Research Methods

Positivist and interpretivist approaches, primary and secondary data, how a piece of research is designed, sampling, the main methods, types of question, practical issues and research ethics.

Sociology studies how people behave in groups, and **research methods** are the tools sociologists use to find out. Every Paper 1 starts with a research methods question, and the other five topics all rely on these ideas. Learn the vocabulary here first.

1.1 How do sociologists approach the study of society?

Two approaches

	Positivist	Interpretivist
Treats society as	a **social fact**: it exists outside us and shapes us (a **macro** view)	something people **create** through their actions and meanings (a **micro** view)
Method	the **scientific method**: measure, compare, test	try to understand the person's point of view
Data	**quantitative** (numbers, statistics)	**qualitative** (words, feelings, reasons)
Aim	find **patterns and trends**, **cause and correlation**	understand **meanings and motivations**
Strength	**reliable**, **objective**, large samples	**valid**, rich, in-depth detail
Weakness	may lack validity, ignores feelings	**subjective**, hard to repeat, small samples
Typical methods	questionnaires, structured interviews, official statistics	unstructured interviews, participant observation, case studies

> **Positivists want reliability and use numbers; interpretivists want validity and use meaning. This is the main debate in research methods.**

Social facts (a term from Durkheim) are things such as the suicide rate or the divorce rate. They can be counted, so positivists treat them like facts in science.

Verstehen is a German word meaning "understanding". Interpretivists try to see the world through the eyes of the people they study, rather than only measuring what they do.

Note Academy

Correlation and causation

A **correlation** is a link between two things, such as hours of study and exam marks. A **cause** is when one thing makes the other happen. A correlation does **not** prove a cause: ice-cream sales and sunburn both rise in summer, but one does not cause the other. The weather is a third factor.

Combining methods

- **Triangulation** means using two or more methods to study the same thing, then comparing the results. If they agree, the findings are more trustworthy.
- A **longitudinal study** follows the same people over a long time (for example, a group of children followed from age 7 to 21) to see how things change.

Evaluating research

Term	What it means
Bias	the researcher's own opinions shaping the results
Interviewer effect	the interviewer's age, gender, ethnicity or manner changes how the person answers
Hawthorne / observer effect	people **change their behaviour** because they know they are being watched
Validity	the research shows a **true** picture of what is being studied
Reliability	another researcher repeating the research would get the **same** results
Representativeness	the sample has the same make-up as the group it stands for
Generalisability	the findings can be applied to the wider population

NOTE

Exam tip: "validity" and "reliability" are not the same. A bathroom scale that always reads 2 kg too heavy is **reliable** (same every time) but not **valid** (never true).

Note Academy

1.2 What types of data and evidence do sociologists use?

Primary and secondary data

- **Primary data** is collected by the researcher for their own study (a survey they carried out). It fits the aim exactly but costs **time and money**.
- **Secondary data** already exists (collected by someone else). It is **quicker and cheaper**, but it may not fit the study or may be out of date or biased.

Quantitative and qualitative data

- **Quantitative**: numbers, statistics, percentages. Easy to compare and show in graphs, but gives little detail on *why*.
- **Qualitative**: words, quotations, descriptions. Gives depth and meaning, but is harder to compare and analyse.

Secondary sources

Source	Strength	Limitation
Official statistics (government figures such as crime, census, exam results)	free, large, cover long periods	collected for the government's purposes, may hide unreported cases, definitions can change
Historical and personal documents (diaries, letters, photographs)	give an insider's view of the past	may be biased, unrepresentative, or not authentic
Digital sources (websites, social media, online forums)	cheap, up to date, large amounts of data	anyone can post, so accuracy and representativeness are doubtful
Media content (newspapers, TV, adverts)	show how groups are represented	reflect the owners' views and may exaggerate

Reading tables, charts and graphs

When a question gives a **table, chart or graph**:

1. Read the **title** and the **labels on the axes or columns**.
2. Pick out the **highest, lowest and any trend** over time.

Note Academy

3. Quote figures (with units) in your answer.
4. Say what the source cannot tell you (for example, *why* the figures changed).

> **TRY IT**
>
> A table shows that the proportion of households with the internet rose from 40% to 85% between 2008 and 2022. **Describe one trend.** The proportion **more than doubled** over 14 years, from 40% to 85%. (It does not tell us *why*: you would need other evidence.)

