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Research Methodology and Scientific Writing

Second Edition



Contents

1	Research: The Search for Knowledge	1
1.1	Acquiring Knowledge	2
1.2	Science and Technology	4
1.3	What is Research?	6
1.4	Qualities of a Researcher	9
1.5	History of Research	11
1.6	Induction and Deduction in Research	21
1.7	Hypothesis, Theory, Law, Fact, and Others	22
1.8	The Scientific Method	26
1.9	Research Methodology and Research Methods	29
1.10	The Research Process	29
1.11	Academic Research	31
	Bibliography	32
2	Philosophy of Research	33
2.1	Philosophy and Science	33
2.2	Epistemology	35
2.3	Empiricism	36
2.4	Rationalism	37
2.5	Skepticism	38
2.6	Falsifiability	39
2.7	The Principle of Parsimony	40
2.8	Pseudoscience	41
2.9	Reductionism	42
2.10	Paradigm and Paradigm Shift	44
2.11	Post-modernism	45
	Bibliography	47
3	Approaches to Research	49
3.1	Intuition in Research	50
3.2	Unconventional Ways to Intuition	52
3.3	Variables in Research	54

3.4	Formal Approaches to Research	58
	Bibliography	63
4	Major Research Methods	65
4.1	Natural Observation	65
4.2	Historical Research	66
4.3	Ethnographic Research	67
4.4	Cross-Sectional Study	68
4.5	Longitudinal Study	69
4.6	Cohort Study	70
4.7	Case Study	71
4.8	Correlational Research	72
4.9	Model Building	72
4.10	Action Research	73
4.11	Participatory Learning and Action	74
4.12	PLA Tools	77
4.13	Some Special Research Methods	89
	Bibliography	90
5	Experimental Research	93
5.1	Cause and Effect Relationships	94
5.2	Hypothesis in Experiments	95
5.3	Validity of Experiments	97
5.4	Principles of Experimentation	102
5.5	'Control' in Experiments	104
5.6	Classification of Experiments	106
5.7	Experimental Design	110
5.8	Field Experiments	113
5.9	Field Experiments in Agriculture: Some Practical Considerations	114
5.10	Randomized Controlled Trial	122
5.11	Paired Design	123
5.12	Quasi-experiments	124
5.13	Ex Post Facto Experiments	127
5.14	Requirements of a Good Experiment	131
	Bibliography	132
6	Collection and Analysis of Data	135
6.1	Sampling	135
6.2	Scales of Measurement	140
6.3	Collection of Data	142
6.4	Observation	143
6.5	Surveys	146
6.6	Possible Errors in Research	149
6.7	Analysis of Data	151
6.8	Descriptive Statistics	151

6.9	Inferential Statistics	153
6.10	Some Common Statistical Tests	157
6.11	Popular Statistical Packages	163
6.12	Monitoring Research	165
	Bibliography	166
7	Planning and Writing a Research Proposal	169
7.1	Research Projects	170
7.2	Finding a Research Problem	172
7.3	Analysis of Research Ideas	174
7.4	Planning a Proposal: Some General Considerations	176
7.5	Proposal Outline	177
7.6	Presentation and Evaluation of Proposals	185
7.7	Students' Outline of Research Work	186
7.8	Major Funding Agencies	187
	Annexure	195
	Bibliography	197
8	Publications and the Library	199
8.1	Role of Libraries in Information Retrieval	199
8.2	Laws of Library Science	203
8.3	Classification and Arrangement of Publications	204
8.4	Tools for Identifying Literature	210
8.5	Types of Publications	212
8.6	Grey Literature	219
8.7	Microfiche	219
8.8	Digital Libraries	220
	Bibliography	224
9	Academic Databases	227
9.1	Bibliographic Databases	228
9.2	General Search Engines	237
9.3	Metasearch Engines	239
9.4	Academic Search Engines	240
9.5	Citation Indexes	244
9.6	Citation Analysis	248
9.7	Online Searching Methods	253
9.8	Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CABI)	255
9.9	The Indian Academy of Sciences	255
9.10	National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources (NISCAIR)	256
9.11	ICAR Initiatives for Knowledge Management	258
	Bibliography	259

