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DOING RESEARCH IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

An essential guide to planning your project

Mark Saunders
Philip Lewis

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Doing Research in Business and Management

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About this text

It is now 20 years since we collaborated in the writing of our first research methods book and six years since we wrote the first edition of *Doing Research in Business and Management*. The success of both books suggests that research methods is a popular subject with business and management students. This may be so. But we think that it has more to do with the fact that research methods is a complex area – one where it is easy to do things, but much less easy to do things right.

In writing the second edition of *Doing Research in Business and Management*, we have responded to the many comments we have received regarding the previous edition as well as recent developments in research methods and methodology. In particular this has led us to revise Chapter 4 to take account fully of the numerous sources of secondary data available online; Chapter 5 to incorporate fully revised sections on philosophical underpinnings of management research including a discussion of postmodernism, and on different approaches to theory development including a discussion of abduction; Chapter 6 to incorporate a new section on observation; and an appendix on how to reference. Alongside this we have taken the opportunity to also update examples and references as well as revise tables and figures. Inevitably, the body of knowledge of research methods has developed further since 2012, and we have revised all chapters accordingly. Our experiences of teaching and supervising students and working through the methods with them have suggested alternative ways to explain concepts, and we have incorporated these where appropriate. However, the basic structure remains the same as the first edition.

When we wrote the first edition of *Doing Research in Business and Management*, we had one overall mission in mind. That was to write a text that was clear and straightforward and explained things in a way that lost none of the complexity, or academic rigour, of the subject. In writing the second edition this mission has not altered. We still feel just as passionate about clear communication.

In fully revising *Doing Research in Business and Management*, we have taken into account that although some degree programmes require students to complete an assessed research project, they may be told that, rather than collect their own data, they should use only data that have already been collected for some other purpose (secondary data) or, alternatively, write an extended review of the literature. For a second category of students on undergraduate programmes, the extent of their research work is a research methods module which is assessed by a research proposal. There is a third category, those business and management students who opt not to do a research project at all. For those undertaking research to be assessed by a written project report, we aim to help in all aspects of the research process: from thinking of a topic through to writing the final submission. We therefore include material, in Chapter 3, on managing the research process, as well as chapters on using secondary data (Chapter 4) and reviewing

the literature critically (Chapter 2). There are also two chapters (6 and 7) on collecting and analysing data, as an understanding of these is important for all types of research projects as well as preparing a research proposal. If you're taking a research methods module which is assessed by a research proposal, you will find that there is considerable emphasis on the preparation of a research proposal. Indeed, Chapter 8 deals specifically with writing the research proposal.

It may sound strange, but we think that business and management students in the third category, those who opt not to do a research project at all, can gain just as much from this book as those in the other two categories. As a student, you will spend much of your time studying material which is the result of careful research that has been scrutinised by the research community prior to publication. This scrutiny is a guarantee of good quality: that you should put your faith in what you have read. However, some of what you read may not have been through quite such a rigorous process. Knowing something about the research process enables you to ask the right questions of the material you are studying. It gives you the sense of healthy scepticism that is the hallmark of a university education.

How you might use this text

We don't anticipate that you will read this text progressively from Chapter 1 through to Chapter 8. In fact, you may not read all the chapters, although we certainly hope that you will! The reason, we suspect, is that you will choose those chapters that meet your own needs. This may be because you are in one of the categories we mentioned earlier, have specific questions about the research process you need to answer, or it may be that your research methods lecturers specify certain chapters. We've written the chapters in such a way that they can be read on their own without recourse to the other chapters. To some extent, they draw inevitably on material from other chapters directly. Where this is so, we have cross-referenced to the relevant chapter. But the point remains that you can pick up any chapter in isolation and make sense of it.

This book is not a self-study text in the truest sense; there are no questions with model answers! However, we have included points in each chapter which facilitate an element of independent learning. Each chapter begins with a summary of content which we call 'Why read this chapter?' This gives you some idea of the chapter content and the approach we have taken on the topic being discussed. Each chapter contains a small number of examples of research called 'Research in practice'. These serve to illustrate in a practical manner some of the points being made in the chapter, in much the same way as a lecturer would give practical examples in a research methods lecture. Every chapter ends with a summary of the main points in the chapter and a section called 'Thinking about . . .' Here we make suggestions as to how you may test and reinforce the learning you have achieved during the reading of the chapter. Throughout the book, key research terms we use are isolated and placed in 'Definition' boxes to make it easy for you to refresh your understanding of these terms as you read through each chapter.

