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Research Design Basics: How to Choose and Justify a Design

Derek Jansen, MBA
Grad Coach
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Abstract

A study's research design determines what kind of evidence it can produce, and no later analysis can repair a design that cannot answer the research question. Yet methodology chapters often name a design without justifying it, and the term itself is used in several senses. This article defines research design as the overall strategy of a study and distinguishes it from methodology and methods. It describes four common quantitative designs (descriptive, correlational, experimental and quasi-experimental), separates them by three questions about relationships, manipulation and random assignment, and sets out the causal claim each can support. It then describes five common qualitative designs: phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study and narrative inquiry. Three extracts from doctoral dissertations show how designs are stated and justified in practice. The article closes with the considerations that guide the choice of a design and the four elements of a convincing design section: the design named, its fit to the question, a rejected alternative and its limitations. It is intended for students and early-career researchers planning a study, and for the educators who teach research methods.

Keywords: types of research design; categories of research design; different types of research design; research design; quantitative research design; qualitative research design; research design example; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

The research design is the decision on which the rest of a study depends. Sampling, data collection and analysis are all chosen to serve it, and a reviewer or examiner judges the findings against it. If the design cannot answer the research question, careful analysis will not compensate, and the problem is difficult to correct once the data have been collected.

Two difficulties are worth naming at the outset. The first is terminological: "research design" is used in several senses, sometimes for a single kind of study such as an experiment, sometimes for a whole methodology, and sometimes for the broad labels "qualitative" and "quantitative". The second is that a design is often named in the methodology section but not justified. The reader is told that a study is, for example, a case study, but not why that design suits the question, what alternative was considered or what the design cannot show.

This article is written for students and researchers planning a study and for those who teach research methods. Section 2 defines research design and its relation to methodology and methods. Section 3 describes four common quantitative designs and the causal claims each supports, and Section 4 describes five common qualitative designs. Both sections include extracts from completed doctoral dissertations. Section 5 discusses how a design is chosen, and Section 6 sets out how it is written up and justified.

2. What Research Design Is

Research design refers to the overall strategy of a study: the kind of study that will be carried out to answer the research question. A study might, for example, change one factor and measure the effect, measure how two factors relate without changing either, or examine a single case in depth. The research guide of the University of Southern California Libraries describes the design as "the overall strategy and analytical approach you have chosen to integrate, in a coherent and logical way, the different components of the study" (Labaree, n.d., Introduction section). In the same guide's account, a design does its job when the evidence it yields allows the researcher to address the research problem clearly and logically (Labaree, n.d.).

2.1 Design, methodology and methods

Design is one part of a study's methodology, and the two terms overlap. Methodology is the wider set of choices and the reasons for them: the design, together with the sampling strategy, the methods of data collection and analysis, and the justification for each. Methods are the specific tools, such as a questionnaire, an interview guide or a t-test. A study's research philosophy, its assumptions about the nature of reality and of knowledge, sits above all three and shapes which designs are coherent for it.

The word "design" is used loosely in textbooks and in practice. Some sources describe qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research as the three types of research design. These labels describe the kind of data a study works with, so they are better treated as types of methodology: a quantitative study still requires a design, such as an experiment, and so does a qualitative one. Other sources use "design" for the whole methodology, or use "research strategy" for what this article calls design. This article uses the narrower sense defined above and groups designs by the

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kind of data they usually involve (Figure 1). Some designs can be combined, as when a case study draws on ethnographic fieldwork. A study that combines designs should identify the one that answers its main question and explain how the others support it.



Figure 1. Four quantitative and five qualitative designs, each with the question it asks.

2.2 The time dimension

A separate distinction concerns when data are collected. A cross-sectional study collects data on its variables in a defined population at one point in time, giving a snapshot of that population at that moment. Repeating the measurement after an interval, with the same people or a fresh sample, allows change over time to be examined (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). Studies designed from the outset to follow the same people over time are usually called longitudinal. Because this distinction concerns timing rather than what a study compares or changes, it combines with the designs described below: a correlational study, for example, may be either cross-sectional or longitudinal.

3. Quantitative Research Designs

Quantitative research collects and analyzes numerical data. Four designs are commonly distinguished: descriptive, correlational, experimental and quasi-experimental. Three questions separate them. First, does the study examine a relationship between variables? Second, is a change introduced and its effect studied? The change may be made by the researcher or by someone else, such as an institution that introduces a program. Third, is the change randomly assigned? Random assignment means that chance (for example, a random number) decides who receives the

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change or, when every participant receives every version of it, the order in which they receive the versions. A descriptive design examines no relationship. A correlational design examines a relationship without changing anything. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs both introduce a change; only the experiment uses random assignment. Table 1 summarizes the four.

Table 1. Four quantitative designs, distinguished by three questions, and the causal claim each supports.

