

Evaluating different research methodologies

One key consideration is the selection of an appropriate research methodology for the subject domain of the learner's research report and the implications of this for the requirements of the Cambridge Research Report. Largely, the identification and discussion of methodology is a matter for the learner and their specialist supervisor. Indeed, this is a key reason why specialist supervision is so important, as it is only in this way that supervisors can provide informed guidance within specific subject domains. For example, appropriate research methods and methodologies in literary or historical studies will differ from those in the social sciences, and those in the physical or life sciences, or mathematics, will be different again. The generic approaches to research in this broad subject domain must be the initial point for departure.

Once this has been established, however, much productive work can be done in deciding on approaches to methodology within disciplines, and navigating academic debates around this. Most learners at this level will not have done this before and indeed the extent to which they do this at all will be dependent on the level of sophistication reached by their project. For example, in literary studies, does the nature of the debate demand a focus on the close reading of texts and a methodology of linguistic analysis, or is an exploration of contextual evidence more appropriate, drawing on methodologies closer to the evaluation of historical evidence? The sciences offer a number of different methodologies depending on the type of data to be gathered and its intended usage. It is impossible to prejudge these issues in advance, but a key differentiator for the project will be the extent to which the learner is capable of considering them, and the willingness of the supervisor to encourage them in doing so.

The selection of methodology must, however, still bear in mind the necessary requirements of the structure of the Cambridge Research Report, as set out by the mark scheme and discussed in the previous section.

That is, the methodology selected must be describable and justifiable against other alternatives, it must be capable of giving rise to a conclusion and be definable in an introduction, and it must lead to alternative perspectives which can be compared with one another. This final consideration might generate some difficulties for some types of project within the sciences. What follows is some guidance intended to assist supervisors and learners who are engaged in scientific and mathematical research to avoid difficulties.