

Historical methods of research

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HISTORICAL METHODS OF RESEARCH

Introduction

The process of learning and understanding the background and growth of a chosen field of study or profession can offer insight into organizational culture, current trends, and future possibilities. The historical method of research applies to all fields of study because it encompasses there: origins, growth, theories, personalities, crisis, etc. Both quantitative and qualitative variables can be used in the collection of historical information. Once the decision is made to conduct historical research, there are steps that should be followed to achieve a reliable result.

Definition of Research

Research is the continual search for truth using the scientific method. It is the pursuit of the truth with the help of the study, investigation, observation, comparison. Research is a quest for knowledge through diligent search or investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of new knowledge. Scientific method is a systematic body of procedures and techniques applied in carrying out investigation or experimentation targeted at obtaining new knowledge. Here research and scientific methods may be considered a course of critical enquiry leading to discovery of facts or information.

What Is A Historical Method of Research?

Historical methods of research are the process of systematically examining an account of what has happened in the past. It is not facts and dates or even a description of past events. The dynamic account of past events that involves an interpretation attempt to recapture the nuances, personalities, and ideas that events. One of the goals of historical research is to communicating of past events. In the field of library and information science, there are vast arrays of topics that may be considered for conducting historical research. For example, a researcher may chose to answer questions about the development of school, academic or public libraries, the rise of technology and the benefits/ problems it brings, the development of preservation methods, famous personalities in the field, library statistics, or geographical demographics and how they affect library distribution.

Historical methods of research is a scientific method in which comparison is used to reveal the general and the particular in historical phenomena and to gain an

understanding of the various historical stages of development of one and the same phenomenon or of two different but contemporaneous phenomena.

The historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other evidence, such as secondary sources and tertiary sources, to research and then to write history. The question of the nature, and indeed the possibility, of sound historical method is raised in the philosophy of history, as a question of epistemology. The following summarizes the history guidelines commonly used by historians in their work, under the headings of external criticism, internal criticism, and synthesis.

The historical method is employed by researchers who are interested in reporting events and/or conditions that occurred in the past. An attempt is made to establish facts in order to arrive at conclusions concerning past events or predict future events. Harter and Busha define library history as “the systematic recounting of past events pertaining to the establishment, maintenance, and utilization of systematically arranged collections of recorded information or knowledge....A biography of a person who has in some way affected the development of libraries, library science, or librarianship is also considered to be library history.

Stages of historical methods of research conducting:

1. Identify an idea, topic or research question
2. Conduct a background literature review
3. Refine the research idea and questions
4. Determine that historical methods will be the method used
5. Identify and locate primary and secondary data sources
6. Evaluate the authenticity and accuracy of source materials
7. Analyze the data and develop a narrative exposition of the findings.

Sources of historical methods of research

Primary Sources of Information - Direct outcomes of events or the records of eyewitnesses

- a) Original documents
- b) Relics
- c) Remains
- d) Artifacts

Secondary Sources of Information - Information provided by a person who did not directly observe the event, object, or condition

- a) Textbooks
- b) Encyclopedias
- c) Newspapers
- d) Periodicals

Review of research and other references

External Criticism - Asks if the evidence under consideration is authentic. The researcher checks the genuineness or validity of the source. Is it what it appears or claims to be? Is it admissible as evidence?

Internal Criticism - After the source is authenticated, it asks if the source is accurate, was the writer or creator competent, honest, and unbiased? How long after the event happened until it was reported? Does the witness agree with other witnesses?

Research plan of historical methods of research

1. **Choose a subject** **Choose a subject** (usually it will be relevant to you class, or limited by your instructor). Probably, you will then need to narrow your topic down, and often define your research paper by gaining a working hypothesis and a thesis

2. **Find sources.** You should use both internet and libraries to find your sources. The best sources are still those that are found in libraries or archives, so do NOT limit your searches to the web, even if it is easier.

In libraries you can find sources through:-

Library Catalogue and library database and other links of database

On the internet you can find sources through

- subject directories, hierarchical indexes, etc., such as yahoo, or even set library pages, or Prof. Pavlac's Women's History Site;
- search engines (For a list of the better ones, with descriptions, click here).

3. **Learn from your sources.** Historians usually distinguish between three kinds of sources, tertiary, primary, secondary. You can use sources to find more sources. Reading tertiary sources like encyclopedias, dictionaries, and handbooks can give you the general outline of subjects and their problems. They often have useful bibliographies (lists of books used), that are sources you can use. Secondary sources (professional historical books, scholarly articles) also have bibliographies that should lead you to more information. Primary sources, the immediate records of the past, should be used whenever possible.

