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## Introduction

ibraries and archives of relevance and websites of interest to researchers in media and culture.

Throughout, *How To Do Media and Cultural Studies* presents case studies and examples of key work published in the field to encourage students to think about how previous scholars have used certain methods in their work. In the space of a single volume, it would be impossible to cover all the methods available; the methods selected have been carefully chosen to fit the ability and resources of a beginner researcher. I hope that students will find this book a useful and practical guide to conducting their own research, and that lecturers will find the book a valuable addition to the literature on research methods.

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## Getting Started

### Chapter overview

This chapter is designed to guide students through the early stages of developing a research project, from designing a question to submitting a proposal. It begins with a discussion of how to decide upon a subject. Students are encouraged to think about the field and about their own interests and networks before settling on a research area. The range of possible topics is discussed and some tips for coming up with ideas are given.

The design and development of the research question is a crucial stage in the development of any research project. In this chapter we give advice and ideas on how to develop a workable research question by thinking about the object of analysis and the theoretical paradigms you wish to work within or develop. The emphasis throughout is on thinking about how to find the right method for your research interests. We discuss the main paradigms of research in media, cultural and film studies. In this chapter we discuss which methods are appropriate to the study of texts, industries and audiences. Of course, it is always possible to combine research methods, although you have to be wary of conducting two different research projects – here we look briefly at when it is appropriate to combine research methods. Phrasing your research question is a very important part of the project, too. We give some examples of how to phrase your question here. Table 1.1 shows the main stages in designing a research project to be discussed in this chapter.

You should be wary of beginning your research project before you have positively determined that you have access to the necessary material: included in this chapter is a section on identifying sources as well as reviewing previous literature. We also discuss how to design your proposal, note taking and working from an outline or proposal.

**TABLE 1.1**  
Stages in  
Designing a  
Research  
Project

1. Think about what interests you most from your studies so far
2. Think about what areas of media or culture interest you the most
3. Read (or reread) literature which relates to your area of interest
4. Decide on a subject area
5. Discuss the topic with colleagues and lecturers
6. Define your object of analysis
7. Design your research question

## Introduction

Most courses require students to conduct an original piece of work towards the end of their degree. While a lot of people are energized at the opportunity offered by the project, others find the idea daunting. This chapter will help you to decide what topic you are going to investigate and guide you through the necessary stages in designing a project up to the stage of writing the research proposal.

## Deciding on a subject

The areas covered by media, film and cultural studies sometimes seem so broad that the task of deciding what to research can seem overwhelming. You may wonder, 'What is an appropriate subject for academic research in a field where all areas of culture seem open to study?' Remember that our fields of study were largely originated by people who were prepared to study what others considered to be unworthy of academic investigation. Media and cultural studies would not exist as a field of academic research if people had not been prepared to take risks and to challenge conventional notions of what is appropriate to study. So do not worry too much about whether what you want to study is legitimate or not; as long as it is fundamentally to do with the media or culture, it will probably be fine. The most important factor in your selection of a topic is that you find a subject engaging enough to sustain your interest throughout the time you will be working on it. Settling on a subject area is one of the most important decisions you will make in designing your project, so it is worth spending some time thinking carefully about what you want to do.

In general, the project should bring together your academic and your personal interests, so try to match your own experience with your studies. You need to think about what interests you, but this must be informed by your knowledge of what other people in the field have done and what it is feasible for you to investigate.

**TABLE 1.2**  
Self-Administered  
Questions for  
Generating Ideas  
for the Project

*About yourself*  
What medium or media do I enjoy using?  
Do I belong to a cultural group which I could study?  
What motivates me to study media or cultural studies?  
Could my family or friends make interesting subjects of research?

*About your studies*  
What subject areas have I especially enjoyed studying?  
Is there a researcher whose work I especially admire? What do I like about his/her work?  
Did a specific lecture or seminar particularly interest me?  
Which assignment for a previous class did I particularly enjoy?  
Is there any area of my studies so far which I would like to look at in more depth?

*About the subject*  
What current developments in media technology, industry or culture do I find especially interesting?  
Is there an important event in the history of the field about which I would like to find out more?  
Do I have access to an institution (through work experience or personal networks) which could be useful to me in conducting the project?

## Reflect on your interests

A good way to start thinking about the topic for your research is to reflect on your personal interest in the field. Ask yourself what areas of culture or media interest you the most. Think about your own personal use of the media: for example, do you spend more time watching television, listening to music or reading books? Which is your favourite medium and why? Would you describe yourself as a fan or a connoisseur of any particular media form or genre? Many excellent projects are written by students about programmes, films or music that they admire. If you are part of a subculture or scene, perhaps you could research the attitudes and behaviour of fellow members of your group? If you are a member of a fan club, your co-members can make an excellent resource: after all, they share your passion and are probably keen to talk about their interest. Perhaps you have experience of working in the media, or access to people who work in the media and who would be amenable to being interviewed. Your own knowledge, experience, contacts and interests are invaluable resources in conducting original research. If there is some aspect of media or culture about which you want to know more, this is a good starting point. Listing all of the subject areas you are interested in on a piece of paper will help you to appreciate the range of areas on which you could draw. Table 1.2 provides some ideas to get you started.

### Think back on your studies

By now you will probably have taken several modules in the field. The project is a good opportunity for you to pursue areas of interest which you did not have time for during your course. Go through your notes, reflecting on classes or lectures you found especially interesting. Spend some time with your course and module guides to remind yourself of what you have been studying. When you look through your folders, you will probably be surprised at the range of topics you have studied so far. You should find that one of these is interesting enough to give you some ideas for your own research project.

### Build on studies you have read

One excellent starting point is to ask yourself what has interested you the most about the research you have read on your course? Most research is generated by testing theories of previous scholars in new situations: is there any work that you have read which you can build on in your own research? For example, David Morley's book *Family Television* studies how the structure of the family is reflected in the way people watch television (Morley, 1986). One of his main conclusions is that patriarchal power structures are reflected in television viewing habits, but Morley acknowledges the limitations of his study, which is based on a narrow demographic range of mainly white, middle-class families. You might be inspired by Morley to ask whether members of other demographic groups use television in distinctive ways. For example, your own family background may differ in interesting ways from those Morley researched. A study of the decision-making processes around television viewing in extended or single-parent families, for example, would make an interesting comparison with Morley's research. Alternatively, you could ask: 'Who controls television viewing in households which are not based around family relations as in student accommodation or when groups of friends live together?' Is it the owner of the television? Are decisions about television viewing made by the person who is most similar to the *patriarch* in the group (the person who earns the most perhaps)? Or are such matters determined by the person who watches television the most? You could use the same methods as Morley, but by applying his ideas to a different situation you could come up with some new ways of thinking about how we watch television.

Another way to build on Morley's research would be to interview groups of people about their collective media habits, as Morley does, but apply that method to other areas of media use. For example, you might interview a group of friends who frequently socialize together about the

decision-making process involved in choosing what film they are going to see.