Design	Relationship examined?	Change introduced?	Random assignment?	Causal claim supported
Descriptive	No	No	Not applicable	None
Correlational	Yes	No	Not applicable	Weak; findings are associations
Experimental	Yes	Yes	Yes	Direct, within the study's conditions
Quasi-experimental	Yes	Yes	No	Cautious; alternative explanations remain

To make the four comparable, the subsections below apply each to the same invented topic: walking and blood pressure in adults over 65. The figures that illustrate them are labeled as illustrative examples.

3.1 Descriptive design

A descriptive design describes a situation as it is, without changing anything and without testing a relationship. In the clinical research literature, a descriptive study sets out how one or more variables are distributed (how their values are spread) and does not test any hypothesis, causal or otherwise (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). Such studies can say who, what, where, when and how, but cannot settle why (Labaree, n.d.). Applied to the walking topic, a descriptive study might survey older adults in one town about how often they walk, record their blood pressure and report how many meet a recommended activity level: one group, measured once (Figure 2). A descriptive study can also be repeated over time (Section 2.2).

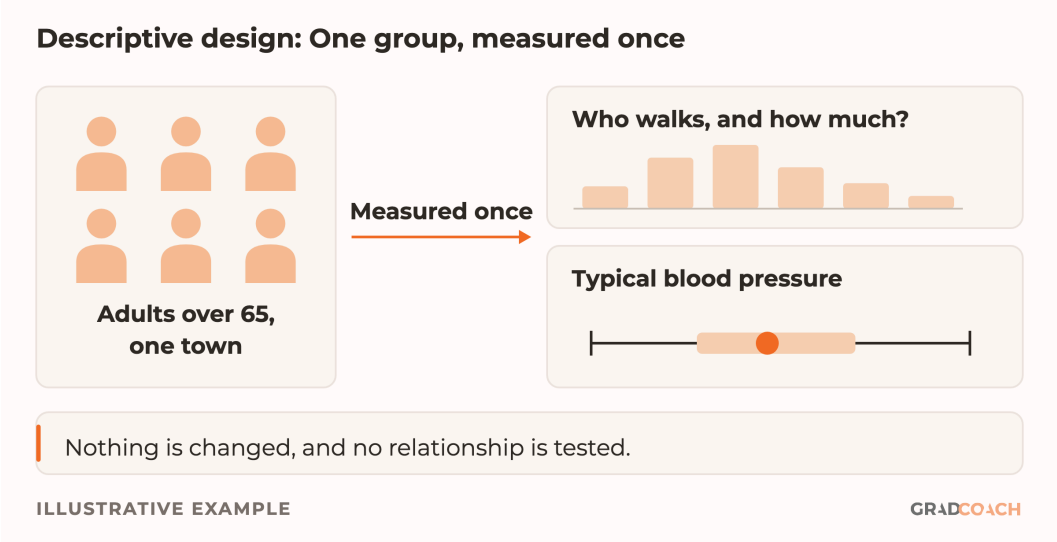


Figure 2. A descriptive design: one group, measured once, with no relationship tested.

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Because it only describes, a descriptive design is useful when little is yet known about a problem, and it is the natural choice for questions of prevalence ("how many" or "how common"). Its findings often supply the background against which later correlational or experimental studies are planned.

3.2 Correlational design

A correlational design measures two variables and assesses how strongly they are related, without trying to control extraneous variables, the variables other than the two being studied (Price et al., 2015, Chapter 7). Whether the variables are quantitative or categorical, its defining feature is that they are measured and none is manipulated, that is, systematically varied. A correlational study of the walking topic would measure each participant's weekly walking time and blood pressure and test whether the two vary together (Figure 3).

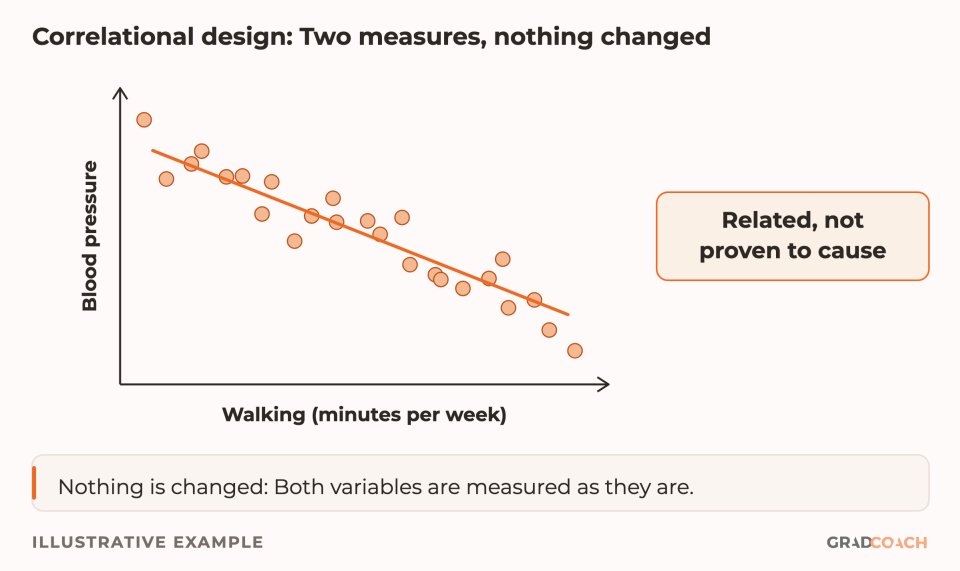


Figure 3. A correlational design: two variables measured, neither changed by the researcher.

