

An Introduction to the Research Workflow and the Scientific Approach to Communication

From Curiosity to Credibility: Why the Research Workflow Matters

Imagine scrolling through your social media feed and stumbling upon a heated argument under a news post. One person posts a link to an official-looking report, another shares a personal story, and a third posts a meme with a bold claim. Some of what you see feels believable; other parts feel exaggerated or manipulative. You might even start wondering: *How do I know which of these is true?*

That moment of wondering is the starting point of research. Research begins with **curiosity**—something catches your attention, and you want to understand it better. But curiosity alone isn’t enough to reach a trustworthy conclusion. You need a process that takes you from “I’m wondering...” to “Here is my evidence-based answer.” In the world of communication studies, that process is called the **research workflow**.

The research workflow is like a recipe for building knowledge. If your curiosity is the raw ingredient, the workflow is the set of instructions that transforms it into a final dish: a credible, verifiable conclusion. It takes you step-by-step from having a general interest to producing an argument that other people can check, test, and trust. Without this process, we’re left guessing, relying on personal opinions, random examples, or unreliable sources. With it, you can produce work that is seen as **credible**—something that could stand up in a professional meeting, a court case, or an academic journal. This credibility isn’t just about being “right”; it’s about showing your work in a way that allows others to see *how* you arrived at your answer.

This chapter will walk you through both the workflow itself—the practical steps that take you from question to answer—and the **scientific approach**, which is the set of guiding ideas that helps researchers keep their work fair, systematic, and open to scrutiny. To fully appreciate why this structured approach is so vital, let’s first examine the common shortcuts we all use to make sense of the world.

Everyday Ways of Knowing—and Their Limits

Before we dive into the formal process of research, it’s worth noticing how people usually come to believe things. In our daily lives, we can’t stop to conduct a study for every decision. Instead, we rely on mental shortcuts. While efficient, these “everyday ways of knowing” have serious limitations. The four most common are tradition, authority, common sense, and intuition.

Tradition is the acceptance of knowledge because “it’s the way things have always been.” We inherit these beliefs from our culture, family, and communities. For example, the idea that a firm handshake conveys confidence is a traditional belief in many Western business cultures. Tradition provides stability and saves us from having to reinvent the wheel for every social custom.

- **The Limit:** Tradition is often based on habit, not evidence, and it can be highly resistant to change. The belief that “watching too much TV will rot your brain” was passed down for generations. While excessive screen time can have negative effects, the claim isn’t scientifically precise. Tradition discourages us from asking, “Is this *still* true? Was it *ever* true?”

Authority involves trusting the word of an expert, leader, or figure of respect. We listen to a doctor’s medical advice, a professor’s lecture, or a trusted journalist’s reporting. This is generally a good strategy, as experts have specialized knowledge we lack.

- **The Limit:** Experts can be wrong, they can have biases, and their expertise might be in a different area than the one they are speaking on. A famous actor endorsing a particular diet plan is an appeal to authority, but their expertise is in acting, not nutrition. True authority should be scrutinized: What are their credentials? What is their evidence? Is there a conflict of interest?

Common sense refers to the feeling that something is simply “obvious” or “stands to reason.” It’s based on our personal experiences and the unstated rules we’ve picked up from daily life. It might seem like common sense that talking to people face-to-face is always better for building relationships than texting.

- **The Limit:** Common sense is notoriously contradictory (e.g., “birds of a feather flock together” vs. “opposites attract”) and is often shaped by our limited, personal view of the world. For an isolated senior, texting might be a vital lifeline that strengthens their relationships, contradicting the “obvious” truth that it’s an inferior form of communication. What’s “common sense” in one culture can be nonsense in another.

Intuition is that “gut feeling” or sudden insight that something is true. It’s a quick, non-analytical feeling that you can’t always explain logically. You might have an intuitive sense that a political candidate is trustworthy or that a new ad campaign will be a hit.

- **The Limit:** Intuition is heavily influenced by our emotions and unconscious biases. That “gut feeling” about a politician might be a reaction to their appearance or speaking style, not their policies. While intuition can be a great starting point for developing a hypothesis, it’s a terrible endpoint for concluding. It’s a hunch to be tested, not a fact to be trusted.

