

Methodology: video script

Hi, and welcome to the third teaching video about writing your dissertation. This time, I'll be talking to you about your methodology chapter.

This video is intended to help you to understand what's required in your methodology chapter, and to make you think about communicating your decisions about how to carry out your research to your reader. As always, I'm happy to meet people individually to give you feedback on your writing – please use the link to book an appointment, and you can email me a draft before coming if you like – if you do send me something, please make sure it's at least one full working day in advance of your appointment. Otherwise, print out your draft and bring it along with you.

Your methodology chapter is going to tell your reader both how you did your research, and why you did it that way. In order to write this well, you need to ensure you fully comprehend the different aspects of how you are doing your research – if you don't understand it yourself, it's going to be impossible to communicate your choices clearly to your reader. This is initially about your philosophical approach to knowledge, and what you want to find out – it concerns the reasons for your particular way of answering your research questions.

To break down the different aspects to your methodology, let's look at this diagram of the 'research onion' that you're likely to be familiar with from Saunders, Lewis and Thornill's book. This demonstrates the decisions you will need to make as different layers – starting with whether your research is going to be primary (gathering your own data) or secondary (using other people's data), and working through your philosophy, approach, strategy, time frame and data collection.

This second diagram shows how these decisions are related to each other. It uses slightly different vocabulary (such as ideology rather than philosophy), but it demonstrates how a choice at one stage will affect subsequent selections – working out your approach to knowledge will influence what kind of responses you are looking for, and thus what you do to discover your answers. If you're unsure about the terminology, or the differences between, for example, positivism and interpretivism, I suggest you revisit your learning materials from the Research Methods module, if you had one, or take a read through some of the research methods books we have in the library. It's also a good idea to have a chat with your supervisor about the decisions that you make, as they may have some useful suggestions and be able to give you the benefit of their own research experience.

I'm going to go through an example of the different ways you might look to answer a research question. Do you know what's in the picture? Those of you who are familiar with China will know that these are special dumplings, which are filled with soup. Shanghai is particularly famous for xiaolongbao, and the photo is of some very tasty ones I had during a recent holiday there. But what if I wanted to do some research into

what the best xialongbao in Shanghai were. How would I find this out? I'd need to start by thinking about what I meant by the best. Would I want an objective approach, and so look for something that could be measured? That's the method used by Christopher St. Cavish, who decided that the best dumplings are those that have a thin wrapper, and a large amount of soup and filling. He therefore created a formula which uses the weight of the filling and the thickness of the wrapper to come to a numerical rating for dumplings from Shanghai restaurants. He then looked at the range of ratings, and divided them into classes, with class A being the best dumplings in Shanghai. If you're interested in his results, you can take a look at his website. But what if I don't think that the best dumplings can be observed or measured? Perhaps I am more interested in people's perceptions of and attitudes to the dumplings they have eaten, and why they have liked or disliked them, and their beliefs about what the best dumplings are. If I decided that these were the kinds of answers I wanted to my research question, I would take a very different approach to Christopher St Cavish, and might set up interviews or focus groups. You can see that your decisions about the type of knowledge that your project will aim to discover has an important influence on how you conduct your research.

So, now I'd like you to think about another research question: do dissertation writing workshops improve students' dissertations? Think about your philosophical ideas about how this question might be answered – do you think that objective, observable and measurable results are possible, or are you more interested in perceptions, beliefs and attitudes? Once you know what kind of information you will be looking for, will you look for quantitative or qualitative data? And how will you collect your data? When you have come up with your research methods for this question, post them to the Padlet wall along with the reasons why you have chosen this strategy. After posting your own response, take a look at other people's to see what other approaches have been suggested, and comment in response. Please pause the video now to undertake this activity.

Once you're confident that you understand the reasons for deciding on the philosophy, approach and data collection that you'll be using for your own research, you can think about how you're going to start writing this chapter.

When you begin to plan your chapter, you need to take a careful look at your module handbook and see what elements you need to cover. Depending on your programme, these requirements might be slightly different, but will usually include your philosophy, approach, data collection methods, ethical considerations and limitations of your strategy. Once you have worked out what you need to include, you can start thinking about how to structure this chapter through subheadings, and how to allocate the word count. Don't forget that each chapter needs its own introduction and conclusion, which will usually be about 10% of this chapter's word count. You can then divide up the remaining words into your different sections. You aren't given a specific word count for each chapter, but instead can, in conjunction with your supervisor, decide how to

distribute your overall word count between the chapters. Initially, it might help you to think about your introduction and conclusion chapters as being about 10% of the total, and the rest allocated in a roughly equal manner between your literature review, methodology and results chapters.

To help you decide on what sections you might need, and how to arrange these, it's useful to take a look at some of the example dissertations in the library. You can see that each of these three students have included roughly similar information, but that this has been arranged slightly differently each time, to suit the needs of the individual project. It might be that you're using a mixed methods approach, and so might need to allow a greater word count for this chapter, and have several extra sections. When you're thinking of how to structure this chapter, consider how to minimise repetition.

As I mentioned in the literature review video, you should always be focused on your reader as you write - consider what you want them to understand. When you're discussing the methodology of your project, you will need to make sure that your reader not only understands what you're doing, but also the reasons why you have made your decision to do it that way. You need to justify your choices, and also ensure that you cite the source of your information – so, if you're defining a particular philosophy, or talking about the benefits of a particular strategy, you need to show where you got this information from. Using evidence will provide authority for the assertions you make, and if you synthesise and contrast different sources and opinions, it will also allow your writing to become balanced and critical.

In terms of describing your data, you need to clearly state what you are collecting, and why those methods are appropriate for discovering answers to your research questions. You should also consider any ethical issues. Sometimes students become confused about whether material about data analysis goes in their methodology or results chapter. The type of analysis you will perform on the data (for example, the specific statistical tests you'll use, or your method of looking at qualitative data) belongs in your methodology chapter. It is the outcome of the analysis that fits in your results chapter.

To summarise: your methodology chapter should be written very clearly, enabling your reader to appreciate how you are going to go about answering your research questions, and why you have decided on this approach. This chapter should be able to act as a pathway for other researchers to follow – it should contain enough detail so that your project could be replicated by another person, so you need to make sure that you have explained exactly what it is that you are doing. The chapter also needs to convince your reader that this is a worthwhile path to take, and that it will lead you to useful answers to your questions – therefore, it is imperative that you provide full justifications for your research decisions. In the face-to-face session, we'll be using some examples of methodology writing to assess whether other students have achieved these goals.