Price et al. (2015, Chapter 7) give two reasons for choosing a correlational study over an experiment. First, the researcher may not believe that the relationship of interest is causal, as when a short test is checked against an established one. Second, the researcher may believe that it is causal, but the presumed cause cannot be manipulated because doing so would be impossible, impractical or unethical. A comparison of existing groups, such as regular walkers and non-walkers, is also correlational, because the researcher has not manipulated the grouping variable; Price et al. make the same point about comparisons by nationality or occupation.

The limitation is that a correlation does not establish causation. People who walk more may also eat differently or be healthier to begin with, and such a third variable, or confounding variable, could explain the association. The direction of influence may also run the other way (Price et al., 2015, Chapter 7). An association can be consistent with a causal explanation, but nonexperimental research generally cannot provide strong evidence of cause and effect (Price et al., 2015, Chapter 7). The causal evidence a correlational design offers is therefore weak, and its findings should be reported as associations ("more walking is associated with lower blood pressure"), not in the causal language of an experiment.

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3.3 Experimental design

An experiment is designed to establish whether a causal relationship holds between an independent and a dependent variable. It has two fundamental features: the researcher manipulates the independent variable, creating two or more levels of it, called conditions; and the researcher controls extraneous variables, including by assigning participants to conditions at random so that the groups are similar to begin with (Price et al., 2015, Chapter 6). When each participant instead takes part in every condition (a within-subjects design), it is usually the order of the conditions that is randomized or counterbalanced. In line with this, Price et al. (2015, Chapter 7) define non-experimental research as research that "lacks the manipulation of an independent variable, random assignment of participants to conditions or orders of conditions, or both". In the walking example, volunteers would be randomly assigned to a 12-week walking program or to their usual routine, and blood pressure would be compared at the end (Figure 4).

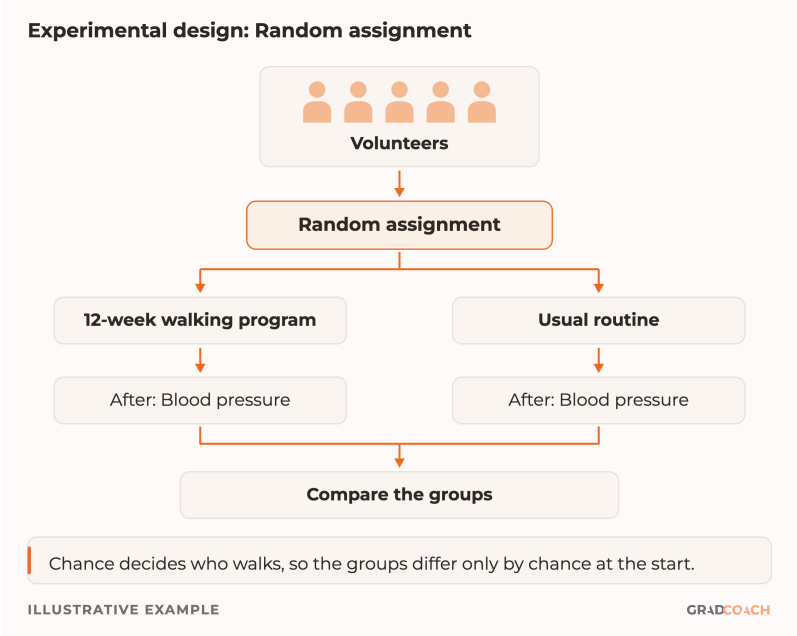


Figure 4. An experimental design: random assignment to a walking program or usual routine.

Random assignment is what supports the causal conclusion. Each participant has an equal chance of entering any condition, so at the start the groups differ only by chance; a consistent difference at the end can then be attributed to the condition. That is why experiments that assign participants at random are high in internal validity: a study is high in internal validity when "the way it was conducted supports the conclusion that the independent variable caused any observed differences in the dependent variable" (Price et al., 2015, Chapter 6). Random assignment should not be confused with random sampling, which concerns how participants are selected into the study in the first place. Price et al. (2015, Chapter 6) also note a criticism of experiments: because the independent variable must be manipulated and other variables controlled, experiments frequently take place in settings that feel artificial, which raises questions about external validity, the extent to which the findings hold for people and settings beyond those studied. Withholding a potentially beneficial treatment from a control group can also raise ethical questions.

