, manages to knit together elements of the story to whet the reader's interest.

Your introduction has to do a number of things:

- It has to introduce the reader to your thinking behind the project. What interested you? And what made you think that your topic was worth researching into?
- It has to outline the purpose. Pure curiosity? Evaluating something? Developing your practice?

- It has to translate your thinking and your interests into research questions.
- It has to summarise the ways that you are likely to go about finding evidence and answering these questions.

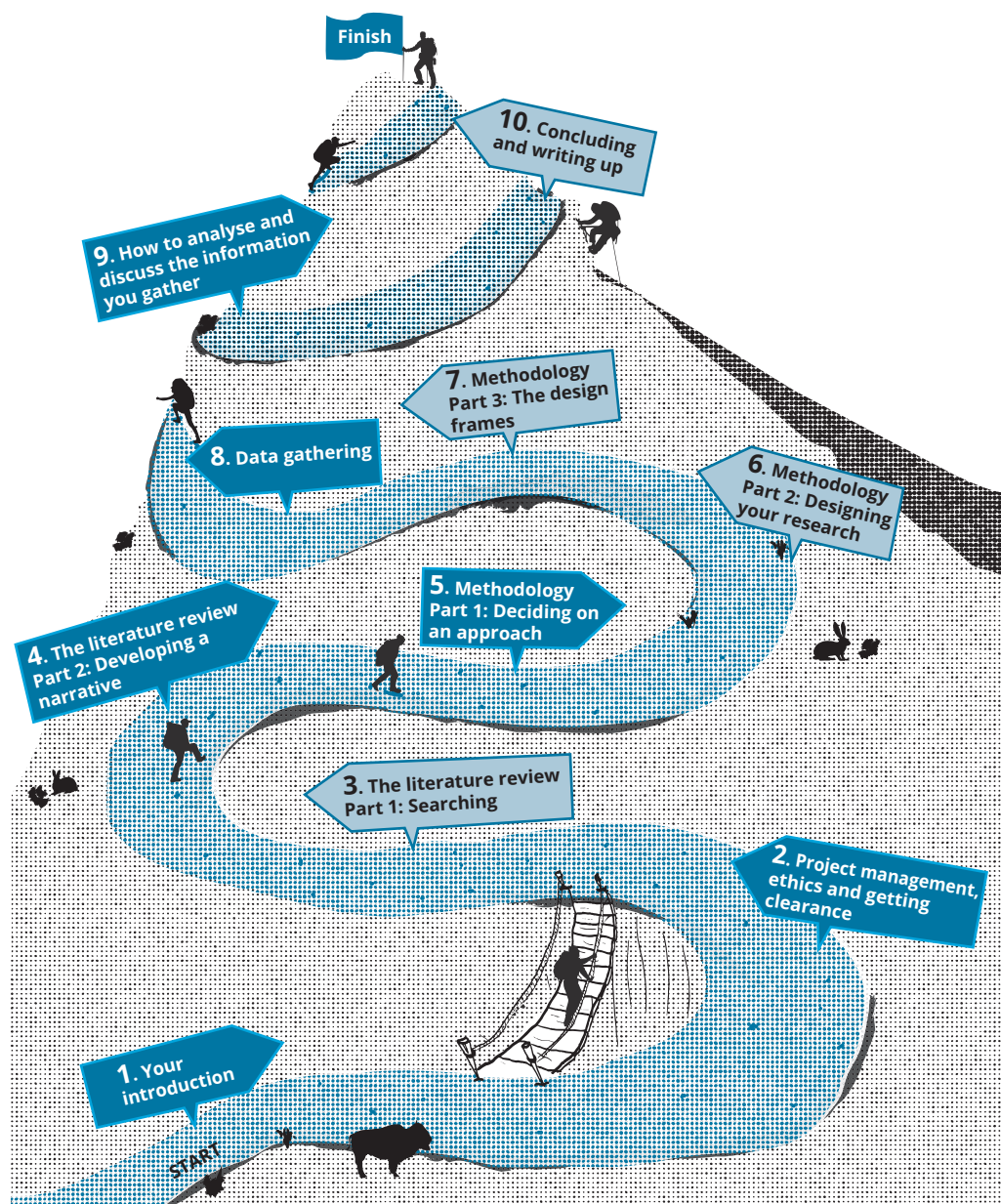


Figure 1.1 A road map of your research project journey; each numbered 'staging post' matches the numbered chapter in this book

However, your introduction is not a summary of the whole project. Students often make the mistake of limiting their introduction to a list: 'Chapter 1 is about ... Chapter 2 is about ... Chapter 3 is about ...'. Leave this kind of summary for the abstract (see p. 280). Instead of this, the introduction should be the beginning of a story: it should capture the reader's interest. Most of all, it should say *why* you are doing the project.

WHO CARES? WHAT IS THE *POINT* OF THIS RESEARCH?

Here in the introduction you have to communicate to the reader (that is to say, your markers) why you think this is a good topic to research. What is the problem you are trying to solve? There has to be a problem there, or at least an issue – something that needs to be found out – which your research promises to throw light on. In other words, why are you doing this research? Your research should not simply launch into some exploration without a reason for that exploration. As Booth et al. (2016: 240) put it, you have to state 'your own incomplete knowledge or flawed understanding in a way that shows you are committed to improving it'. In other words, you have to make it clear that the topic you wish to research is in some way unclear; you are promising in your research project to throw light on this area.

Maybe it's only going to be a little bit of light, a chink, but it is light nonetheless – and more important than the *amount* of light you manage to throw is the relationship of this light to some issue, problem or dilemma. You have to make it clear what this issue, problem or dilemma is. Not making this clear is one of the commonest weaknesses in both undergraduate and postgraduate research. If you don't make it clear, the reader is quite justified in asking, 'So what? What is the *point* of the research?' Indeed, this is one of the most common weaknesses in professionally done research as well. When I was the editor of a research journal I would ask myself, when reading an article that had been submitted, 'Why is this research being done?' If the author didn't make that clear, the article did not stand much chance of being accepted. However experienced or inexperienced, a researcher always has to be able to answer the question, 'Why should anyone care?'

