

# Document Analysis Qualitative Research

## Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the function of documents as a data source in qualitative research and discusses document analysis procedure in the context of actual research experiences. Targeted to research novices, the article takes a nuts-and-bolts approach to document analysis. It describes the nature and forms of documents, outlines the advantages and limitations of document analysis, and offers specific examples of the use of documents in the research process. The application of document analysis to a grounded theory study is illustrated.

**Keywords:** Content analysis, documents, grounded theory, thematic analysis, triangulation.

Organisational and institutional documents have been a staple in qualitative research for many years. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of research reports and journal articles that mention document analysis as part of the methodology. What has been rather glaring is the absence of sufficient detail in most reports found in the reviewed literature, regarding the procedure followed and the outcomes of the analyses of documents. Moreover, there is some indication that document analysis has not always been used effectively in the research process, even by experienced researchers.

This article examines the place and function of documents in qualitative research. Written mainly for research novices, the article describes the nature and forms of documents, outlines the strengths and weaknesses of document analysis, and offers specific examples of the use of documents in the research process. Suggestions for doing document analysis are included. The fundamental purpose of this article is to increase knowledge and understanding of document analysis as a qualitative research method with a view to promoting its effective use.

### DEFINING DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; see also Rapley, 2007). Documents contain text (words) and images that have been recorded without a researcher's intervention. For the purposes of this discussion, other mute or trace evidence, such as cultural artifacts, is not included. Atkinson and Coffey (1997) refer to documents as 'social facts', which are produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways (p. 47).

Documents that may be used for systematic evaluation as part of a study take a variety of forms. They include advertisements; agendas, attendance registers, and minutes of meetings; manuals; background papers; books and brochures; diaries and journals; event programs (i.e., printed outlines); letters and memoranda; maps and charts; newspapers (clippings/art-

Bowen, Glenn A., 2009, 'Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method', *Qualitative Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 27-46. DOI 10.1316/QRQ090207. This is a peer-reviewed article.

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Document analysis qualitative research is a powerful method used in the social sciences and humanities to interpret and analyze various forms of documents. This approach allows researchers to delve into the meanings, context, and implications of written, visual, or audio materials. Unlike quantitative research methods that emphasize numerical data, document analysis focuses on the rich, qualitative insights that can be gleaned from textual and visual artifacts. This article will explore the purpose, methodology, and advantages of document analysis in qualitative research, as well as provide practical guidance on how to conduct a thorough analysis.

# Understanding Document Analysis in Qualitative Research

Document analysis in qualitative research refers to the systematic examination of documents to gain insights into the phenomena being studied. Documents can take many forms, including:

- Textual Documents: Books, articles, reports, meeting minutes, policy papers.
- Visual Documents: Photographs, maps, advertisements, infographics.
- Audio-Visual Materials: Interviews, speeches, documentaries, podcasts.

This method enables researchers to explore historical, cultural, and social contexts, making it particularly valuable for understanding complex issues and narratives.

## The Purpose of Document Analysis

The primary goals of document analysis in qualitative research include:

1. Understanding Context: Documents provide context for social phenomena, allowing researchers to comprehend the setting in which events occur.
2. Revealing Perspectives: Analyzing documents helps uncover the perspectives and biases of authors, as well as the intended audience.
3. Tracking Changes Over Time: By comparing documents from different periods, researchers can identify changes in policies, attitudes, or cultural norms.
4. Complementing Other Research Methods: Document analysis can be used alongside interviews and observations to enrich findings and provide triangulation.

## Types of Documents Analyzed

Different types of documents serve distinct purposes in qualitative research. Here are some common categories:

- Official Documents: Government publications, legal documents, organizational reports.
- Personal Documents: Diaries, letters, autobiographies, blogs.
- Media Content: News articles, advertisements, television programs.
- Academic Works: Research papers, theses, conference presentations.

# Methodology of Document Analysis

Conducting document analysis requires a systematic approach to ensure validity and reliability. Below are key steps in the methodology:

## 1. Define Research Questions

Before starting the analysis, researchers must clearly articulate their research questions. This helps to focus the analysis and determine which documents will be most relevant. Questions may address:

- What themes emerge from the documents?
- How do documents reflect societal values or norms?
- What historical context is necessary to understand the documents?

## 2. Select Documents

The next step involves selecting documents for analysis. Researchers should consider:

- Relevance: Are the documents directly related to the research questions?
- Diversity: Does the selection include a range of perspectives and formats?
- Availability: Are the documents accessible for analysis?

Researchers can employ sampling strategies, such as purposive sampling, to ensure that chosen documents are representative of the phenomenon being studied.

