



# A-Z of research methods.

# A – Z of research methods.

**Whatever your research topic, there are a wide range of methods available to help you uncover those important insights that will guide your recommendations and next steps. If you are a changemaker [like us] you will be keen to understand the attitudes, values, motivations and behaviours of your target audience to design solutions that make change possible. But, with so much choice, how do you decide which method (or mix of methods) to use?**

In some cases, it will be obvious which research method is most appropriate, based on your topic area and target audience. For example, to measure public opinion about breastfeeding, we decided on a survey followed by in-depth interviews to explore key themes further (see how we did it [here](#)).

However, in some cases, the decision can be more difficult. For example, what if you are working with children too young to be able to talk about and express their thoughts enough for your work? What if you are product testing and want to see your customer journey (UX) and an interview just doesn't cut it? Or what if your research simply isn't engaging enough to generate the responses you need?

Well, never fear! The changemakers are here. Our handy A – Z list of research methods can support you to make decisions about which methods to use to engage with your target audience to uncover important insights and ultimately support your changemaking work towards the wider social good. But before we get started, here are some key concepts to consider before deciding on your methodology:

## **Informed consent**

Informed consent is the most important phrase in any researcher's dictionary. It means that participants must give their consent (permission) to participate in the research and have their data collected by the researcher AFTER being fully informed of the purpose of the research, what they will be asked to do as part of the research and how their data will be used, with confidentiality and anonymity ensured.

**Please, please, PLEASE, ensure you get informed consent in the form of a signed document (print or electronic) from all of your participants before conducting your research. This is a requirement under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). You can find out more about how we work in line with GDPR [here](#).**

## Quantitative research

This is statistic-geek [Daisy's] favourite type of research. Quantitative research includes any methods that collect numerical data about your target audience, such as the number of people who said a particular answer in response to a question. Closed questions (those with set answers) are used for this type of research.

## Qualitative research

This is eloquent Eloise's favourite type of research. In simple terms, it involves research which collects 'non-numerical' data (for example, words, images, stories and sounds) from your audience, with a focus on understanding and creating meaning. It often goes beyond what numbers and statistics can reveal. Open-ended questions (those which allow participants to answer freely) are typically used for this research.

## Ethnographic research

Ethnographic research is any research conducted within and about the natural (real-life) environment of your audience. Observation is a good example of this (almost a spoiler here!). An easy way to explain this would be 'people-watching', which many of our team-members are also good at...

## User experience research

User experience research, often abbreviated to UX research, involves collecting information about your target audience's needs and behaviours for particular products, such as websites and apps. This is a favourite for our Senior Creative Designer Savannah, who is our resident expert in UX (and UI) – find out more about UX and UI [here!](#)

# A-Z of research methods.



## A/B testing

### What is it?

A/B testing is a control test, which allows you to test a variable to see which resonates best with your target audience, this could be the design, concept, message, call to action or as granular as a colour. This enables you to see which variation performs best and is therefore more likely to make an impact with your target audience.

### Type of research?

Quantitative (with a hint of qualitative if you want to take a look at what people are commenting or saying about your ideas).

### How do I do this?

We recommend conducting this through online paid social media advertising. You can tailor the marketing of these ads to your target audience, show the two different variations to a random selection but equal number of participants from your target audience and collect data about the performance of each idea (based on engagement, likes and shares) to understand which concept is most preferred by your target audience.



## Be flexible and adapt!

**OK, we know this isn't a research method but:**

- A) It's a good piece of advice for doing research, and**
- B) We don't have a method beginning with B...**

Research isn't always straightforward. Sometimes you can have your ideal research topic and method in mind, but when it comes to actually doing it, any number of unexpected issues can arise. However, the key thing for research is the ability to be flexible and adapt to your research topic as your project evolves.

Are participants disengaging from a focus group because the topic is a bit too personal? That's fine – try telephone interviews or a survey instead to allow them to share their views more anonymously. Can't find a location that works for the number of people wanting to take part in your focus group? **Try digital focus groups!** Finding it difficult to get people to provide in-depth answers for survey questions? Give them a call and go through it with them!

