

# Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the function of documents as a data source in qualitative research and discusses document analysis procedure in the context of actual research experiences. Targeted to research novices, the article takes a nuts-and-bolts approach to document analysis. It describes the nature and forms of documents, outlines the advantages and limitations of document analysis, and offers specific examples of the use of documents in the research process. The application of document analysis to a grounded theory study is illustrated.

**Keywords:** Content analysis, documents, grounded theory, thematic analysis, triangulation.

Organisational and institutional documents have been a staple in qualitative research for many years. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of research reports and journal articles that mention document analysis as part of the methodology. What has been rather glaring is the absence of sufficient detail in most reports found in the reviewed literature, regarding the procedure followed and the outcomes of the analyses of documents. Moreover, there is some indication that document analysis has not always been used effectively in the research process, even by experienced researchers.

This article examines the place and function of documents in qualitative research. Written mainly for research novices, the article describes the nature and forms of documents, outlines the strengths and weaknesses of document analysis, and offers specific examples of the use of documents in the research process. Suggestions for doing document analysis are included. The fundamental purpose of this article is to increase knowledge and understanding of document analysis as a qualitative research method with a view to promoting its effective use.

## DEFINING DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; see also Rapley, 2007). Documents contain text (words) and images that have been recorded without a researcher's intervention. For the purposes of this discussion, other mute or trace evidence, such as cultural artifacts, is not included. Atkinson and Coffey (1997) refer to documents as 'social facts', which are produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways (p. 47).

Documents that may be used for systematic evaluation as part of a study take a variety of forms. They include advertisements; agendas, attendance registers, and minutes of meetings; manuals; background papers; books and brochures; diaries and journals; event programs (i.e., printed outlines); letters and memoranda; maps and charts; newspapers (clippings/art-

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**Albert A Gayle**



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