You could find out more about media use by understanding the group dynamics involved in deciding what to do in leisure time. Or you could look at the family unit, as Morley did, but investigate how families decide which channels they are going to receive on their subscriber television service. Morley's focus on the dynamics of group decision making around the media is very productive of new ideas. There are numerous ways in which you could apply a method of research that has been used by previous researchers to new situations or media. Start by rereading research which you found particularly interesting, and this time pay close attention to the method used. Think about how the researcher's approach may be adapted to new situations or environments.

### Think about current developments

Your research should be original, and one of the best ways of ensuring that you avoid already well-trodden ground is to study the latest developments in the field. These may be

- *technological* – looking at the implications of the latest media technology
- *regulatory* – looking at how recent governmental legislation or decisions (for example, the granting of a new BBC charter) may influence the media system
- *social* – examining how new cultural phenomena are forming.

Each of the above is constantly changing. Our field is often at the forefront of examining the impact of new technology. Don't be put off by the fact that 'nothing has been written' about a new technology – there is a large literature on the impact of new technology which you can exploit in your project. Likewise with the changing political or economic environment: there are always points of comparison you can make with past events. Think about how new changes will impact a well-documented industry or institution. Current events are well tracked in trade and industry publications and on the Internet – don't be afraid to use a variety of sources as long as your background and theoretical approach are founded on academic research.

### Use your contacts

If you have contacts within the industry – perhaps through work experience or personal networks – could you base your study on these? Employers may be willing to allow you to use the workplace as the focus for your study. You

**TABLE 1.3**  
Examples of Subject Areas for Research Projects

The African-American man in Hollywood cinema
Beatles fan culture
Benetton advertisements
Black British culture
Boy bands
Contemporary British cinema
<i>Cosmopolitan</i> magazine
Disabled people in the media
The films of Quentin Tarantino
Football coverage in British newspapers
Game shows
Home improvement television
Indian cinema
Internet shopping
Men's magazines
New technology in publishing
Sindy doll marketing
Teenage magazines
Television advertising
Webzines

may be permitted to sit in on meetings (on your own time!), where decisions are made, or to observe at first hand how some aspect of the business is conducted. Chapter 4 gives some more discussion of using your work experience (see pages 122–25). Family and friendship contacts can also be helpful; for example, they may be useful in recruiting interviewees or subjects for survey research (see Chapter 5).

Think carefully about your studies, your interests and your contacts, and you will probably be able to think of several subjects you could choose for your project. Look again at Table 1.2 and write down your own responses to these questions.

#### *The range of topics for student projects*

Table 1.3 shows some of the subject areas that students of mine have used for their projects. As you can see, this is a wide range of subjects, and I am sure you could come up with some ideas that would not look out of place among these. Note that these are not *questions* but *subject areas*; there is a big difference between them which we will discuss in the section on ‘Developing your research question’. You might want to read the appropriate chapters of the rest of this book before you settle on an idea. You should read through the rest of this chapter when you have come up with a general topic area in order to hone down your subject to a researchable question.

#### *Brainstorming*

*Brainstorming* is a great way of generating ideas and a useful technique for helping you to think about what you really want to do. When you have thought about the questions raised in Table 1.2, allow yourself the time to indulge in a brainstorming session. You can do this alone, in a study group or in class. First get a very large piece of paper and some marker pens. Give yourself a set period of time – ten to fifteen minutes, depending on how many of you there are – to cover it with writing. Write down each and every topic that you *could*, *would* or *might* like to study. Don’t edit your ideas – be spontaneous and write everything down, almost like automatic writing. Make sure you keep writing, as quickly as you can, for the whole time. When the time is up, go and have a cup of tea or take a walk. Come back to the sheet of paper after about ten minutes and read it. Now, think about what connections you can make. Take a different coloured pen and draw lines between similar ideas and try to come up with categories for your ideas. Can you identify common themes? Is there one idea which seems to dominate everything else? Do you have several distinct ideas? Once you have gone over the sheet of paper and covered it in new writing, make a list of any ideas which are potential research subjects. Next think about how you could put these ideas in order of what interests you the most. Is there one topic which seems more appealing than the others? You may have several different ideas at this stage or you may still be stuck; don’t worry: talk through your concerns with other students in your class or with your tutor. By the end of your brainstorming session, you should have at least a couple of ideas which are worth pursuing further and you will have thought more about what interests you and why.

#### *How high is your brow?*

The debates about the ‘highbrow’ and ‘popular’ cultures are very well rehearsed elsewhere, and I will not get into them now (see, for example, Storey, 1993, 1994; Inglis, 1990, 1993; Turner, 1996). Suffice it to say that although there is a general acceptance of the distinction between ‘media’ and ‘culture’ in academic and popular debate, in this book we are going to consider them equally valid areas of study. The distinctions we need to make for our present purposes are not of the brow level of the various forms, but of the kinds of work which can be done in researching media and culture. However, although the method for researching Covent Garden opera may not be any different from that used to research Carlton television, whether one chooses to study the opera or popular television can in itself be a highly

political decision. In planning your research, you should feel equally entitled to study the so-called ‘elite’ or ‘popular’ forms – all have equal currency in the market place of cultural forms and ideas.

### Use your supervisor

You should talk to your tutor or supervisor at an early stage in the design process to get guidance on how to approach your chosen subject area. Each university will have its own expectations and criteria; your tutor will be able to advise you on these. Your tutor will also know if there are any special resources available to you locally relating to your topic. Early discussions can save you from going down false paths, so make an appointment to see your tutor as soon as you have an idea. Make regular appointments to meet your supervisor and stick to them. Students who discuss their project regularly with their supervisor do much better in the final assessment than those who don’t. Supervisors constitute a valuable resource provided for you – make the most of them!

### Developing your research question

Once you have decided on a subject area, and you have discussed it with your tutor, you need to work on developing your *research question*. The research question is what will guide your project, so it is crucial that you define it very carefully. Begin to do this by thinking about what it is about the subject that you find interesting. Read as much as you can about the topic to find out what kinds of research have been done in this area before. Think about *theory*; how could you apply the findings of particular theorists to your own interests?

#### Define your object of analysis

The next stage in the design process is to define exactly what you are going to take as your *object of analysis*: that aspect of the subject which you are going to study in detail. The object of analysis specifies the precise set of phenomena you will examine and is a description of your particular area of enquiry. What do you want to say about British films of the 1990s, game

shows or digital music? Try to be as precise as possible. Narrow your focus to a single aspect of the subject, or to one key relationship. Your object of analysis should be *manageable* – sufficient to keep you busy but not too much to handle. It should also be *accessible*; you will be wasting your time trying to research films if you can’t get hold of viewing copies, for example.

If your subject area was one of those in Table 1.3, let’s say contemporary British cinema, there are several narrower areas you could select for your project, depending on the exact area you are interested in. Table 1.4 gives some ideas of how this subject may be narrowed down further.

If you want to look at issues of representation in British films, you could choose to look at how a particular social group is depicted in a certain set of films. Let us take as an example representations of the Asian community in films such as *East is East*, *Bhaji on the Beach* or *Bend it Like Beckham*. The representation of British Asian culture in these films would provide a clear object of analysis. Another recurrent theme in contemporary British cinema is the East End villain. You could take as your object of analysis films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* which use the mythology of the East End of London as a theme, building on stereotypes of that community as villainous and dangerous. If, however, you were struck by the popularity of *Billy Elliot* and think the film bears all the hallmarks of a classical musical, while also being a typically British movie, you could study it in the context of a history of the British musical and determine for yourself the extent to which this film conforms to type.