1.3 How do sociologists investigate society?

The stages of research design

1. **Selection of topic**: what to study.
2. **Aims**: what the research wants to find out.
3. **Hypothesis**: a **testable prediction**, such as "Pupils who study with friends achieve higher grades". Positivist studies usually have one; interpretivist studies usually have only aims.
4. **Target population**: the whole group being studied (all Year 11 pupils in a country).
5. **Methods**: which methods to use.
6. **Operationalisation**: turning an idea into something **measurable** (for example, "social class" measured by parents' jobs and income).
7. **Pilot study**: a small trial run to test the method and fix problems before the real study.

Sampling

A **sampling frame** is the list of people the sample is drawn from (a school register). A **sample** is a smaller group chosen to represent the **target population**.

Note Academy

Technique	How it works	Strength	Limitation
Random	everyone has an **equal chance** (names drawn from a hat)	fair, avoids bias	may not include every group; needs a full list
Systematic	every **nth** person on the list (every 10th)	simple and quick	can miss a pattern in the list
Stratified	the population is divided into **groups** (strata), then a **random** sample is taken from each in the right proportions	representative of the groups	needs detailed information, takes time
Snowball	one participant introduces others	good for hidden or hard-to-reach groups	not representative; depends on contacts
Quota	the researcher fills a set number from each group (50 men, 50 women) by choosing them	quick, cheap	researcher bias in who is chosen

Note Academy

Primary research methods

Method	What it is	Strengths	Limitations
Survey	questions put to a large sample	large, quantitative, representative	little depth
Questionnaire	written questions the respondent fills in	cheap, quick, large sample, anonymous	**low response rate**, closed questions limit answers, respondents may lie
Structured interview	fixed questions asked by an interviewer	reliable, easy to compare	little flexibility
Semi-structured interview	some set questions plus follow-up probes	balance of reliability and depth	interviewer effect, takes time
Unstructured interview	a conversation with a few themes	high **validity**, rich detail	time-consuming, hard to repeat, small sample
Group interview (focus group)	a discussion among several people	shows how opinions form	some members may dominate or follow the group
Participant observation	the researcher joins the group	real behaviour, high validity	takes a long time, risk of **going native** (losing objectivity), may be dangerous
Non-participant observation	the researcher watches without joining	less involvement, can record more	still the observer effect
Overt	the group **knows** it is being observed	ethical (consent)	**Hawthorne effect**
Covert	the group **does not know**	natural behaviour	**deception**, no consent, risky

NOTE

Overt/covert and **participant/non-participant** are separate choices: an observer can be participant and overt, participant and covert, and so on.

Note Academy

Types of question

Type	Example	Good for	Limitation
Closed	"Do you own a phone? Yes / No"	easy to count, quick	no explanation
Open	"Why do you use social media?"	detail, own words	harder to analyse
Multiple choice	"Which is your main use? A, B, C, D"	easy to analyse	may not include the person's real answer
Scaled	"Rate from 1 to 5 how much you agree"	measures strength of opinion	people avoid the extremes; the points mean different things to different people

Practical and theoretical issues

- **Researcher perspective**: a positivist will prefer questionnaires and statistics; an interpretivist will prefer observation and unstructured interviews.
- **Access to the sample**: some groups (gangs, wealthy people) are hard to reach or will not cooperate.
- **Response rate**: the percentage who reply. A low rate (common with postal or online questionnaires) leaves the sample unrepresentative.
- **Funding/cost** and **time**: large samples and long studies need more of both.

Ethical issues

Issue	What it means
Informed consent	people agree to take part knowing what the study involves (under-age participants need a parent's consent)
Privacy/confidentiality	personal details are kept private and results are anonymous
Deception	misleading people about the purpose of the research
Prevention of harm	no physical or psychological harm to participants or the researcher
Legality	the research must not break the law

Covert observation breaks the most ethical rules at once: no informed consent, deception, and often a risk of harm.

Note Academy

Examples to quote: **Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968)**, a field experiment on teachers' expectations (Pygmalion in the Classroom); **Zimbardo (1973)**, the prison experiment, where participants conformed to the roles of guard and prisoner and some suffered distress, so it raises questions of harm.

Answering Paper 1

- **"Identify"/"State"**: give a short point, no explanation.
- **"Describe two..."**: give two points, each developed with a sentence.
- **"Explain..."**: give the point and the **reason**.
- **"Describe two strengths and two limitations"**: four separate points, linked to the method named.
- **"To what extent..."** (the 15-mark question): argue **both sides**, link to the source, and finish with a **judgement**.

Note Academy