

Types of data, methods and research design

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

1. **Tell primary data from secondary data, and quantitative data from qualitative data**, with examples of each.
2. **Weigh up the main secondary sources**: official statistics, personal documents, digital content (social media, websites, online forums) and media sources (newspapers, television, advertising), giving strengths and limitations of each.
3. **Weigh up the quantitative methods**: questionnaires, structured interviews, experiments (laboratory and field) and content analysis.
4. **Weigh up the qualitative methods**: participant and non-participant observation, each done overtly or covertly, and unstructured, semi-structured and group interviews.
5. **Describe the stages of research design**: choosing a research strategy, setting research questions and hypotheses, finding a sampling frame, choosing a sampling technique, running a pilot study, operationalising concepts, carrying out the research and interpreting the results.

Exam questions on this topic also lean on ideas from the next two topics, approaches to research (2.2: positivism and interpretivism, longitudinal studies, mixed methods) and research issues (2.3: validity, reliability, funding, values, ethics). This note gives the parts of those that the tagged questions need; the rest is in their own notes.

Understand it

Four kinds of data

Primary data is collected by the sociologist for their own study (questionnaire, interview, observation, experiment), so it fits the research question, but it costs time and money.

Secondary data already exists, produced by someone else for another purpose (official statistics, diaries, social media posts, newspapers, earlier studies). It is cheap and can cover the past or huge populations, but its questions and definitions were not the sociologist's choice, and it may be incomplete or biased.

Quantitative data is numerical: percentages, rates, counts, answers to closed questions. It shows patterns, trends, comparisons and correlations, and is easy to analyse and repeat.

Qualitative data is in words (or pictures): what people say, feel and mean, described in depth and detail. It shows the meanings behind behaviour.

The two splits cross, so every source sits in one of four boxes:

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Primary	Closed-question questionnaires, structured interviews, laboratory experiments, structured observation	Unstructured and group interviews, participant observation
Secondary	Official statistics, the data sets of earlier surveys	Diaries, letters, autobiographies, social media posts, media texts

Content analysis is a method applied to secondary sources (media texts): the researcher counts or codes them, so the numbers it produces are the researcher's own.

The ideas used to judge any method

Almost every strength or limitation comes back to a few concepts. Use the words exactly: examiners report that many candidates mix up validity and reliability.

Concept	Meaning	Usually a strength of
Validity	The data gives a true picture of what it claims to show: what people really think, feel and do	Qualitative methods
Reliability	Another researcher using the same method would get the same results, because the method is standardised	Quantitative methods
Representativeness	The sample has the same mix of characteristics as the group being studied	Large surveys with random samples
Generalisability	Findings from the sample can be applied to the whole population	Representative samples
Objectivity (value freedom)	The researcher's own opinions do not shape the results	Standardised, quantitative methods
Verstehen	Understanding behaviour by seeing the world through the eyes of those studied (Weber)	Observation, unstructured interviews
Rapport	A relationship of trust between researcher and respondent	Unstructured interviews, participant observation

A useful test: a set of bathroom scales that always reads 2 kg too heavy is **reliable** (same result each time) but not **valid** (the reading is wrong).

Some problems come up again and again:

- **Hawthorne effect:** people change their behaviour because they know they are being studied (named after Mayo's studies of workers at the Hawthorne factory).
- **Interviewer effect:** the interviewer's age, gender, ethnicity, class, tone of voice or reactions change the answers given.
- **Social desirability:** respondents give the answer that makes them look good rather than the true one.
- **Imposition problem:** the researcher decides the questions and answer options in advance, so respondents cannot say what matters to them.
- **Going native:** an observer becomes so involved in the group that they lose their detachment and start to see things only as members do.
- **Ecological validity:** whether the findings apply to real, everyday settings (low in an artificial laboratory).

Three kinds of factor shape which method is chosen:

- **Theoretical:** the researcher's approach. **Positivists** see society as a set of **social facts** that can be measured like the natural world (**Durkheim**); they want reliable, objective, quantitative data from large samples to test hypotheses and find cause and effect. **Interpretivists** see people as having free will and acting on meanings; they want valid, qualitative data that gives **verstehen**, usually from small groups in natural settings.
- **Practical:** time, cost, funding, access to the group, the researcher's skills and personal characteristics, and the topic itself.
- **Ethical:** informed consent, avoiding harm, deception, confidentiality and anonymity, the right to withdraw, and the law.

Secondary sources

Official statistics are numerical data collected by governments and their agencies: the census, birth, marriage, divorce and death registrations, crime figures, exam results, health and unemployment figures.

