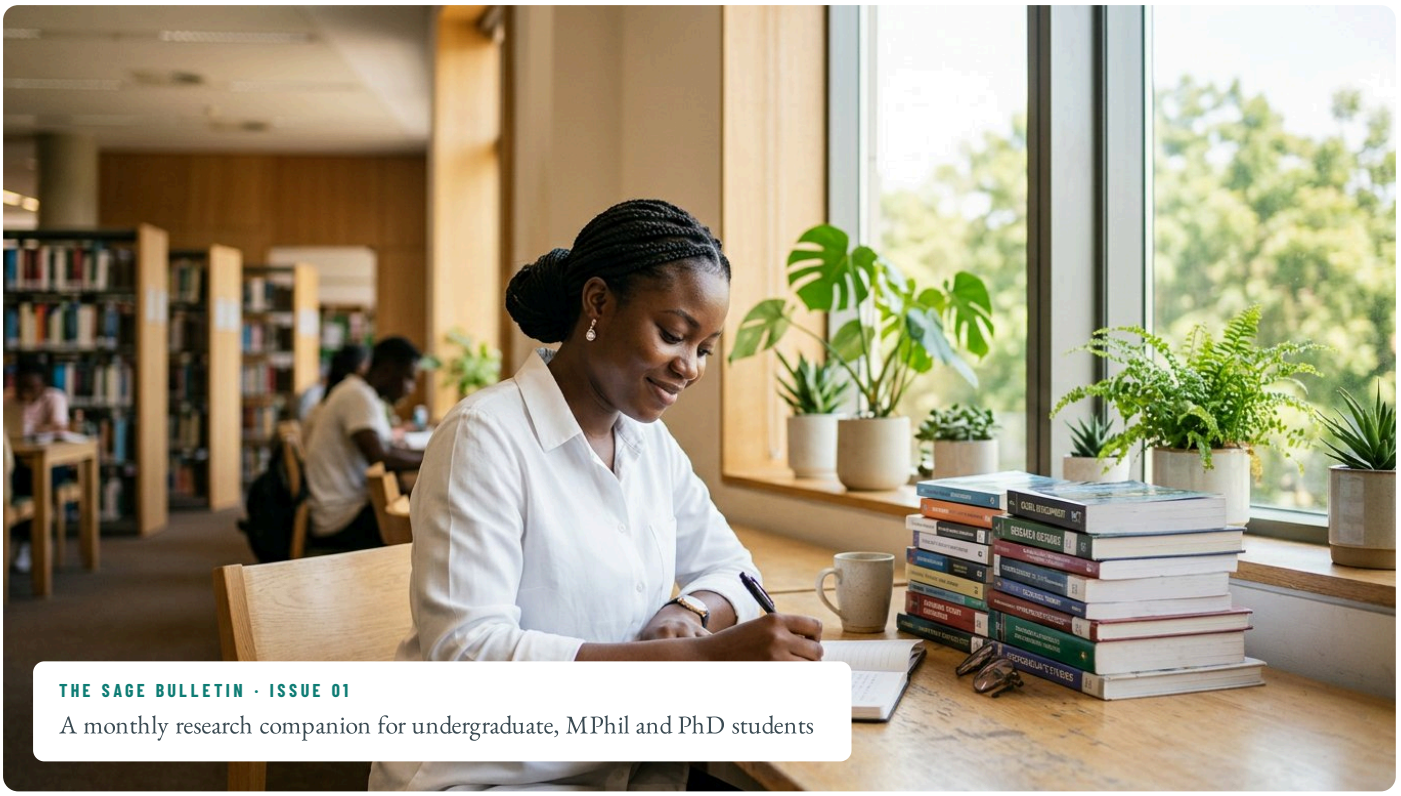
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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & METHODS
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THE SAGE BULLETIN · ISSUE 01
A monthly research companion for undergraduate, MPhil and PhD students

THE DIFFERENCE THAT DECIDES YOUR CHAPTER THREE

Methodology is not methods.

Two words, used as if they were one. One is the reasoning that justifies your study; the other is the procedure that produces your data. This issue separates them, tests the separation on a single study, and shows what examiners look for.

01 **The difference**
Methodology and methods, defined and tested on one running example — pages 2–3.

02 **Designs & rigour**
Three families of design, the research onion, ethics and quality.

03 **Ask the Sage**
Four questions students actually ask, and five common errors.

04 **Checklist**
Ten boxes to tick before you email the draft to your supervisor.

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Methodology is not methods.

