

## Research Rundowns >Qualitative Methods > Qualitative Research Design

This review provides an overview of qualitative methods and designs using examples of research. Note that qualitative researchers frequently employ several methods in a single study.

### **Basic Qualitative Research Characteristics**

1. Design is generally based on a [social constructivism](#) perspective.
2. Research problems become research questions based on prior research or experience.
3. Sample sizes can be as small as one.
4. Data collection involves interview, observation, and/or archival (content) data.
5. Interpretation is based on a combination of researcher perspective and data collected.

### **Keywords**

- *Transcribing* is the process of converting audio or video data to text for analysis.
- *Coding* is the process of reviewing notes and discovering common “themes.”
- *Themes* describe the patterns/phenomenon as results.

### **Overview of Methods**

#### **1. Interview (Individual, focus groups)**

What is the difference between an interview and a survey? Primarily, open-ended questions differentiate the two. Qualitative researchers are concerned with making inference based on perspective, so it is extremely important to get as much data as possible for later analysis. Therefore, researchers spend a considerable amount of time designing interview questions. Interviews are designed to generate participant perspectives about ideas, opinions, and experiences.

#### **2. Observation (Individual, group, location)**

How is data derived from an observation? The researcher may use a variety of methods for observing, including taking general notes, using checklists, or time-and-motion logs. The considerable time it takes for even a short observation deters many researchers from using this method. Also, the researcher risks his or her interpretation when taking notes, which is accepted by qualitative researchers, but meets resistance from [post-positivists](#). Observations are designed to generate data on activities and behaviors, and are generally more focused on setting than other methods.

#### **3. Document Analysis (Content analysis of written data)**

What types of documents do qualitative researchers analyze? Virtually anything that supports the question asked. Print media has long been a staple data source for qualitative researchers, but electronic media (email, blogs, user Web pages, and even social network profiles) have extended the data qualitative researchers can collect and analyze. The greatest challenge offered by document analysis can be sifting through all of the data to make general observations.

## ***A Few Qualitative Research Designs***

### **1. Biographical Study**

A biographical study is often the first design type that comes to mind for most people. For example, consider [O'Brien's \*John F. Kennedy: A Biography\*](#). The author takes a collection of archival documents (interviews, speeches, and other writings) and various media (pictures, audio, and video footage) to present a comprehensive story of JFK. In the general sense, a biographical study is considered an exhaustive account of a life experience; however, just as some studies are limited to single aspects of a phenomenon, the focus of a biographical study can be much narrower. The film *Madame Curie* is an example. [Crawford studies the film](#) from a biographical perspective to present the reader with an examination of how all aspects of a film (director's perspective, actors, camera angles, historical setting) work to present a biography. Read the introduction and scan the text to get a feel for this perspective.

### **2. Phenomenology**

Your first step should be to take this word apart – phenomenon refers to an occurrence or experience, logical refers to a path toward understanding. So, we have a occurrence and a path (let's go with an individual's experience), which leads to a way of looking at the phenomenon from an individual's point of view. The reactions, perceptions, and feelings of an individual (or group of individuals) as she/he experienced an event are principally important to the phenomenologist looking to understand an event *beyond* purely quantitative details. [Gaston-Gayles, et al.'s \(2005\)](#) look at how the civil rights era changed the role of college administrators is a good example. The authors interview men and women who were administrators during that time to identify how the profession changed as a result.

### **3. Grounded Theory**

In a grounded theory study, interpretations are continually derived from raw data. A keyword to remember is *emergent*. The story emerges from the data. Often, researchers will begin with a broad topic, then use qualitative methods to gather information that defines (or further refines) a research question. For example, a teacher might want to know what effects the implementation of a dress code might have on discipline. Instead of formulating specific questions, a grounded theorist would begin by interviewing students, parents, and/or teachers, and perhaps asking students to write an essay about their thoughts on a dress code. The researcher would then follow the process of developing themes from reading the text by coding specific examples (using a highlighter, maybe) of where respondents mentioned common things. Resistance might be a common pattern *emerging* from the text, which may then become a topic for further analysis.

A grounded theory study is dynamic, in that it can be continually revised throughout nearly all phases of the study. You can imagine that this would frustrate a quantitative researcher. However, remember that perspective is centrally important to the qualitative researcher. While the end result of a grounded theory study is to generate some broad themes, the researcher is not making an attempt to generalize the study in the same, objective way characteristic of quantitative research. Here is a link to [a grounded theory article on student leadership](#).

### **4. Ethnography**

Those with sociology or anthropology backgrounds will be most familiar with this design. Ethnography focuses on meaning, largely through direct field observation. Researchers generally (though not always) become part of a culture that they wish to study, then present a picture of that culture through the "eyes" of its members. One of the most famous ethnographers is [Jane Goodall](#), who studied chimpanzees by living among them in their native East African habitat.

## **5. Case Study**

A case study is an in-depth analysis of people, events, and relationships, bounded by some unifying factor. An example is principal leadership in middle schools. Important aspects include not only the principal's behaviors and views on leadership, but also the perceptions of those who interact with her/him, the context of the school, outside constituents, comparison to other principals, and other quantitative "variables." Often, you may see a case study labeled "ethnographic case study" which generally refers to a more comprehensive study focused on a person or group of people, as the above example. Case studies do not have to be people-focused, however, as a case study to look at a program might be conducted to see how it accomplishes its intended outcomes. For example, the Department of Education might conduct a case study on a curricular implementation in a school district – examining how new curriculum moves from development to implementation to outcomes at each level of interaction (developer, school leadership, teacher, student).