Research Methodology Sample: Master's Dissertation Chapter

About this document

A complete methodology chapter from a Master's dissertation, written by Grad Coach to show what a strong chapter looks like, section by section. It belongs to the same study as our Master's research proposal sample, so you can see how a proposal section grows into a full chapter. The shaded "Coach's note" boxes explain why each part is written the way it is; they are not part of the chapter. This is an illustrative sample, not a real student's work: the study has not been carried out, and the participants it describes do not exist. Its references are real and were checked at source.

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Three real methodology chapters (quantitative, qualitative and mixed), annotated: gradcoach.com/research-methodology-example/

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

Staying or Leaving: How Early-Career Secondary Teachers Experience Workload in Their First Three Years

Degree: Master of Education (MEd)

Chapter: 3, Research Methodology

Word count (excluding notes and references): approx. 2,700

COACH'S NOTE · WHAT THIS CHAPTER IS FOR

The methodology chapter answers two questions about every decision you made: what did you do, and why was it the right choice for your research questions? An examiner should be able to follow your steps, see the reasoning behind each one, and judge whether your findings can be trusted. Description without justification is the most common weakness in this chapter.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and justifies the methodology used to answer the study's three research questions:

1. How do early-career secondary teachers describe the demands of their workload?
2. What resources do they draw on to manage those demands, and how adequate do they find them?

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3. How do they connect their experience of workload to their thinking about staying in or leaving teaching?

Section 3.2 sets out the study's philosophical position, and section 3.3 the research design that follows from it. Sections 3.4 to 3.6 describe how participants were selected, how data were collected and how they were analyzed. Section 3.7 explains how the trustworthiness of the findings was addressed, section 3.8 covers ethical considerations, and section 3.9 discusses the methodological limitations of the study.

> **COACH'S NOTE · RESTATE THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**
> Repeating your research questions at the start of the methodology chapter isn't padding. Every choice in this chapter has to be justified against them, so putting them in front of the reader makes each justification easier to follow. It also lets an examiner check alignment without flipping back to Chapter 1.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This study takes an interpretivist position. Interpretivism holds that people's experiences cannot be understood apart from the meanings they give them, and that those meanings are best reached through people's own accounts. Applied to this study, it means treating workload as something teachers experience and interpret, not only as a quantity of hours or tasks that can be measured from the outside.

This position follows from the gap identified in Chapter 2. Most research on teacher workload has measured it through surveys, as an amount reported on a scale. Yet there is evidence that the nature of workload, what a task means to the teacher and why it is being done, may matter more than its quantity (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). A positivist approach, which would seek to measure workload objectively and test its relationship with intentions to leave, would reproduce the limitation this study sets out to address. An interpretivist approach allows teachers to define for themselves which demands weigh most and why.

> **COACH'S NOTE · PHILOSOPHY THAT EARNS ITS PLACE**
> Many methodology chapters include a page of definitions (ontology, epistemology, paradigms) that never connects to the study. This section does the opposite. It names one position, explains it in plain terms, and justifies it with a specific finding from the literature review. Notice that it also says why the alternative wouldn't work. That's what makes a philosophical position a decision rather than a label.

3.3 Research Design

The study used a qualitative, exploratory design, with data collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews at a single point in time. A qualitative design suited the research questions, which ask how teachers describe, experience and connect, rather than how much or how often.

Two alternative designs were considered and rejected. A survey with open-ended questions would have reached more teachers, but written answers tend to be brief and cannot be followed up, which would limit the depth the research questions require. Focus groups would have allowed teachers to build on

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one another's accounts, but participants might have been reluctant to criticize their schools or leaders in front of other teachers, some of whom could be colleagues in the same district. One-on-one interviews offered privacy and the chance to follow each participant's account where it led.

Semi-structured interviews, rather than fully structured or unstructured ones, struck a balance between two needs. A shared interview guide ensured every interview addressed all three research questions, which made accounts comparable across participants. Open questions and follow-up probes left room for participants to raise demands and resources the researcher had not anticipated.

> **COACH'S NOTE · REJECTED ALTERNATIVES**
> Saying what you didn't do, and why, is one of the strongest ways to justify what you did. Here two credible alternatives are named, each with a specific reason it was less suitable for this study. An examiner who might have asked "why not focus groups?" now has the answer before they can raise it.