All of the above examples involve focusing on *texts*. However, contemporary British cinema could be narrowed to an industry-focused study, if you took as your object of analysis the health of the cinema industry. If that were the case, you could cull information about the financial well-being of the industry from the pages of the trade journals such as *Variety* and *Screen Finance*. Here you would be conducting primary analysis not on the films, but on company reports and industrial information found in press releases and financial news coverage. Potential titles for such a study could be ‘The Rise of the British Film Industry since the 1990s’ or ‘The Impact of the Multiplex on Cinema Attendance’.

Alternatively, your object of analysis might lean towards the social uses of cinema-going. In this case you might be more interested in what people get out of going to the cinema, and wish to focus on audiences. If you looked at what people get out of a night out at the cinema, perhaps interviewing your own friends or colleagues at university, you would have the basis of an interesting investigation into the social uses of the cinema. Here you would be taking cinema-going as a social phenomenon and studying it from the perspective of the pleasures people get from the social aspect; the content of the texts themselves and of the industry which produced them might be completely irrelevant.

**TABLE 1.4**

Moving from  
Subject Area to  
Object of  
Analysis

Subject area	Focus of analysis	Examples of potential objects of analysis
Contemporary British cinema	Texts	The representation of British-Asian culture in <i>Bhaji on the Beach</i> , <i>East is East</i> and <i>Bend it Like Beckham</i> The East End of London as location for gangster movies <i>Billy Elliot</i> as British musical
	Industry	The rise of the British film industry since the 1990s The impact of the multiplex on cinema attendance
	Audience	What people like about going to the movies
Men's magazines	Texts	Analysis of the representation of women in men's magazines Comparison of product reviews in men's and women's magazines
	Industry	The rise and fall of the 'lads' mag': a case study of <i>Loaded</i>
	Audience	What do readers and non-readers think about men's magazines: a focus group study
Television advertising	Texts	Advertisements and the representation of place: landscape as a signifier in television advertisements
	Industry	The impact of the expansion of commercial television on the advertising industry: comparing the 1950s with today
	Audience	Recall and impact of advertisements. What advertisements do people recollect and does it have an impact on purchasing?

The examples in Table 1.4 include various approaches to other topics given in Table 1.3, men's magazines and television advertising. The object of analysis for any study can be narrowed down by deciding on the focus of analysis. Both of these general subject areas lend themselves to multiple potential objects of analysis, depending on whether the researcher defines their main interest as primarily concerned with *texts*, *industries* or *audiences*. Table 1.4 offers some examples of objects of analysis under each category.

When you are narrowing your subject area to a workable object of analysis, it might be useful if you think about which of these areas interests you most. When you have decided whether it is the texts themselves, the ways the texts are produced or the ways the audiences understand and receive them, you will be on the way to developing your research question. The categories of *text*, *industry* and *audience* are those which are used in later chapters of this book.

#### *Read around your subject area*

When you have settled on your object of analysis, you should begin to read as much as you can about it. Read any key literature, but also read *around* your subject area; investigate related areas or similar topics for ideas on theoretical approaches and methods of analysis. The research project is an opportunity for you to add to the knowledge which already exists, but you can't do this until you are aware of what is already known and written about your subject (see Chapter 2 Sources and Resources). If you find that there are hundreds of books and articles on your object of analysis, you have probably not narrowed it sufficiently. Read the most frequently cited and/or recent books and articles on the topic and find out which are the main areas of contention. Could you find out something about these? Is there an area which the literature seems to have missed? Or a new phenomenon which the research hasn't caught up with yet? If, however, you find nothing has been written, you are probably not looking in the right place or you are being much too specific. Redefine your search terms and try again. As you read, take careful notes on what research has been done in your area of interest and by whom; you will need this information when you come to write your literature review (see Chapter 6, pages 159–60).

#### *Think about theory*

When you have settled on your object of analysis, the next stage is to consider *why* you are studying it. The matter of *why* brings in the central topic of *theory*. The importance of theory as a tool to help us think about things cannot be overvalued or overlooked. In doing original research at this level, we are unlikely to be developing new theoretical models or having dramatically profound theoretical insights. Our use of theory, then, is purely pragmatic: theories provide us with ways of thinking about our object of analysis. The purpose of theory is to help us.

In defining your object of analysis, I asked you to hone it down by thinking about what exactly interested you about your research area. In defining the theory, you are thinking about *why* you are interested in your object of analysis. What is it about your chosen subject that you find

interesting? What theoretical approaches can you bring to bear on your investigation? This might be glaringly obvious or incredibly difficult to unpack depending on the exact nature of your question. But spending some time reflecting on why you are interested in this topic will bring to the fore the crux of your study. You need to draw on the existing literature, too; to think about how previous scholars have justified their research in this area. What theoretical approaches have been taken to your object of analysis? How have previous researchers explained why they are interested in the topic? Do their explanations have any resonance with your own interest in the area? What approaches have not been taken? Can you find a new coupling of object of analysis with theory that has not been tried before? The theoretical basis may be taken from key writers within the field such as Stuart Hall or David Morley. Alternatively you might choose to apply theories developed by leading intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas or Michel Foucault. The theoretical paradigm is what gives you the *rationale* for your research. It should help you to justify your selection of subject and your method of analysis. The theoretical paradigm will help to explain *why* you are undertaking your project.

#### *Choosing the right method*

We have discussed the *what* and the *why* of your research project. The next stage in your planning is to think about *how* you are going to conduct your research. You will improve the overall quality of your work if you spend as much time thinking about *how* you are going to approach your subject as you did settling on the subject itself. The method of research you are going to adopt will depend largely on the object of analysis and the theoretical approach you are going to take (the *what* and the *why*). But before you can make a decision about what method to use, you need to be aware of the various paradigms for studying media and culture.

In the introduction, we briefly discussed the way research paradigms are typically categorized into *quantitative* and *qualitative* methods (see pages 2–4). The literal definitions of these are simple: a *quantitative* method is any kind of inquiry which uses numerical values, such as statistical research, certain kinds of survey research or any method which generates numbers. These are largely about measurement of one kind or another. In contrast, *qualitative* research is based on the interpretation of the world according to concepts which are typically not given numerical values, such as ethnomethodology or certain kinds of interview. These methods are considered to be interpretive (see Table 0.1, page 3 and discussion). Whether a researcher conducts quantitative or qualitative research has become a highly charged issue in social science, and the two sets of paradigms are typically presented as separate and distinctive (see, for example, Burns, 2000). The difference

between qualitative and quantitative research methods may be great, but the differences in the kinds of questions asked are not always great – it is important to realize that *most research topics in media and cultural studies involve some measurement and some analysis – the two do not exist independently of each other*. Klaus Bruhn Jensen argues that ‘for purposes of theory development as well as applications of media studies, it is crucial that researchers assess the relevance of different methodologies with reference to the purposes and objects of analysis, asking *what* and *why* before asking *how*’ (Jensen, 1991a: 6).