- **Strengths:** large or complete coverage, so representative; collected regularly in the same way, so trends over time can be traced; comparisons between regions, groups and countries; free; sometimes the only source available; positivists treat them as social facts. **Durkheim** compared suicide rates between groups and countries to show that a social cause (how well people are integrated into society) affected an apparently individual act.
- **Limitations:** the definitions and categories are the state's, not the researcher's (what counts as "poverty" or "unemployed" can be changed); some record only what is reported or recorded, so crime statistics miss the **dark figure** of crime never reported; they show what happens but not why; governments may present figures in a flattering way; Marxists and feminists say they reflect the interests of powerful groups.

- **Interpretivists** argue that many statistics are **social constructions**: they are the end product of decisions made by people. **Douglas** and **Atkinson** showed that a death is recorded as suicide only after a coroner interprets the evidence, so suicide rates tell us about coroners' judgements as much as about suicide. **Hard** statistics (births, deaths) are more trustworthy than **soft** ones (crime, suicide) that depend on such decisions.

Personal documents are written or made by individuals about their own lives: diaries, letters, autobiographies, photographs, home videos. **Thomas and Znaniecki** used letters between Polish migrants and their families to study how migration changed their lives.

- Strengths: rich qualitative data in the person's own words, so high in validity and good for verstehen; give an insider's view of private experiences; the only way to study people in the past; cheap.
- Limitations: may not be authentic or truthful (written to impress a reader, or forged); the people who keep diaries and write memoirs are not typical, so they are not representative; hard to find and to interpret; the researcher may read meanings into them.
- **Scott** gave four tests for any document: **authenticity** (is it genuine?), **credibility** (is it sincere and accurate?), **representativeness** (is it typical?) and **meaning** (can we understand what the writer meant?).

Digital content is material created online: social media posts and comments, blogs, forums, videos, websites, reviews.

- Strengths: a vast amount is free and searchable; produced naturally, so no Hawthorne effect; reaches groups hard to meet face to face; can be followed as events happen.
- Limitations: fake, anonymous or automated posts make authenticity hard to check; people present an edited self online; users are not representative (the **digital divide**: older and poorer people are less online); using posts without consent raises ethical questions.

Media sources (newspapers, television, films, advertising, news websites) are studied through content analysis or semiology (reading the hidden meanings of signs). Strengths: cheap and available; show how groups are represented; comparisons over time. Limitations: representations, not reality; nothing about how audiences read them; subjective readings.

Quantitative methods

Questionnaires are written lists of questions that respondents answer themselves. **Closed questions** give fixed answers to choose from (yes/no, tick boxes, rating scales), so they are easy to count; **open questions** let people answer in their own words. They can be **postal**, **online**, or handed out and collected in person. (Online and postal are different: online questionnaires come back instantly and cost almost nothing to send.)

- Strengths: a large sample quickly and cheaply, so representative and generalisable; the same questions for everyone, so standardised and **reliable**; closed answers are easy to code, count and compare (often by computer); no interviewer effect; anonymity encourages honesty on sensitive topics. Positivists favour them.

- Limitations: **low response rates** (especially postal), and those who reply are **self-selecting**, so unrepresentative; the **imposition problem**; no one to explain a confusing question; closed answers lack depth, so low validity; the researcher cannot be sure who filled it in; literacy is needed.

Structured interviews are like a questionnaire read aloud: the interviewer asks the same questions, in the same order, with the same wording, and records answers in fixed categories.

- Strengths: higher response rates than postal questionnaires; people who cannot read can take part; standardised, so reliable and easy to compare; little interviewer training needed.
- Limitations: **interviewer effect** and social desirability (worse with a team of interviewers); no follow-up questions, so little depth and low validity; the imposition problem; dearer than questionnaires.

Experiments test a **hypothesis** by changing one factor (the **independent variable**) and measuring its effect on another (the **dependent variable**), while keeping everything else the same. An **experimental group** gets the change; a **control group** does not, for comparison.

- **Laboratory experiments** take place in an artificial setting the researcher controls. Strengths: variables can be controlled and isolated, so **cause and effect** can be shown; the procedure can be repeated exactly, so **reliable**; quantitative data to test hypotheses; objective and scientific, which attracts funding. Limitations: an artificial setting, so low **ecological validity**; people who know they are tested change their behaviour (Hawthorne effect, **demand characteristics**); deception and harm (**Milgram**); humans have free will and so many social variables that full control is impossible.
- **Field experiments** take place in a real social setting (a school, a workplace, a street), often without participants knowing. **Rosenthal and Jacobson** told teachers that some randomly chosen pupils were about to "spurt" ahead; a year later those pupils had improved more, showing the effect of teacher expectations. Strengths: natural setting, so higher ecological validity; people are often unaware, so no Hawthorne effect; can involve large groups; can track change over time and inform policy. Limitations: far less control of variables, so cause and effect is less certain; ethical problems of deception and no consent; hard to repeat exactly.