**Regardless of whatever barrier has become apparent, there's always another way. Don't panic, adapt!**



## Card sorting

### What is it?

Card sorting is a user experience (UX) research method that can support the structural development, or re-development, of a website. Participants are provided with a range of 'cards', each with its own category typically taken from the current navigation menu (e.g. contact us, news, blogs, projects) of the website to be updated. Participants are then asked to group these cards together based on what they think is relevant and under an appropriate title of their choosing. You can then use lovely statistics to determine which cards were most frequently grouped together and under what title (and why, if you opt to include some follow-up questions).

### Type of research?

Quantitative (with qualitative if you ask participants follow-up questions).

### How do I do this?

We recommend doing this online through dedicated card sorting platforms. This ensures the task is easily accessible to your participants, and it also enables you to generate similarity matrixes, dendrograms and other outputs with the results which can help you analyse the data and pull out key insights with ease. If you want to do it in-person, we'd recommend writing down your 'cards' on sticky notes and asking participants to group them together under a title of their choosing. If you'd like further information from your participants, you can then ask them some follow up questions to explore their reasoning behind these groupings. Fun fact, we did this exercise with our team when developing our fab new website, **and just look how pretty it is!**



## Drawing

### What is it?

This research method simply involves giving your participants a concept and asking them to, well, draw it. This can be particularly useful for research which involves young children and other audience groups who might find it harder to verbally express their thoughts, particularly with regards to tough topics.

### Type of research?

Qualitative.

### How do I do this?

Although this could be done through electronic platforms, we'd recommend doing this in-person so you can observe your participants' decision making and body language, and ask them questions about their drawings as they are being created, which can give valuable insight into their thought processes.



## Experiments

### What is it?

Experiments investigate how different conditions can impact on and change the outcome of a particular task or situation. These conditions can be both naturally occurring or put in place by the researcher. For example, asking inactive, fairly active and active people to record their happiness ratings would involve naturally occurring conditions (that is, no change has been made to their activity levels by the researcher). Asking for happiness ratings from people who have been given either a 30-minute sedentary task or 30-minute activity task would involve conditions set by the researcher.

### Type of research?

Quantitative, qualitative and ethnographic – it depends on your task and collection of data.

### How do I do this?

To conduct an experiment, you need at least two participant groups. Assign a condition to each group and then ask them to do your given task. You would then need to explore how the outcome of this task has been impacted by each group's condition. Whether this is done in-person or online is completely dependent on what you are researching and whether it is possible to be conducted online.



## Focus groups

### What is it?

Focus groups involve getting a group of people together, either with the same or varying demographics and backgrounds, to openly discuss and debate questions related to your topic area. The quality of discussion captured by these groups means that they are unlikely to be quick – don't be surprised if your focus group takes between one and a half to two hours to complete!

### Type of research?

Qualitative.

### How do I do this?

This method is largely conducted in-person, but it is actually very easy to facilitate online through digital platforms. You need to pull together a discussion guide which includes the key questions surrounding your topic area – you want these key questions to spark interest and conversations amongst your participants. Once your guide is complete, you need to recruit your participants, give them a time and a place (or a link) and ask them to attend! Make sure you have permission to video or audio record your session – this will allow you to transcribe the focus group and ensure you don't miss any important insights! Focus groups can be done with a range of different audiences – see how we engaged with residents and policing staff in Cambridgeshire to understand police visibility [here!](#)



## Gamification

### What is it?

Gamification is, as the name would suggest, about applying the main elements of game playing to a research context. The aim is to make the research more fun and engaging for your participants! It uses elements of game playing (relatedness, autonomy, mastery and purpose) to encourage people to engage with research and subsequently collect data from your target audience. Participants are given a task, which can range from creating an avatar to solving a puzzle, and data is collected based on the decisions they make.

### Type of research?

Quantitative.

### How do I do this?

Gamification can be done through a variety of methods, whether it be through coding questions and data collection into an actual game or developing an online form / survey which integrates key elements of games, such as point-gaining. Alternative to using online and digital methods, you can simply provide scenarios in paper format (e.g. a printed survey) and ask for participants to complete alone or in the presence of another researcher whilst talking through the tasks.



## Have incentives

### Again, we know, not a research method – but some more great advice!

Exchange is a key component of interaction and motivating desired behaviours. With this in mind, we understand that people want to feel they are getting something from participating in research. For some, having the opportunity to talk about a topic they are passionate about might be incentive enough! However, for others, taking the time out of their day to participate in research is not something they can do easily, and so it's always handy to have some incentives to thank people for their time. Giving them something, such as a shopping voucher, can help to show your participants that you value their time and are thankful for their participation. It also means that they are more likely to be motivated to engage in the first place!