I like to frame the answer to the 'Who cares?' question in a mnemonic that captures the relationship between what it is that needs to be explained and the explanation that will hopefully be forthcoming from your research: it's about doing the BIS – about the relationship between:

- the background (B)
- the issue (I)
- and the promised solution (S).

The BIS is the core of your introduction.

Can you State the 'BIS' in Your Introduction?

- Background (the general area which gives rise to the issue)
- Issue (or problem, or question)
- Solution (you promise to throw some light on the issue through your research).

Let's look at this in a little more detail. The *background* will contain some common ground on which everyone can agree; it's the context within which your issue is seated. The *issue* or 'angle' contains two parts: (i) some missing evidence or contradictory reasoning or some paradox or dilemma in the existing literature; and (ii) the consequences of not being able to resolve this lack of information or this dilemma. The *solution* concerns your promise of elucidation. (See Figure 1.2.)

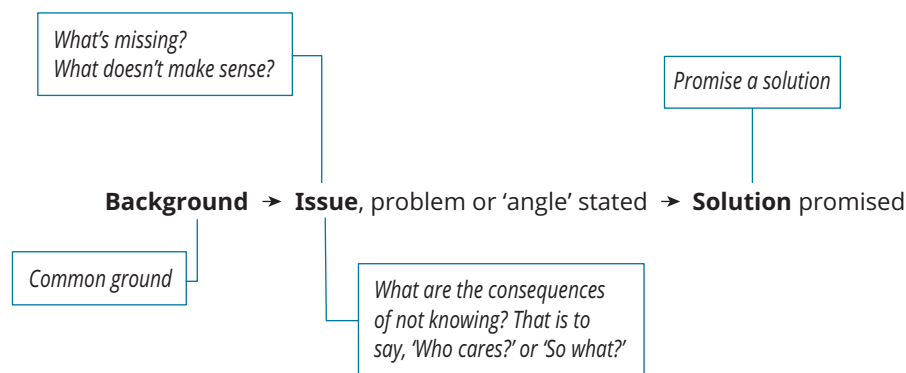


Figure 1.2 Doing the BIS: Making it clear how your research will address an issue of importance

I give an example of the BIS in Table 1.1. It's from a research project that I undertook for the children's charity Barnardo's (Thomas et al., 1998). The case to be studied was of a special school closing and moving all of its staff and students to continue in the local secondary and primary schools. Politicians and educators mainly agreed that moves such as these were to be welcomed – this was the *background*. The *issue*, though, which the research promised to address, was 'How did the move to inclusion actually have an impact upon the affected children?'

You will notice, in this discussion of the *background* and the *issue*, that consideration of these comes *before* deliberation about the *solution* and the methods to be used in the research. A common mistake made by inexperienced researchers is to do this the other way round – to think first about methods, almost before they have thought about the issue to be addressed by the research. They will say, 'I want to do a questionnaire' or 'I want to do a case study' or

'I want to do a piece of qualitative research' before they have even worked out the principal focus of the research. Doing this is like putting the cart before the horse. Always let the issue and your research questions take centre stage, for, as we shall see in Chapter 5, different kinds of issue will lead to different approaches and different methods.

Table 1.1 The BIS in practice

BIS element	Example text
Background ...	Inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream schools is happening increasingly. The move to inclusion, backed by anti-discrimination legislation, is occurring principally in response to concerns over the loss of social and educational opportunities for those who are segregated in special schools ...
Issue , problem or 'angle' stated ... <i>What's missing from the available information? What are the consequences of not having this information?</i>	While the push to inclusion means that more children are being included in mainstream schools, little is known about the experiences of students who make this transfer to the mainstream from special schools. Concerns have been expressed about (a) the ability of mainstream teachers adequately to meet the needs of young people with serious difficulties, and (b) the readiness of mainstream students to help accommodate special school students ... Without information on these issues the policy to include children with special needs risks failure in practice ...
Solution , or response ... <i>promise of a solution</i>	A case study focusing intensively via case study, observation and interviews, on the experiences of the students of a recently closed special school promises to add to knowledge about students' social and educational adaptation over time, and will offer insight into the means by which such closures are effected.

THINKING OF A RESEARCH IDEA

Once you know that a research project is part of the expectation for your course, you have to think of an idea for it – the 'issue' or problem that I have just spoken about (the 'I' of the BIS) – and this can be one of the hardest parts. The right idea can lead to a good project, and the wrong idea will almost certainly lead to a less interesting project.

A research project begins with your curiosity – with an issue or an uncertainty, and this issue or uncertainty is reframed into the *research question* (which we'll come to in a moment). You may want to know whether something is the case, or why it is the case. You may want to know what the consequences are of doing something. Your interest may stem from personal experience, from a discussion with a friend or colleague, from a lecturer's comment in a lecture, or from having read an article in the newspaper. There may be an 'angle' that needs investigating: you may, for example, want to resolve an apparent discrepancy between your own observation of the world and the situation that is reported by others. But whatever the inspiration, you should feel curious; you should feel that you want to know the answer.

Remember, though, that you are not out to prove something or to demonstrate that something is the case. Rather, you are looking to find the answer to a genuine question.

Your research idea is at the heart of your research project.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When you have thought of an issue which your research will throw light on, you will need to shape your ideas into a more specific question, or set of questions, which will lie at the heart of your research. Different kinds of questions will lead to different kinds of projects. This may sound obvious, but failure to recognise this represents one of the main problems for those beginning to undertake research: too often students get into trouble because they set off with a question that is not right and by the time they realise that this is the case it is too late.