One is the logic that justifies a study. The other is the procedure that produces its data. Keep them together and Chapter Three reads like a plan; blur them and it reads like a shopping list.

Every research proposal makes two different promises. The first is a promise about **logic**: what kind of knowledge you believe is possible, and therefore what kind of study can legitimately produce it. The second is a promise about **procedure**: the instruments, samples and analyses you will actually use to generate and handle data.

Crotty (1998, p. 3) draws the line precisely. *Methods* are "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis." *Methodology* is "the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods, and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes."

Read those two sentences again and the hierarchy appears: methodology answers **why this design**; methods answer **how the data came to be**. A methods section that names no design is a list of activities. A methodology section that names no instrument is a philosophy essay.

The distinction also settles an old argument. Crotty reminds us that the difference between qualitative and quantitative research "occurs at the level of methods, not at the level of epistemology or theoretical perspective." A survey is not automatically positivist and an interview is not automatically interpretivist — the methodology decides what the method is allowed to mean.



FIG. 1 — THE TWO LAYERS

An audio-recorded interview is a *method*. Whether it counts as evidence of a trader's true saving behaviour, or as an account she has constructed for you, is a *methodological* decision.

> *"If a sentence in your Chapter Three could sit in another student's thesis on another topic, it is probably a method. If it is tied to your question, your field and your assumptions, it is probably methodology."*

01 · THE LOGIC — Methodology

The strategy behind the choice of methods

The worldview, approach and design that justify your choices: ontology and epistemology, deductive or inductive reasoning, and the design itself — survey, case study, ethnography, experiment, action research, mixed methods. It is where sampling logic, quality criteria and the limits of your claims belong.

SPECIMEN
A qualitative case study of one rural clinic's referral system.

02 · THE TOOLS — Methods

The techniques used to gather and analyse data

The concrete techniques you use to generate and analyse data: questionnaire, semi-structured interview, focus group, document review, observation, experiment; and for analysis, thematic analysis, content analysis, descriptive statistics or regression. Each method carries its own instrument and reporting standard.

SPECIMEN
Twelve semi-structured interviews, coded with Braun and Clarke's six phases.

ONE STUDY, TWO LAYERS THE SAME QUESTION, TWO KINDS OF ANSWER

"Does mobile-money use improve household savings among market traders in Accra?"

METHODOLOGY — THE DESIGN

Post-positivist worldview. A quantitative, explanatory design: a cross-sectional survey, argued deductively. A hypothesis drawn from the financial-inclusion literature is tested against new data, and findings are cautiously generalised to the trader population. The question asks whether one variable affects another, across many people, at one point in time — a design question, not a tool question.

METHODS — THE TOOLS

A structured questionnaire administered to 400 traders selected by multi-stage sampling; data cleaned in Excel and analysed in Stata or R with descriptive statistics and a multiple linear regression controlling for income and age. You report the sampling frame, response rate, reliability, coefficients and their significance.

THE SWAP TEST Change only the methodology to interpretivism and the same traders are still interviewed — but at length, and their own accounts of saving become the finding instead of a coefficient. The methods changed because the methodology changed.

SOURCES Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research*. London: SAGE, p. 3. · Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. · Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research Methods for Business Students* (8th ed.). Harlow: Pearson.

From worldview to instrument.

Three families of design, one logic of choice. Pick the family that can answer your question, then name the tools that belong to it.

	QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE	MIXED METHODS
QUESTION	How, and why, do people make sense of this in their own context?	How much, how often — and does X affect Y?	What does the number miss that the word reveals?
LOGIC	Inductive; interpretivist or constructionist.	Deductive; post-positivist.	Abductive; pragmatic.
METHODS	Interviews, focus groups, observation, document analysis.	Structured surveys, experiments, secondary datasets.	Both, integrated by a stated design: convergent, explanatory or exploratory sequential.
QUALITY	Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).	Construct validity, internal validity, external validity, reliability (Bryman, 2016).	Does the integration answer the question better than either strand alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018)?
WATCH OUT	A small sample is a limit to declare, not a flaw to hide.	Significance is not importance — report effect sizes.	Two parallel studies side by side are not mixed methods.

PEEL IT BACK · THE RESEARCH ONION

1 PHILOSOPHY — Positivism, interpretivism, pragmatism.

2 APPROACH — Deduction, induction, abduction.

3 STRATEGY — Survey, case study, ethnography, experiment.

4 CHOICE — Mono, mixed or multi-method.

5 TIME HORIZON — Cross-sectional or longitudinal.

6 TECHNIQUES — Instruments, sampling, analysis.

Adapted from Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2019), *Research Methods for Business Students*, 8th ed. Most weak proposals are strong at layer 6 and silent at layers 1 to 4.

