How do I...

DESIGN A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

Designing a qualitative research project involves much more than deciding how to collect data.

Research design refers to the overall plan for conducting your study, including decisions about what you want to understand, where to find relevant evidence and how to collect and analyse it. These decisions should fit together to form a coherent research plan.

As you work through the steps below, discuss your decisions with your supervisors.

CHOOSE YOUR METHODOLOGY

A good qualitative research project begins with a well-defined research problem and a set of research questions. Your methodology provides the overarching approach and principles that guide how you investigate your research problem. **Phenomenology** might be the approach of choice if you are looking to explore lived experience, while **ethnography** might be the way to go if you are interested in the culture and practices of a particular group. You need to be clear as to *why* you have chosen the approach you have and how that has informed your research design. If you are not employing a named methodology, then you need to be very explicit about the rationale for your design.

DECIDE WHAT DATA YOU NEED AND HOW YOU'LL GET IT

Once you have chosen your methodology, think about who or what can give you the information you need (i.e. your data) and how you will collect it. Decide on a sampling strategy, set your selection criteria, and plan how you will reach your participants or data sources.

Different methods serve different purposes. For example, **interviews** help you explore people's experiences, **observations** let you see practices in context, and **document or records analysis** can show you an organisation's policies and perspectives. Whatever method you choose, make sure you have a clear plan for collecting data, including the steps you will follow and how you will record, manage, and safely store your data. Remember that your plan may change as your study progresses.

PLAN DATA ANALYSIS AND REVIEW DESIGN

It is also important to consider how you will analyse your data. For example, **thematic analysis** may help you identify patterns of meaning across your data, while **discourse analysis** may help you explore how language constructs meaning and social realities. You may also draw on an existing theory or conceptual framework to guide your analysis. Make sure your chosen analytical approach is appropriate for your research questions, methodology and the type of data you intend to collect. For example, if your research question focuses on how language constructs social identity, simply identifying recurring themes in participants' accounts may not adequately address your question.

ADDRESS ETHICS AND QUALITY

Ethical and practical issues should be considered from the beginning, not after the design is complete. Take care to protect participants, consider power relationships and manage data securely. Be realistic about the time, access and resources available to you as a graduate researcher. Throughout the research process, be reflective and transparent about your approach. For example, reflect on how your own perspective, experience, and background may influence how you collect or interpret the data; keep a record of important decisions; and provide sufficient contextual detail to help readers understand your findings.

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October 2026

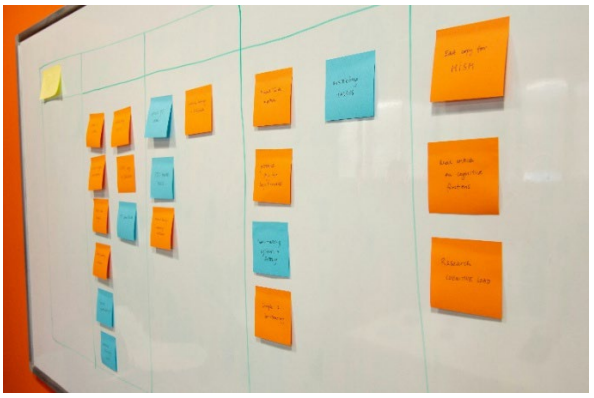


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How Do I...? Guidelines are produced by the Graduate Research Development team for graduate research candidates. They provide succinct, user-friendly advice consistent with best practice and MQ Policy and Procedures at time of writing.

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