While the main focus of this book is on *how* to do your research project, it is essential that your choice of method is fully predicated on *what* you want to study and *why*: the object of analysis and the theoretical approach should be the primary determinants of the method. In the subsequent chapters, we examine the methods of analysis available to the student according to the main object of analysis and try to avoid perpetuating the unhealthy distinction between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ methods.

#### *Rules of evidence in media, cultural and film studies*

Every area of enquiry, whether it be in the natural or social sciences or in the humanities, has its own *rules of evidence*. This refers to the way in which arguments are made and evidence gathered. The underlying ideology behind the rules of evidence is sometimes referred to as the *epistemology*: the study of knowledge. How we can know anything, and, moreover, how we can prove what we know, are essential questions in any academic discipline. Within the classic scientific model, for example, knowledge is built through the observation of replicable experiments. The ‘scientific method’ has been applied to some areas of social science, but the rules of evidence are by no means fixed. In the fields of media and cultural studies, there is no consensus among scholars as to what the rules of evidence should be: some people (largely those with training in mass communications) tend towards using the models derived from the social sciences in which quantitative and qualitative methods are used fairly rigorously. Scholars within the cultural studies tradition, who may come from a background in the humanities, would be more likely to use hermeneutic methods of analysis typical of those employed in literary analysis. Whatever our background, we all aim to prove a point in our research: we have to have something to say, and we use our analysis of the media and of culture to support our claims. We have to present our work in such a way that any reasonable person reading it would agree with our conclusions based on the evidence we have presented. We talk about a project being *valid* if it is a well-designed piece of research which does what the researcher wants it to. Roger Sapsford puts it neatly when he says:

To ask whether a study is valid – or rather, the *extent* to which it is valid – is to ask about the status of the evidence. We are asking whether what is presented as evidence can carry the weight of the conclusions drawn from it, or whether there is a logical flaw (in measurement, in sampling, in comparison) which makes the conclusions doubtful or at least detracts from our belief in them. (Sapsford, 1999: 9)

A valid piece of work should demonstrate the relationship between the object of analysis and the method: the researcher should show that the choice of method was the correct one to make the desired point. Regardless of whether our work falls into the category of quantitative or qualitative research as discussed above (see pages 2–4; 18–19). It should be both *valid* and *reliable*. Reliability is a measure of how well the research is actually done and the consistency of the findings. Research is said to be *reliable* when it has been accurately and appropriately conducted.

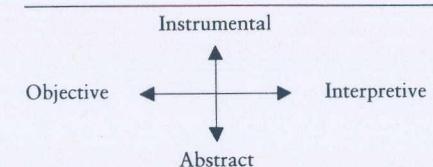
### Paradigms of research in media, culture and film studies

Although the categories of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ may not be very useful in a multidisciplinary field such as ours, we do need a way to define different kinds of research. It is useful to think about the various ways we conduct research according to two separate dimensions, which I have labelled ‘*objective/interpretive*’ and ‘*instrumental/abstract*’. Table 1.5 presents a schematic outline of these two dimensions of research, and it is possible to position research on this map according to the extent to which it is characteristic of these dimensions.

Let’s start with the *objective/interpretive* dimension. This relates somewhat to the qualitative/quantitative distinction. It is useful to think about research according to the kinds of claim the researcher is making for it. Some researchers argue that their work is totally objective and not open to interpretation. They base their conclusions on scientifically argued grounds relating to the design of their study: their findings are the product of the method, and their own opinions or interpretation have little to do with the outcome. Their work is judged according to the criteria of the *validity* of the question, the *reliability* of the study and the *integrity* of the researcher as *impartial*. In our field, this kind of research focuses on *factual* information and tends to be largely descriptive. Examples of ‘objective’ research include analysis of large sets of statistical data, such as audience numbers used in gathering ratings data.

However, many researchers conduct enquiries which are fundamentally *interpretive*. In this kind of research, scholars acknowledge that their findings

**FIGURE 1.1**  
Dimensions of  
Research  
Paradigms in  
Media and  
Cultural Studies



depend on how the work is interpreted and may not be particularly valid according to researchers steeped in the objectivity of some social science research. Interpretive research acknowledges the limitations of enquiry and does not aspire to be all-knowing (a criticism sometimes made by such researchers of the more objective approach). The interpretive scholar relies on insight and judgement. The persuasiveness of an interpretive study depends on the rhetorical force with which the case is made. Examples include analyses of television programmes which focus on the themes and character portrayals. ‘Interpretive’ studies are less factual and more analytical in focus than their ‘objective’ counterpart.

In practice, these distinctions are very rough. Most research contains elements of both – even the most interpretive work will contain statements of fact which are objectively true. In recent years, the use of interpretive research has been accepted as an industry standard, with focus groups, for example, forming a mainstay of the market researchers’ armament.

It is necessary to make a further distinction, which I have labelled ‘*instrumental/abstract*’ (see Figure 1.1). For we need to distinguish between research which is done mainly for business or bureaucratic reasons, which we could call *instrumental* and research which has as its aim only the pursuit of abstract knowledge. In practice, these dimensions, too, are caricatures: most research has a functional, bureaucratic aim, even if that is only to expand the researcher’s CV. But there is research which is more highly theoretical and has no particular business application. There is not necessarily a discrepancy between critical work (that is politically engaged) and empirical work (working with numbers and statistics). The Glasgow Media Group have engaged in what Greg Philo has called ‘a critical media studies’ for some time (Philo, 1999). Their research is ‘empirically based and critical’, according to Philo (1999: ix).

Because media and cultural studies take as their object of analysis a topic, there is no one method of research that you can use. Many disciplines in the sciences, for example, have a preferred method and canon of texts which everyone trained in that specialism must learn. This is one of the definitions of a discipline. Neither media nor cultural studies is a discipline in this sense: our field is a topic which we can use any method to study. However, the method must be appropriate to the particular area of the topic. For example, if you

want to study the *representation* of gay people in soap operas, your method would be a *textual analysis* based on the analysis of images of lesbian and gay men in particular soaps. If you want to know what gay and lesbian people *think* about their representation in soap operas, you would base your research on *surveys and/or interviews*. It would be inappropriate to use interviews to analyse texts or to use textual analysis to study attitudes and opinions. Which method of analysis you use depends largely on your object of analysis. In analysing the portrayal of any group of people in any genre of programme (or film, book, or other form), you would use techniques appropriate to the study of texts. Matters of how frequently something is represented are best understood through *content analysis*, while questions of what those representations *mean* would be more directly answered by *semiotic analysis*. If you are interested in gay people's attitudes towards and opinions about the representation of their communities on television, you would be most concerned, not with the texts themselves, but with the audience – you would probably choose the focus group or the interview if you wanted to take this approach. However, if you think the appointment of a particular executive to the position of commissioning editor for that division has led to a change of policy regarding the representation of gay people, you should look at methods appropriate for the study of industry.