## 3. Develop a Framework for Analysis

Creating a framework helps structure the analysis process. Researchers can develop coding schemes based on:

- Themes: Identify recurring topics or issues present in the documents.
- Patterns: Look for trends or anomalies across documents.
- Narratives: Examine how stories are constructed and conveyed through the documents.

## 4. Conduct the Analysis

With the framework in place, researchers can begin the analysis. This typically involves:

- Close Reading: Engaging deeply with the text to understand its meaning and implications.
- Annotation: Making notes on key passages, quotes, and insights during the reading process.
- Coding: Assigning codes to segments of text that correspond to identified themes or patterns.

## 5. Interpret Findings

After analyzing the documents, researchers must interpret their findings. This includes:

- Contextualizing Results: Relating findings to the broader social, cultural, or historical contexts.
- Drawing Conclusions: Making assertions based on the analysis and answering the research questions.
- Identifying Limitations: Acknowledging potential biases or limitations in the documents or the analysis process.

## 6. Presenting the Analysis

Finally, researchers should present their findings in a clear and coherent manner. This may involve:

- Writing a Report: Documenting the methodology, findings, and interpretations in a structured format.
- Using Visuals: Incorporating charts, graphs, or images to illustrate key points.
- Engaging Stakeholders: Sharing findings with relevant audiences, such as policymakers, practitioners, or academic peers.

## Advantages of Document Analysis

Document analysis offers several advantages that enhance qualitative research:

- Rich Data Source: Documents provide a wealth of information that can reveal insights not available through other methods.
- Accessibility: Many documents are readily available, making them easier to collect compared to conducting interviews or surveys.
- Historical Perspective: Documents can serve as historical records, offering insights into past events and trends.
- Cost-Effectiveness: Analyzing existing documents can be more economical than collecting new data.

through primary research.

## Challenges in Document Analysis

Despite its advantages, document analysis also presents challenges that researchers must navigate:

- Bias and Reliability: Documents may reflect the biases of their authors, leading to questions about their reliability and validity.
- Contextual Understanding: Researchers must ensure they understand the context in which documents were produced to avoid misinterpretation.
- Volume of Data: Large volumes of documents can be overwhelming, making it essential for researchers to have a clear focus.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, document analysis qualitative research serves as a vital tool for understanding complex social phenomena. By systematically examining a wide range of documents, researchers can uncover rich insights that contribute to scholarly knowledge and inform practice. The methodological rigor and interpretive depth inherent in document analysis make it an indispensable approach in the qualitative research toolkit. As researchers continue to explore the diverse forms of documents, the potential for new discoveries and perspectives remains vast.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is document analysis in qualitative research?**

Document analysis in qualitative research refers to the systematic examination and interpretation of documents to understand their meaning and context. It involves analyzing texts, images, and other media to uncover insights related to the research question.

### **What types of documents are typically analyzed in qualitative research?**

Common types of documents analyzed include official reports, meeting minutes, personal diaries, letters, policy documents, social media posts, and any other written or visual materials relevant to the research topic.

## **How does document analysis complement other qualitative research methods?**

Document analysis complements other qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, by providing additional context, corroborating evidence, and deeper insights into the topic being studied, thus enhancing the overall richness of the data.

## **What are the key steps in conducting document analysis?**

Key steps include identifying relevant documents, collecting and organizing them, analyzing the content for themes and patterns, interpreting findings, and reporting the results in relation to the research question.

## **What are the advantages of using document analysis in qualitative research?**

Advantages include access to a wide variety of data sources, the ability to study historical contexts, reduced reliance on participant recall, and the potential for uncovering hidden narratives or perspectives.

## **What challenges might researchers face in document analysis?**

Challenges include potential biases in the documents, issues of authenticity and credibility, the context in which documents were created, and the time-consuming nature of analyzing large volumes of text.

## **How can researchers ensure the reliability of their document analysis?**

Researchers can ensure reliability by using clear and consistent coding schemes, triangulating findings with other data sources, documenting their analysis process, and involving multiple researchers to cross-verify interpretations.

## **What ethical considerations should be taken into account during document analysis?**

Ethical considerations include respecting confidentiality and privacy, obtaining necessary permissions for using documents, being transparent about the purpose of the research, and avoiding misinterpretation of the documents.

## **Can document analysis be used in mixed-methods research?**

Yes, document analysis can be effectively integrated into mixed-methods research, providing qualitative insights that complement quantitative data, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

## What software tools can assist in document analysis?

Software tools like NVivo, Atlas.ti, and MAXQDA can assist in coding, organizing, and analyzing qualitative data from documents, helping researchers to manage large amounts of textual data more efficiently.

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