Content analysis studies media texts systematically. The researcher draws up a **coding sheet** of categories (for example, the roles women are shown in) and counts how often each appears in a sample of texts. A qualitative version looks for themes and meanings instead of counts. The **Glasgow University Media Group** used it to show bias in television news.

- Strengths: sources are cheap and easy to get; the coding sheet is standardised, so others can repeat it (reliable); counts are easy to compare across media, countries and years; the texts are not affected by being studied; it reveals patterns and themes that are not obvious on the surface.
- Limitations: the researcher chooses the categories and decides which category each item fits, so bias can creep in; counting how often something appears misses its meaning and context; it tells us nothing about how audiences interpret what they see; coding a large sample is slow.

Qualitative methods

Observation has two choices. **Participant** observers join in with the group's activities; **non-participant** observers watch without taking part. **Overt** means the group knows they are being studied; **covert** means the research is secret. Non-participant observation can also be **structured**, using a schedule that records how often set behaviours happen (which gives quantitative data).

	the group knows	the research is secret
	overt	covert
participant joins in	joins in; the group knows <i>e.g. Whyte's street corner gang</i> + consent, notes, questions – Hawthorne effect	joins in secretly <i>e.g. Patrick's Glasgow gang</i> + natural behaviour, access – no consent, danger, notes
non-participant only watches	watches openly <i>e.g. a schedule in a classroom</i> + detached, easy to record – Hawthorne effect, less insight	watches without being seen <i>e.g. a busy public place</i> + natural behaviour – no consent, little insight

Participant observation in general:

- Strengths: the researcher sees what people **do**, not just what they say, in a natural setting, so validity is high; sharing group life gives *verstehen*; flexible; a way into hidden groups. Interpretivists favour it.
- Limitations: slow and sometimes dangerous; one small group, so unrepresentative; cannot be repeated, so unreliable; observer bias; going native; recording is hard.

Covert participant observation: the researcher hides their identity. **Humphreys** acted as a lookout to study secret sexual encounters between men in public toilets; **Patrick** joined a Glasgow gang by passing himself off as a member.

- Strengths: the group does not know, so there is no Hawthorne effect and behaviour stays natural, giving more valid data; the only way to study groups that would refuse a researcher (criminals, closed religious groups).
- Limitations: no **informed consent**, and the group is deceived; danger if discovered; pressure to join illegal acts; no open note-taking or questions; hard to leave.

Overt participant observation: the group knows. **Whyte** studied an Italian American street gang openly, with the help of a gatekeeper, "Doc", who vouched for him.

- Strengths: ethical, as members can consent and withdraw; open notes and questions; a clear role, so less risk of going native; easier to avoid illegal acts and to leave.
- Limitations: Hawthorne effect; the group may refuse access or hide activities; less complete *verstehen*.

Non-participant observation keeps the researcher detached, which helps objectivity and recording, but gives less insight into meanings; if overt it suffers the Hawthorne effect.

Interviews run along a line from fully structured to unstructured. The less structured, the more depth and validity, but the less reliability and comparability.

Unstructured interviews are guided conversations: the interviewer has topics, not set questions, and follows what the respondent says. **Dobash and Dobash** used them to study women's experiences of domestic violence; **Oakley** argued that a friendly, two-way interview gets more honest answers from women than a cold, formal one.

- Strengths: **rapport** and trust lead to honest, detailed answers; the interviewer can **probe**, ask follow-ups and check understanding; the respondent can raise new issues, so less **imposition**; good for sensitive topics; gives verstehen and high validity.
- Limitations: slow and costly, so small, unrepresentative samples; each interview differs, so unreliable and hard to compare; needs skilled interviewers; interviewer effect; bias in choosing what to report.

Semi-structured interviews use a set of core questions for every respondent, but the interviewer can probe, change the order and add follow-up questions.

- Strengths: more control than an unstructured interview, so easier to compare and analyse; can collect both quantitative and qualitative data; flexible enough to follow up answers and build rapport; a balance between reliability and validity.
- Limitations: less depth than an unstructured interview and less reliable than a structured one; interviewer effect; the core questions still impose the researcher's agenda.

Group interviews question several people together. In a **focus group** the researcher sets a topic and acts as a facilitator while members discuss it with each other. They are often used with pupils in school research (**Willis's "lads"**, **Mac an Ghail**).

- Strengths: peers in a familiar setting make people relaxed and confident; one answer sparks ideas in others, giving range and depth; shared meanings show up in the discussion; the group leads, so less researcher imposition.
- Limitations: dominant members take over and quiet ones say little; peer pressure and social desirability push members towards one view; hard to record and impossible to repeat exactly; small groups are not representative.