What's in the text?

Chapter 1 deals with the first issue you will encounter in the research process: choosing the right research topic. We suggest some novel ways in which you may decide upon your topic, offer guidance in deciding what constitutes an effective research topic and consider some topics which may be problematic. In the latter part of the chapter, we deal with the issue of defining suitable research questions and objectives. The chapter ends with a discussion on what is meant by the all-important term 'theory'.

In Chapter 2, we approach the subject of the critical literature review. We offer some practical suggestions on the way you may go about approaching your literature review and actually conducting it, using full-text databases of academic articles. The chapter also explains what constitutes an effective critical literature review and offers guidance in how it may be structured.

Chapter 3 is concerned with practical issues regarding gaining access to organisations from which you may collect your own research data. In this chapter, we also consider the issues of self-management you may face in conducting your research, particularly the effective use of resources such as time. The management of other aspects of the research process is also discussed, such as your supervisor, university and those from whom you collect your data. We also help you to think about the ways in which you adhere to the code of research ethics that you will be required to observe.

In Chapter 4 we consider the use of secondary data. We discuss the valuable role which secondary data may play in your research and the reasons you may use secondary data. The ready availability of a wealth of secondary data online is considered. We also warn you about some of the pitfalls inherent in the use of secondary data and how to assess its value to your own research project.

The subject of Chapter 5 is research strategy. This involves a consideration of the main philosophies you may adopt and the ways in which they affect choice of strategy. We discuss the different types of research strategy, with an emphasis on the possibility of mixing strategies in one research project. We end the chapter with a discussion of the importance of validity and reliability: ensuring that your research results and conclusions are believable.

Chapter 6 gets to the core of the research process: the collection of data. We first explain how to choose a sample. We then consider three frequently used methods of collecting primary data in more detail. In this we look at how to design and distribute effective questionnaires, including the use of Internet questionnaires; conduct face-to-face, telephone and Internet-mediated interviews; and undertake structured and unstructured observations.

In Chapter 7 we deal with the process of data analysis. We discuss the two types of data – quantitative and qualitative – and the ways in which these data may be prepared for analysis and actually analysed. The use of statistics in both the presentation and analysis of data is explained with particular emphasis on the use of different software packages. We also discuss ways in which qualitative data may be prepared for analysis and analysed. As with the analysis of quantitative data, we emphasise the way in which you may develop theory from the analysed data.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the writing of your research proposal. We explain how the process of writing clarifies your ideas, and we emphasise the importance of treating the research proposal as an item of 'work in progress' by constantly revising it. The chapter also includes a discussion on what content the proposal should contain, how it may be structured and the appropriate writing style to be adopted. Finally, we suggest some of the criteria against which the quality of your research proposal may be assessed.

We hope you will learn a lot from this book: that's why it exists! But we also hope that you will enjoy reading it. Doing your research project should be fun!

Mark and Phil
July 2017

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Mark N.K. Saunders BA, MSc, PGCE, PhD, Chartered FCIPD is Professor of Business Research Methods at Birmingham Business School and Director of Postgraduate Research Methods Training for the College of Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham. He is a Fellow of the British Academy of Management and member of the Fellows' College. Mark currently holds visiting professorships at the Universities of Surrey and of Worcester. He teaches research methods to master's and doctoral students as well as supervising master's dissertations and research degrees. Mark has published articles on research methods, and human resource aspects of the management of change including trust and organisational learning, in a range of journals including *British Journal of Management*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Small Business Management*, *Management Learning*, *R and D Management* and *Social Science and Medicine*. He is co-author with Phil Lewis and Adrian Thornhill of *Research Methods for Business Students*, currently in its seventh edition and, with Bill Lee, co-author of *Doing Case Study Research for Business and Management Students*. He is also co-editor with Bill Lee and Vadake Narayanan of the *Mastering Business Research Methods* book series and editor of the *Handbooks of Research Methods in Management* book series. Mark undertakes research and consultancy in public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Prior to becoming an academic, he had a variety of research jobs in local government.

Philip J. Lewis BA, PhD, MSc, MCIPD, PGDipM, Cert Ed began his career in HR as a training adviser with the Distributive Industry Training Board. He then taught HRM and research methods in three UK universities. He studied part-time for degrees with the Open University and the University of Bath, from which he gained an MSc in Industrial Relations and a PhD for his research on performance pay in retail financial services. He is co-author with Mark Saunders and Adrian Thornhill of *Research Methods for Business Students*, currently in its seventh edition, and of *Employee Relations: Understanding the Employment Relationship*; and with Adrian Thornhill, Mike Millmore and Mark Saunders of *Managing Change: A Human Resource Strategy Approach*; and with Mark Saunders, Adrian Thornhill, Mike Millmore and Trevor Morrow of *Strategic Human Resource Management*. He has undertaken consultancy in both the public and private sectors.