Remember the question Loonquawl asks the supercomputer in *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: 'What's the answer to the question of Life, the Universe and Everything?' After seven and a half million years the computer comes up with the answer: forty-two.

'Forty-two!' yelled Loonquawl. 'Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?'

'I checked it very thoroughly,' said the computer, 'and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is.'

Maybe social scientists' questions will never actually be posed as simplistically as Loonquawl's, but the story is a salutary warning to us all. It warns us that we should be aware of the complexities of the subjects we are studying.

The questions that educational and social researchers pose and try to answer aren't simple. And simplistic – that is to say, over-simple – questions lead to silly answers. It's very important in any inquiry concerned with people, and how they behave and interrelate, that we think about the *nature* of the questions we want to ask.

How, then, do you think of a good question? First you have to understand that there are many *kinds of questions*, and that these will lead you off into different lines of inquiry and different kinds of research. Some questions have fairly simple answers. For example, if you ask whether there are more women teachers than men teachers, and whether the proportions of each have changed over the years, the answer will be quite easy to discover. However, if you ask a question such as, 'Why do girls tend to do better than boys in literacy?' an answer – or a route to finding an answer – will not be so readily evident. In fact, to this question several possible answers immediately suggest themselves. It may be that girls' brains are better 'hard-wired' for language. Or the answer may be nothing to do with brains and hard-wiring: it may be because parents, friends and family of baby girls talk more to them than they do to boys. Eventually schools repeat the process. More is expected of girls in the way of language, so girls get more feedback and training about how language is used. They therefore get better at it.

Each of these possible answers to this question comes with a perfectly valid train of reasoning behind it, and you might think that we should be able dispassionately to work out which is correct. But that isn't possible. It isn't possible because:

- a These answers aren't either/or – in other words, there is not one cause or the other. Both may be contributing to the phenomenon of girls' superior literacy.
- b There are measurement issues involved – it may be that girls merely look as though they are better because of the nature of the tests that we use to assess performance.
- c We have no definitive way of answering the question – even if (a) and (b) didn't apply, there is no research design that could be set up which would enable an answer to be given once and for all.

Just because a question is difficult, though, doesn't mean that we should not try to answer it, but we should be aware of the difficulties and, possibly, frame different, additional or more tentative questions.

A Thesis Statement

Before moving on to look at different kinds of question, it is worth noting that sometimes it seems best to state the issue at the heart of your research not as a question as such, but rather as a *thesis statement*. This may be the case if your research project is not based around some issue which demands empirical study, but rather is based solely on a review of the literature. The thesis statement is a sentence that sums up the central theme and purpose of your study.

FOUR KINDS OF QUESTION

So, if getting the right research question is vital, how can we decide on it? It is first necessary to acknowledge that there are different kinds of question and it might be helpful to spend a moment categorising them. Broadly speaking, there are four kinds of question involved in social research, all of them perfectly valid as starting points for a project, but each of them involves different kinds and degrees of complexity and each of them leads to different kinds of inquiry: (1) What's the situation? (2) What's going on here? (3) What happens when ...? (4) What is related to what?

- 1 *What's the situation?* You're a business studies student and have noticed the increase in number of 'assistant' professions developing in the public services – community support officers in the police force, teaching assistants in schools, healthcare assistants in hospitals. This may lead you to be interested in the growth in the number of these kinds of staff over the last 20 years. This would lead to the first kind of question: What's the situation ...? The actual question may be something like: 'How have numbers of ancillary professionals grown as a consequence of ideas about workforce reform over the last 20 years?'
- 2 *What's going on here?* You may be a teaching assistant and note that a group of students in a class persistently flouts the rules and engages in more difficult behaviour than others in the class. Or you may note that one child in the class is always putting

up her hand but has no idea what the answer is when the teacher asks her. These are specific instances that emerge from your own observation, and in each case you may ask yourself why this is happening. You want to explore the issue. This leads then to the question: What's going on here ...? The actual question may be something like: 'Why does Jade put up her hand when she doesn't know the answer?'

- 3 *What happens when ...?* You're a team leader in your company, working for a business studies degree part-time. You want to introduce a training needs assessment programme for your team to help you to identify who needs to develop their skills, and what kind of training is right for them. As part of this (and at the core of your research project for your degree) you want to understand the consequences of the introduction of this programme. The research question may be something like: 'What are the consequences of introducing a training needs assessment programme for my team?'
- 4 *What is related to what?* As a student in education and taking a 'wild' module (a module outside your main discipline) in economics, you notice from the latter that there seems to be a relationship between a country's gross domestic product and the amount it spends on education. Looking further, you see that while the relationship seems to be strong, there are interesting variations that exist in the amounts spent on different phases of education (nursery, primary, secondary, tertiary and higher education). You decide to explore these relationships further, to see whether there are cultural or historical reasons that might explain them.

Though these four categories may seem similar – they are all questions, after all – in fact they offer very different kinds of starting points and will lead to very different lines of inquiry. And within one study it may be appropriate to ask more than one kind of question, with several lines of inquiry, each intertwining with the others. Let's look at them in a little more detail.

THE FOUR KINDS OF QUESTION – AND SOME NUTSHELL-SIZED STUDIES

Here are some examples of those different kinds of question and their implications.

Spotlight 1.1

What's the Situation?

'How have numbers of ancillary professionals grown as a consequence of work-force reform over the last 20 years?'

Here you are looking to *describe* something that is happening. When you are describing, you are not trying to do anything much more complicated than saying 'This is how it is'. Nor are you trying to find the *cause* of something – you are not, in other words, trying to see if *x* causes *y*.

(Continued)

But the researcher understands that to say ‘This is how it is’, while relatively simple if compared with saying x causes y , is nevertheless not straightforward. As with an artist or a photographer, you are trying to present a faithful representation of the facts that you find, and this is harder than it seems.