Research into media and culture can be divided into three broad areas, each with its own preferred paradigms of research: *texts*, *industries* and *audiences*. Within each of these areas, it is theoretically possible to employ any method used in the humanities or social sciences, but, in practice and by convention, each of these three areas has a different set of methods associated with it (see Tables 1.6, 1.7, and 1.8). Sometimes the use of a particular method to study a specific phenomenon is based on sound epistemological principles; sometimes it is simply a convention.

#### *Studying media texts*

If you are primarily interested in studying particular films, television programmes, pieces of music or museum exhibits, these can all be considered texts for our present purposes. The paradigms most frequently used in the analysis of texts derived initially from the study of literature. The field of hermeneutics is the classical precursor, although in modern times it is to the subject of English literature that we can look to see the most direct antecedents of textual analysis. Many approaches to media and cultural output have a great deal in common with analyses of novels and other forms of literature. In some cases, the analysis of texts has changed little since the development of English literature as a field in the early part of the twentieth century: methods which analyse the themes, plot or characterization of texts

**TABLE 1.6**  
Methods for  
Studying Texts

Object of analysis	Method	Example
How much of something occurs in a set of texts	Content analysis	Glasgow University Media Group (1976; 1980; 1982), <i>News studies</i> ; Greg Philo (1996, 1999); Jane Stokes (1999a), 'girls' magazines'
The meaning of a text or set of texts	Semiotics	Roland Barthes (1990), <i>Fashion</i> ; Judith Williamson (1978), <i>Decoding Advertisements</i>
The narrative structure of a text or set of texts	Narrative analysis	Vladimir Propp (1968); Arthur Asa Berger (1982), <i>The Prisoner</i> analysis
A group of texts of the same kind or genre	Genre study	Jane Feuer (1982), <i>The Hollywood Musical</i> ; Will Wright (1979), <i>Six-Guns and Society</i>
A group of texts by the same 'author'	Auteur study	Lawrence S. Friedman (1999) on Martin Scorsese
A group of texts featuring the same performer	Star study	Dyer (1982), <i>Stars</i> ; (1987) <i>Heavenly Bodies</i> ; Holmes (2001) on Joan Crawford

derive from the study of the novel or poetry. Since the 1960s, there has been a strong influence from film studies and an expansion in the approaches available to analyse texts.

Table 1.6 shows the methods to be discussed in Chapter 3. Content analysis is the most empirical of the methods we will consider in our discussion of textual analysis: it is a method which relies on the gathering of numerical information about texts under examination. In Table 1.5, it would be located at the 'objective' end of the 'objective/interpretive' dimension, although there are many aspects of it which are interpretive, as we shall see in Chapter 3. You should choose this method if you are interested in *how much* of something occurs in a text or set of texts. Whenever you need quantitative values relating to the occurrence of particular phenomena in texts, content analysis is the best method to adopt. Content analysis should be used if your object of analysis is texts of some kind, and your theoretical question is about quantities. It has been used most widely to study how many news items cover what kinds of issues by the Glasgow University Media Group, who are perhaps the most prolific users of this method (Eldridge, 1993; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982; Philo, 1996, 1999).

If, however, you are primarily interested in the *meaning* of texts or images, semiotics is more appropriate to your needs. This method allows you to develop your own interpretation of your object of analysis by breaking down the text into its component units of meaning, or *semes*. This is often used in conjunction with content analysis to gain a multifaceted analysis of a set of texts: content analysis can give a value to how many of something occur, and semiotics can supply some interpretation as to what those occurrences mean. For example, we hypothesize that men's magazines cover sports less and in a less informed way than news magazines. We are interested in theories of masculinity and think that the images of sportsmen vary significantly in both media. A content analysis of how much sport coverage there is in men's magazines as opposed to news magazines would give you facts to support an argument about the relative coverage of sport in these two kinds of publications. You would be able to categorize the different representations of men to a certain extent by content analysis. A semiotic analysis of the nature of the coverage, the kinds of images carried and the types of features and stories these images support would give you an interesting study of the representation of sporting heroes.

If you were interested in studying the nature of the stories told about sportsmen in various publications, a very good method would be narrative analysis. This embraces a range of methods for looking at the structure of narratives in any media: it can be applied to film, television, songs, advertisements – any medium in which stories are being told. If your interest is mainly in the plot or storyline, in how it is that 'boy meets girl' in a particular set of texts, you should choose narrative analysis. The set of methods discussed in Chapter 3 under the rubric of 'typological methods' all derive from film studies and provide valuable insights into other media; these are *genre*, *auteur* and *star* studies. Table 1.6 gives examples of studies employing each of the main methods of investigating texts.

#### *Studying the culture industries*

The media industries have provided the object of analysis for research by media sociologists, economists, and critical scholars. There are many hundreds of different ways in which the media industries have been studied, deriving from almost every discipline; here I concentrate on those that students are most likely to research. These are presented in outline in Table 1.7.

The most typical method is *archive research*, which is used to investigate the contemporary and historical status of the culture industries. If you are interested in the history of a particular company or industry, archive research will probably be your primary method. Documents pertaining to, or produced by, the organizations you are studying will form your primary source.

**TABLE 1.7**

Methods for  
Studying  
Industries

Object of analysis	Method	Example
History of specific institutions; history of media technologies; past policy debates; history of legislation	Archival research	Asa Briggs (1961–1995), <i>History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom</i>
History of broadcasting; social impact of media	Social history	Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff (1991), <i>A Social History of Broadcasting</i> ; John Corner (1991), <i>Popular Television in Britain</i>
Opinions and attitudes of industry workers	Interview	Lesley Henderson (1999), 'Producing serious soaps'; Kembrew McLeod (1999) 'Authenticity in hip-hop'
Working practices of a company or organization; behaviour of workers in industry	Participant observation	Philip Schlesinger (1987), <i>Putting Reality Together</i> ; Jackie Harrison (2000) <i>Terrestrial TV News in Britain</i>

If, however, you are interested in the history of industries from the point of view of the audiences, you will be conducting *social history*. In this case, your primary sources would also include documents pertaining to how the industry was understood in the broader society, perhaps through contemporaneous magazine and newspaper reports. The example of social history discussed here is Scannell and Cardiff's (1991) study of broadcasting as a cultural phenomenon. Most academic research based on archive research is fairly interpretive – the researcher must determine the significance of the documents being investigated.

Industries are not researched through archives alone; people are frequently excellent sources of information about the industries in which they work. If you are able to *interview* people in industry about their work, they can often provide interesting and important insights into the culture industries, as in Lesley Henderson's (1999) study of soap opera workers or Kembrew McLeod's study of workers in the hip-hop industry. The interview is a good method for getting at people's perceptions of what they are doing and to finding out about their attitudes towards and opinions of their work. Your main interest might be in what actually happens rather than what people tell you happens, in which case you should consider *participant observation*. This is a more intensive method than interviews in general, and depends on your being able to get access to the workplace itself and observe people in their normal work. Participant observation was the method

employed by Philip Schlesinger in his (now) classic study of BBC newsroom workers, *Putting Reality Together* (1987), and by Jackie Harrison in her study (2000).