10	The Literature Review	263
10.1	Importance of the Literature Review	263
10.2	Planning a Literature Search	265
10.3	Locating Relevant Literature	267
10.4	Managing Information	268
10.5	Reliability of a Source	269
10.6	Writing a Review	272
	Bibliography	274
11	Preparation of Research Papers and Other Articles	275
11.1	The IMRAD Structure for Research Reporting	276
11.2	Research Papers	277
11.3	Selecting a Journal	279
11.4	The Structure of a Research Paper	282
11.5	Other Considerations in the Preparation of Research Papers	286
11.6	Review and Peer Review	289
11.7	Review Papers	291
11.8	Conference Papers	292
11.9	Electronic Publications	293
11.10	Short Notes and Other Forms of Reports	294
11.11	Copyediting and Proofreading	295
	Bibliography	301
12	The Structure of a Thesis	303
12.1	Thesis or Dissertation?	303
12.2	Parts of a Thesis	304
12.3	Preliminary Pages of a Thesis	305
12.4	The Subject Proper	306
12.5	The Abstract	312
12.6	Formatting Requirements of a Thesis	312
12.7	Paper and Text Spacing	313
12.8	Thesis Editing	316
	Bibliography	318
13	Tables and Illustrations	319
13.1	Making of a Table	319
13.2	Arrangement of Data in Tables	321
13.3	Illustrations	323
13.4	Bar Diagrams	325
13.5	Pie Diagrams	330
13.6	The Line Graph	330
13.7	Line Drawings	333
13.8	Photographs	334
	Bibliography	334

14 Reasoning in Research	337
14.1 Some Logical Terms	337
14.2 Evidences	340
14.3 Inductive and Deductive Reasoning	342
14.4 Fallacious Reasoning	345
14.5 Formal and Informal Fallacies	346
14.6 Common Fallacies	347
Bibliography	360
15 References: How to Cite and List Correctly	361
15.1 Importance of Referencing in Documents	362
15.2 Citation and Listing Systems of References	363
15.3 Common Documentation Styles	368
15.4 CSE Style: The Name-Year System	369
15.5 Citation of Sources in the Text	370
15.6 Examples of in-Text References	376
15.7 Listing References in the “References” Section	379
15.8 Examples of Writing References	384
15.9 Websites and Other Online Sources	389
15.10 Reference Management Software	392
Annexure	393
Bibliography	399
16 Improve Your Writing Skills	401
16.1 Use Plain English	401
16.2 Use Paragraphs Properly	402
16.3 Avoid Gender Specific or Discriminatory Language	404
16.4 Titles	408
16.5 Verbs: Care with Tenses	409
16.6 The Active or Passive Voice Dilemma	412
16.7 Be Definite About the Use of the ‘Articles’	413
16.8 Prepositions	415
16.9 Relative Pronouns: Use the Most Appropriate	417
16.10 Transitional Words and Phrases	420
Bibliography	430
17 Use Appropriate Words and Phrases	433
17.1 Economy in Words	433
17.2 Singular and Plural Words	436
17.3 Commonly Confused Words	438
17.4 Avoid Using More Words Instead of a Single Word	444
17.5 Avoid Unnecessary Qualification of Words	446
17.6 Remove Unnecessary Phrases	449
17.7 Avoid Clichés	451
Bibliography	452