## Interviews

### What is it?

Interviews involve facilitating an open conversation with members of your target audience around your given topic area. There are two main types of interviews: semi-structured (having a list of key questions whilst having the freedom to explore answers further with other non-listed questions) and unstructured (having a general topic guide rather than a set of questions, so that the nature and content of the interview is more free-flowing based on the conversation with the participant).

### Type of research?

Qualitative.

### How do I do this?

We'd recommend conducting semi-structured interviews, as they allow you to capture relevant insight into your topic area whilst still providing the researcher with the freedom to explore the participant's

perceptions and experiences beyond what the questions may initially find. So, before recruiting participants for your interview, you need to write down a script including the list of questions you intend to ask. Remember, you do not have to rigidly follow this script. If someone gives a response which you want to explore further then go ahead and ask questions which may not be written down, or if you find that a later question has already been answered previously then feel free to skip that question.

There are a few ways in which you can do interviews, such as through video chat, in-person or over the phone. However, we'd recommend telephone interviews. They are more flexible for you and your participants and allows that increased anonymity for those taking part. We conducted telephone interviews with a range of UK built environment professionals for our Healthy Placemaking project, which we presented at the Houses of Parliament – check the project out [here!](#)





## Journal keeping

### What is it?

Using journal keeping (or diary if you prefer – we needed a 'J') in research is exactly the same as keeping a journal in everyday life. It involves asking your participants to keep a record, whether through the written language or video, of a given experience. This could include their experience of trying to quit smoking, detail their exercise habits or just be a record of what happened in their day. Asking participants to keep a record of this can help you understand your research topic from the point of view of your target audience, and subsequently how the experience made them feel. You can specify some key questions for participants to address in their journal entries, or simply set the topic to cover and let them determine what to include – it depends on the level of detail you require!

### Type of research?

Ethnographic/qualitative.

### How do I do this?

Journals can be kept using a range of mediums, for example, through video, electronic files (written files or audio files) or using good old-fashioned paper and pen. Simply ask your participants to spend five minutes reflecting back on their experiences (relevant to your topic area of course) and consider what happened, how it made them feel and how it makes them feel upon reflection. It is often best to ask participants to complete their journal entry as close to the experience in question as possible to ensure that their recollections are as accurate and real as possible. A key, and perhaps difficult part of this research method, is identifying an appropriate duration to ask participants to keep a journal for – too short a time and you may miss out on some important insight, but if it goes on for too long, your participants may get fatigued and stop.



## Kindness is key

### Starting to spot the letters we couldn't find methods for?!

Kindness is important in everyday life, and research is no different. If someone doesn't want to take part or answer a particular question, that's well within their right! Equally, if someone opens up to you around a sensitive topic, it's important that you are empathetic towards their experiences and recognise the difficulty they may have had sharing this.



# Longitudinal research

## What is it?

Longitudinal research monitors and measures changes in relation to a particular phenomenon (such as topic, theme, behaviour, or attitude) over a set period of time with the same group or groups of people. So, for example, asking the same group of people to record health and wellbeing metrics every month for two years, or maybe once a year for ten years. Longitudinal research utilises other methods, such as surveys, focus groups and observation to provide data and information.

## Type of research?

Quantitative, qualitative or ethnographic – it depends on the data you need and your research topic.

## How do I do this?

First and most importantly, you need to recruit your participants and obtain their buy-in to re-participate for the expected duration of the study. You then need to pick the research method which most suits your research topic, for example, you may want a simple survey to capture key metrics or a focus group to delve deeper into your topic area. What's important for longitudinal research is that you then use this same research method each time you opt to collect data across the study (i.e. at set time periods of your choosing). The questions asked each time also need to be the same or as similar as possible to those in the first (baseline) study to ensure you can accurately determine and analyse changes over time.



# Media listening

## What is it?

Media listening refers to a review and analysis of information published by media sources, i.e. newspapers and social media, to see what people are saying about your topic area.

## Type of research?

Qualitative.