Like an artist, you will be more or less successful at representing the world that you are trying to describe, depending on what you choose to focus on and depending on the techniques you use. The first problem the researcher faces compared with an artist is that, while artists literally try to draw a picture, in research you are making your picture with words or numbers, and we all know (e.g. from the way that politicians present their cases) that words and numbers may be unreliable messengers of truth. We select the words and numbers that we use. Also like an artist or a photographer, your portrait will be vulnerable to pressures and prejudices of one kind or another and the picture you paint will be susceptible to distortion because of this. Artists’ subjects want to look beautiful or handsome, and the subjects of research tend to be the same: they want to look good.

Again like an artist or a photographer, you will be exposed to the risk of things going wrong: a photographer may have the picture go fuzzy or blurred, or have the wrong part of a portrait in focus, or may make a beautiful person look ugly. A skilled photographer will know how to avoid these problems. Likewise, the photographer may be able to magnify the relevance of a

particular facet of a scene by using a special lens. These kinds of problems and opportunities are possible also when you are using words or pictures, and in the same way that skilled photographers can avoid problems, well-prepared researchers can circumvent the traps that confront them when doing research.

While this represents a simple kind of question, it is perfectly acceptable and valid as a basis – a platform – for an undergraduate or master’s degree and can lead to a first-rate project or dissertation. But description on its own will not be sufficient for a project. You will

be expected to make some sort of *analysis* of the increase in ancillary professionals as well, and this may depend on further reading or on certain kinds of fieldwork – perhaps asking informed people (such as police officers, nurses and teachers) for their opinion on the growth of this group of personnel.

Definition 1.1

Fieldwork: The process of collecting data – so a place where data are being collected is called ‘the field’. The field could be a classroom, a playground, a street, a hospital ward, someone’s home – anywhere you are collecting data.

Spotlight 1.2

What’s Going on Here?

‘Why does Jade put up her hand when she doesn’t know the answer?’

How could you answer this question? You can’t climb inside Jade’s head. And asking her why she does it probably will not reveal very much. To try to answer it without recourse to a map of

Jade's mind, you have to use your own knowledge of situations like this, and your own knowledge of people (including yourself) to make informed guesses. All of this is, of course, subjective, but it is none the worse for this, as long as you realise and acknowledge the boundaries that surround this kind of inquiry – and, as in all research, we must be sure that we do not make inappropriate claims for it. This is a very particular kind of research: it is about two people – the observed and the observer – and we must be careful not to generalise from this very particular situation to others. You are trying to interpret the situation in order to illuminate what is going on. That is why a study of this kind may be called interpretative or illuminative.

When you are *illuminating*, you are shining a light on something. This implies that the subject currently is in the dark (or at least is badly lit): it's impossible to see what is going on. (If the sun were shining brightly, there would be no need for illumination – no need for research.) So you shine a light. What does this metaphor mean here?

First, it means that you are expecting to see something that you couldn't see before. Second, it implies also that you will be able to see because you are looking in a way that you weren't able to previously. Third, it implies that you are giving time and energy to looking hard (i.e. shining the light) and using *your own self* – your intelligence and experience – to make sense of the subject under study.

There's nothing 'unscientific' about this use of your own self, as some people who prefer more structured research proclaim: the famous mathematician George Pólya (1945/2004: 172) said that all kinds of discovery, in research or elsewhere, are determined by having 'brains and good luck' and by 'sitting tight until you get a bright idea'. In other words, the main part of research is not the cleverness or the specialness of the methods that you use, but rather your willingness to use your own head to look at something intelligently.

Don't, in other words, ignore your own ability to reflect on a problem, and don't minimise its significance in helping you to understand the problem. This is the case in all kinds of research, but particularly in illuminative inquiry you will be drawing on your own resources – your own knowledge of people and social situations – to make sense of what you find.

Extending the metaphor about illumination, remember that the object will look different when the light shines from different angles, and will appear different from various viewpoints and to different people. In remembering all of this, you will realise that you are doing something more than describing. In doing this kind of study, your aim will not be simply to describe the facts, because you will be interested in a social situation that is not usefully explicable simply within a framework of description. You will be involved in the kind of study that is about feelings, perceptions and understandings, and to get at these you will need to be listening to people and interpreting what they are saying, observing what they are doing and trying to understand their actions.

Spotlight 1.3

What Happens When ...?

'What are the consequences of implementing an anti-bullying policy in Tower Hill Primary School?'

(Continued)

This ‘What happens when ...?’ question is accompanied by a particular kind of structure. This structure usually involves taking two or more observations or measures (e.g. before and after an imposed change) and then trying to deduce what any difference between those observations or measures may mean. So, in this example, you would need a measure of the amount of bullying that took place before the policy and after the policy to see whether there had been a drop – which you might infer was due to the implementation of the policy. Clearly, the measures to tackle the subject under study, namely bullying, could be taken in a multitude of ways, and it is these different forms – and their satisfactoriness – that will be examined in Chapter 5.

Usually in this kind of study you are asking ‘Does *this* seem to be causing *that*?’ You are asking questions of the variety: ‘Does *x* cause *y*?’

The situations here may have been engineered by you, for example by your setting up an experiment, or they may be naturally occurring situations where you want to examine the influence of one phenomenon on another. Your observations of them may be more or less structured and your inferences more or less particular on the basis of this structuring.

Another example: you may be interested in changing the way that you, as a year tutor in a secondary school, address your Year 8s when you meet them in the morning. You may choose to be in class half an hour early, not take a formal register and instead ask the youngsters to sign in as they arrive. What effects does this seem to have? You will be making deductions about any possible consequences. You could make this observation informally by just watching and taking notes, or in a much more structured way by precisely adjusting the conditions (down to the length of time you are making the change) and also the outcome you are choosing to measure, and comparing the behaviour under the original condition and the new one. You might also compare what happens in a colleague’s class where no such changes are made. Whether your observations are informal or formal, you will be making inferences about the cause and effect.