These shortcuts aren’t inherently bad—we need them to navigate countless daily interactions. However, they are unreliable for building a shared, factual understanding of the world. Research offers a more rigorous and dependable alternative.

The Scientific Approach: A More Reliable Path

To overcome the limits of everyday knowing, researchers in mass communication and other social sciences often adopt the **scientific approach**. This isn’t about wearing a lab coat; it’s a mindset and a framework for building knowledge that actively tries to minimize bias and error. It rests on four foundational principles.

Empiricism

At its core, empiricism insists that knowledge must be based on **observable, tangible evidence**. It’s the principle of “show me the data.” Instead of accepting a claim based on tradition or authority, an empiricist seeks to measure, see, or document it. For example, instead of just arguing about whether negative political ads work, a researcher would conduct a study. They might show one group of participants a negative ad and another group a neutral ad, and then measure each group’s voting intentions. The resulting data—the numbers and responses—constitute **empirical evidence**. Empiricism moves us from “I believe...” to “My data show...”

Objectivity

Objectivity is the goal of removing personal biases, feelings, and beliefs from the research process. It's important to understand that no researcher is perfectly objective—we all have perspectives. However, the scientific approach uses procedures to minimize the influence of those perspectives. For instance, a researcher studying the effects of a new teaching method they invented might have a **double-blind** study, where neither the students nor the person grading the final exam knows who received the new method versus the old one. This prevents the researcher's hopes from influencing the results. The ultimate goal is **intersubjectivity**: a study so transparently and carefully designed that another objective researcher could repeat it and get a similar outcome.

Determinism

This is the idea that events and behaviors are not random; they are caused by identifiable factors and follow predictable patterns. In communication, we operate on the assumption that the way a message is crafted, the channel through which it is sent, and the characteristics of the audience all systematically affect the outcome. This is usually **probabilistic determinism**—we don't claim that X will *always* cause Y, but that the presence of X *increases the probability* of Y occurring. For example, research might find that using more visuals in a health campaign increases the likelihood that teenagers will remember the message, even if it doesn't work for every single teenager. Without determinism, research would be pointless; if everything were random, there would be no patterns to discover.

Control

Control is the practice of isolating the factor you are studying. To confidently say that one thing causes another, you must rule out other possible explanations. Imagine you want to test if a new website design increases user engagement. If you launch the new design at the same time you launch a massive advertising campaign, you won't know if increased engagement is due to the design or the ads. A controlled study would change *only* the website design for a test group and keep the old design for a control group, while keeping all other conditions (like advertising) the same for both. Control is what allows us to move from simply observing a relationship (**correlation**) to establishing a cause-and-effect link (**causation**).

These four principles are put into action through the **scientific method**. This is the cyclical process where a researcher starts with a **theory** (a broad explanation of how something works), develops a specific, testable **hypothesis** (a prediction), collects **data** (observations) to test the hypothesis, and then draws a **conclusion** that either supports, refutes, or refines the original theory. This conclusion then raises new questions, starting the cycle all over again.

The Research Workflow: Five Interconnected Stages

The scientific method provides the logic, but the **research workflow** provides the practical, step-by-step map for a project. It consists of five overlapping and often cyclical stages.

1. Conceptualization This is the “thinking and planning” stage. It begins with a broad spark of curiosity (e.g., “I’m interested in how misinformation spreads”) and refines it into a focused, answerable **research question**. This process almost always involves a **literature review**—a deep dive into previous studies on the topic. By seeing what other researchers have already found, you can identify gaps in knowledge and sharpen your focus. Your question might evolve from “How does misinformation spread?” to the more specific “How does the presence of a ‘fact-check’ label on a social media post affect a user’s likelihood to share it?”