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A doctoral dissertation in psychological sciences at Purdue University tested whether generating one's own memory cues, rather than being given them, changes how many words people recall. Its second experiment states its design as follows:

> The independent variables, encoding condition (allocated cue vs. generated cue) and retrieval condition (cued recall vs. free recall), were manipulated between-subjects for a total of 4 groups. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition.
>
> Fordyce (2026, p. 60)

The two sentences name the manipulated variables and their levels, give the number of groups and state that assignment was random, which is what makes the study an experiment. "Between-subjects" means that each participant took part in only one condition; the dissertation's first experiment, by contrast, manipulated its condition within subjects, presenting the conditions in a fixed order for reasons it explains (Fordyce, 2026, p. 35). The design is set out precisely, although the dissertation does not give it a single name, and the experiment's aims, which give the reasons for the design, are stated on the preceding page (Fordyce, 2026, p. 59).

3.4 Quasi-experimental design

A quasi-experiment resembles an experiment in that the independent variable is manipulated, but participants are not randomly assigned to conditions (Price et al., 2015, Chapter 7). The change is real, but something other than chance decides who receives it: the researcher, an administrator, or participants themselves when they choose to take part. What separates this from a correlational comparison of existing groups (Section 3.2) is that a specific change is introduced and its effect evaluated. Residents who choose to join a newly introduced walking group are part of a quasi-experiment. A comparison of people who already walk with people who do not looks at a situation that already exists, and is correlational. Because the groups are likely to differ in other ways, a quasi-experiment does not remove the problem of confounding variables, and its internal validity generally lies between that of a correlational study and that of a true experiment. Quasi-experiments are most often conducted in field settings where random assignment is difficult or impossible, frequently to evaluate a treatment or an educational intervention (Price et al., 2015, Chapter 7).

In the walking example, a care home that introduces a walking group might be compared with a similar home that does not. Comparing groups whose members were not randomly assigned, here the residents of the two homes, is a nonequivalent groups design. Measuring blood pressure in both homes before and after the walking group is introduced adds a pretest-posttest design, a combination that Price et al. (2015, Chapter 7) describe as generally stronger than either alone (Figure 5).

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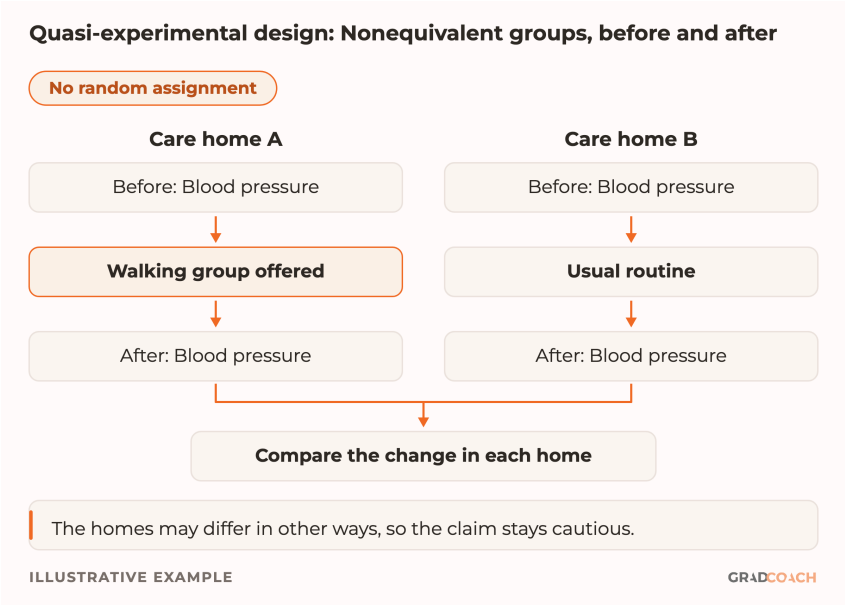


Figure 5. A quasi-experimental design: two care homes measured before and after, no random assignment.

Because the residents of the two homes may differ before the study begins, in diet, staffing or health, any causal claim must be worded cautiously and the main confounding variables discussed. Across the four designs, then, only the experiment supports a direct causal claim. The quasi-experiment supports a qualified one. The correlational design, because nothing was changed, offers at most weak causal evidence, and the descriptive design, which tests no relationship, offers none. The language of the findings should match the design.

4. Qualitative Research Designs

Qualitative research works mainly with words, such as interview transcripts, field notes and documents. Textbooks group qualitative designs in different ways. This article describes five of them, which differ chiefly in what the research question asks about: an experience, a process, a group's way of life, a case or a story.