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Figures

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Tables

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Chapter 1

Choosing your research topic

1.1 Why you should read this chapter

This is a big moment in your life. You are about to embark on a voyage of discovery. You will discover a lot about the research process, the topic you are going to research and, we hope, a lot about yourself too. For many of you, the research project is the one part of your course where you have an opportunity to choose what you are going to study and the way in which you study it. We hope that you see this as an exciting opportunity because we believe strongly that's what it is. It's your chance to express your individuality, your ingenuity and imagination, your resourcefulness and, above all, your personal organisational skills. These attributes have always been important. But in the twenty-first century, they are more important than ever. Why do we say this? It's because we think that all the social, economic and technological changes of the last few years have empowered us all to take charge of our own lives to a greater extent than ever before. So take charge of your research topic now!

The overall purpose of this chapter is to enable you to get your research project off to a good start by choosing a topic to research that will give you the best chance of succeeding and passing this important component of your course. It's worth bearing in mind that however good you may be at all the relevant skills that go into producing a good research project, you will give yourself a better chance of succeeding if you have chosen your topic wisely.

In this chapter, we talk about why choosing the right research topic is so important. We then explain why, for many of us, the choice of topic is so difficult. The choice is made easier if this decision-making process is tackled in a systematic way. In the chapter, we outline some of the procedures for adopting a systematic approach. Then, having got to the stage where you have chosen a topic, we examine ways in which the topic you have chosen can be refined in such a way that it is acceptable to your assessors and will provide you with the maximum amount of satisfaction.

We end the chapter with a consideration of what makes a good research topic, and some help on writing research questions and objectives.

1.2 Why choosing the right research topic is so important

It is possible, of course, that you may be constrained in your choice of research topic. Your university may define strict limits outside which you may not stray. Alternatively, it is possible that an employer has asked you to undertake a piece of research. In either case, some of the points in the next two sections on choosing the right research topic and generating research ideas may not apply to you directly. However, we encourage you not to ignore the points made. It may be that although you may not have a free choice of the general topic, the way in which you approach it may be entirely your decision.

Now let's look at some of the reasons why choosing the right research topic is so important.

You have to live with it

The decision about which research topic to choose is something you will have to live with, maybe for as long as a year or more. We mean this in two senses. First, it is a topic you will become intimately familiar with, so it makes sense to choose something that you will enjoy. Ask yourself: what am I really interested in? OK, so it may be that football is your passion. Well, football nowadays is big business, particularly in the major leagues in Europe such as the English Premier League. So if your passion has a business dimension, then maybe there is a research topic to be pursued. One of our student's undergraduate projects explored the reasons why attendances at matches were generally lower when the match was screened live on television. This led into interesting areas such as the affiliation aspect of motivation theory, where some people, for example a football team's fans, have a need to be affiliated with like-minded people and are motivated towards interaction with these people, leading them to attend matches. This posed a question about the extent to which a comfortable armchair and the economic benefits of not attending the match in person overrode the need for affiliation!

The second sense in which we mean that the decision about your choice of research topic is something you will have to live with is that when you have chosen it, normally there is no going back. You will make life much more difficult for yourself if you find out after one half of the time period allotted to your research that you have chosen the wrong topic. It may be possible to change even at that stage, but you spend the rest of the allotted time playing catch-up. We talk later in this chapter about problems in choosing a research topic, and the consequences of making the wrong choice. So it is better to spend the time at the outset making sure it's right for you. It is a time-consuming process. Many students have remarked to us in the past that they thought that choosing their topic would be easy. It may be easy to choose one that interests you, but turning it into a viable proposition for your course may take much longer than you thought.

It will be better choosing a topic that will both exploit and develop your knowledge and skills

As well as choosing a topic that you will enjoy, it obviously makes sense to choose a topic that you are capable of doing well. Making a list of your skills and knowledge

seems a good starting point. Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to help you prepare the list.

What are your personal strengths and weaknesses?