Most research projects can benefit from an understanding of the economic reality of the culture industries, and Chapter 4 includes some discussion of the type of information available for researchers in this area. Academic research is usually done in the interests of knowledge for its own sake, but that is not the case for the vast majority of research undertaken into the culture industries. Most of the documents which the researcher analyses will have been written for purely instrumental reasons by companies and organizations to gain a strategic advantage in the market place. The credibility of such documents is not necessarily reduced by their instrumentality, but you need to be aware of why information has been collected in order to discount any potential bias in the material you find.

#### *Studying audiences*

Audience research is another area of our topic which is extensively pursued by the culture industries for their own instrumental reasons. Indeed, the vast majority of audience research is not academic but bureaucratic in motivation. Television companies need to know how many people are watching which programmes; companies with products to advertise need to know what magazines their potential customers are likely to read. The kinds of research undertaken to investigate audiences' use of media and culture are presented in Table 1.8.

**TABLE 1.8**  
Methods for  
Studying  
Audiences

	Object of analysis	Method	Example
	Behaviour of people in own environment	Observation	James Lull (1990), <i>Inside Family Viewing</i> ; Liebes and Katz (1990) on <i>Dallas</i> viewers
	People's responses to questions	Survey	Guy Cumberbatch (2000), <i>Television: The Public's View</i>
	Audiences' reports of behaviour	Interview	David Morley (1986), <i>Family Television</i>
	Attitudes, opinions and behaviour of groups	Focus group	Janet Wasko et al (2001) <i>The Global Disney Audiences Project</i> on Millwood Hargrave (2000) <i>Delete Expletives</i>
	Memories of past behaviour and attitudes	Oral history	Tim O'Sullivan (1991), 'Television memories . . .'

Most academic research concerns the impact of the media on the people who use it, on the meanings and interpretations people get out of the media. One of the methods adopted by media scholars to the study of audiences is participant observation. As in the study of industries, this involves studying the behaviour of people in their natural environment – in this case, usually their own home. James Lull (1990) has concentrated on the observation of audiences watching television, and he uses methods derived from ethnography. This very labour-intensive method is relevant only if your research question is about precisely how people use the media, and it is applicable only to certain kinds of media use. *Survey research* is a more adaptable method for studying audiences, although it relies on subjects' reports of their own behaviour, attitudes and opinions. Survey research is widely used by the industry, too, and the case study used in this chapter is from Guy Cumberbatch's work, which was commissioned by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) (Cumberbatch, 2000). Within media and cultural studies, a more typical method of studying audiences is the *interview*, and David Morley's (1986) work offers several examples of how this approach can provide interesting insights into the audiences of the media. More recently, the *focus group* has found favour with researchers at the instrumental and the abstract end of the research scales. Focus groups have become widely used by the industry and also by academics. The example given here is from Andrea Millwood Hargrave's work, which includes focus groups among its methods (Millwood Hargrave, 2000). Audience research usually concentrates on people's current use of the media and culture, but there is no reason why this should be so: there has been some very interesting research on the history of audience by the method of *oral history*. If you are interested in people's memories of their past use of media or culture, this is an ideal method to use (and the past does not have to be the distant past – you could interview people in your class about their memories of television in their school years, for instance).

Your method of analysis, then, will differ according to the nature of your object of analysis – if you are interested in people's ideas and opinions you will use different methods than if you were interested in their behaviour. This book covers only those methods which it is feasible for a final-year undergraduate to undertake, so not all paradigms are covered.

#### **Combining research methods**

By conducting two or more methods of research, you can often achieve a more textured understanding of your object of analysis. The idea of 'triangulation' is that one method confirms or reinforces another. Thus, interviews can provide a reinforcement of what one suspects from reading archives. Here we

look at the ways in which methods of analysing texts, industries and audiences can be combined and discuss some examples from the literature of how this has been done in the past.

There are times when you might want to combine methods of audience research to get a more nuanced picture of a phenomenon. Many researchers have used surveys followed up by in-depth interviews: the survey generates data of a broad scope but little context; interviews are then used with a smaller subset of the original sample to get more detailed, contextual information. Andrea Millwood Hargrave's study of attitudes towards offensive language, for example, used both surveys and interviews (Millwood Hargrave, 2000). In the first phase of the study, surveys were administered to find out how people ranked particular words; this was then followed up with focus groups to discover why people found certain words offensive, and not others. In studying audiences, it is not unusual to combine a broad method such as questionnaire survey with a more textured one such as the focus group or the open-ended interview.

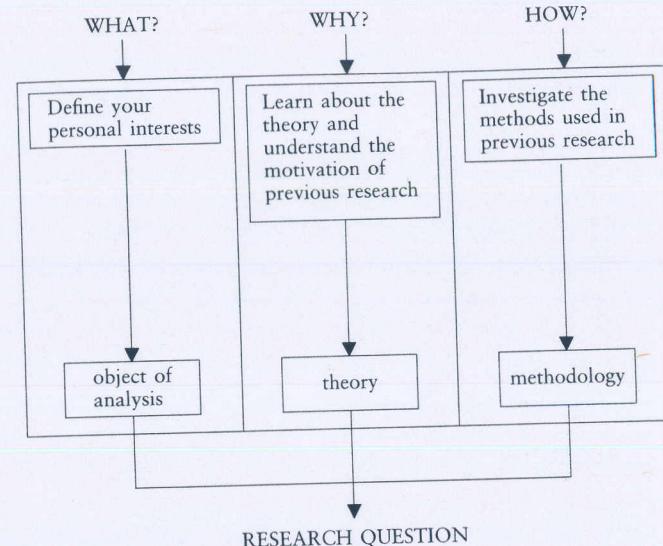
There will often be situations when your object of analysis does not fit neatly into the three categories of 'texts', 'audiences' and 'industries' I have used in this book. Sometimes you will be interested in the relationship between texts and readers, or between producers and their audiences. In such cases, it is sometimes appropriate to conduct two separate studies, using different methods, and compare the findings.

In Chapter 4, we will discuss interviewing people in the industry and in Chapter 5 interviewing audiences. Sometimes, though, it is valuable to interview producers and receivers of the same text, as Dorothy Hobson did in her study of the British soap opera, *Crossroads* (1982). Hobson interviewed staff at ATV, the production company behind *Crossroads*, including actors, casting directors and producers, as well as interviewing audiences for this popular but much denigrated television series. Hobson had more time, resources and access than most readers of this book.

The key to combining methods is to know why you are doing it. Don't make access your only criterion – always have a good rationale for why you are combining two methods, and think about what this adds to your study.

A word of warning, though. As a general principle, it is better to do one thing well than to do several things shoddily. I am not an advocate of the 'scattergun' approach to research which says that if you look at your subject from as many angles as possible you will get the fullest picture possible. It is more pragmatic to define exactly what you want to look at and think carefully about what you are doing and why. The thinking phase may be time-consuming, but it is cheap and it doesn't hurt anyone! When you have limited time and resources, as most people reading this book do, it is better to spend your time constructing a well-designed study of one aspect of the media or culture.