2. Design The design stage is where you create the blueprint for your study. Here, you make the critical decisions about *how* you will answer your research question. This includes:

- **Methodology:** Will you use a survey, an experiment, a content analysis of media texts, or in-depth interviews?
- **Sampling:** Who will you study (your **population**), and how will you select a representative subset of them (your **sample**)?
- **Measurement:** How will you define and measure your key concepts (**operationalization**)? For example, how will you measure “likelihood to share”? Will it be a scale from 1-7 on a survey, or an actual button-click in a simulated environment?
- **Ethics:** How will you protect your participants? This involves planning for **informed consent**, ensuring confidentiality, and minimizing any potential harm.

3. Data Collection This is the “doing” stage where you execute your design plan and gather your evidence. If you designed a survey, this is when you distribute it. If you planned interviews, this is when you conduct them. If you are doing a content analysis, this is when you systematically review and code the articles or videos. This stage requires precision and consistency. Any mistakes made here—like asking questions in the wrong order or losing survey responses—can compromise the entire project.

4. Data Analysis Once you have your raw data, the analysis stage is where you search for patterns and meaning. The goal is to connect your findings back to your original research question. The approach depends on your data:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** If you collected numerical data (e.g., from a survey or experiment), you will use statistical tools to look for relationships, differences, and trends. For example, you might find that “posts with a fact-check label were shared 40% less often than posts without one.”
- **Qualitative Analysis:** If you collected non-numerical data (e.g., from interviews or focus groups), you will look for recurring themes, interpretations, and narratives. You might find a common theme where participants said the fact-check label made them “stop and think” before sharing.

5. Communication The final stage is to share what you’ve learned with the world. Research that sits on a hard drive is useless. Communication can take many forms: a final paper for a class, a presentation at an academic conference, a published article in a scholarly journal, or even a blog post or report for a non-academic audience. Effective communication involves telling the whole story of your research: not just *what* you found, but *how* you found it. This transparency is crucial because it allows others to evaluate your work and build upon it critically.

Crucially, these stages are not always linear. Insights from your data analysis might send you back to the literature to refine your concepts. A pilot test of your data collection method might reveal a flaw in your design, forcing you to revise it. Research is an iterative and sometimes messy process.

Tool-Agnostic Principles

In modern research, you will almost certainly use software tools: statistical packages like SPSS or R, survey platforms like Qualtrics, or qualitative analysis software like NVivo. While learning these tools is a valuable skill, it’s far more essential to understand the **principles behind them**.

Think of it like this: learning to use a calculator is not the same as learning mathematics. A calculator can give you the answer to $1,000/20$, but only your understanding of division tells you what that answer *means* in the context of your problem. Software changes, new programs emerge, and old ones become obsolete. However, the fundamental principles of research—what makes a good sample, how to create a valid measurement, how to ethically treat participants—are timeless. A researcher who understands the “why” can adapt to any tool. A researcher who only knows the “how” of a specific program is stuck when that program changes. Focus on the logic of the method, not just the buttons you click.

Conclusion: Research as Disciplined Curiosity

At its heart, research is **disciplined curiosity**. It begins with the same questions we ask every day, but channels that curiosity through a structured, systematic process designed to produce trustworthy answers. It's the essential bridge between a private hunch and public, credible knowledge.

The research workflow provides the practical steps, and the scientific approach provides the guiding philosophy. Together, they allow us to move beyond the limitations of tradition, authority, and common sense. By learning this process, you are gaining more than just an academic skill; you are developing a powerful tool for critical thinking. In a world saturated with information and misinformation, knowing how to ask the right questions and how to identify a credible answer is one of the most important skills you can possess.

Journal Prompts

1. Think about a claim you've seen online that you weren't sure was true. How would the principles of **empiricism** and **control** help you design a study to test whether it was accurate?
2. Choose a topic you're curious about in media or communication (e.g., the effect of streaming on movie watching, how politicians use TikTok, portrayals of families on TV). Write a specific **research question** about it. Then, briefly describe what you would do in each of the five stages of the **research workflow** (Conceptualization, Design, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Communication) to answer it.
3. Describe a time you learned a digital tool (in any context—school, work, a hobby) without really understanding the reasoning behind what you were doing. How might knowing the “why”—the **tool-agnostic principles**—have helped you use it more effectively, solve problems, or even choose a better tool for the task?