A particular kind of research design emerges from this sort of question, a design that promises an indication about the causative link. But, just as was the case in the consideration of ‘What’s going on here?’ questions, we have to acknowledge the potential frailty of this kind of inquiry, and we must be sure that we do not make inappropriate claims for it. We’ll discuss some of the things that might go wrong in Chapters 6 and 7.

Spotlight 1.4

What is Related to What?

‘What is the relationship between the distribution of wealth in a country and life expectancy?’

This question could be answered fairly straightforwardly by reference to published statistics showing how the two variables (wealth distribution and life expectancy) vary in relation to one another. Of course, there will always be issues about how we measure each of the variables and how we should interpret any relationship that we uncover. Even if we do find a

relationship, how far can we say that there is any causation involved? The inappropriate attribution of causation highlights the main challenge to the interpretation of a question that seeks relationships of any kind, as I shall discuss further in Chapter 7.

These four types of question lead to their own routes of inquiry and will cause you to lean lightly or heavily towards a particular kind of approach and design for your research. Approach and design are facets of the research process that we shall examine in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6, but you should be aware at this stage where your initial questions are likely to take you.

DOES YOUR QUESTION DEMAND A DESCRIPTIVE OR AN EXPLANATORY ANSWER?

You can probably see from the four kinds of question that I have just outlined that the nature of your question can be more or less complex. At their simplest, questions demand straightforwardly descriptive answers, questions such as:

- What are the principal means by which students at this university arrive on campus?
- What are some of the main ways in which anti-MRSA measures are being ignored at Gotham General Hospital?
- What are consumers' most trusted commercial websites?

Definition 1.2

Data: This is a rather confusing word when you first come to social research, since you will probably associate 'data' with numbers. In social research, however, the term 'data' means any source of *raw* information – raw in the sense that no one has worked on it. So it may indeed be numbers (test scores, say) but it may also be the transcript of an interview, questionnaire responses, photographs, documents, videos, etc. All of these constitute data.

By contrast, questions which promise some kind of explanation are always going to be more complex. On the same themes of the three questions I've just posed, these more complex questions might be ones such as:

- What factors are determining students' choices concerning travel to campus?
- Why has there been resistance to anti-MRSA measures being implemented in Gotham General Hospital?
- Are there factors associated with consumers' trust of commercial websites?

The second set of questions is about more than just description since these questions seek an explanation of an issue or a problem. Such questions will usually be asked by students who

have more time and resources at their disposal – that is to say, those at master's or doctoral level. For an undergraduate project a question that leads to description is quite acceptable, although those which seek some kind of explanation, if only in conjecture or theorisation in the discussion, will always be looked upon favourably (see 'Theorising', p. 266).

It may be that one kind of question will emerge out of another, so that description comes first and explanation follows. Let's imagine an important issue in applied social science – one that concerns child abuse. Here, the question about child protection may be followed by another one:

- Who are the professionals centrally involved in child protection?

will be followed by:

- Why did these professionals fail to communicate effectively in the case of Baby X?

So, to a question that students often ask, 'Can I have more than one research question?', the answer is 'Yes, though these will need to be related to one another, and you shouldn't start off with too many.' It is best to start with fewer, simpler questions and see what these lead to as your project progresses. Questions that demand description may precede ones that demand explanation.

DIY ACTIVITY 1.1

Coming Up with a Question

Your question will emerge from your interests and your observations. If you are having difficulty coming up with a question:

- Think of the situation in which you are working or the subject you are studying. Is there something novel, perplexing or unusual about it? If so, think about how you might look into it further.
- Ask a colleague, friend or relative who works in the field about a particular issue or problem in their working day. How might this lead on to research questions?
- Think of a story in the media about education, healthcare, sport science, probation, business or the field in which you are studying. Are there aspects of it that seem interesting or puzzling? What aspects of it could be followed up?
- Try looking at some websites, such as those of the big government departments. Find out what is topical. Assisted dying? The dangers for children heading balls when playing football? Privacy and the media? Children's happiness? How could a project be geared around these topics?
- Go to the Campbell Collaboration or Cochrane Collaboration websites (see p. 62) for information on important current issues.

If you are still left wondering what to do, try:

- *Brainstorming*: Try to come up with three different research questions, preferably from a situation you know something about. The ground rules for brainstorming are: (1) two or more people get together and say anything that comes into their heads on the topic in question; (2) quantity (of ideas) is paramount, not quality; (3) there must be no criticism of the ideas of others; (4) unusual or bizarre ideas are welcome.
- *Doing an A–Z of topics*: Think of anything at all using the initial letters of the alphabet as prompts, and see what they spark off in your mind.

IS IT FEASIBLE? PROBLEMS WITH RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When you have thought of a question and about how it maps on to the four types of question I outlined above, consider it against two more important criteria: preciseness and ‘doability’.

Is it Precise?

The most common problems with research questions are that they are too *broad* or too *general*. ‘What causes children to have reading difficulties?’, for example, is a question that is almost impossible to answer. However, ‘What are the characteristics of Sean’s behaviour when he is reading?’ is a question that *can* be answered in a small-scale study.

Common Problems with Research Questions

- They are too broad.
- There’s no clear way to answer them.
- You can’t get the information you need.

Is it Doable?

Sometimes there will be problems of ethics about a research question. For example, if you were interested in how parents’ arguing affected children at school, it would not be ethical to ask children (or parents) about these intimate matters. Or there may be problems of *access* to the kind of information that you want. If your question would require observation in classrooms, are you sure that any school is going to let you in to observe? These issues of ethics and access are addressed in Chapter 2.

Remember also that you have serious time and material constraints. You don’t have much time to do the research, and money is tight (I’m guessing). It might be an idea to start by

thinking about how you would do the *ideal* project and then considering how you would trim (or perhaps hack away at) this, taking into account ethics, time, your own expertise, money, and so on.