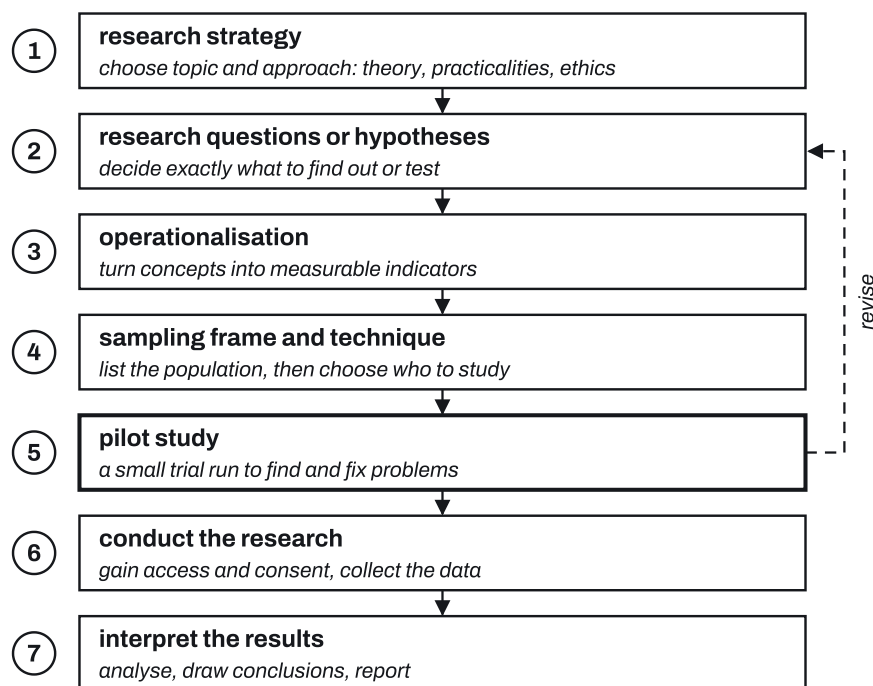
Wider approaches that use these methods

- **Social surveys** collect standardised information from a large sample, usually by questionnaire or structured interview.
- **Case studies** study one example (a school, a community, a gang) in depth.
- **Ethnography** describes a group's whole way of life from the inside, usually by participant observation.
- **Longitudinal studies** study the same group at intervals over a long period (months to decades). Examples: the **National Child Development Study** (everyone born in one week of 1958 in Britain, followed through life), **Douglas's** study of the education of children born in 1946, and the **7 Up** documentaries (the same children filmed every seven years). Strengths: show **change over time** and its likely causes, unlike a one-off "snapshot"; reveal trends; less reliance on people remembering the past,

because earlier answers are on record; trust builds over the years. Limitations: **sample attrition** (people drop out, die or move away, so the sample becomes unrepresentative); very expensive, with few funders willing to commit for decades; repeated study may change behaviour (Hawthorne effect); research teams change.

- **Mixed methods: triangulation** uses two or more methods to check one set of results against another, raising validity; **methodological pluralism** combines methods (often quantitative and qualitative) to build a fuller picture. **Barker's** study of the Moonies (a religious movement) used questionnaires, interviews and participant observation.

Stages of research design



- 1. Research strategy.** Decide the overall plan: survey, case study, experiment, ethnography, longitudinal study or mixed methods, and whether the data will be mainly quantitative or qualitative. Theoretical, practical and ethical factors all shape this choice.
- 2. Research questions and hypotheses.** A **hypothesis** is a testable statement predicting a link between two variables, such as "pupils who work more than 15 hours a week in paid jobs get lower exam grades"; positivists test hypotheses. A **research question** is an open question to explore, such as "how do part-time workers experience school?"; interpretivists often start this way and let ideas emerge.
- 3. Operationalisation.** Turn an abstract concept into something that can be measured, using **indicators**: social class measured by occupation, religiosity by how often people pray or attend worship, poverty by income below a set line. Different definitions give different results, so the choice matters, and interpretivists argue it imposes the researcher's meaning.
- 4. Sampling.** The **target population** is everyone the study is about. A **sampling frame** is a list of everyone in it (a school register, an electoral roll, a staff list). A **sample** is the smaller group actually studied. Some groups have no sampling frame (illegal drug users, the homeless).

5. **Pilot study.** A small trial run of the research on a few people like the real sample. It shows whether questions are clear and not leading, whether answer options cover all replies, how long it takes, whether the method is practical and affordable, and what response rate to expect; interviewers can practise. Fixing problems before the main study saves money and improves validity and reliability.
6. **Conducting the research.** Gain access (often through a **gatekeeper**), get informed consent, collect the data and record it accurately.
7. **Interpreting the results.** Analyse the data (statistics for quantitative data, coding into themes for qualitative), decide whether the hypothesis is supported, draw conclusions and report them. The researcher's values can shape interpretation here.