4.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach concerned with how individuals experience the world they live in (Neubauer et al., 2019). A phenomenological study usually involves in-depth interviews with a small group of people who share an experience, such as life after cancer treatment, and reads their accounts together for what the experience is like (Figure 6).

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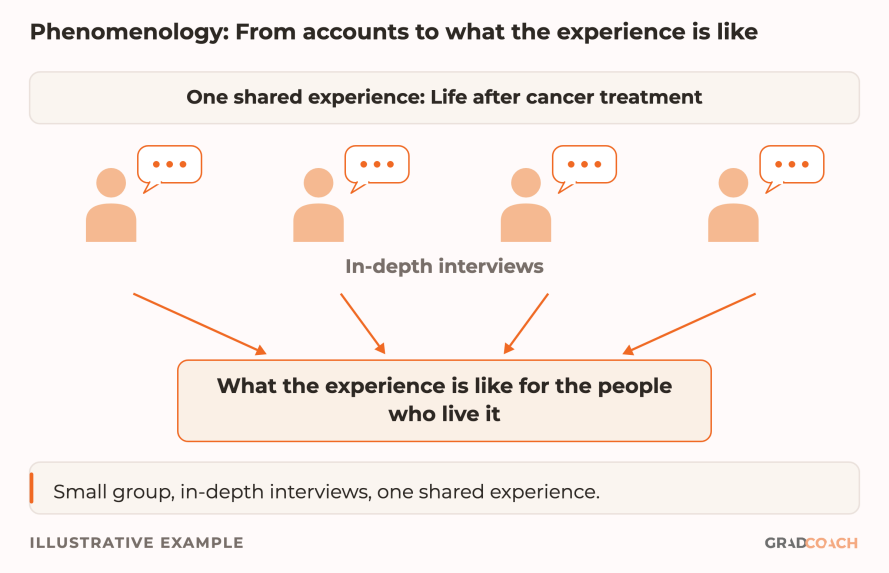


Figure 6. Phenomenology: several accounts of one shared experience, read together.

Neubauer et al. (2019) distinguish two main traditions, which treat the researcher's own assumptions differently. Transcendental, or descriptive, phenomenology derives from Husserl and asks researchers to set aside, or bracket, their prior understandings and assumptions about the phenomenon; methods in this tradition include those of Moustakas, Colaizzi and Giorgi. Hermeneutic, or interpretive, phenomenology derives from Heidegger and Gadamer and holds that researchers cannot set aside their own lifeworld, the world as they experience it, shaped by their own history and culture. Researchers in this tradition therefore acknowledge their preconceptions and treat their interpretation as part of the analysis. Neubauer et al. list interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) separately, among more recent approaches that bridge the two traditions. Because the tradition changes how data are collected and analyzed, a study should name the one it follows.

A nursing dissertation at the University of Massachusetts Amherst studied nurses who had witnessed dying patients' end-of-life dreams and visions (ELDVs). It adopted Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, with Colaizzi's method of analysis (Herron, 2025, p. 34), and gave this as one reason for the choice:

> Another reason Husserl's phenomenology approach was chosen is its emphasis on "bracketing" for acquiring knowledge. Husserl believed that to achieve new knowledge, a researcher's former knowledge and experience should be bracketed so as not to influence gathered data. As a nurse with 33 years of experience and personal encounters witnessing ELDVs, I believe that bracketing provided the best opportunity to capture the pure essence of the participants' subjective and objective experiences.
>
> Herron (2025, p. 35)

The justification ties the design to the researcher's own background and experience. A nurse with personal experience of the phenomenon needs a way to keep that experience out of the data, and bracketing is the tradition's answer. A researcher with a personal connection to a topic should state it in the methodology section and explain what the chosen design does about it.

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4.2 Grounded theory

Grounded theory aims to construct a theory from data rather than to test a theory chosen in advance. It was introduced by Glaser and Strauss, whose *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, published in 1967, explained how theory could be generated inductively, that is, built up from the data instead of being deduced from existing theory and then tested (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Data collection and analysis proceed together. Data are coded (labeled with short tags that capture their meaning) and constantly compared with earlier data. In theoretical sampling, the developing analysis decides whom or what to sample next, and sampling continues until theoretical saturation is reached, the point at which new data no longer develop the categories (Chun Tie et al., 2019). A study of how people with chronic pain come to manage it day to day, where no existing theory fits, would be a candidate for this design (Figure 7).