3.4 Participants and Sampling

3.4.1 Inclusion criteria

Participants were teachers who:

- taught in a public secondary school (grades 6-12) in the United States;
- were in their first, second or third year of full-time teaching; and
- were currently employed as a teacher, or had left teaching within the previous 12 months.

Recent leavers were included so that the study could hear from teachers who had acted on an intention to leave, not only from those considering it. The 12-month limit was set to keep leavers' experience recent enough to recall in detail.

3.4.2 Sampling strategy

The study used purposive sampling, which selects participants because they can provide rich information about the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Within the inclusion criteria, the researcher aimed for variety in four characteristics expected to shape workload: subject area, year of teaching, school setting and whether the participant was still teaching. This final characteristic was added to the proposal's list so that recent leavers would be recruited deliberately rather than by chance. Participants were recruited through professional teacher networks and social media groups for new teachers. An online screening form confirmed eligibility and recorded these characteristics, so that later recruitment could target any gaps. Snowball sampling, planned as a fallback, was not needed.

3.4.3 Sample size

The proposal for this study planned 12 to 15 participants, citing Guest et al.'s (2006) finding that, in their study of 60 interviews, saturation had largely occurred within the first 12. Before recruitment began, this justification was revised: the appeal to saturation was dropped, and information power, which the proposal had already named, became the sole guide to sample size. Guest et al. (2006) define sufficiency

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in terms of data saturation, the point at which new interviews stop producing new codes. Braun and Clarke (2021b) argue that saturation is not consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the analytic approach used in this study, because themes are generated through the researcher's interpretation rather than discovered in the data, and judgments about how many interviews are enough cannot be made wholly in advance.

The sample size was therefore guided by information power (Malterud et al., 2016), which holds that the more information a sample holds that is relevant to the study, the fewer participants are needed. Braun and Clarke (2021b) describe information power as a useful alternative to saturation for reflexive thematic analysis. Malterud et al. (2016) name five dimensions. Four of them favored a smaller sample here: a narrow aim, an established theoretical framework to guide the interviews, in-depth one-on-one dialogue and, within the inclusion criteria, a closely defined participant group. The fifth, analysis strategy, pointed the other way: the analysis compared accounts across participants, and the deliberate variety in subject, year, setting and status called for more participants than a single-case or highly uniform design would. Taken together, these suggested a moderate sample. Recruitment continued until the researcher judged that the interviews held rich, relevant accounts addressing all three research questions across the range of participant characteristics.

COACH'S NOTE · WHEN YOUR METHODOLOGY CHANGES

This section does something many students avoid: it says the plan changed since the proposal, and explains why. That's a strength, not an admission of failure. Examiners expect your thinking to develop, and an honest, well-reasoned change is far more convincing than a justification that no longer fits your method. In this case, the student noticed that saturation belongs to a different kind of thematic analysis and replaced it with a better-matched concept.

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3.4.4 The final sample

Fourteen teachers took part: nine who were still teaching and five who had left teaching within the previous year. Their characteristics are summarized below. To protect confidentiality, individual participants are not described in a way that links their characteristics together.

Characteristic	Category	Participants
Year of teaching	First year	4
	Second year	5
	Third year	5
Subject area	Mathematics or science	5
	English or social studies	5
	Other subjects, including special education	4
School setting	Urban	6
	Suburban	5
	Rural	3
Current status	Still teaching	9
	Left teaching in the previous 12 months	5

COACH'S NOTE · PROTECTING IDENTITIES IN YOUR SAMPLE

Notice that the table reports each characteristic separately (four first-year teachers, six in urban schools) instead of profiling each participant. A row reading "Participant 3: rural, special education, left in year two" could let someone who knows the district work out who that is. Reporting in aggregate shows you met your sampling aims without exposing anyone.

3.5 Data Collection

3.5.1 Developing the interview guide

The interview guide was developed following the five phases set out in Kallio et al.'s (2016) systematic methodological review: confirming that semi-structured interviews suited the research questions, drawing on previous knowledge, drafting a preliminary guide, pilot testing it and presenting the complete guide. Previous knowledge came from two sources: the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which shaped the questions on demands and resources.