Sampling techniques

Random (probability) samples give everyone in the sampling frame a known chance of selection, so they are more likely to be representative:

- **Simple random:** every member of the sampling frame has an equal chance of being picked, for example by drawing names or using a random number generator.
- **Systematic:** pick every n th name from the list. From a school roll of 1200 students, a sample of 60 means every $1200 \div 60 = 20$ th name.
- **Stratified random:** divide the frame into groups (strata) such as gender or age, then pick randomly from each in proportion. If 45% of the 1200 students are girls, a sample of 60 includes $0.45 \times 60 = 27$ girls and 33 boys.
- **Cluster:** divide the population into areas or units, randomly pick some units, then sample within them; **multi-stage** sampling repeats this (a sample of schools, then of classes within them).

Non-random samples are used when there is no sampling frame, the group is hidden, or depth matters more than generalising:

- **Quota:** the researcher fills set numbers in each category to match the population (27 girls and 33 boys), but chooses who to ask, so it is not random.
- **Snowball:** one member introduces the researcher to others, who introduce more; used for hard-to-reach groups such as gang members or drug users.
- **Opportunity:** whoever is available and fits the criteria.
- **Volunteer** (self-selecting): people choose to take part, for example by answering an advertisement.

Reasons for using a non-representative sample: no sampling frame exists; the group is hidden or distrustful; interpretivists want depth and meaning, not generalisation; it is quicker and cheaper; the research is exploratory.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in Sociology. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Key term	Status
Primary data (collected by the researcher) vs secondary data (already exists); quantitative (numbers) vs qualitative (words and meanings)	Learn it
Validity (a true picture), reliability (same results if repeated), representativeness (sample matches the population), generalisability, objectivity	Learn it
Hawthorne effect, interviewer effect, social desirability, imposition problem, going native, ecological validity	Learn it
Theoretical, practical and ethical factors; positivism vs interpretivism	Learn it
Hard vs soft statistics, dark figure of crime; Scott's tests: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, meaning	Learn it
Independent and dependent variables, control group; coding sheet	Learn it
Longitudinal studies and sample attrition; triangulation, methodological pluralism	Learn it
Research design: strategy, hypotheses, operationalisation, sampling frame, sampling technique, pilot study, conducting, interpreting	Learn it
Sampling: simple random, systematic, stratified, cluster, multi-stage; quota, snowball, opportunity, volunteer	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 73 questions for this topic (2021–2026), all from Paper 1 except one essay from the old Paper 2 (June 2021). In 25 of them both parts of Question 2 are on this topic and count as different types, so the counts add up to 98.

Question type	Questions
Explain two strengths or limitations of a method or source (6 marks)	32
Describe two types or features (4 marks)	16
Evaluate one method or source (26-mark essay)	14
Evaluate a wider methods debate (26-mark essay)	11
Explain two influences on the research process (8 marks)	11
Explain two reasons a method or design choice is used or valued (8 marks)	10
Explain two features of the positivist or interpretivist approach (8 marks)	4

1. Explain two strengths or limitations of a method or source (32 questions)

Question 2(b). Every method and source above has been asked, some several times: questionnaires (closed, postal, online), structured, semi-structured, unstructured and group interviews, laboratory and field experiments, overt and covert participant observation, content analysis, official statistics, qualitative secondary data and longitudinal studies. Each of the two points earns up to **3 marks**:

1. **Identify** the strength or limitation in a few words: "Low response rate."
2. **Explain why this method has it**, using a feature of the method: "Postal questionnaires arrive with no one to encourage people to fill them in, so many are never returned."
3. **Explain why it matters**, naming the concept: "Those who do reply may be a self-selecting group with strong views, so the sample is no longer representative and findings cannot be generalised."

Variations you will meet:

- **"One strength and one limitation"** (7 of the 32): one of each, same 3-step build.
- **A version of a method** (overt or covert observation, online or postal questionnaires, field or laboratory experiments): the point must depend on that version. For overt observation, "it gives verstehen" fits all participant observation and is not credited; "members can give informed consent" is about the overt part. For longitudinal studies, each point must use the time dimension (tracking change, attrition).
- **Pick two clearly different points**: "cheap" and "quick" are one practical point. One practical and one theoretical point (validity, reliability, representativeness) is safest.

2. Describe two types or features (16 questions)

Question 1, **4 marks**: for each of two items, **1 mark** for naming it and **1 mark** for a short accurate description. Asked so far: features of a laboratory experiment, features of longitudinal studies, types of qualitative interview, types of interview, types of observation, types of questionnaire, sampling techniques, quantitative research methods, secondary sources of qualitative data.

