



## Methods in Context

Methods in Context is an area of sociology specifications which is important to understand.

The aim of this part of the specifications is to give you the opportunity to apply your knowledge and understanding of sociological research methods and types of data used within sociology to topics within sociology.

Methods in Context is an application skill which needs practice. You must apply what you know about research methods to specific topics.

This Factsheet will focus on answering Methods in Context questions on the topic of Education.

When answering this question, you need to:

1. Understand the question.
2. Identify and explain strengths and limitations of a given research method.
3. Link the strengths and limitations of research methods to the item e.g. using questionnaires to investigate the subjects chosen by boys and girls in school.
4. Use the information presented in the source material in your answer.

### Understanding the Question

Deconstructing a Methods in Context question is similar to any other question. You need to identify the key elements:

- Command words.
- Research method.
- Topic area being investigated.



**Activity:** The following question contains command words, a research method and topic area:

Applying material (command words) from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate (command word) the strengths and limitations of using unstructured interviews (research method) to investigate streaming (topic being investigated).

**In the following scenario, identify the:**

- Command words.
- Research method.
- Topic being investigated.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using self-completion written questionnaires to investigate unauthorised absences from school.

### Strengths and Limitations of Research Methods

You need to demonstrate good knowledge and understanding of the different research method by showing that you understand the strengths and limitations of each research method.

**Activity:** Complete the table below with the strengths and weaknesses of the different research methods.

Research method	Strengths	Limitations
Questionnaire	Fairly quick to complete. Produce quantitative data.	People may not give truthful responses. They may not produce qualitative data.
Formal interview		
Informal interview		
Participant observation		
Non-participant observation		
Case study		
Laboratory experiment		
Field experiment		
Official statistics		
Historical/ personal documents		

### Link the Strengths and Limitations of Research Methods to the Item

You will be asked to consider the strengths and limitations of a given research method for investigating a particular issue, for instance using questionnaires to study the effects of streaming in schools, or using official statistics to study educational achievement among minority ethnic groups.

**Activity:** Think about the use of questionnaires to study the effects of streaming in schools.

Take the strengths of questionnaires from the previous table.

Produce a table explaining why each of these strengths are strengths for investigating the effects of streaming in schools.

For example:

Strengths	Why are these strengths for investigating the effects of streaming in schools?
Fairly quick to complete	?
Produce quantitative data	?

Positivists prefer to use research methods that produce quantitative data, such as questionnaires. It is useful to make this point when discussing the strengths of questionnaires.

Interpretivists prefer to use research methods that produce qualitative data so they would prefer to use other methods rather than questionnaires. It is useful to make this point when discussing the limitations of questionnaires

Now do the same with the limitations of questionnaires Explain why these are limitations for investigating the effects of streaming in schools.

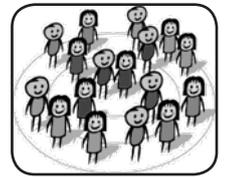
For example:

Limitations	Why are these limitations for investigating the effects of streaming in schools?
People may not give truthful responses	?
They may not produce qualitative data	?

**Exam Hint:** Don't just identify strengths and limitations of the research method – you must say why a strength is a strength for the specific piece of research you are being asked about.

When considering strengths and limitations of these research methods also consider:

1. The characteristics of the research participants (e.g. pupils, parents, teachers – is it a strength or a limitation that a certain group of people have been used in the study?)
2. The setting of the study (e.g. classroom, school – is it a strength or a limitation that the study has been conducted in a specific environment?)
3. Practical factors (e.g. time, cost – do some research methods take more time or cost more than others?)
4. The sensitivity of research (e.g. access to certain groups, ethics – who is being used in the study and what ethical issues are there with using the group?)



**Activity:** Now you have a list of strengths and limitations of using questionnaires to study the effects of streaming in schools, choose one strength and one weakness and write two paragraphs explaining why these are strengths and limitations for this specific study.

### Use the Information Presented in the Source Material in your Answer

The source material will generally give you some information about the strengths and/or weaknesses of the research method so make sure you use the information given.

Some examples of terms you could use could be:

- As stated in Item A...
- One limitation identified in item A is...
- Item A states that a strength of this research method is...

### Writing a Conclusion

If you follow these four steps you will have a structure for answering this type of question. Don't forget that you also need to write a conclusion. A conclusion should summarise what you have written. It should point out that there are strengths and limitations for using the particular research method.

A good way to conclude this type of answer is to explain that all research methods have their strengths but they also have their limitations. To overcome the limitations of the research method used, most sociologists would use more than one research method. The use of a variety of methods is known as methodological pluralism and this is very useful for increasing sociological understanding of social life.

**Possible Topics You Might Be Asked to Consider****Education:**

- Researching how the values, attitudes, and aspirations of parents contribute to the achievement of certain groups of children.
- Why boys are more likely to be excluded from school than girls.
- Why white working class boys underachieve.
- Looking at whether the curriculum is ethnocentric.
- Examining how 'gender identities' enhance or hinder children's ability to learn.
- Assessing the relative importance of material deprivation in explaining underachievement.

**Activity:**

1. Pick one method (e.g. structured interviews).
2. Choose a topic from the list above.
3. Identify one strength and one limitation of using this research method.
4. Write a paragraph to explain why this is a strength and a limitation for this specific piece of research.

**For example:** Structured questionnaires would be a good method to research the values and attitudes of parents and how these affect achievement. This is a strength of structured interviews as they allow you to collect quantitative data from lots of different parents which allows you to compare how long parents spend helping with homework, or whether they want their child to go to university. However, a problem is that if parents aren't that interested in their children's education, they wouldn't bother to fill in a questionnaire and therefore you would not get an accurate view of the different values and attitudes of parents.

Practice writing paragraphs for the other above studies.