4. **Evaluate your sources.** While you are researching, you should be carefully judging each source. Take careful notes from your sources, always recording carefully from where you got what information.

5. **Start writing, while you research.** You can, and should, begin writing as soon as possible. Do not wait until you have collected all your information. Prewriting can be based on good notes. You should be shaping your thesis in writing. To get there, if you started with a broad subject, along the way you should have been refining your subject into a narrow topic or a hypothesis. Writing as you go helps you to clarify your ideas, measure the length of parts of your argument, and finish the paper sooner.

6. **Write a rough draft.** Write your rough draft as if it were your finished paper. Put it aside, and go over it again carefully. You might use the checklist provided by the instructor.

7. **Have other people critique your draft.** It is best to talk to the person, but written comments, perhaps according to a checklist, are also good. Rewrite until you have a polished draft. The more you rewrite, the better it will be.

8. **Submit your final draft.** Notice that the end product is called a draft. Do the best you can, but every piece of writing has room for improvement. Try to get it done well in advance of the deadline, in case you have problems with printing out the paper.

Characteristics of Historical Methods of Research: Historical methods of research are a process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting information to answer questions. But to qualify as research, the process must have certain characteristics: it must, as far as possible, be controlled, rigorous, systematic, valid and verifiable, empirical and critical.

- ▶ **Controlled**- in real life there are many factors that affect an outcome. The concept of control implies that, in exploring causality in relation to two variables (factors), you set up your study in a way that minimizes the effects of other factors affecting the relationship. This can be achieved to a large extent in the physical sciences (cooking, baking), as most of the research is done in a laboratory.
- ▶ **Rigorous**-you must be scrupulous in ensuring that the procedures followed to find answers to questions are *relevant, appropriate and justified*. Again, the degree of rigor varies markedly between the physical and social sciences and within the social sciences.
- ▶ **Systematic**-this implies that the procedure adopted to undertake an investigation follow a certain logical sequence. The different steps cannot be taken in a haphazard way. Some procedures must follow others.
- ▶ **Valid and verifiable**-this concept implies that whatever you conclude on the basis of your findings is correct and can be verified by you and others.

- **Empirical**-this means that any conclusion drawn are based upon hard evidence gathered from information collected from real life experiences or observations.
- **Critical**-critical scrutiny of the procedures used and the methods employed is crucial to a research enquiry. The process of investigation must be foolproof and free from drawbacks.

Methods of using in historical methods of research

here are four major methods that researchers use to collect historical data. These are

- Archival data,
- Secondary sources,
- Running records, and
- Recollections.

The archival data, or primary sources, are typically the resources that researchers rely most heavily on. Archival data includes official documents and other items that would be found in archives, museums, etc. Secondary sources are the works of other historians who have written history. Running records are “documentaries maintained by private or nonprofit organizations.” Finally recollections include sources such as autobiographies, memoirs or diaries.

Values of historical methods of research

he values of historical research have been categorized by Hill and Kerber as follows:

- It enables solutions to cotemporary problems to be sought in the past.
- It throws light on present and future trends
- It stresses the relative importance and the effects of the various interactions that are to be found within all cultures
- It allows for the revaluation of data in relation to selected hypotheses, theories and generalizations that are presently held about the past.

Advantages and disadvantages of historical methods research

Disadvantages

- Cannot control for threats to internal validity

- › Limitations are imposed due to the content analysis
- › Researchers cannot ensure representation of the sample.
- › Bias in interpreting historical sources.
- › Interpreting sources is very time consuming.
- › Sources of historical materials may be problematic
- › Lack of control over external variables

Advantages

- › Throws light on present and future trends.
- › It enables understanding of and solutions to contemporary problems to be sought in the past.
- › It can illuminate the effects of key interactions within a culture or sub-culture.
- › It allows for the reevaluation of data in relation to selected hypotheses, theories and generalizations that are presently held about the past and the present.
- › Permits investigation of topics and questions that can be studied in no other fashion
- › Can make use of more categories of evidence than most other methods (with the exception of case studies and ethnographic studies)

Conclusions

Historical methods of research can also mean gathering data from situations that have already occurred and performing statistical analysis on this data just as we would in a traditional experiment. The one key difference between this type of research and the type described in the first paragraph concerns the manipulation of data. Since historical research relies on data from the past, there is no way to manipulate it. Studying the grades of older students, for example, and younger students may provide some insight into the differences between these two groups, but manipulating the work experience is impossible. Therefore, historical research can often lead to present day experiments that attempt to further explore what has occurred in the past.