18	Punctuation Marks and Abbreviations	455
18.1	Periods	455
18.2	Comma	456
18.3	Semicolon	458
18.4	Colon	459
18.5	Quotation Marks	460
18.6	Apostrophe	461
18.7	Brackets	462
18.8	Parentheses	462
18.9	Dashes	463
18.10	Hyphens	464
18.11	Virgule	464
18.12	Italics	464
18.13	Capitals	465
18.14	Abbreviation, Initialism, and Acronym	468
	Annexure: Abbreviations Commonly Used in Writing	470
	Bibliography	472
19	Units and Numbers	475
19.1	Units and Dimensions	475
19.2	A Brief History of the Units	476
19.3	The SI System	478
19.4	SI Unit Rules and Style Conventions	486
19.5	Non SI Units Accepted for Use	490
19.6	Care with Numerals	491
19.7	Roman and Arabic Numerals	493
	Bibliography	494
20	Conference Presentations and Posters	497
20.1	Scientific Meetings	497
20.2	General Features of a Scientific Conference	498
20.3	Planning and Delivering a Presentation	502
20.4	Preparing Good Presentation Slides	512
20.5	Poster Presentation in Meetings	516
20.6	Students' Seminar	519
20.7	Group and Panel Discussion	520
	Bibliography	521
21	Guidelines for Successful Lecturing	523
21.1	Qualities of a Good Lecturer	524
21.2	Planning for Lecture	526
21.3	The Process of Lecturing	529
21.4	Use Visual Aids Effectively	533
21.5	Sustain the Interest of Students	535
21.6	Improve Motivation of Students	536
21.7	Build Rapport with the Students	538

21.8	Plan and Prepare for Group Work	538
21.9	Conduct of Examinations	539
	Bibliography	540
22	Note Taking, Note Making, and Assignments	543
22.1	The Issue of Forgetting and Recall	544
22.2	Note Taking	545
22.3	Note Taking Systems	549
22.4	Listening and Note Taking	554
22.5	Note Making	556
22.6	Note Making from Text Books	558
22.7	Assignments as a Part of Learning	560
22.8	Essay Assignments	561
22.9	Writing Style	567
	Bibliography	568
23	Ethics and Related Issues in Research	569
23.1	Nuremberg Code and After	570
23.2	Some Concepts in Ethics	570
23.3	Intellectual Property Rights	574
23.4	Fraud and Misconduct in Science	580
23.5	Unscientific Practices in Thesis Work	584
23.6	Ethics in Science Practicals	586
23.7	Whistle Blowing	587
23.8	Scientific Values: Needed a Code of Conduct	588
	Bibliography	588
24	Plagiarism: Prevention and Cure	591
24.1	What is Plagiarism?	592
24.2	Acknowledge Sources Appropriately	595
24.3	Paraphrasing	597
24.4	Direct and Indirect Quotations	601
24.5	Summarizing	604
24.6	Evaluation of Text	605
24.7	Plagiarism Checking	606
	Bibliography	608
	Index	611

Chapter 1

Research: The Search for Knowledge



We know very little, and yet it is astonishing that we know so much, and still more astonishing that so little knowledge can give us so much power.

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)

Human beings have been curious from the very beginning. Primitive humans observed matters concerning the universe, and changed their way of living, settlement, food habits, social institutions, and many others over time. In fact, these were the results of ‘research’ done by our ancestors on the processes happening in nature, which helped them to learn many lessons and draw several conclusions. Our ancestors used observation as the primary means to understand various phenomena. They invented many devices and tools by trial and error. Discoveries or inventions by accident were galore. Nevertheless, the pursuit of humans to unravel the mysteries of the universe had to face many challenges.

Earlier efforts of our ancestors to explain the operation of the universe paved way for primitive religious concepts; and for many phenomena, they attributed the cause to supernatural powers. This gave birth to religions and priests. At least for some part of history, religions became the authority on everything, even on science! Yet, there were many ‘researchers’ among them who could observe cause–effect relationships for various phenomena and processes. They also discovered that under certain conditions, events could be predicted with reasonable accuracy. The saddest part of the story is that often these findings and explanations were simply rejected, if they seemed to conflict with the prevailing religious dogmas. Nobody was allowed to question religious authority, and those who dared faced the consequences—sometimes even death! In course of time, however, humans could break the religious hold on matters concerning science. This emboldened them to have a quantum leap in science and technology, and they succeeded in offering accurate explanations for innumerable phenomena. In fact, the accumulated knowledge over the centuries was the result of ‘research’ done by our ancestors.

