

How to write about research methods

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Research methods are the thing that unites an otherwise divided academic community

As academic researchers we all have our individual research topics and interests, and the community of other researchers operating in the same field is relatively small

But we all need to do good research

Potentially, our readership, when writing about methods, could be bigger and much more wide ranging than it might be when we're writing about our research findings

When we write about research methods we need to be aware that our audience is more wide-ranging than it would be for many of the other things we write as academics

The way we write therefore needs to be meaningful to a community of readers who

The PhD Methods Chapter

For PhD students your first task as a writer is to visualise your examiners as your core readership

They are your audience, so what will they need to know, what won't they know already, and what will you need to explain to them and justify?

The PhD Methods Chapter

You're not writing for yourself, you're communicating to others – your examiners – how you designed and carried out your research

Methods sections in standard research papers

If you're writing a research paper, your audience is your peer reviewers, and beyond that your academic research colleagues and PhDs working in similar fields to you

Methods sections in standard research papers

- Visualise what your readers will want and need to see before you write your methods section
- But remember how much shorter a methods section in a research paper is than a PhD chapter

Methods sections in standard research papers

- When writing an empirical paper, don't write too much in your methodology section
- Just give enough (and no more) information to allow your readers to be able to evaluate how your data was created and how your methods underpin your theories and arguments

Methodological articles

- Contrast this with a methodological article
- A paper written entirely to engage in issues of method and methodology
- Here your entire word count can be devoted to methodological discussion

Methodological articles

- For methods papers (just as with methods books and book chapters) your audience will be much more wide ranging than it will be for more standard 'empirical' research papers

Methodological articles

- Understand the breadth of your audience

What might go in a methodological article?

- New application of an existing method
- New critique of an existing method
- Refine or engage with methodological theory
- New refinements in practice (for instance by using technology in a new way)

The point is to have something new or unique to say about methods

Good methodological writing...

- Never about you; always about audience
- Remember, your readers were not there while you did your research

- Ask yourself, would someone who was NOT there while I did my research understand everything they need to in my methods writing?

Principles and strategies when writing about methods

1. Consider writing about methodology from day one of your research

Capture the decisions and the rationale behind them (as they happen)

- Writing from the start removes some of the pressure and can reduce the chances of getting writer's block

Keeping a research diary...

- Use it to develop your writing organically
- Keep it up to date
- Write and reflect regularly on your research practice to generate a corpus of ongoing writing you can use later

- What should you keep a note of in your research diary?

If space allows, state the seemingly obvious

2. No methodology chapter or section is an island

Don't disconnect your methodological writing from the rest of your thesis or paper

Try to avoid writing in dry and overly abstract tones, so make it more concrete and meaningful

- Show findings, context, data to illustrate and make concrete your methodology section
- Particularly show material that serves to illustrate your methodological point

- Draw also on methodological literature in your discussion of method

- Relate your methodological writing back to the research problem

- Your methodological decisions make most sense when put in the context of practice and the research problem
- An example from survey research

- We're adding rich material and meaningful context to our methodological writing

- The principle of showing as well as telling
- Not just a principle for fiction writing

Showing AND telling = the methodological / writing principle of warrant

Writing a methods book

- Understand who is reading and why they're reading a methods book
- Whether they're students or senior academics, it's most often to learn a new method for themselves

- When writing methods book, try to articulate a rationale for why other researchers or students should consider adopting the method themselves

- As a book author remember you're future readers won't have the benefit of you to be there to help them in person when they read your book
- So has your book covered everything in sufficient detail and made it meaningful?

4. Write about your decisions

- An account of the most important and reader-appropriate decisions you made in your research

How many of those decisions merit writing about?

- In a PhD chapter?
- In a research paper methods section?

5. Consider stating and eliminating your alternatives as a narrative device in methods writing

Decisions imply alternatives

- What were they?
- What were their merits?
- Why did you reject such alternatives?

- You're demonstrating erudition, that you're aware of the range of methodological options and have made your decision for good reasons

6. Write with openness, clarity and charity

'Charity' in research writing

The importance of full disclosure

7. Write about the situational details in your research?

When should you write about situational details in methods writing?

In quantitative research consider writing for replication

Writing for replication

Do your readers have sufficient information to repeat the study themselves?

Consider writing for improvement and replication

7. If in doubt, everything relates to your research problem

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To help with the problem of what to include and exclude in your writing

8. Consider the question of identity

Is writing about your identity something expected of you or not?

Writing about your identity vis-à-vis your research practice

How has who you are as a researcher impacted on the questions you ask, your thinking about your topic, the responses I might get, the theories I come up with

9. Consider a chronological structure to your methods writing?

The research project as a journey

vs

Compare and contrast before and after

10. Can you look for unique contributions, precedents and innovations?

Flaunt your methodological innovations

11. When writing about methods, every problem could potentially be a writing opportunity

The problems we experience when conducting research – and no research project is ever perfect – could be starting points for you to engage more deeply in issues of methodology for yourself

Back to the problem of what to include and what to leave out when writing about methods

Ask yourself: what difference did method(s) make?

12. Conclude with self evaluation

An honest appraisal of what you did