## How do I do this?

Dependent on your sources, media listening is conducted both online (i.e. social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter

and email newsletters) and offline (i.e. newspapers and magazines). You simply need to find information and stories on your topic area and conduct an overarching analysis to identify key themes, similarities and differences in order to pull out key things people are talking about. This is a great tool for understanding the impact that your campaign has made, if it has got people talking and what they are saying (which is ultimately key to facilitating behaviour change).



# Narrative research

## What is it?

Narrative research involves the study of an individual's or group of individuals' experiences from their own perspective and construction of their own story (narrative).

It uses people's own accounts of a particular situation, whether this is obtained through verbal or written communication, to capture an in-depth understanding of their personal meaning of an experience or experiences and provide insight into the attitudes and behaviours involved.

## Type of research?

Qualitative.

## How do I do this?

First you need to determine how you are going to collect your data. This may be through conducting interviews, asking your participants to make written accounts of the experience or using secondary data online – if you are conducting interviews, you will need to transcribe these. Once you have your participants' narratives in written format, you need to read through these in order to become familiar with each individual. You can then begin to analyse these narratives by identifying similarities and differences across these experiences, and in-turn begin to identify insights relating to your topic area.



# Observation

## What is it?

Observation involves watching your participants in their everyday / natural environment or within conditions put in place by the researcher. These conditions could involve putting people into groups to do group activities (often used in recruitment processes) or simply asking individuals to complete a task and watching them do so.

## Type of research?

Ethnographic.

## How do I do this?

There are multiple ways you can do observation - it depends on your research topic and what you're hoping to achieve

from the observation. If you want to get an understanding of an individual's lifestyle or working life, we'd recommend shadowing (following) them for a day, watching what they do, seeing how they react to situations and making notes on key things for you to talk about and explore in more detail with them later – this would be natural observation. An alternative is to give your participants a task, either alone or in groups, and watch how they complete it, how groups work together and make notes – these types of situations can also provide you with an opportunity to record the observation (with consent of course) so you can go back to key parts you may have missed.



## Play

### What is it?

Bear with us here. Play might seem like quite an abstract method but it can be very useful for sensitive topics and research with young children. Like drawing, the way children play can be very telling as to their thought processes and experiences, particularly with regards to social norms. You can even ask them questions if you want further insight into their decision making. You can find out more about how you to conduct research with children with our guide [here](#).

### Type of research?

Ethnographic, with a hint of qualitative.

### How do I do this?

Invite your participants to a research session and provide them with a toy, relevant to your topic area, to play with. You can then either leave them to play as they wish and create their own scenarios or give them a situation to play out. We'd recommend doing this in person (maybe behind a one-way mirror) so you can watch the situation unfold and ask questions which may be pre-planned or spontaneous and in response to the development of the situation itself.



## Quantitative survey

### What is it?

A quantitative survey is a good way to start research and gain an idea of what key themes you should explore further through more in-depth, qualitative methods. It involves giving participants a set number of questions and answer options around your topic area. The set answer options allow you to conduct statistical analyses and identify similarities and differences across different audience groups.

### Type of research?

Quantitative (it's in the title!).

### How do I do this?

We recommend conducting these surveys online where possible to enable a wider reach amongst your audience group and to also make it easier for you to analyse the results. However, in some cases where your target audience may not have access to an internet connection or the online channels sharing the survey, paper copies can be issued and, once completed and returned to you, you can upload them to your online platform to enable to subsequent analysis.



## Reverse card sorting

### What is it?

Reverse card sorting is a UX methodology – it can also be called ‘tree testing’ but we needed something to fit the letter R. It asks participants to find items on a website via its navigation menu only. There’s no design or extra website detail involved, the participants have only the menu navigation (and how that is organised and its terminology) to help them find their designated item. It’s great for testing how easy your website is to navigate!

### Type of research?

It’s a mix of ethnographic, quantitative and qualitative because you are observing your participants, whilst looking at how long it may take them to navigate your website, and you might be asking them some follow up questions.

### How do I do this?

As this method looks at website navigation, it goes without saying that this is conducted via online platforms. You need to strip your website and navigation menu to the basics – you only need the headings and subheadings for your navigation. Give your participants the task of finding a particular page on your website and observe their actions. Whilst you can do this in person, you can also do this online through mouse tracking software, or over the phone whilst they talk you through what they’re doing.



