

Collecting the Information

Techniques (or Methods) for Collecting Data

You will need to include empirical (primary) research in your project. There are a number of ways of doing this which include the following approaches.

- **Structured Interviews**, where questionnaires are used which contain identical questions. The researcher will carefully read out the questions in the same way each time they are asked, in a tone of voice which is neutral, in order to avoid influencing the respondents.
- **Semi-structured interviews**, where some of the questions will be standardised and asked to all participants, but the interviewer may add to these depending on the responses.
- **Unstructured interviews**, where there are likely to be a pre-decided range of topics which the interviewer intends to explore, but no pre-set questions which are asked. Usually these are discussions where the researcher wishes to explore a particular topic in some depth.

Questionnaires

Moore (2006) makes an attractive claim for self-completion questionnaires, saying they are:

“very popular with researchers. They are relatively easy to administer. They are flexible in that they can be used to collect a wide range of data in a variety of different circumstances. And they are cheap”

Moore (2006: 120)

However, to be effective they need to be very carefully designed, and given to the most appropriate people to complete, in terms of representation..

Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2003: 315-6) suggest considering the following areas when designing questionnaires:

- Questionnaires facilitate the collection of data by asking a sample of people to respond to the same questions.
- There are five types of questionnaires:
 - on-line
 - postal
 - delivery and collection
 - telephone
 - interview – one-to-one/group
- Before designing a questionnaire, you need to be very clear about what it is you want to learn, and what data you need to help you. You need to think ahead about how you are going to collate the information you gather.

- The validity and reliability of the data you collect depend on the design of the questionnaire and the words you use.
- Questions can be open or closed.
- The order and flow of the questions should be logical.
- Questionnaires have a low rate of return, so consider how you would encourage or motivate respondents to complete and return them.
- If possible, pilot questionnaires with a small group before launching the research, so issues such as validity, reliability and the value of the questionnaire itself can be assessed.

Are you likely to use a questionnaire in your research? (Is this an open or closed question?)

If so, in what way/s do you anticipate using the questionnaire?

The Power of a Question

Getting the questions 'right' is of the utmost importance in order to yield data which is useful and of value. Collis and Hussey (2003) provide some general rules for designing questionnaires which you might find helpful.

1. Explain the purpose of the questionnaire to all participants
2. Keep your questions as simple as possible.
3. Do not use jargon or specialist language (unless it is known and understood by the participants).
4. Phrase each question so only one meaning is possible.
5. Avoid vague and descriptive language.
6. Avoid asking negative questions as these are easy to misinterpret.
7. Only ask one question at a time.
8. Only use questions which are relevant.
9. Avoid leading or value-laden questions which imply what the required answer might be.
10. Keep your questionnaire as short as possible, but include all the questions you need in order to achieve your purpose.

Thomas (2009) offers the following advice:

1. Keep everything short. If possible limit your questionnaire to one side of A4. The number of people who respond to a questionnaire will decrease in proportion to its length.
2. Be clear about what you are asking. Only ask for one piece of information a time (not two pieces of information within the same question).
3. Be precise – because the only source of information is on the piece of paper in front of your respondents, you have to be clear about what you are asking. So instead of asking, for example, 'How often do you read academic journals?' you would be better to ask: 'Do you read academic journals..' and give a choice of options such as 'more than once a month, once a month...[etc].
4. Collect all necessary details. It is frustrating to look at a returned set of questionnaires and say to yourself: 'Oh, I wish I'd asked about...'
5. Be aware of 'prestige bias'. Most people want to look good: to appear clever, nice, rich (or, in the case of students, poor), educated, ethical and so on...Be aware of this in the way you pose questions and interpret the responses.

Thomas (2009: 174)

Thomas (2009) also advises that you do not include a middle option when designing questionnaires, as most of us will go for the middle ground, thus saving ourselves the challenge of making a decision. For example, in matrix or grid questionnaires, with a rating of 1 through to 5, most people will select the central number '3'. The Likert scale, designed to measure attitudes, sometimes has the central 'neither agree nor disagree' removed for the same reason.

Other techniques, or methods, for collecting data include:

- panels, including focus groups
- observation, including participant observation
- documents
- surveys
- databases.

Depending on the nature of your research investigation, you will decide which approaches are the most appropriate.