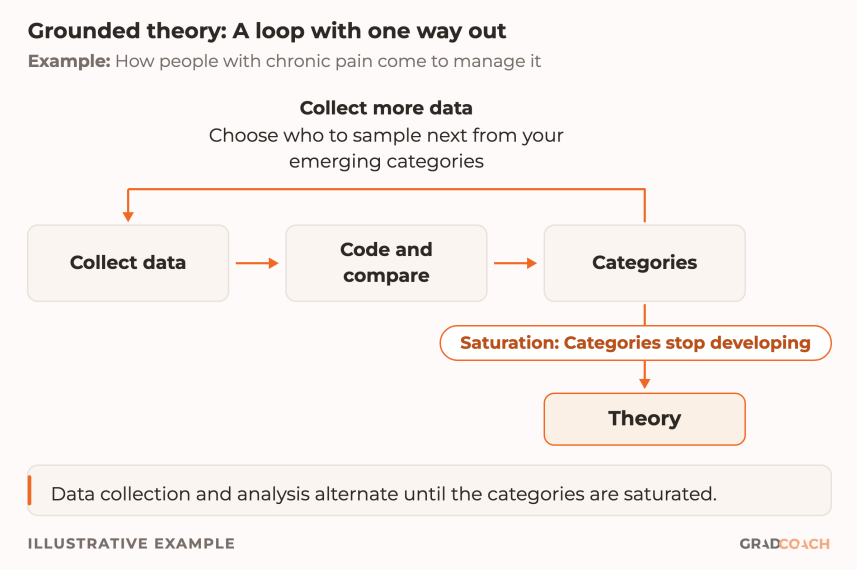


Figure 7. Grounded theory: data collection and analysis alternate until the categories are saturated.

Reaching saturation can take several rounds of data collection, so grounded theory is demanding of time. The method also has distinct schools: a traditional version associated with Glaser, an evolved version associated with Strauss, Corbin and Clarke, and a constructivist version associated with Charmaz, which differ in philosophical position, use of the literature and approach to coding (Chun Tie et al., 2019). A study should name its school and follow it consistently.

4.3 Ethnography

Ethnography examines how the members of a group, team, organization or community interact, behave and perceive their world (Reeves et al., 2008). The ethnographer typically spends an extended period with the group in its own setting, combining observation with interviews and keeping detailed field notes. An ethnography of how a hospital's night-shift team manages handovers, for example, might involve several months on the ward (Figure 8).

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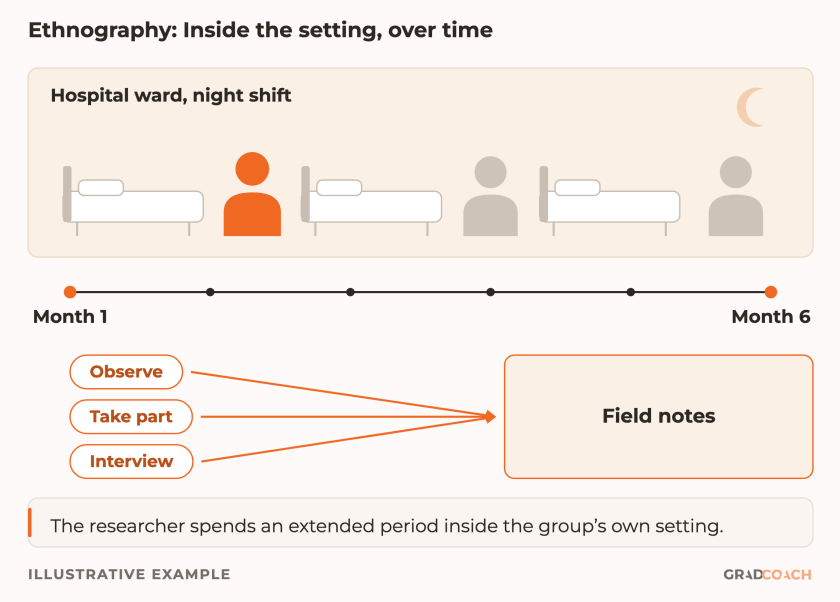


Figure 8. Ethnography: one setting, several months, and three ways of gathering data.

The observation is usually participant observation, in which the researcher takes part in the group's life to some degree. A doctoral dissertation in curriculum and instruction at Purdue University, based on 12 months of fieldwork with a university student movement in Honduras (Fúnez-Flores, 2020, p. 13), describes participant observation as "the primary work involved in conducting ethnographic research" (Fúnez-Flores, 2020, p. 149). It is also explicit about what that involvement means for the researcher:

> Participant observation, for instance, allowed me to immerse myself in the everyday practices and meaning-making processes student activists engaged in. As the researcher, however, I had to be cognizant that I would also influence the social space in which participants interacted.
>
> Fúnez-Flores (2020, p. 149)

The first sentence states the design's strength; the second acknowledges that the researcher changes what is being studied. An ethnographic methodology should address both. It should also explain how four issues will be managed: the researcher's influence on the group, researcher bias, confidentiality, and the ethics of membership in the group studied.