1. **Name** each item clearly at the start: "Snowball sampling." Without a clear identification no mark can be given, even for a good description.
2. **Describe** it in one sentence: what it is or how it works, with an example. "The researcher finds one member of a hidden group, who introduces them to others, and so on; useful for groups with no sampling frame, such as drug users."
3. Make the two items **clearly different**: for observation, covert participant and overt non-participant; for questionnaires, postal and online, or closed-ended and open-ended; for interviews, unstructured and group. Don't describe online questionnaires as if they were postal ones.
4. Keep it short, with no evaluation. For "features", say what the method **is like** (a controlled, artificial setting; an independent variable changed; a control group), not claims that fit any method (see Common mistakes).

3. Evaluate one method or source (14 questions)

Section B essay on one method or source (official statistics, structured, qualitative or group interviews, covert or overt participant observation, longitudinal studies, questionnaires, experiments, secondary data). Marked **AO1** knowledge 8, **AO2** interpretation and application 8, **AO3** analysis and evaluation 10, so $8 + 8 + 10 = 26$ marks.

1. **Introduction** (short): what the method is and which approach favours it.
2. **For and against** (4–5 developed paragraphs each): every point linked to a concept (reliability, validity, representativeness, practicality, ethics) and a named study, mixing theoretical, practical and ethical points.
3. **Evaluate inside each paragraph** ("however, a pilot study reduces this..."). Good lines: **fitness for purpose** (it suits some topics and groups, not others), comparison with other methods, and **triangulation**.
4. **Conclusion**: how useful the method is, and for what kind of research.

Stay on the method named (see Common mistakes).

4. Evaluate a wider methods debate (11 questions)

Essays on: quantitative methods are the best way (or have more strengths than limitations); qualitative methods are the best way, or lack reliability; sociology should follow the methods of the natural sciences; using several methods together is more effective; practical factors (or theoretical perspective) are the main influence on choice of method; quantitative methods are more useful than qualitative (old Paper 2, 25 marks). Same AO1/AO2/AO3 marking.

1. **Identify which side the view takes**, then build that side first with the matching approach: **positivism** (social facts, scientific method, objectivity, reliability, large representative samples, generalisation, hypothesis testing, Durkheim) or **interpretivism** (free will, meanings, verstehen, validity, natural settings, Weber).
2. **Use several named methods as evidence** for each side, not as separate descriptions.
3. **For "influences on choice" essays**, weigh theoretical, practical (time, cost, funding, access, the researcher's characteristics) and ethical factors against each other, and show they interact: a positivist may still choose interviews if there is no sampling frame.
4. **For "mixed methods" essays**: for, triangulation and pluralism give both reliability and validity (Barker); against, more time and cost, and the two approaches disagree about what counts as knowledge.
5. **Conclusion**: the best method often depends on the research question.

5. Explain two influences on the research process (11 questions)

Question 2(a), **8 marks**: funding, bias and values, the difficulty of being objective, ethical factors in observation, practical factors (in observation or in choosing a method), how interviewers influence answers, why some groups are hard to study. Each of the two points earns up to **4 marks**:

1. **Make the point**: "The funding body may decide which method is used."

2. **Explain it:** "Government departments usually want numbers to justify policy, so they expect quantitative methods."
3. **Select sociological material:** a method, concept, theory or study, such as "large-scale social surveys".
4. **Explain how the material supports the point:** "Social surveys give the statistics on a social problem that a government funder wants, so a researcher may use one even if interviews would suit the topic better."

Points that work:

- **Funding:** the funder chooses the topic (often social problems), expects certain methods, sets the budget (which limits sample size, length of study and method), may target some groups and ignore others, or put pressure on the findings; self-funded research is small-scale.
- **Values and bias:** values shape the topic chosen (**Becker:** "whose side are we on?"), question wording, what is recorded and how results are interpreted; researchers absorb the ideas of their time (**Kuhn's** paradigms); a preferred approach steers the method.
- **Interviewer influence:** approval or disapproval in tone or expression; age, gender, ethnicity and class; social desirability; leading questions.
- **Ethics in observation:** informed consent (impossible in covert work), deception, confidentiality and anonymity, harm to the group or the researcher, being drawn into illegal acts, whether to report crimes seen.
- **Practical factors:** time, cost and funding, access and acceptance by the group (gatekeepers), the researcher's personal characteristics and skills, recording data, safety.
- **Hard-to-study groups:** criminal or deviant groups do not want to be found; no sampling frame (snowball sampling, gatekeepers); social differences between researcher and group; legal and ethical limits (children); practical problems of keeping contact (the homeless).