PRIMA FACIE QUESTIONS

Prima facie questions are questions that you start off with – the questions that you state here in your introduction. They may change and become refined as your study progresses.

If you feel that your question is not quite right at this stage, don't worry. It is often the case – no, *nearly always* the case – that things won't be sorted out once and for all at the beginning of the study. Actually, I should state it even more strongly than that: *it is to be expected* that this (or these) will not be your final question(s). Especially in small-scale research of the kind that you are doing, and particularly where there is any kind of practitioner bent to it, it is very likely that you will not be able to specify your questions exactly at the outset.

Memo 1.1 You will revise and sharpen your ideas as your work progresses. For this reason, your early ideas and questions are prima facie questions. These can be refined after your literature review. And social research rarely follows a blueprint. Plan for change as you progress.

You may feel that you don't know enough about the area to make definitive choices at this stage on your questions or your plan of attack on the subject. This is fine. Or you may feel that you wish to do some practical groundwork that will in some way set the boundaries for the project, and in some way map out the channels down which your inquiry can run. Your reading of the literature will almost certainly enable you to refine your first questions.

The idea that you have to specify exactly and definitively your course of action at the beginning of your project is something of a hangover from the days when social research aped the methods of the natural sciences, with experiments in which a blueprint of questions, procedures and methods would be drawn up in detail at the outset and followed conscientiously. In fact, it is doubtful whether that is actually the way that natural science researchers ever operated in real life, but it's what they *said* they did. As the renowned biologist Sir Peter Medawar put it in debunking this idea of cleanly planned and executed research, the special methods and procedures that are supposed to be associated with scientists' work represent merely 'the postures we choose to be seen in when the curtain goes up and the public sees us' (Medawar, 1982: 88).

But social scientists, having a bit of an inferiority complex about their status as scientists, believed the natural scientists and tried to copy the folklore model of science that had been presented to the public. In the social sciences, though, it is nigh on impossible to set up a project of the kind you will be doing without stopping, rethinking, replanning, changing, and starting again. And rethinking your *question* is the first part of this process of revisiting. It is to be expected, and is a necessary and integral part of the process of a research project such as yours.

All of this replanning and revisiting means that the kind of research that you do in investigating the social world is often called *recursive* or *iterative*. In other words, it turns back on itself and starts again, and a distinction is drawn between this pattern – involving reviewing and replanning – and what is sometimes called a ‘linear’ plan (see Figure 1.3).

Linear plan



Recursive plan

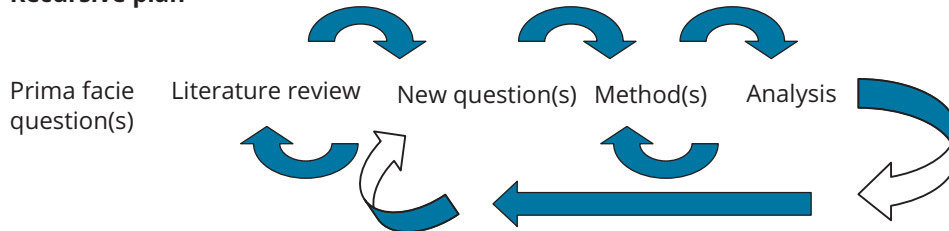


Figure 1.3 A linear or a recursive plan?

So the idea that things won't go to plan is itself planned for. If the 'recursive' part of Figure 1.3 looks a bit of a mess, that's because that's what social research is often like. Your research in fact *may* follow an entirely different or simpler path, but most likely it won't be a straight, blinkered path from beginning to end. Importantly, your reading for your literature review will inform your question and help you to refine it. Beyond this, you will see things to the side of the path; you will notice something over there and decide that it is more interesting than the original topic; you will find that you can't talk to the people with whom you wanted to talk, and so on. What you discover and the way that the world treats you will always influence the way that you proceed: it's like a game of snakes and ladders – you'll get knock-backs and sudden boosts and insights. And both knock-backs and insights will make you do a lot of rethinking.

It is for this reason that the question or questions that you have at the beginning of your study are called *prima facie questions*. *Prima facie* means 'on its first appearance' or 'at first sight', so calling your questions *prima facie* is an acknowledgement of their status – an acknowledgement that they are tentative and may change. They're rough-and-ready questions. They may turn out to be fine, without any need for change, but in all likelihood you'll want to refine them in some way. We will look at how you may revise your *prima facie* questions in Chapter 4.

KINDS OF EVIDENCE AND KINDS OF ANSWER

I've concentrated so far on questions. When we want to answer a question we are going to have to rely on *evidence* of some kind, and at this stage it is worth thinking about the kinds

of evidence that might help to answer particular kinds of questions. We talk of evidence being of varying kinds – strong, weak, circumstantial, primary, secondary, etc. – but what do these mean and how are they likely to be related to your thesis? This is important to think about at this stage, since the assessment of your thesis by your marker will depend on your collection of evidence. If you have a question that leads to weak evidence, you will be marked down heavily for it. This is a good reason to get the question right at the outset.

Let's look at the simple questions given in Table 1.2 – none of them anything to do with social science – just to see what kinds of evidence might emerge and why you should be very careful at this stage.

Table 1.2 Questions and evidence

Question	Ways of answering it with evidence	Is the evidence reliable and robust? (score out of 5)	Why this star rating?
How many colours are there in the rainbow?	Look it up in a book.	4	The book is almost sure to be right. However, books aren't always right. There's always room for interpretation (e.g. what do you mean by 'colour'? Does ultraviolet count?).
	Wait for the next rainbow and count the colours.	4	It's good to rely on your own observations rather than someone else's (e.g. in a book). However, be aware that your answer may not agree with another person's – because, in the case of this example, you may disagree on what constitutes one colour (where do yellow and blue become fused, and does the merging constitute a separate colour?).
	Ask someone else.	3	They may know; they may not. They may not know but not want to tell you that they don't know – and make something up.
What is my best friend's middle name?	Ask her/him.	4	You'd think this should be pretty accurate. But what if your best friend is ashamed of their name? Might they claim not to have one, or make up a different one?
What is the meaning of life?	Reflect on it yourself or ask others. Read books.	1	No clear answer (ever, no matter how much research you do).
How can I get to Edinburgh from here?	Look it up on a map or go on the internet.	5	The chances of a published map being wrong in directions of this simplicity are vanishingly small.