**FIGURE 1.2**  
Designing a  
Research  
Question



### Phrasing your research question

Your research question, then, should include an indication of the object of analysis, the theoretical background and the method to be used. Each of these should complement the others, and your question should be phrased in such a way as to give an indication of what is involved in all three areas. Figure 1.2 presents a flow chart summarizing how these three elements relate to your research question.

Before you can determine the final wording of your research question, you will need to ensure that you can answer the following three questions:

1. What are you going to research?
2. Why is this a topic of interest?
3. How are you going to conduct your research?

The research question may or may not be the title of the project – you may want to give your project a more sexy and catchy title. If it is not the title, the research question should be clearly stated within the first paragraph in one concise sentence. Your research question should be on a topic which will sustain your interest for the duration of the study. Don't choose a subject which you know you will get bored of – make sure the topic is something you can commit yourself to working with.

If yours is a hypothesis-driven question, you must be able to express your project idea in the form of 'a statement which can be proved'. The task of conducting research must be directed towards proving something, preferably something which has not been proved before. It is a rhetorical requirement of writing academic essays that you must state what you intend to prove in the form of a hypothesis. This will be the product of your knowledge of the subject area derived from your studies to date, your reading and your own experience.

The use of hypotheses in media and cultural research is part of the adoption of scientific method. Scientific method is the standardized procedure by which scientists find answers to questions; it typically involves building on knowledge through replicable experiments. A clear hypothesis will help guide your research. Hypotheses can come in different forms. For example, they can be comparative: 'people like soap operas better than documentaries' or 'Internet dissemination is faster than video'. Alternatively, they can relate to a norm, as in the statement, 'Moving ITN news undermines the public service remit of commercial television'. Your hypothesis will set you off on a pattern of enquiry which will result in proving or disproving the statement to a greater or lesser degree.

Most research questions or hypotheses are *comparative* – comparing a text or set of texts with something. You can study a set of texts against a *hypothesis*, testing, for example, whether the news is biased in the way it represents a particular group, or whether Eminem's lyrics are misogynistic. You might study the themes against a *normative* ideal. For example, how sensitively do the social realistic themes of soap operas deal with topical issues? Or, should girls' magazines include sexualized images of boys?

If you are using people of any age as subjects, make sure that you are not exposing them to any harm, physical or psychological. If you have any doubt, consult your tutor and find out about the university's *human subjects policy*, or *ethical research policy*. It is not generally considered ethical to conduct research on children unless you are a very experienced researcher. There are serious ethical considerations involved in showing children media material they might not otherwise see, whether these are 'violent' videos or ordinary advertising messages. Children are not able to give informed consent to take part in a study because they don't understand what is involved.

## Identifying sources and resources

What you decide to examine for your project will invariably be influenced by what you can access: it is impossible to research media texts audiences or institutions if you can't get hold of the relevant object of analysis. If you are

interested in doing a textual analysis of some obscure films, for example, make sure you can get hold of viewing copies of them before you commit yourself to that subject. You will probably write a better project if you use films readily available for purchase or loan, if only because you won't spend so much time trying to get hold of them. If you are interested in researching audiences, why not use your friends, neighbours and family as resources? University students make good subjects (they are easy to get hold of and can easily be bribed). Your friends are probably interested in your work, and might well be flattered if you ask them to help out. Most social science research prides itself on its impartiality and considers that impartiality is not possible if their subjects are personally known to researchers, but it is impractical for students to take such an approach. As a student, you may have reservations about asking complete strangers to be respondents in your studies, and you should not be pressured into doing this if you don't want to. However, if you need lots of questionnaire responses, your fellow students are usually suitable to approach, even if you don't know them personally. Students in the canteen or bar may be willing to spend five or ten minutes answering your questionnaire. People who share your interests and lifestyle are often willing to help out, so think about asking neighbours or members of your church or fellow music fans if they are interested. One student of mine wrote an excellent project based on a survey of fellow members of the Beatles fan club. You will find that people with the same enthusiasms and interests are more than happy to talk about their obsession. If you have worked in a study group successfully during the rest of your academic career, encourage the rest of the group to keep meeting during the project: you will all benefit from discussing your ideas and progress with one another and it will help prevent you from feeling isolated. If you need to have interview subjects for your project, the study group is an ideal source.

### Primary and secondary sources

Your sources; the material you are going to use (be it people, books, films or whatever), can be thought of as falling into two categories: *primary* and *secondary* sources. A primary source is the material which makes up your object of analysis; it comprises what you are actually going to study. While you are planning your study, you will read work by other people who have conducted their own primary analysis, but the work done by others comprises a secondary source for you. Thus, if you are writing about the films of Takeshi Kitano, the film *Hana-Bi* (1997), which he directed, wrote and starred in, would be a primary source: you would study the film and conduct your own analysis of it. As part of your research, though, you would want to see what other people thought of the film, and you would read books, articles and reviews about Takeshi Kitano and his films: these materials would all

comprise secondary sources. It is quite possible that the same material might comprise a primary source in one study and a secondary source in another, depending on the object of analysis. If, for example, you wanted to analyse the responses from British film critics to Kitano's movies, you would use as your object of analysis the reviews in film magazines – these would now be the primary source. A television documentary about Steven Spielberg would be a primary source if you were studying how television constructs a particular view of film-makers, but if you were studying the films of Spielberg, it would be a secondary source, providing background information on the director. Where the object of analysis is audiences, the primary source will always be your subjects' responses. If you were interested in people's responses to the controversial campaign for the clothing company French Connection, which used the letters 'fcuk' in their campaign, your object of analysis (and your primary source) would be what your subjects actually say about these advertisements. You might use examples of the ads as prompts in focus groups or interviews, but the advertisements themselves would not comprise primary sources for your research.

In our field, it is sometimes difficult to draw the line between primary and secondary sources because we draw upon so many different media in our work. In general, whatever medium you are studying provides the primary source – thus, the soap operas themselves are the primary source for a study of *EastEnders* or *Coronation Street*, while television programmes about the soaps might provide secondary sources. If you are looking at the tabloidization of the press, the newspapers are the primary source and the books and articles which have been written about them (some of which may well appear in newspapers) comprise the secondary source. While you are doing original research, you are working with a primary source; when you are reading around your research, you are conducting secondary research. Your primary sources must be clearly explained and identified in your discussion of methods; if there are many of them, they should be listed in your appendix (see Chapter 6, page 63).