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The guide was organized around the three research questions, with main questions to open each topic and probes to explore it further. Main questions were open and asked about experience rather than opinion ("Walk me through…" rather than "Do you think…"), so that participants described their workload in their own terms before any framework categories were introduced. Wording was adapted for participants who had left teaching, for example by asking in the past tense.

Research question	Main questions	Example probes
RQ1: Demands	Walk me through a typical week. Which parts of your workload take the most out of you?	Can you tell me about a recent time when that happened? What makes that task harder than others?
RQ2: Resources	When things get heavy, who or what helps? What support do you wish you'd had?	How did that help, in practice? Was it there when you needed it?
RQ3: Stay or leave	Tell me about any times you've thought about leaving teaching. What brought that on?	What keeps you in teaching (or what made you go)? What would have changed your mind?

The guide was piloted with one early-career teacher who met the inclusion criteria but was not included in the final sample. The pilot participant described demands at length before resources came up naturally, so the order of topics was kept; one question asking participants to rank their most demanding tasks was removed because it produced short, list-like answers, and the main questions for RQ2 and RQ3, which in the proposal opened with yes-or-no questions, were reworded to open with experience.

3.5.2 Conducting the interviews

Each participant took part in one interview, held by video call at a time of their choosing, typically lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Video calls allowed participants from different states to take part and fit around teachers' working hours. In a study of 16 practice nurses interviewed by video call, Archibald et al. (2019) found that most rated the experience highly, though several experienced technical difficulties. To reduce the risk of lost data, each interview was recorded on two devices with the participant's consent; both recordings were moved to encrypted university storage and deleted from the devices the same day.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher checked each transcript against its recording. Short field notes were written after each interview to record first impressions and anything that might not show in the transcript, such as a long pause before an answer.

> **COACH'S NOTE · SHOW THE GUIDE, NOT JUST MENTION IT**
>
> Including your interview guide (or a version of it, with the full guide in an appendix) lets the examiner see how your questions connect to your research questions. The pilot paragraph is worth copying in spirit too: it reports what the pilot actually changed. A pilot that changed nothing tells the reader very little about why you ran it.

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3.6 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis treats themes as patterns of meaning that the researcher develops through engaged, interpretive work with the data, rather than as objects that emerge from it. It suited this study because it is designed to explore how people make sense of their experiences, and because it can be used flexibly with or without a guiding theory.

Analysis followed the six phases Braun and Clarke (2006) describe, moving back and forth between them rather than through them in a straight line. Byrne's (2022) worked example of the approach was used as a practical guide.

The analysis combined deductive and inductive orientations. The demands and resources of the Job Demands-Resources model informed early coding, particularly for the first two research questions. At the same time, codes were developed from the data wherever participants raised ideas that did not fit the model, and these were kept through to the final themes. This matches the study's use of the model as a sensitizing lens rather than a theory to test (section 2.7).

Phase	What was done in this study
1. Familiarizing yourself with the data	Each transcript was read in full at least twice, with the recording, and initial observations were noted.
2. Generating initial codes	Transcripts were coded line by line in NVivo. Codes were both semantic (what participants said) and latent (the assumptions underlying it).
3. Searching for themes	Codes were grouped into candidate themes around shared meanings, using visual maps.
4. Reviewing themes	Candidate themes were checked against the coded extracts and then against the full data set; some were merged, split or discarded.
5. Defining and naming themes	Each theme was given a short definition stating its central idea and its boundaries.
6. Producing the report	Themes were written up with illustrative extracts, as the analysis continued through writing.

No inter-coder reliability measures were used. Braun and Clarke (2021a) argue that measures of coding agreement belong to coding-reliability versions of thematic analysis, and are inconsistent with the reflexive approach, in which the researcher's interpretation is a resource rather than a source of bias to be controlled. Quality was instead addressed through the practices described in section 3.7.

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COACH'S NOTE · BE SPECIFIC ABOUT YOUR ANALYSIS

"Data were analyzed thematically" is not enough. This section names the exact approach, gives a reason it fits, and shows what each phase involved in this particular study. The final paragraph anticipates a common examiner question ("did a second person check your coding?") and answers it with a reason grounded in the method, rather than an apology.

3.7 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria, with practices chosen to fit a reflexive, interpretive approach. Nowell et al. (2017) set out how these criteria can be met at each phase of thematic analysis. Their audit trail, reflexive journal and detailed description of context were adopted; their team-based practices, such as reaching consensus on codes, were not, because the analysis was the work of a single researcher using a reflexive approach. Confirmability was read as transparency about how interpretations were reached, not as neutrality.