✓ Rigour, in your examiner's language

- **Triangulate.** Two sources, two methods or two analysts — and say what the agreement told you (Yin, 2018).
- **Show your trail.** Sampling decisions, coding steps, exclusions, dates.
- **Report against a standard.** COREQ for interviews and focus groups (Tong et al., 2007).
- **Reflexivity.** One honest paragraph on how your position shaped the data.

TOOL SPOTLIGHT

Zotero — references, cited as you write

NVivo — coding with an audit trail

R / Stata — reproducible analysis

Scholar — cited-by search

RESEARCH TIP OF THE MONTH

Write your methodology backwards from your defence.

Finish this sentence in one line: "This study can claim _____ because it _____." If you cannot fill both blanks with the same design, the design is wrong — or the claim is too large.

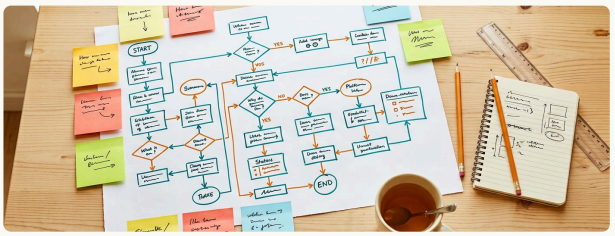


FIG. 2 – sketch the design before you write the chapter: boxes that will not connect are a warning.

§ Ethics, before the field

Ethics approval from your committee, with the reference number in the text. Consent the participant can actually understand, in their own language. Confidentiality is not anonymity — say which you promise. Personal data handled under the Data Protection Act, 2012 (Act 843). A clear right to withdraw, and a plan for unanticipated harm.

DEADLINE RADAR · THE MILESTONE MAP

Nov–Dec proposal defence, ethics clearance · **Jan–Feb** pilot and instrument revision · **Mar–May** fieldwork and data entry · **Jun–Aug** analysis and first chapters · **Sep–Oct** full draft · **Nov** revisions and defence.

A typical sequence only — confirm dates with your department.

Ask the Sage

Four questions we are asked most often in the first week of a supervision cycle.

Q1 Can I have two methodologies?

One study needs one coherent methodology. You may combine designs, but the combination itself must then be justified — that is what **mixed methods** means: a named design with an integration point. "I used interviews and a survey" is not a methodology.

Q2 My supervisor says Chapter Three is "just methods".

You have described your instruments but not the reasoning behind them. Add the worldview, the design and its rationale, the sampling logic, the quality criteria, and the limits of what you can claim. Then the chapter stops being a list.

Q3 Is secondary data a method or a methodology?

The **use of secondary data** is a method. The **design** that frames it — descriptive quantitative analysis, say, or a comparative case study — is the methodology. Name both.

Q4 How many methodology references do I need?

There is no number. There is a conversation: cite the primary methodologist for each method you actually use — Yin for case study, Braun and Clarke for thematic analysis, Crotty for the terminology itself. Two well-chosen sources beat twelve decorative ones.

FIVE ERRORS WE SEE EVERY WEEK

1. **A method list with no design**
   Questionnaire, interview, focus group — but no statement of what kind of study this is.
2. **"Mixed methods" as a label**
   Two parallel studies, no integration point, no mixed-methods design named.
3. **Random that is not random**
   Convenience sampling described as random; the sample then cannot carry the claim.
4. **Software instead of procedure**
   "Data were analysed using SPSS" tells us the vehicle, not the journey. Name the tests.
5. **Ethics as a paragraph**
   Confidentiality promised, but no approval reference and no consent procedure.



FIG. 2 — NAME THE TEST, KEEP THE OUTPUT

Reproducible analysis is part of the method, not an afterthought.

Pre-submission checklist

TEN BOXES · TICK ALL TEN BEFORE YOU EMAIL THE DRAFT

- ✓ Research question, design and methods name the same thing.
- ✓ Methodology section states the worldview and justifies the design.
- ✓ Each method is cited to a primary methodological source.
- ✓ Sampling is named correctly, with size and rationale.
- ✓ Instruments are attached as appendices.
- ✓ Analysis procedures are named, not just the software.
- ✓ Quality criteria match the family of design used.
- ✓ Ethics approval reference and consent procedure appear in the text.
- ✓ Limitations follow from the methodology, not from excuses.
- ✓ References are complete and consistently formatted.

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