6. Explain two reasons a method or design choice is used or valued (10 questions)

Question 2(a), same 4-mark build (point, explain, material, link back). Asked: why group or unstructured interviews are high in validity, why questionnaires are high in reliability, why positivists use experiments or favour questionnaires, why interpretivists use participant observation, why a researcher might use a pilot study, a non-representative sample, or more than one method.

1. **Tie a feature of the method to the quality asked about.** Validity comes from rapport, depth, flexibility (probing), less imposition and natural settings. Reliability comes from standardised questions, fixed categories, no interviewer and easy replication. Positivists value control of variables, cause and effect, hypotheses and objectivity.
2. **Support and link back:** a concept, theory or study, then the question's words ("...so unstructured interviews give a more valid picture of meanings").

Pilot studies, non-representative samples and using more than one method: use the reasons in "Stages of research design", "Sampling techniques" and "Wider approaches".

7. Explain two features of the positivist or interpretivist approach (4 questions)

Question 2(a), same 4-mark build. Each feature needs a matching method or study as its sociological material.

- **Positivist features:** measurable **social facts**; the **scientific method** and hypothesis testing; **cause and effect**; **quantitative** methods; **objectivity** and **reliability**. Material: Durkheim's suicide statistics.
- **Interpretivist features:** **meanings** and free will; **verstehen** (Weber); **qualitative** methods; **validity**; natural settings. Material: Whyte or Patrick, Dobash and Dobash.

Give features of the approach asked about, not the other approach's turned round ("interpretivists do not use statistics").

Worked examples

Example 1

Describe two features of covert participant observation. [4]

Feature 1. The researcher's identity is hidden (1): the group is not told it is being studied, and the researcher poses as an ordinary member, as Patrick did when he joined a Glasgow gang (1).

Feature 2. The researcher takes part in the group's everyday activities (1): they share in what members do over weeks or months, so they see behaviour as it happens in its natural setting (1).

Two different features, each identified and described: **4 marks**.

Example 2

(a) Explain two problems of operationalising concepts in sociological research. [8]

(b) Explain two limitations of using digital content in sociological research. [6]

(a) Problem 1. One problem is that **concepts can be measured in different ways (1)**. A concept such as poverty has no single agreed meaning, so one researcher may measure it by income and another by whether people can afford basic items (1). Official statistics on poverty are a good example (1): when a government changes the income line it uses, the number of people counted as poor rises or falls even though no one's life has changed, so findings depend on the definition chosen rather than on reality (1).

Problem 2. A second problem is that **the indicator may not capture what the concept really means to people (1)**. Measuring religiosity by how often people attend a place of worship misses people who pray privately, and counts some who attend only for social reasons (1). Interpretivists argue this is the **imposition problem (1)**: the researcher's definition is imposed on respondents, so the data lacks validity because it does not reflect their own meanings (1).

Two points, each made, explained, supported with sociological material and linked back: **8 marks**.

(b) Limitation 1. Authenticity is hard to check (1), because posts can be made under false names or by automated accounts, and the researcher usually cannot contact the author **(1)**. This means the researcher cannot be sure the content is genuine, which reduces the validity of conclusions drawn from it **(1)**.

Limitation 2. Users are not representative (1), because of the digital divide: older people, poorer people and those in some regions are less likely to post online **(1)**. So findings based on online content cannot be generalised to the whole population **(1)**.

Two limitations, each identified, explained and shown to matter: **6 marks**.

Example 3

Evaluate the usefulness of content analysis in sociological research. **[26]**

Introduction. Content analysis is the systematic study of media texts. In its quantitative form the researcher uses a coding sheet to count how often set categories appear; in its qualitative form the researcher looks for themes and meanings. Positivists value the counting version as reliable and objective.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Practical:** newspapers, television, advertising and websites are cheap and easy to get, and the researcher needs no access to a group or consent from participants.
- **Reliable:** a clear coding sheet means another researcher analysing the same texts should get similar counts, so the study can be checked and repeated.
- **Comparisons and trends:** the same coding sheet can be applied to different newspapers, countries or decades, showing, for example, whether women are shown in a wider range of jobs than thirty years ago.
- **No Hawthorne effect:** texts do not change because they are being studied.
- **Reveals patterns:** the **Glasgow University Media Group** showed that television news coverage of strikes regularly favoured management, a pattern hard to spot from watching casually.

Against the view (AO3).

- **However**, the researcher chooses the categories and decides where each item fits, so their values can shape the results. This weakens the claim that content analysis is fully objective, although testing the coding sheet in a pilot and having two coders check each other reduces the problem.
- **Counting misses meaning:** one sympathetic and one mocking image of a group both count as "one appearance". Interpretivists argue that a qualitative approach, such as semiology, is needed to understand what a text means, which suggests the counting version is useful only as a first step.
- **Audiences:** content analysis shows what is in the media but not how people interpret it. Audiences may reject or reinterpret messages, so conclusions about media influence need audience research as well.
- **Practical limits:** coding a large sample of programmes or posts is slow, so samples may be small or selective.

