

Skills for Learning

Guide to Primary Research

What is Primary Research?

So what exactly *is* research? Well, the word research is taken from the French *rechercher* which means ‘to seek out’. So research is the act of seeking things out. The OED (2017) also gives us ‘Systematic investigation or inquiry aimed at contributing to knowledge of a theory, topic, etc.’. So research is to seek out new knowledge, at least at in its broadest sense. From this definition we can see that whenever you look for new information as part of your studies, you are doing research, you *rechercher information*.

When it comes to looking for information, there are, broadly speaking, two types of research, primary and secondary.

Primary Research

Primary research is original data/information. If someone has done primary research they will have found out new information for themselves, possibly through questionnaires, interviews, surveys or focus groups.

Primary research articles should be written by one (or more) of the people who actually did the research. Usually one or more members of the research team will write an article chronicling the research process.

Secondary Research

Secondary research involves looking at existing data. For example, a literature review looks at existing research and would therefore be classed as secondary research. You may also find articles that are written about primary research, but not by one of the people who actually did the research. This would still be classed as secondary research because the author was not involved in the research process.

One way of telling if research was primary or secondary is to look for a section called ‘methods’ or ‘methodology’. This section of an article will describe the way in which the research was

undertaken. It will tell you how the data was collected. Often this will be through interviews, questionnaires or through anonymous data collection.

‘Smoking behaviour was recorded via a self-completed, touch-screen questionnaire’ (Dare, Mackay and Pell, 2015)

‘A small-scale pilot study was designed initially. Schools in selected areas were canvassed and twelve were selected on the basis of obtaining a mix of school sizes, geographical spread and rural/urban balance.’ ‘A screening test was devised ..[and] .. was administered by the project team’ (Ball *et al*, 2001)

Looking at the methods used will tell you whether or not primary research was undertaken. Sometimes it will be clear that primary research was undertaken, other times it may be less so. Similarly, it may be clear that secondary research was being carried out.

‘The present literature review was reported according to the PRISMA statement. A protocol for this literature review was not registered. The database search was limited to studies published between 2000 and June 2015’ (Bartsch *et al.*, 2016).

Some articles will need to be read closely in order to determine their nature as primary or secondary research.

‘Data on participating schools are collected through a questionnaire administered to head teachers or a nominated representative. Information requested includes details on school food and physical activity policies and any relevant initiatives or programmes delivered through school.’ (Adab *et al*, 2015)

In the above example, the research described is certainly primary, but when investigating further:

‘The primary analysis will be adjusted for baseline values for all outcomes. Secondary analysis will additionally adjust for pre-specified baseline school and child level covariates’

We find that the research had not, at that point, taken place.

Conclusion

Check the methods or methodologies of an article. If you have been asked to find primary research, this means you are looking for original research, not someone reporting on what someone else has done. Look for evidence of interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, clinical trials or other data collection methods. This will be an indicator of primary research. Ideally, the author(s) of an article will have been part of the research team that carried out the primary research.

The next stage is to evaluate the research.

Checklist

- Is the author writing about their own research? (If no, this is probably secondary research)
- Is there a section describing research methods? (If yes, check the methods. It may still be a systematic review and therefore secondary research)
- Is there a results section? (If no, has the research been carried out, or is the article a proposal?)

References

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