Question	Ways of answering it with evidence	Is the evidence reliable and robust? (score out of 5)	Why this star rating?
How many legs does a millipede have?	Look it up – in a book, or on the internet.	3	Doing an internet search reveals a suspiciously similar range of answers, giving ‘between 80 and 400’ rather too often for my liking, revealing that ‘authorities’ may just rely on each other rather than find out for themselves (on the danger of secondary sources, see p. 61).
	Dig up some earth, find one and count.	3	There’s a good chance you’ll lose count or in some way be inaccurate. And if you decide to check by counting the legs of another millipede and you come up with a different number you are into further questions about the possibility of different species or variation within one species.
What does this button do?	Press it.	3	You should be able to see what the button does when you press it, but it may be the case that nothing happens (imagine a car dashboard, or a microwave oven control panel). However, if something observable does happen you can be fairly sure that the button did it. (But not absolutely sure – it might have been coincidence of some kind.)

Already from Table 1.2 you’ll note several processes – you may be looking up facts in books or already published research. Or you may be collecting your own evidence ‘out there’ in the field: asking people who are directly involved, or making an observation, or trying something out to see what happens. What you get from each of these processes are different kinds of evidence, each kind acceptable. However, each has its own strengths and weaknesses and its own potential pitfalls, as you will have noticed from the examples.

Usually (but not always), there will be an expectation that the kind of evidence you collect during a research project you undertake at university will be *empirical*. That is to say, you will be expected to go out into the wide world and collect data yourself rather than relying on information marshalled by others – for example, in a book. (In fact, a research project as a literature review – that is, *just* as a literature review – is acceptable, but if you want to do a research project that is based solely on literature you should check with your tutor.)

Definition 1.3

Empirical: Strictly speaking, this means something that has been found out from experience, from trial and error, or from the evidence of your senses. 'Empirical' is often wrongly used, though, with the intimation of experiment of some kind, so when people talk of 'empirical evidence' they usually (incorrectly) mean evidence coming from some kind of trial or experimental study.

Because of the potential frailties and weaknesses of one kind or another in evidence, it is useful to gather it in different ways, so that one piece of evidence supports another. When the police gather evidence at a crime scene they talk about *corroborative evidence* when one piece of evidence supports another piece. One piece of evidence on its own is often taken to be not enough, since mistakes can be made by witnesses or police officers; equipment may be faulty; witnesses may not understand what has been asked of them, or may be making something up for any of a host of reasons. It's good to look for different sources of evidence (e.g. reading, observing, interviewing people).

The same kind of thing applies in a social research project. It is much better to rely on several kinds of evidence rather than just one. There are many ways in which evidence can be sourced, among others:

- personal experience
- trying something out – 'suck it and see'
- the testimony of others
- documents or archives
- artefacts
- observation.

In social research, using more than one kind of evidence is sometimes called triangulation (see p. 142). Having noted the importance of corroboration (or triangulation), though, it is important to say that you will never in social research get conclusive evidence of something being the case. However, the more evidence there is – each piece corroborating the other – the surer you will be. This is why the noun 'evidence' is so often qualified with adjectives – *prima facie* evidence, inconclusive evidence, weak evidence, strong evidence, conclusive evidence, and so on.

I have spoken about these issues of evidence in general, but it is important to think about them in particular in relation to the social sciences and your own thesis. Can you collect evidence that will enable you to answer your question? Think about the evidence you are likely to collect when you answer a question. Suppose your question were something to do with the problems children have with maths. What kind of evidence could you collect? You could:

- ask the teacher directly about the problems
- ask children what their problems are
- get children to talk to you while they are doing a problem
- get children to complete diagnostic tests.

All of these would garner evidence of some kind, and each would have its own strengths and weaknesses.

BEING CRITICAL ABOUT EVIDENCE – THINKING CRITICALLY

It is the way that you view, scrutinise and use evidence that is important. It is a matter always of looking at evidence, thinking about it *critically* and *assessing* it. The great philosopher John Dewey (1920/2004), in reviewing several kinds of thinking, argued that it is only ‘reflective thought ... [that] is truly educative in value’ (p. 3). He distinguished this *reflective thought*, where there is a deliberate self-questioning about the grounds for a belief, from other kinds of thought where there is slight or no acknowledgement of the strength of the evidence or grounds on which it is held.

Dewey makes the important point that we should be suspicious of certain kinds of thinking, particularly those arising from *tradition* and *authority*. We should think for ourselves. And we should be wary of any line of reasoning (in others or in ourselves) that comes from a vested interest or a strongly held opinion (a ‘passion’). The *reflective thought* that he favours is about being sceptical about our thoughts and about always looking for evidence for a line of reasoning. He suggests that we should try to be almost instinctively critical. Such reflective thought is one of the hallmarks of a good research project.

Memo 1.2 Show that you can think critically. When you seek evidence, always question its value.

A TITLE

You may want to have a precise title for your thesis right from the start, and while this may seem like good planning, in fact this is one place (that is to say, the beginning) where it is probably good to be a little imprecise. In fact, it is more important to think about your *question* than your *title*. This isn’t to say that a title is unimportant. It *is* important. It is vitally important, because your work will be assessed by reference to your title – in other words, the examiners will ask themselves, ‘Does this thesis address the title?’

But when you are doing a project in the social sciences, large or small, you will realise that the world isn’t quite as you thought it was going to be. You can’t get access to this place, there are ethical problems there, or better questions occur to you as you begin to read about the issue. (These changes will be addressed in Chapter 4.) The important fact to realise is that these changes will inevitably occur and that if you stick rigidly to a premeditated title, you will miss many opportunities to make your project more interesting or more manageable.