4.4 Case study

A case study examines a complex issue in depth and from several angles, within the real-life setting in which it occurs (Crowe et al., 2011). A case might be a single small business, studied through interviews with staff and management, observation of daily operations, policy documents, financial statements and a customer survey. Case studies usually draw on multiple sources of evidence, collected by a range of quantitative and, more commonly, qualitative techniques (Crowe et al., 2011). The case is bounded: it has a boundary, defined in advance, that sets its scope and the period it covers, such as one organization over a stated period (Crowe et al., 2011). Figure 9 shows such a case, marked off from its wider context, with each source feeding into it.

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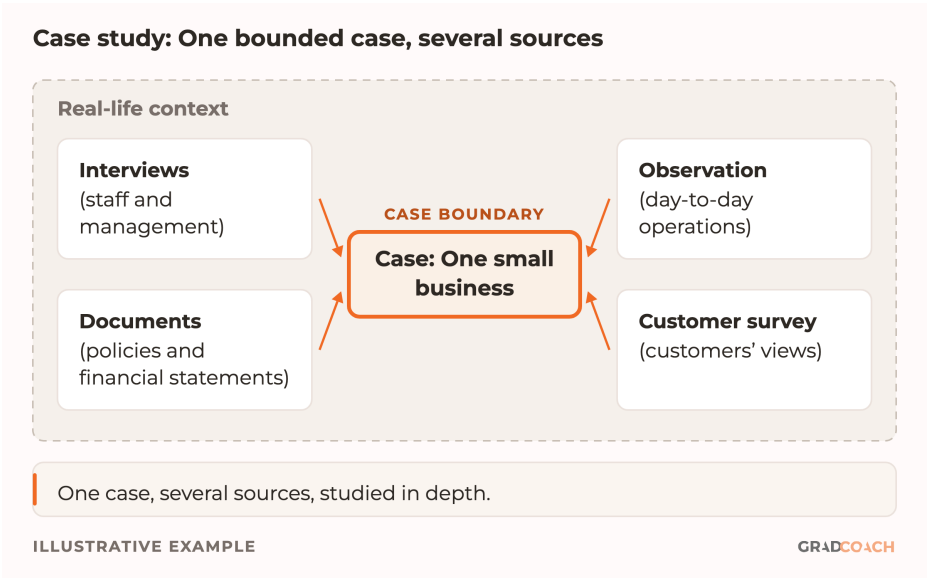


Figure 9. A case study: one bounded case in its real-life context, informed by several sources.

Crowe et al. (2011), following Stake, distinguish intrinsic case studies, undertaken to learn about a unique phenomenon, from instrumental and collective ones, which use one or several cases to understand a broader issue. Several cases can be compared in a multiple-case design, and a single case can be followed over time.

The usual criticism of the case study is that a single case cannot be generalized. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that this is one of several misunderstandings. In his account, a single case can often be a basis for generalization, for example when a single case falsifies a general proposition, or when a critical case is chosen strategically: one for which a finding that holds is likely to hold for many other cases as well. He also argues that case studies can play a central part in the development of a field. What a case study cannot establish is how common something is in a population. Crowe et al. (2011) describe case studies as able, in certain circumstances, to support theoretical, as opposed to statistical, generalization. A case study should therefore state whether its case is used to build or test a theory, or to say something about a wider population, and explain why the case chosen suits that purpose.

4.5 Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry studies how people tell the stories of their experiences. Narrative researchers use the stories participants tell to understand experience and to present it to others; what interests them is the meaning a story carries, more than whether its account is factually accurate (Wang & Geale, 2015). A study might collect first-generation students' stories of their first year at university and examine how each makes sense of what happened (Figure 10).

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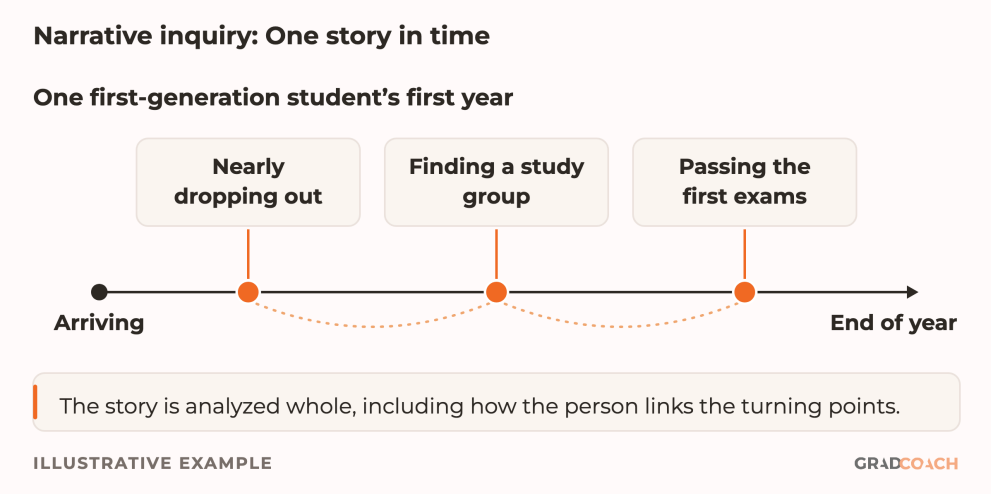


Figure 10. Narrative inquiry: one person's story in time, with the turning points that shape it.