## Secondary data analysis

### What is it?

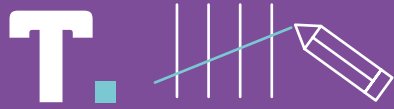
Secondary data and information refer to anything which is already known about the topic in question and which has already been collected by others. Secondary data analysis therefore involves sourcing, reviewing and analysing the data and information which already exists in the public (and private) domain. This is a good method to use to gather an in-depth understanding of your topic area before going ahead with your primary research.

### Type of research?

Qualitative.

### How do I do this?

You can review secondary data which is available both online (e.g. online articles and reports) and offline (e.g. books and publications), you just need to find it first! A quick online search or trip to the local library should help with this. If you are seeking any data from private domains, such as subscription journals or held by particular organisations, ask them to help with your request and explain why you need the data you are requesting.



## Tally taking

### What is it?

By tally taking we mean poll taking, but we needed something to fit the letter T...

Tally (poll) taking involves presenting your target audience with a question and a series of answer options, and asking them to vote for the one which they most agree with.

### Type of research?

Quantitative.

### How do I do this?

This can be done both online and offline. An online example would involve going on social media, posting a question for all to see and then giving them a choice of emojis to use as their answer. An offline example would be Exit Polls that are conducted alongside elections or referendums – researchers ask people who / what they voted for as they leave their polling station after voting and this is often used as an indication of the actual outcome of the vote itself. Let's hastily move on from politics...



## Usability testing

### What is it?

Usability testing involves observing people completing tasks whilst engaging with a particular product, such as a website or an app. This is another user experience (UX) research method which tests the accessibility of your product.

### Type of research?

Ethnographic (UX).

### How do I do this?

This can either be done with the researcher observing the participant in-person (which could be a little off-putting) or by investing in tracking software, which records your participant's screen and mouse movements. Simply provide them with the details of your product (e.g. website link or app download) and then provide them with a task to complete whilst using this product. You can then watch or track them completing this to see how they use your product, thereby giving you some insight into the accessibility of the product.



## Vignettes

### What is it?

Vignettes involve using scenarios to convey a particular topic and gather feedback. Participants are presented with a short story followed by a scenario and asked what they would do in that situation. This is a good method to use for sensitive and taboo topics where people would easily shy away from answering questions which are of a personal nature.

### Type of research?

This depends on your responses – closed responses (i.e. option A, B or C) would be quantitative, but open responses would be qualitative.

### How do I do this?

This can be integrated into focus groups, telephone interviews and even surveys. You can either present the story as something for participants to read, or read it to them, and ask follow-up questions. These questions can be structured with set responses to choose from, or open for participants to answer as they would like. We would suggest using the former for a survey and latter in a focus group or interview.



## Workshop

### What is it?

A workshop is similar to a focus group but extends on the format of a focus group by asking the participants to engage in some activities (such as co-creation activities or getting input into creative concepts) as well as discussing your given topic area. This can be a great creative research method when you're looking to work with your target audience to create a brand, campaign or solutions to a social issue.

### Type of research?

Qualitative.

### How do I do this?

Akin to a focus group, gather people together (either in-person or through the screen) and present them with materials and / or tasks for them to discuss with each other. If you're gathering feedback on some concept materials, it's worth having a set of questions to ask them to gather their views. We conducted an 'Insight into Action' workshop on behalf of Active Lincolnshire with stakeholders and partners and supported them to work collaboratively to generate recommendations and solutions to the social issue of high levels of inactivity in adults over the age of 55 in Lincolnshire. **Click here for more information!**

# X, Y and Z.

**Ok, we hold our hands up here – we struggled to find a perfect fit for these letters! But 23 out of 26 isn't too bad!**

However, we'd like to challenge you to think of some example research methods, or handy pieces of advice, that could fit into these letters. We're always open to learning new things and so if you have any suggestions, reach out to us via: **hello@social-change.co.uk**.

## Conclusion.

So, there you have it! An A–(almost) Z guide to research methods. We know there are so many to choose from, so if you need a hand with finding the right method for you, then get in touch via our **project planner!** We can work with you to develop and deliver your perfect project.



**We only work with organisations that want to bring about positive social change, and people who want to do good. This is you... let's work together.**

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