#### *Reviewing the literature*

Your research question should be addressing something new; you need to ensure that you are not reinventing the wheel by reading as much as you can get hold of about what has been written on your subject. You can begin with the documents used on your course: if you took a course on the subject area you are interested in, begin by looking at the reading list. Next, do a search of the library catalogue of your university to find out if there are any books on the subject. Get these out of the library and think about whether you want to get involved in this debate. Use the bibliography of books and articles to find more titles which may be relevant to you. If you find yourself reading a book

from cover to cover, stop – you should be much more careful to read only what you have to read. You need to read widely and to think a lot about what you are reading. It is rarely necessary to read everything. It is a good idea to get in the habit of making decisions quickly about whether a book or article is going to be of relevance to you. In the first instance, you should aim to spend between three and five minutes deciding whether a book or article is going to be of any use to you. This is long enough to determine from the title and the chapter and section headings whether the book has any relevance to your topic. If it does, spend a further ten minutes scanning the contents of the relevant chapters or sections: look at the headings and the first sentence of each paragraph only. Make a note of the title, author and other details, and then put the book aside and write down the main topics covered and a couple of sentences about how it relates to your research question. Then move on to the next book or article. Aim to skim through several books and articles in this way, drawing up a list of from five to ten of the most useful texts. When you have made a list of the books, articles and websites which you have identified as being relevant, assess the importance of each one to you – you should not read the entire piece until and unless you have ascertained by skimming and speed reading that it is directly relevant to your subject. If you find four to ten books or articles that you will read and use in detail, you are doing very well. Most of the material you read will be relevant only as background reading, and you don't need to do more than scan it.

In writing your project, remember that you will not get your answers from books but from conducting your own research. The literature you read will usually provide you with secondary sources, which you must use to your own advantage. Be sure to get a balance between primary and secondary research: both are important parts of the project. Remember that one of the key criteria for assessing the project is usually that you can show that you can conduct original research. The requirement to show how your work fits into the field is usually less important, but remember that you are reading to demonstrate how your work fits in with previous literature. Don't waste time reading irrelevant things, however interesting they may be, and make sure that you don't get bogged down in reading more widely than is necessary. Your time is precious, and there will be lots of time for reading in more detail when you have graduated!

See Chapter 2 for more information on identifying sources and resources for your project.

## **Beginning to write your project**

Now that you have read this chapter, I hope you are feeling more confident about how to conduct your project than you did at the beginning. You

**TABLE 1.9**  
Contents of a  
Project  
Proposal

Your research question
A definition of your object of analysis
A description of your primary sources
An overview of the secondary sources you will consult
A preliminary literature review indicating where your work fits into the field
A timescale for your study
Sample 'instrument' such as questionnaire or coding sheet
What you hope to find
Bibliography and indication of further reading

should have come up with a question for your research project and begun to look into the available literature on the topic. In the following section, we are going to look at how to conduct the first main piece of writing involved in the project: the proposal or outline.

### Designing a proposal

Whether it is a requirement for completion of your project or not, it is highly recommended that you write a proposal or outline (see Table 1.9). You need to get down on paper exactly what you are planning to do, and you need to show it to your tutors and listen to what they say about it! Getting feedback on your proposal before you begin is essential.

Table 1.9 shows the main components of the proposal. Your proposal should include your research question: state very clearly what your object of analysis is going to be. Indicate how you are going to access it (for example, are you going to record episodes off air of television programmes, hire videos from the local store, or make photocopies of newspaper articles in your public library). Your proposal should include a schedule with sensible estimates of how long things should take. Draw up a detailed timetable of when you need to get things done by, starting with the submission date and working backwards. Plan your work carefully and realistically, allowing yourself lots of time to write up your findings – allow at least one-third of the available time just for writing, so if you have one twelve-week semester in which to conduct the entire project, make sure you leave the last four weeks just to write up the project. You should allow one-third of the time to do preliminary research, organization, writing your proposal and reviewing the literature.

Get going with any arrangements which involve other people as soon as possible – you don't want to rely on being able to interview people in March, only to find out that they take their annual vacation then. Make sure you can get access to any libraries or special collections, and book appointments as early as possible in your timetable.

### Note taking

Make sure that you keep very good notes as you research your work. Write down the full bibliographic details of every book, article, newspaper or website that you even glance at – you never know whether you will need to go back to it later. Make sure that if you are going to quote from a television programme or other non-written source, you get the full details (see Chapter 6, 'Notes on references' pp. 165–70, for discussion of bibliographic conventions).

Take care not to confuse your *notes* and your *quotes*. A common cause of plagiarism is students accidentally copying as their own words someone else's work and not acknowledging it as a quotation. Deliberate plagiarism is a form of cheating and nearly always results in expulsion from university. Even if you reference the work, you should not copy directly except as a quotation (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). In your note-taking, be wary of using the words of others: when copying text or different pages in your notebook, use one colour of ink for actual words from texts and a different colour of ink for your own commentary. It is good to précis the work of others – but get into the habit of writing précis of ideas and concepts without having the original in front of you. In fact, whenever you are writing your own thoughts and ideas, you should not have anything in front of you except a blank piece of paper or computer screen. Do not use actual quotations until you get to the 'writing up' stage of the work and then go back to your sources again.

### Working from an outline or proposal

Plan your work carefully and make sure that you know what you are doing and why! Use your proposal as a foundation for your subsequent work. Make a point-by-point account of what you want to say for each section of the project. Read to fill the gaps. Once you have started your project, you should not read any more 'background' material – everything has to be directly relevant to what you are working on.

### Discussion

Getting started is one of the most difficult parts of writing your research project, as you have some very important decisions to make. You need to spend time thinking about the issues and deciding what is really interesting and relevant to you. You should settle on something which will sustain your interest through the duration of the assignment. Have a look at the questions

**TABLE 1.10**

Checklist for  
Your Project  
Design

1. Does your research question make sense?
2. Is the project feasible? (can you do it in the time available?)
3. Do you have access to your primary material?
4. Can you locate sufficient appropriate secondary sources?
5. Have you discussed your idea with your supervisor?
6. Is your question original?
7. Does your question build on previous research?

in the checklist for your project design (Table 1.10). Can you answer every question honestly and fully? Don't go on with the project until you are able to address all the points raised.

#### *Time management and the project*

One of the main problems students have in general is managing their time efficiently. Today's students must often combine their studies with work, and many have family responsibilities which make it difficult to concentrate on their studies exclusively. Writing the project can sometimes present additional difficulties in terms of time management, as most people find working on an independent research project a challenge. Be warned that you have to exercise very strong self-discipline in undertaking the research project. Often the only deadline your university will give you is the final one – when that is several months away, it is sometimes tempting to get on with other things and put the project on the back burner. This is asking for trouble! When you are working on the project, you have to organize your own time. Get out your diary now and think about when you can spend time on your project. Ideally, you should try and do a little every day and set aside an hour each day to focus on the project. You might also try to think about how to integrate studying for the project into your everyday routine. For example, every time you go to the library, find some references for the project; every time you see a friend whom you like to talk to about ideas, have a chat about how your work is going; every time you pick up a book for another class, have a look and see if there is any information relevant to your project. Try to write something every day if you can, and give yourself regular time slots during the week when you can work on the project. A little bit regularly will get the job done more efficiently than leaving yourself a block of time at the end when there may well be other pressures which you are not able to foresee now. The extent to which students are left alone to conduct their project will differ according to what institution they are at and, sometimes, according to the personality of their supervisor. I would advise you to arrange several meetings with your supervisor and to make sure that you keep to them. Regular meetings to talk over how things are progressing (even if they are

not going particularly well) are very important in helping to keep the project at the top of your agenda.

Many students write the project in their final year when there are several other important distractions which can make them forget to focus on their project. Remember that the project is one of the few opportunities you get to do your own research, and think about things which are of interest to you. Make the most of it. Enjoy!