Or you might take notice of the necessary changes, but still stick unthinkingly to the title even though the project has changed substantially in practice. After all, *you* know what you

are doing, and as your research gathers momentum the title may slip to a cobwebby corner of your reptile brain, never to be re-examined. But remember that while your tutors are reading your project, they will be asking themselves if it is addressing the title. So, if you have a title that doesn't match up to what is actually in the write-up of your project the marker will be disappointed and wonder why. One of the commonest causes of low marks is when a piece of work – essay or project – doesn't address the title.

So the best plan is to have a *working title* – something that captures what you originally set out to do – which you can then change once you have finished the dissertation. It may just need a tweak or perhaps a substantial modification. But the new title – the one you decide on after you have finished – will match the completed product exactly. Always use the working title, though, to remind yourself of what you set out to do, because you will always find when you are doing research that you will be tempted to follow a hundred different paths. It might be worth following one of them, but do you really want to? Always examine your motives for potential change and your likely outcomes. This is where a *mindmap* will help. It will help you to decide which are the likely main routes that will

emerge from your working title and what avenues of investigation may be opened up by each main route. (Mindmaps are discussed further in Chapter 4.)

Memo 1.3 Be prepared to change your title. But do this at the *end* of your project.

WHAT RESEARCH IS – AND WHAT IT ISN'T

It is worth closing this chapter with a word about what research is and what it isn't. Research is about curiosity and inquiry, as for example journalism is. However, it differs from journalism in that it is governed by a number of expectations. There is the expectation that research will:

- aim to find new knowledge
- be thorough
- be balanced
- be fair
- be ethical.

What your supervisor wants for your introduction. They probably won't expect you to polish up your introduction until you finish your project. But they will expect a reasoned account of why this research is needed and worth doing. Base this account on 'Doing the BIS' in this chapter.

These are some ground rules, and we'll look at them in more detail in later chapters. But it is worth reinforcing the fact that research is not journalism and it is not about campaigning for an issue. It's not about being committed to a position. Nor is it about 'knowing' something and trying to find 'proof' for it. You cannot assume that you already know the answer.

Research *is* about disciplined, balanced inquiry, conducted in a critical spirit.

OVERVIEW

Your introduction is important: it sets the scene for readers. It should interest readers and make them want to read further. It tells them why you are interested in an area and why you think it is worth researching. It outlines what your first research questions are. You should have taken time to think about the kinds of questions you will ask because your whole project will be geared around the way that they are constructed and the kinds of evidence you will need to address them. As you think about your questions, you should consider their nature and the likely paths of inquiry down which they will lead you. But you shouldn't become paralysed with fear about these early questions. At this stage they are *prima facie* questions – questions that will be refined as you undertake preliminary work and as you do your literature review. They are working questions, in the same way that your title at this stage is a working title.

In fact, the whole of your introduction is really a working document, to be revised as your work progresses. It should not, however, attempt to airbrush out difficult aspects of your journey or places where you have decided to change direction. These are all part of your story. If you say where you started and where you have altered course it will help readers to understand why you went where you did. Do tell them about what you intended to do originally and how things have progressed as you have worked on your project.

FURTHER READING

- Becker, H.S. (2008) *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (2nd edn). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. More for advanced students than undergraduates. Really gets you to think about research and what it is you are trying to do. A nice antidote to recipe-driven research.
- Booth, W.C., Colomb, G.C. and Williams, J.M. (2016) *The Craft of Research* (4th edn). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This excellent book is about research right across the spectrum, from the sciences to the humanities, and gets its readers to examine the relationship of research question to research approach.
- Denscombe, M. (2021) *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects* (7th edn). London: McGraw-Hill Education. Some good, straightforward advice (at the end of the book) on the importance of establishing the integrity of the project.
- OECD (2015) *Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*. Paris: OECD Publishing. www.oecd.org/en/publications/frascati-manual-2015_9789264239012-en.html. This provides a technical discussion of what research is – for the advanced student.
- Seale, C. (2017) *Researching Society and Culture* (4th edn). London: Sage. An interesting compilation with chapters on most issues to do with social research, and a good one on research questions.
- Thomas, G. (2023) Evidence, schmevidence: The abuse of the word 'evidence' in policy discourse about education. *Educational Review*, 75(7), 1297–312. In this article, I take a critical look at what 'evidence' means in public discourse, focusing especially on its use by politicians.

Thomas, G. and Pring, R. (2004) *Evidence-Based Practice in Education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. A compilation looking especially at evidence and evidence-based policy and practice in medicine as well as in education. See Chapter 1 for my discussion of evidence, what it is and how it is used.

White, P. (2017) *Developing Research Questions: A Guide for Social Scientists* (2nd edn). London: Palgrave Macmillan. This book concentrates, as the title suggests, on the research question in social science, its importance and how it can be developed.

Worksheet 1.1 Chapter 1 checklist

CHAPTER 1 CHECKLIST		
You may find it helpful to copy this table and write down the answers to the questions.		
Have you ...	Notes	Tick
1 ... done the BIS? Considered the <i>background</i> ? Thought about the <i>issue</i> or <i>problem</i> you <i>specifically</i> want to address? Reflected on the kind of solution that may be forthcoming – the kind of research that will address your issue?	Write a sentence or two on the background. Outline the specific problem in a sentence or two. Don't write anything about a solution yet – just think about it at this stage. You can be more definite only after considering different research approaches and methods (Chapter 5).	☐
2 ... had an idea to focus on?	Say how your issue or problem (above) translates into an idea for research.	☐
3 ... got a prima facie question?	Write this down. Remember that it may change as you read around the area (see Chapter 4).	☐
4 ... thought of a working title?	Keep it short.	☐