This process of research in search of more and more scientific knowledge is still going on in all the scientific disciplines.

1.1 Acquiring Knowledge

What is known is knowledge. From the day we are born, we begin to acquire and refine knowledge in many ways. Acquiring knowledge and sharing it with others are widely recognized as the basis for improving one's power, especially reputation and influence in the society. Every addition to scientific knowledge is an accession to human powers. Francis Bacon (1561–1626), considered as the 'father of scientific method', recognized this power of knowledge and said, 'Knowledge is power', implying that with knowledge one's capability to succeed in life would surely increase. Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), a renowned philosopher of the twentieth century, recognized the power of knowledge; he said: 'We know very little, and yet it is astonishing that we know so much, and still more astonishing that so little knowledge can give us so much power'.

Knowledge can refer to both theoretical and practical understanding of a subject, which includes facts, descriptions, information, and skills acquired through experience or learnt through books or other means. In other words, knowledge can be *implicit knowledge* as with practical skills or *explicit knowledge* as with the theoretical understanding of a subject. *Information* is knowledge communicated through any media such as sensible statements, opinions, facts, concepts, or ideas. Information becomes knowledge only when it is conceived and understood.

The knowledge we acquire may be *a priori* (a Latin term, meaning 'prior to') or *a posteriori* (posterior to). Note that the knowledge known independent of experience is *a priori*. It is non-empirical or arrived at beforehand without experience. In contrast, a *a posteriori* knowledge is knowledge known only by experience. It is empirical or gained only after we have firm experiences.

We consider *a priori* knowledge as true, because *deductive reasoning* is used to arrive at that conclusion using valid arguments. For example, the knowledge that 7 plus 5 is equal to 12 is known without direct experience. Anybody with some arithmetical understanding will be able to tell the answer. In other words, we acquire *a priori* knowledge not through experience but by reason alone. Most of the equations in mathematics are examples of *a priori* knowledge, as they are self-revealing. Similarly, the statement, 'all dogs are mammals' is an *a priori* truth. By knowing the definitions of the word 'dogs' and 'mammals', one can use reason to establish that the statement, 'all dogs are mammals' is true without the need to examine all dogs for mammalian characters.

From *inductive reasoning* based on empirical evidences, we gather a *a posteriori* knowledge. For example, a statement such as: 'this rose flower is fragrant' cannot be considered true through reason alone. You cannot be sure whether the rose flower in question actually possesses fragrance through reason; for that, you must have direct experience—you have to smell the flowers. Note that unlike *a priori* knowledge, this type of *a posteriori* statements can be faulty; the rose in the statement may not have fragrance! Although certain scientific disciplines such as physics treat all knowledge as empirical or *a posteriori*, some disciplines such as mathematics use logic and reasoning. Rationalists suppose that knowledge is primarily attained by a

priori processes or is inherent, but for empiricists knowledge is a posteriori. Most scientific disciplines now utilize both a priori and a posteriori knowledge.

The discussion on knowledge leads us to recognize that acquiring knowledge is through acquaintance and through the description of characteristics of materials or phenomena. We learn many things through perception and sensation. However, most of our knowledge is by description. Knowledge may also take the form of beliefs and judgements. Some beliefs may be supported by evidences, but many are simply beliefs! The beliefs that are supported by evidences are 'justified beliefs'. According to the great philosopher Plato, knowledge is 'justified true belief'.

Kerlinger (1986) quoting Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), a renowned American philosopher, described four methods of acquiring knowledge or fixing beliefs.