Conclusion. Content analysis is highly useful for showing, reliably and cheaply, what the media present and how this changes, which is why it is so widely used. Its weaknesses lie in meaning and effects, so it is most useful as part of methodological pluralism: counts to find the pattern, qualitative analysis to read its meaning, and audience research to test its influence.

How it would be marked. Detailed points with concepts and a study (AO1 7–8), applied to content analysis (AO2 7–8), with explicit, sustained evaluation and a justified conclusion (AO3 9–10). In the exam, make each bullet a full paragraph.

Common mistakes

- **Mixing up validity and reliability.** Examiners report this in many sessions: calling reliability a strength of unstructured interviews, or validity a strength of closed questionnaires. Validity is about truth; reliability is about getting the same result again.
- **Generic points.** Points that fit any method ("it is time-consuming", "it can be biased") score little in Questions 1 and 2. Tie each to a feature of **this** method or version.
- **Vague sampling descriptions.** "Random sampling is when people are picked randomly" is not enough; say that everyone in the sampling frame has an equal chance of selection.
- **Confusing types.** Postal questionnaires are not online questionnaires; a group interview is more than "an interview with several people" (describe the interaction and discussion); a field experiment is not a laboratory experiment.
- **Restating the point instead of explaining the material** in Question 2(a). After naming a study or concept, say **how** it supports the point.
- **Mixing practical, ethical and theoretical factors.** Cost is not an ethical issue; reliability is not a practical factor. Put each point in the right category, especially in "practical factors" questions.
- **Describing methods instead of answering the essay question.** Examiners report answers about methods in general, or half an essay on positivism versus interpretivism, with no link to the view in the question.
- **Juxtaposition in essays.** A list of strengths (or positivist points) then a list of limitations (or interpretivist points) stays in the middle AO3 levels; weigh each point and reach a judgement.

How to get the marks

- **Mark builds:** "Describe" (Q1) is name (1) + describe (1), twice; "Explain two strengths/limitations" (Q2(b)) is identify, why the method has it, why it matters, 3 marks each; "Explain two reasons/ways/features" (Q2(a)) is point, explanation, material, link, 4 marks each.
- **"Evaluate"** (26 marks): AO1 8, AO2 8, AO3 10. Detailed points on both sides with concepts and named studies, applied to the question; evaluation that is clear, explicit and sustained; a conclusion that says **how far** you agree.

- **Sociological material** means a method, concept, theory or study. Positivism and interpretivism give a frame for most answers, but named examples (Durkheim, Douglas, Whyte, Humphreys, Patrick, Oakley, Rosenthal and Jacobson, the 7 Up series) push answers into the top levels.
- **Use the question's words** in your link-back sentences ("...so official statistics are useful for..."); examiners note that missing the key words of the question costs marks.
- **Manage time:** Question 1 needs only a few lines; save time for planning the essay.

Quick check

1. What is the difference between validity and reliability? Give one method that is usually strong on each.
2. A researcher has an electoral register of 3600 names and wants a systematic sample of 150. Every how-many-th name should they pick?
3. In that population 36% are aged over 65. How many people over 65 should a stratified sample of 150 include?
4. Give two reasons why a researcher might run a pilot study before a large questionnaire survey.
5. Describe the imposition problem and name one method it affects.

Answers

1. **Validity** means the data gives a true picture of what people really think or do; **reliability** means another researcher using the same method would get the same results. Unstructured interviews are usually strong on validity; closed-question questionnaires are usually strong on reliability.
2. $3600 \div 150 = 24$, so every 24th name.
3. $0.36 \times 150 = 54$ people aged over 65 (and 96 aged 65 or under).
4. **To check the questions:** a small trial shows which questions are unclear, leading or missing answer options, so they can be rewritten before the main survey, making the answers more valid. **To check practicality:** it shows how long the questionnaire takes, what response rate to expect and what the survey will cost, so the researcher can adjust the sample or budget before money is wasted.
5. The **imposition problem** is when the researcher decides the questions and answer categories in advance, so respondents cannot express what matters to them; their answers are forced into the researcher's framework. It affects closed-question questionnaires and structured interviews.

Past questions to try

- [9699/12/F/M/26 Q2](#): why group interviews are high in validity, and strengths of field experiments.
- [9699/12/O/N/24 Q2](#): how interviewers influence answers, and overt participant observation.
- [9699/12/M/J/25 Q5](#): essay evaluating structured interviews.
- [9699/11/M/J/25 Q2](#): ethics in observation, and strengths of content analysis.