DEFINITIVE GUIDE

Research Methodology: A Practitioner's Guide

What methodology actually means, why it's more than a section heading, and how to choose one defensibly

SEO Title: Research Methodology Explained: A Practitioner's Guide (2026)

Meta Description: What research methodology actually means, the major approaches, and how to choose and justify one for a specific question. A practitioner's guide from OASIS Research Writing.

URL Slug: /insights/research-methodology

Reading time: ~13 minutes | Last reviewed: July 2026

QUICK ANSWER

Research methodology is the overall strategy and justification for how a research question will be answered — the reasoning that connects the question to the specific methods (surveys, interviews, experiments, document analysis) used to investigate it. It is distinct from "methods," which are the specific tools applied; methodology is the argument for why those tools are the right ones for this question.

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Ask a graduate student to explain their "methodology" and many will describe their data collection tool — a survey, an interview protocol. That's a method, not a methodology. Methodology is the layer above it: the reasoning for why that tool, applied that way, actually answers the question being asked. Skipping this

layer is why so many research documents can be technically correct in their data collection and still fail to convince a skeptical reader their conclusion follows from it.

1. Methodology vs. Methods: The Distinction That Matters

Methods are the specific tools: a structured survey, a semi-structured interview, a regression model, a case study protocol. Methodology is the reasoning that justifies using those tools for this particular question — including the underlying assumptions about what counts as valid evidence for the question being asked. A methods section that lists tools without justifying why they fit the question has described methods, not methodology.

2. The Major Methodological Approaches

Approach	Core Assumption	Typical Methods
Positivist / quantitative	Reality can be measured objectively; patterns generalize across cases	Surveys, experiments, statistical analysis
Interpretivist / qualitative	Meaning is constructed by participants and context; depth matters more than generalizability	Interviews, ethnography, thematic analysis
Pragmatist / mixed methods	The question determines the method; combining approaches best serves practical understanding	Sequential or concurrent qualitative and quantitative combination
Doctrinal (legal)	Legal authority itself is the primary evidence, interpreted through established analytical conventions	Case law and statutory analysis

3. Choosing a Methodology for a Given Question

The starting point is always the question, not researcher preference or convenience. A question about the scale or frequency of a phenomenon points toward quantitative methods; a question about meaning, process, or lived experience points toward qualitative methods; a question requiring both depth and generalizability points toward mixed methods, sequenced deliberately rather than run in parallel without connection.

4. Writing a Defensible Methodology Section

- State the research question and explain why the chosen approach answers it better than the alternatives.
- Describe the specific methods in enough detail that another researcher could replicate the approach.
- Justify the sample or data source, and its relationship to the population the question concerns.
- Disclose the analytical approach — how raw data becomes a finding, not just what data was collected.
- State the limitations of the method honestly, rather than presenting it as flawless.

5. Validity, Reliability, and Rigor

Validity asks whether the method actually measures what it claims to measure. Reliability asks whether the method would produce consistent results if repeated. Rigor in qualitative research is often assessed differently — through transparency of process, triangulation across sources, and researcher reflexivity about their own position relative to the data — rather than statistical reliability metrics designed for quantitative work.

6. Methodological Limitations: Saying What the Method Can't Do

Every method has boundaries: a small qualitative sample cannot support broad generalization; a cross-sectional survey cannot establish causation; a single case study cannot be assumed representative. Stating these limitations explicitly is a sign of rigor, not weakness — and omitting them is one of the fastest ways a document loses credibility with an informed reader who notices the gap unprompted.

7. AI and Methodology

AI tools can help draft a methodology section's structure and language, and can assist in analysing large qualitative datasets by surfacing candidate themes. They cannot independently judge whether a chosen method actually fits a given question, and any AI-suggested methodological framework should be checked against established methodological literature before being adopted — using an unfamiliar method incorrectly is worse than using a simpler, well-justified one correctly.

8. Common Mistakes

- Describing methods without justifying why they fit the specific research question.
- Choosing a method because it's familiar rather than because it answers the question.
- Failing to disclose the analytical process — how data actually became a finding.
- Omitting methodological limitations, leaving the reader to discover them independently.
- Applying statistical reliability concepts to qualitative work where they don't directly translate.

9. Best Practices

- Let the research question determine the methodology, not the reverse.
- Justify the method explicitly, not just describe it.
- Disclose the analytical process in enough detail for a reader to assess its rigor.
- State limitations honestly and specifically.
- Verify any AI-suggested methodological framework against established literature before adopting it.

10. Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between methodology and methods?
Methods are the specific tools used (survey, interview, experiment); methodology is the reasoning that justifies choosing those tools for the specific research question.

Is quantitative research always more rigorous than qualitative?
No — rigor is assessed differently for each. Quantitative rigor relies on statistical validity and reliability; qualitative rigor relies on transparency, triangulation, and researcher reflexivity. Neither approach is inherently more rigorous in general.

Should a methodology section discuss limitations?
Yes — explicitly disclosing what the chosen method cannot establish is expected practice and strengthens, rather than weakens, the document's credibility.

11. Key Takeaways

- Methodology is the justification for a method, not the method itself.
- The research question should determine the methodological approach, not researcher convenience.
- Disclosing limitations explicitly is a sign of rigor, not a weakness to hide.

12. Working With OASIS Research Writing

OASIS Research Writing designs and justifies methodology for academic, legal, and business research, matched explicitly to the question at hand.

START A CONFIDENTIAL CONSULTATION

Internal Linking Recommendations

- /insights/qualitative-research — deep-dive on qualitative methodology
- /insights/quantitative-research — deep-dive on quantitative methodology
- /insights/mixed-methods-research — deep-dive on combined approaches
- /insights/research-proposal-guide — related companion piece
- /research-writing — primary service page
- /about — firm background

External Reference Recommendations

- University research-methods libguides distinguishing methodology from methods
- Peer-reviewed methodology journals (e.g., journals dedicated to qualitative or quantitative methods)
- Established texts on research design cited by major universities' graduate programs

JSON-LD Schema Recommendations

Article Schema

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{
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 "author": { "@type": "Organization", "name": "OASIS Research Writing" },
 "publisher": { "@type": "Organization", "name": "OASIS Research Writing" },
 "datePublished": "2026-07-24",
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FAQPage Schema


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     "acceptedAnswer": { "@type": "Answer", "text": "No — rigor is assessed differently for each approach; neither is inherently more rigorous in general." } }
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SEO / GEO Checklist

Primary keyword: research methodology

Secondary keywords: methodology vs methods, how to choose a research methodology, qualitative vs quantitative methodology

Long-tail keywords: difference between methodology and methods, is quantitative research more rigorous than qualitative

Search intent: Informational, primarily academic and professional research audiences.

Featured image: Diagram showing research question flowing into methodology choice flowing into specific methods, navy/gold palette.

Social description: "Methodology isn't your survey tool — it's the argument for why that tool answers your question. Here's how to build that argument."