We are all better at some things than others. You may have discovered strengths on your course that you may want to exploit. These may relate to your background experience or particular skills that you can practise in the data collection and analysis stages of the research. The knowledge gained in previous or current work experience is a good knowledge source for many students. You are more likely to know your way around some of the areas that need specialist knowledge. In addition, this specialist knowledge will lead more easily to an informed research question that needs answering. Alternatively, you may be keen to learn about an industry that's new to you. For example, you may be fascinated by software design and want to learn more about that industry with a view to possible employment. In this case, you will need to ask yourself whether locating a research project in that industry will give you an equal chance of success compared to an industry with which you may be familiar. It's also a good idea to think about the modules you have studied and those in which you have had success. This will give you a confident start.

The data collection and analysis methods you adopt offer slightly different options. Here, you may be experienced at interviewing but less so at designing questionnaires. Do you exploit your expertise or decide to learn the skill of questionnaire design? Of course, you can include an element of both. The choices you make may be based on practical as well as personal development considerations. It's not much good having learned a lot but not passed the module!

What knowledge and skills do you think you will need in the future?

This may be quite a difficult question to answer for many of us. Few of us could have predicted 25 years ago the extent to which we all now need information technology skills in both our work and home lives. Yet it may be possible for you to predict some of the generic skills you will need for effective personal performance. Some of these, such as influencing others and conducting meetings, you may have encountered during your course. The opportunity may present itself in your research to practise some of these skills, particularly in the data collection stage. In the same way, your choice of topic could help develop your specialist knowledge of an aspect of your chosen area of employment.

What resources can you draw upon to help?

Perhaps the value of this question is most evident when it reveals the absence of resources. Most of you will have access to key people such as lecturers, managers and colleagues. The extent to which these can be of assistance will, of course, vary. It will be very valuable to be able to consult an 'expert' in the subject area you are studying for your research but, if you have chosen a fairly specialist field, the absence of such assistance may be a considerable block to your progress. You will, of course, have access to information technology, but such issues as the processing of questionnaire answers and the analysis of questionnaire data is a complex and demanding affair if you have no experience in this. Don't be afraid to ask for help!

Will your choice of topic help you pass the whole course?

Although we have put the emphasis here upon self-development, the point remains that you must choose a topic that will allow you to meet the assessment requirements and will give you the best possible chance of ultimate success. If there is one fundamental lesson that we have learned as a result of supervising many research projects over the years, it is this: the earlier you start deciding upon your topic, the more likely you will be to choose the right one and ensure final success!

1.3 Why choosing a research topic is difficult

There is no question that for many of us, choosing the right topic is one of the most difficult aspects of the whole research process. At this stage, you are on your own! It has to come from you; and making decisions, which have important consequences, is often difficult for most of us. So, what are some of the reasons why this one may be particularly difficult? Let's have a look at some of them.

There is simply too much choice

It's wonderful living in an age when so much information is available at the end of our fingertips. But this can lead us to think that there is no question that has not been asked and no problem which has not been solved. Whatever it is we are interested in, there appears to be a vast amount of information available, much of which there is never enough time to read. This results in the inevitable feeling that whatever it is you have in mind will have been done before. Well, it probably has, but maybe not in the way you intend to do it. But that doesn't mean that you can't tackle it. One of the most popular undergraduate research topics is worker motivation. 'What is that workers value most about their working lives?' is a frequently asked question. The textbooks are full of generic answers to this question, and your university library will be full of project reports which have asked the same question. Yet there are lots of managers in organisations who need to know the answer in respect of their own employees. In other words, even the most familiar topic can be applied to many different, specific situations.

The fear it will be too difficult

The research process is challenging enough without making it more difficult by choosing a topic that stretches you too far. How will you know if that is the case? Have a look at the literature on a topic that interests you as a possible choice. Maybe the way in which the topic is covered has an overly theoretical approach which makes it too difficult for you to 'think your way in'. The motivation of people to work has a distinctly practical feel. But researching the way in which the brain operates to direct our enthusiasm to one interest rather than another seems to emphasise the biological aspects rather than the business perspective, for which your course has prepared you.

The fear that it will be insufficiently theoretical

It's quite understandable that you should feel a mild sense of panic when you go to your supervisor to explain with great enthusiasm your choice of research topic only to be greeted by 'yes, very interesting, but what role will theory play?'. This is where it starts to get tricky. But don't despair, because theory has a role to play in all project reports. It's just a question of how and where you use it. Later in this chapter we explore the role of theory in writing research questions and objectives. And in Chapter 5 we explain that theory can be used as a 'way in' to your research by setting up theoretical propositions which can be tested. It can also be used as a lens through which you can study your data, or a structure against which you can perform your data analysis.