In the framework that Clandinin and Connelly developed from Dewey, a story is analyzed for its personal and social interactions, its continuity across past, present and future, and its situation or place, with temporality treated as central (Wang & Geale, 2015). The researcher and participant negotiate the meaning of the stories during collection and analysis, so the researcher's own subjectivity must be acknowledged and its effect examined (Wang & Geale, 2015).

4.6 Other designs

The nine designs described in Sections 3 and 4 are not the only ones. In action research, an exploratory stance is first adopted to understand a problem and plan an intervention. The intervention is then carried out and observations are collected. This cycle repeats until the problem is sufficiently understood or resolved (Labaree, n.d.). The design suits work and community settings and is oriented toward practical solutions rather than the testing of theory.

5. Choosing a Research Design

The choice of a design begins with the research problem and the question it leads to. The University of Southern California guide puts the point directly: "the research problem determines the type of design you choose, not the other way around!" (Labaree, n.d., Introduction section). Ranganathan and Aggarwal (2018) similarly name three determinants of a study's design: what the question asks, what the research aims to achieve and what resources are available. The four considerations below are best taken in the order given.

1. **The research question.** What the question asks largely decides the design. Table 2 pairs common forms of question with the design each points to.
2. **The data.** Numerical data lead to the quantitative designs and textual data to the qualitative ones. A study's aims and questions usually make this clear.
3. **Time.** Designs differ greatly in duration. An ethnography, or a grounded theory study with several rounds of interviews, is unlikely to fit into a few months.
4. **Resources and access.** A design that depends on a large sample, specialist equipment or hard-to-reach participants is feasible only if those can be obtained.

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Table 2. Common forms of research question and the design each points to.

Form of question	Design it points to
How common is …? How much …?	Descriptive
Is X related to Y?	Correlational
Does X cause Y? (random assignment possible)	Experimental
Does X cause Y? (random assignment not possible)	Quasi-experimental
What is this experience like for those who live it?	Phenomenology
What process explains what happens here?	Grounded theory
How does this group see and do things in its own setting?	Ethnography
What is happening in this case, in its real-life context?	Case study
How do people tell the story of what happened to them?	Narrative inquiry

The first two considerations narrow the field; the last two test what remains. Where a simpler design can answer the question, it is usually the safer choice, since a modest design carried out well is easier to defend than an ambitious one carried out poorly. A contingency plan, in case access to participants or data is lost, is also prudent.

6. Writing Up and Justifying the Design

The design usually has its own subsection in the methodology section, and much of its persuasive weight lies in the justification. A convincing design section does four things:

1. It names the design in one sentence, using the term established in the field.
2. It explains why the design fits the study, starting from the research question.
3. It names a realistic alternative and explains why it was not used.
4. It states the design's limitations: what it cannot show, and what it costs.

The third element deserves particular attention. A reader who sees that an alternative was weighed has less reason to suspect that the design was chosen by habit. Box 1 applies the four elements to the quasi-experimental walking study from Section 3.4, in one sentence each.

Box 1. An illustrative design statement for the walking study, one sentence per element.

> This study uses a quasi-experimental, nonequivalent groups design, with blood pressure measured before and after: residents of a care home that introduced a weekly walking group are compared with residents of a similar home that did not. The research question asks whether a walking group lowers residents' blood pressure, which calls for comparing residents who were offered it with residents who were not. A randomized experiment would give stronger causal evidence, but each home decides whether to run the group, so random assignment was not possible. Because the two homes may differ in ways that also affect blood pressure, the findings can show a difference consistent with the walking group lowering blood pressure, but cannot prove that it caused the reduction.

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The three dissertation extracts in Sections 3 and 4 each show part of this structure: a precise design statement (Fordyce, 2026), a reason for the choice tied to the researcher's own experience (Herron, 2025) and an open account of the design's cost, the researcher's influence on the setting (Fúnez-Flores, 2020).

7. Conclusion

Research design is the overall strategy of a study, narrower than its methodology and distinct from its methods. Among the quantitative designs, descriptive and correlational studies change nothing. The first supports no causal claim and the second at most a weak one. An experiment, through random assignment, supports a direct causal claim, and a quasi-experiment supports a qualified one. Among the qualitative designs, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study and narrative inquiry differ in what they ask about: an experience, a process, a group's way of life, a bounded case or a story. The choice of design starts from the research question and is then tested against time, resources and access. A reviewer or examiner needs a basis on which to judge the rest of the study. A design section provides it when it names the design, shows why it fits the question better than a realistic alternative and states what it cannot show.

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