
Observation – or watching and listening

You can find out what is going on and how people behave by watching and listening. When you watch and listen to get ideas for your research, this is called observation.

There are lots of different ways to do observation. You can:

- observe what is happening while you join in with what is going on
- observe what is happening while you stay away from the action
- look out for anything that might be going on in a general way
- look out for particular things happening that you have already decided will be important.

Think about when you will do your observation. Think about how long you will watch and listen and what you will be observing. In research, a short observation that lets you collect a few important ideas is better than observing for a long time when nothing is happening that matters for your research.

Remember to tell people about your research and ask them if they are willing to help. People should be able to say “no” if they do not want to be observed.

You can join in with what is going on while you are observing – especially if it helps people to relax and behave normally. But you should not try to change what is happening – for example, to get things to work out in a way that agrees with your ideas.

Think about how to keep a record of what happens during your observation. You can write notes or keep a tally of particular things that happen – perhaps things that you have already decided to look out for. You might want to take photographs or video so you can look at what happened again later. Taking photographs or video means that everyone can check and agree with what is being recorded from the observation.

Give the people you observe a chance to check back over what you think you saw or heard – either at the end of the observation or later, when you have worked out the main messages. People should have a chance to change what you have recorded if they think you have got things wrong.

However you decide to do your observations, it is always good to try out your ways of working before you start watching and listening for real. If you practise, you will get better at observation. You can ask your friends to let you try out your observation technique with them. Then you can change things that do not work so well.