In case you are unconvinced, just consider this statement: 'students read research methods textbooks in the hope that they perform more effectively in their research module'. That's a theory, and what you are doing right now is evidence that it is accurate!

The temptation to re-use work you have already done

It is tempting to take the easy way out and use an assignment which you have written for a previous purpose and just enlarge it to make it into a research project. There is a similar temptation for part-time students who perhaps have produced a research report at work. The trouble is that it never quite 'fits'. It's a bit like fitting a wheel to a bike that's not quite the right size. It may be OK, but it's never more than that. You are likely to spend more time getting it to fit than you would spend on thinking through a purpose-made topic.

1.4 Ten ways to generate ideas for a research topic

Now that we have given you some general guidelines on choosing a suitable research topic, let's look at some techniques for deciding on the topic itself. We have listed our favourite 10 of these in Table 1.1. They are in no particular order.

Table 1.1 Ten techniques for generating research ideas

1	Thinking
2	Looking at past project titles
3	Using past projects from the university library
4	Using past course assignments
5	Using relevant literature
6	Following the news media
7	Brainstorming
8	Concept mapping
9	Making a note of ideas
10	Discussion with helpers

Thinking

We are bound to start with this one, because there is no escaping it! By thinking, we mean really thinking. Keep the need to select a topic in your mind all the time – when you watch TV, read a newspaper, browse relevant web pages, talk to colleagues, talk and listen in seminars, discuss issues with your lecturers. Probably, like us, prompted by your study of business and management, questions often go through your mind when you are in stores, airports and buses – questions such as 'How are the work rotas for these people organised?'; 'How can the cost of delivering this service be reduced while maintaining quality of service?' This is what you may call 'background thinking'. Now let's look at a series of more specific techniques for generating ideas.

Looking at past project titles

You are not the first person to have trodden the path, so it's a good idea to look at what those before you have attempted. You may find a list of past research project titles for your course in your university library; alternatively, your course leader may have one. This will give you an idea of the sort of topic that may be suitable. It will also fire your imagination and help you to start thinking about how that title may relate to something that you have thought about. Don't worry about what you think may not be a particularly well-written title. And do bear in mind that in some universities, all past projects are placed in the library whether they are bare passes or distinctions. So the fact that a project is in your library does not necessarily mean that it's a good piece of work. The point is to generate ideas for your project, not work out what makes a good project.

Using past projects

Having delved into the university library to look for past project titles, why not spend some more time checking the projects which have caught your attention? Raimond (1993) suggests a useful method for generating research topic ideas this way (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 Four steps for generating research topic ideas using past projects from the university library

1. Select six projects that you like.
2. For each of these six projects, note down your first thoughts to answer these three questions (if responses for different projects are the same, this does not matter):
   (a) What appeals to you about the project?
   (b) What is good about the project?
   (c) Why is the project good?
3. Select three projects that you do not like.
4. For each of these three projects, note down your first thoughts to answer these three questions (if responses for different projects are the same, or cannot be clearly expressed, this does not matter; note them down anyway):
   (a) What do you dislike about the project?
   (b) What is bad about the project?
   (c) Why is the project bad?

Having completed these four steps, you will have a note of the things that you like and dislike about projects and, of equal importance, what you consider makes good and poor projects. What's more, that list will be personal to you. It's your opinion, and that is what you can use to guide your choice for your own research topic.

Using past course assignments

Many students find that past course assignments serve as a good starting point for research topic ideas. It seems logical to develop the work of an assignment in which you have had some choice of topic, particularly when you have enjoyed it and received a good grade. However, do bear in mind the maxim that 'all research ends with ideas for more research'. Look hard at what you have done and ask yourself: 'Are there questions posed by my work which I have not yet answered?'

Beware of developing the assignment because you got a good grade! There must be scope for development, and it must meet the assessment criteria. For example, many universities have self-plagiarism rules to prevent students from re-using work that they have already submitted as an assignment.

Using relevant literature

Since what you are going to tackle should use the literature relevant to your topic, it seems sensible to start examining that literature. Let's assume that you have decided to look at a possible research topic that is a development of a module you have enjoyed. Go back to your lecture notes and course textbooks on that topic and make a note of the names of relevant authors. This will give you a basis on which to undertake a preliminary search. This should help you to produce a list of articles, books, reports and other items.