Method of tenacity: Probably because of our upbringing and socialization pattern, we believe and accept certain things to be true. These are being taught or thrust upon us from early childhood. Among the public, the more frequent the repetition of the belief, the more the enhancement of its validity. It is difficult to change such beliefs even in the face of conflicting evidences, and sometimes, fresh ideas may evolve from false beliefs or superstitions! For example, most religious beliefs, spirituality, omens, superstitions, and astrology existing in the society are through the method of tenacity or beliefs. People adhere to such beliefs, and it is very difficult to change them. The root cause of many superstitions in the society is because of this human habit of clinging to such dogma.

Method of authority: In olden days, nobody was allowed to question the authority. The authority might be kings, priests, or other leaders. People often take for granted the information passed on to them based on authority. Even now, the authority has some sway over the people. For common people, a statement must be true, if it is in the religious books. Most people also accept as true without questioning what the kings (now, political heads!), judges, priests, oracles, celebrities, leaders, or teachers say. The authority is considered infallible.

Although the 'method of authority' has several problems, it is considered to be superior to the 'method of tenacity'. Acquiring knowledge through authority is common among people because of some reasons. Most people are conditioned from birth by their parents with suggestions to listen, trust, and obey authorities. In most cases, authoritarian method is the fastest and most efficient method of transmitting knowledge. However, authoritarian knowledge should be corroborated by evidences and reasoning to consider it reliable. As far as science is considered, if we accept the authority of politicians or public figures like poets, artists, or other celebrities, that would be the end of science! The norm must be to accept only 'experts' in their own fields as authorities in science.

Method of intuition: The method of intuition or a priori method of acquiring knowledge is considered to be superior to the two already mentioned. As already discussed, it is called a priori method as reasoning is done from what is 'prior' or 'before'. The propositions accepted by the method of intuition are self-evident. However, in intuitive propositions, reason is considered as the criterion of truth rather than experience. It attempts to reason from cause to effect or from observed

fact to another fact or principle not observed. However, if two reputed individuals reach different conclusions based on intuition, it would be difficult to decide for sure whose judgement is correct.

Method of science: The method of science or scientific method is a practical methodology of acquiring knowledge by framing specific questions and systematically finding answers. Among the four methods of acquiring knowledge, scientific method is the most reliable. In this method, the questions formulated and answers predicted are scrutinised based on observation, measurement, verification, and evaluation. The method of science is based on empirical and measurable evidences rather than beliefs or arguments. This unique characteristic distinguishes science from other methods of faith, authority, or intuition. Scientific method has also the rare characteristic of self-correction, which no other method has; in science, theories and laws are revised based on new evidences (see Sect. 1.8).

1.2 Science and Technology

Can you define science exactly? In fact, the word ‘science’ is from *Scientia*, a Latin term, meaning knowledge; and it was originally used to mean simply knowledge. In Sanskrit, the word for science is *Vijnana*, which is associated with the processes of discernment and understanding. However, science as we understand today is much more than simply knowledge.

A major distinguishing feature of scientific knowledge in comparison to other kinds of knowledge is that it is not static. Scientific knowledge is constantly revised or expanded through the processes of observation and experimentation. Therefore, one can say that science includes a ‘content’ part and a ‘process’ part of acquiring or improving this content. Scientific knowledge hitherto known to us developed as the content of science. This ‘content’ is what we usually read and learn from science textbooks comprising of descriptions, facts, principles, theories, laws, and their relationships (Sect. 1.7). The ‘content’ of science develops through the ‘process’ of science involving repeated observation and experimentation done in a methodical manner. This ‘process’ is nothing but *research* using scientific method (Sect. 1.8). The stipulation of methodical approach to acquire knowledge in science is important because this distinguishes science from other knowledge systems prevalent in the society.

The above discussion leads us to define science as follows: Science is a body of knowledge attained through repeated observation and experimentation done methodically, which is always amenable to correction, modification, or improvement upon getting better evidences.

Science is closely related to *philosophy*. For a considerable period in the history of science, both ‘science’ and ‘philosophy’ were considered the same. Some distinctions between philosophy and science, however, began to surface during the late modern period. By eighteenth century, the use of the term ‘science’ in the sense of