- **Credibility.** Each participant was offered a written summary of the main points of their interview and invited to correct anything that misrepresented what they had said. Birt et al. (2016) note that returning interview data to participants can support claims about the accuracy of an account, but not about the trustworthiness of the analysis that follows. It was therefore used to check the accuracy of each account, not to confirm the themes. Eleven of the fourteen participants responded, and two added clarifications.
- **Transferability.** The findings chapter describes participants' contexts (subject areas, school settings and career stage) in enough detail for readers to judge how far the findings might apply to their own setting, within the limits of confidentiality.
- **Dependability.** An audit trail recorded coding decisions, theme development and the reasons for merging or discarding candidate themes.
- **Confirmability.** The researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis.

Reflexivity was especially important because the researcher is a former secondary school teacher. That experience helped in building rapport and in understanding the school-specific language participants used. It also shaped what the researcher noticed. In keeping with the reflexive approach, the aim was not to remove that influence but to make it visible: the reflexive journal recorded moments when an interpretation drew on the researcher's own experience, and asked what that experience brought into view and what it might obscure, so that interpretations were owned and could be examined.

COACH'S NOTE · TRUSTWORTHINESS THAT'S REAL

Most students list Lincoln and Guba's four criteria; fewer say what they actually did for each one. Here, every criterion has a concrete practice. The member-checking point is a good example of critical use of a source: it cites a paper that questions the technique, then explains how the study used it in a way that holds up. The reflexivity paragraph names the researcher's position honestly and says what was done about it.

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3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board before recruitment began. Participants received an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, what taking part involved, how their data would be used and stored, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants could withdraw without giving a reason until two weeks after receiving their interview summary, when their data were combined in the analysis. This replaced the proposal's "before analysis begins", because analysis began while interviews were still under way.

Confidentiality was the main ethical risk, because participants were likely to discuss their schools, leaders and colleagues critically. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and school names, districts and other identifying details were removed during transcription. Participant characteristics are reported only in aggregate (section 3.4.4). Recordings were kept on encrypted university storage and deleted once familiarization was complete.

Talking about workload and the decision to leave could be distressing. At the start of each interview, participants were reminded that they could pause, skip a question or stop at any time. At the end, every participant received a list of support resources for teachers. Recent leavers raised a specific consideration: some described the circumstances of their departure in detail, so particular care was taken to remove details that could identify a former employer.

> **COACH'S NOTE · ETHICS SPECIFIC TO YOUR STUDY**
>
> The ethics section reads best when it names the real risks of your particular study rather than reciting a generic checklist. Notice the last sentence: it identifies a risk that applies to just one group of participants (recent leavers) and says how it was handled. That level of detail tells the examiner you thought about your participants, not just about the ethics form.

3.9 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations follow from the design. As a qualitative study with a purposive sample of fourteen teachers, its findings are not statistically generalizable; they aim to explain how workload is experienced, not how common particular experiences are. Recruitment through online networks may have drawn teachers who were more engaged with their profession, or more frustrated with it, than is typical. Recent leavers described their experience after the fact, and their accounts may have been shaped by their decision to leave. Finally, each participant was interviewed once, so the study captures their thinking at a single point rather than following it over time, which matters given the evidence in Chapter 2 that leaving is a gradual process (Gallant & Riley, 2014).

3.10 Summary

This chapter has set out an interpretivist, qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews with fourteen early-career secondary teachers, including five recent leavers, analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis with the Job Demands-Resources model as a lens. Each choice followed from the research questions and from the gap identified in Chapter 2. The next chapter presents the findings.

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COACH'S NOTE · LIMITATIONS AND SUMMARY

The limitations section is honest without being apologetic, and the last limitation links back to the literature review, which shows the student understands why it matters. The summary is short on purpose: one paragraph restating the design and linking it to the questions is enough. Save the detail for the sections above.

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Writing your own methodology

This chapter grew out of section 6 of our Master's research proposal sample, and follows the study's literature review sample. When you're ready to draft yours, our guide on how to write the methodology chapter walks through each section. If you'd like a coach to work through yours with you, see methodology coaching.

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