A particularly valuable literature source of research topic ideas is academic review articles. They are valuable because they contain both a thorough review of the state of knowledge in that topic area and pointers towards areas where further research needs to be undertaken. Browsing recent journals in your field is also a good source of possible research ideas. For many subject areas, your project supervisor will be able to suggest possible recent review articles, or articles that contain recommendations for further work.

Books, by contrast, are often less up to date than journal articles. But they do often contain a good overview of research that has been undertaken, which may suggest ideas to you. Reports may also be of use. The most recently published are usually up to date and, again, often contain recommendations that may form the basis of your research idea. An example of such a report is shown as Research in practice 1.1.

Research in practice 1.1

Using reports to generate research topic ideas

Access to broadband in the UK is inconsistent, the impact being particularly in rural areas where speeds are unacceptably slow. Written evidence to the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee explains how poor broadband can lead

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to a range of problems: from reduced access to online learning resources for students, families being unable to use everyday online services and the effectiveness of rural businesses being severely affected. Slow broadband can produce a feeling of a two-tier society, with rural communities suffering markedly due to infrastructure problems which make them harder to reach.

The committee expressed concern that BT, the infrastructure developer, told it that the 2015 target of 95% of premises receiving superfast broadband by 2017 may slip. The committee recommended that the government unit overseeing broadband development should insist upon the 2017 target being met. Moreover, a target date for when the last 5% of premises will obtain access to superfast broadband coverage must be published.

The importance of good broadband for all is highlighted by the government's policy of providing its services 'digital-by-default'. This policy has clear ramifications when broadband access is limited or non-existent.

The report emphasised that it is vital that the last premises in the UK to have access to basic and superfast broadband are treated just as well as the first premises and are not left behind or forgotten.

Source: House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2015) *Rural broadband and digital-only services, Seventh Report of Session 2014–15*. London: The Stationery Office Limited.

Table 1.3 lists some useful questions to ask when searching articles and reports for possible research topic ideas. The answers to these can help progress your choice of topic.

Table 1.3 Useful questions to ask when searching articles and reports for possible research topic ideas

- What did the authors conclude?
- What alternative conceptual models, explanations or hypotheses did the authors consider?
- What methods did the authors use to approach the problem?
- Do you accept the authors' conclusions? If not, are there other methods that could allow you to test their conclusion?
- Does the authors' research suggest new ways to interpret a different problem?
- Are there other problems that could be studied using the same methods?

Following the news media

We would always encourage you to go to the academic literature as your first port of call, but don't ignore the value of keeping up to date with items in the news. News media can be a very rich source of ideas. The stories which occur every day in the 'quality' newspapers (e.g. *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Daily Telegraph*) in both print and online versions may provide ideas which relate directly to a possible research topic. Don't forget, there may be other ideas which flow from the main story. On the morning of writing this section in 2016, it was announced that

the film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* had taken $424m (£300m) at the box office worldwide in its first five days, a record for a March debut and the sixth-highest US opening weekend. This suggests a research topic exploring the enormous amount of marketing spin-off opportunities presented by such a high-profile brand.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming can be a useful and fun way of generating research topic ideas. It is particularly valuable when you brainstorm with a group of people, ideally those who really understand why you are doing this. You can brainstorm on your own – but it's much less fun!

To brainstorm, you start off by defining the general field you are interested in. Try to make this as precise as possible. In the early stages of formulating a topic, you may have to be pretty imprecise, such as 'I am interested the effects of the weather on food retailing, but I am not sure how I can turn this into a research topic'.

The next stage is to ask the other members of the group for suggestions, relating to the imprecise topic you have suggested. It's a good idea to arm yourself with a pen and a large sheet of paper and note down all the suggestions you receive. The following five rules are very important:

1. Do record as many suggestions as possible.
2. Do record all suggestions, however 'wacky' or 'off the wall' they may appear at first sight.
3. Don't criticise or evaluate any ideas until they have been considered.
4. Do consider all the suggestions and explore the precise meaning of each of them.
5. Do analyse the list of suggestions and decide which appeal to you most as research ideas and why.

Definition

brainstorming: a technique that can be used to generate and refine research ideas. It is best undertaken with a group of people.

Concept mapping

Having completed your brainstorming, you may move on to use another technique which we find very useful in many contexts – **concept mapping**. This is a process which moves from a general idea that may have been the outcome of a brainstorm, or other idea-generating technique, to the creation of a map which represents visually the organisation of your thinking. Concept maps may be elaborate or simple; indeed, they

Definition

concept map: a diagram which represents visually the way we organize our thoughts about a set of related ideas.