

UNIT 3: RHETORICAL MOVES IN THE METHODS SECTION

Humanities Corpus — Methods Sections (321,285 words)

OVERVIEW

The Methods section describes what was done and why. It is the most procedural section of the paper, dominated by past tense and passive voice constructions. Our corpus reveals five characteristic moves.

The humanities Methods section follows a consistent move structure: **analytical procedures** dominate heavily (93.3/10k), and the corpus reveals a wide range of disciplinary-specific vocabulary reflecting the diversity of humanities methodologies — from archaeological excavation to linguistic analysis to qualitative interviewing. The Methods section accounts for 16.1% of the typical humanities paper — roughly 970 words in a 6,000-word paper.

BEFORE YOU WRITE: CONCEPTUALISING YOUR METHODS

The Methods section may seem straightforward: you simply describe what you did. But a well-written Methods section is not a chronological description of your research process. It is a carefully structured argument that shows why your approach was appropriate. Before consulting the move descriptions below, work through these steps.

STEP 1: NAME YOUR DESIGN

Write one sentence that captures your overall approach: What kind of study is this? (e.g., a case study using process-tracing, a corpus-based analysis, a geo-archaeological survey, a mixed-methods investigation, an experimental study) Why is this design appropriate for your research question?

If you cannot name your design, you may not yet have one. This is a signal to

return to your research question.

STEP 2: DESCRIBE YOUR DATA

Answer in plain language: What data did you collect, or what existing data/materials did you use? Who or what did you study? How many participants, cases, sites, specimens, or observations? How were participants recruited, sites selected, or materials obtained, and why that way? What ethical approvals or consent procedures were followed?

STEP 3: DESCRIBE YOUR INSTRUMENTS

If applicable: What tools did you use to collect or process data? (interview protocols, laboratory equipment, questionnaires, software, imaging systems, databases) Why these tools? Were they validated, adapted, or newly developed?

STEP 4: MAP YOUR ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

Write a step-by-step list of what you did with the data, in order. For each step, ask: Why did I do it this way rather than another way? These reasons will become the justification language that runs through your Methods section.

STEP 5: CHECK COMPLETENESS

Could another researcher replicate your study from what you have written? If not, what is missing? The replication test is the standard your Methods section will be judged against.

MOVE 1: STUDY DESIGN AND CONTEXT (18.0/10K)

This move establishes the overall research design and frames the methodological approach.

Key finding: Move 1 density (18.0/10k) is substantial. If you are writing in the humanities, expect to spend real effort framing and contextualising your design choices. Methodological approaches vary widely across the humanities, so readers need more explicit identification of what you did and why. The marker *in order to*

(5.7/10k) is prominent, connecting each design element to its research purpose.

| Usage | Count | Per 10k | Function |
|---|-------|---------|----------------------------------|
| we + design verb (used, conducted, employed...) | 274 | 8.5 | Announcing the method |
| in order to | 182 | 5.7 | Connecting design to purpose |
| the aim/purpose of this study | 69 | 2.1 | Restating the aim |
| a [qualitative/quantitative/mixed] study | 25 | 0.8 | Naming the design type |
| was designed/conducted/undertaken to | 23 | 0.7 | Passive design announcement |
| this study/paper + verb | 6 | 0.2 | Third-person design announcement |

CORPUS EXAMPLES:

“We used a replicative case study methodology involving process-tracing to investigate social and political processes, with the aim of uncovering causal mechanisms that affect policy outcomes.”

“We employed several strategies recommended by case study methodology experts to limit the risk of bias that accompanies research relying heavily on interviews with involved actors.”

“Prior to dissolution they were leached for a few minutes in HNO₃ at room temperature in order to remove possible surface contamination.”

Writer’s note: Move 1 answers the question “*What kind of study is this?*” The first sentence of a Methods section typically names the design type or the main method. Note how *in order to* (5.7/10k) connects design to purpose — Methods sections do not just describe what was done; they explain why.

MOVE 2: DATA AND PARTICIPANTS (DESCRIBING THE SAMPLE) (19.5/10K)

This move specifies who or what was studied, how the sample was

obtained, and the ethical framework.

| Usage | Count | Per 10k | Function |
|--------------------------------------|-------|---------|-------------------------------|
| ethical approval/clearance/committee | 192 | 6.0 | Reporting ethical oversight |
| N = / n = | 162 | 5.0 | Specifying sample size |
| participants were recruited/selected | 83 | 2.6 | Describing recruitment |
| data was/were collected/gathered | 64 | 2.0 | Announcing data collection |
| a total of [N] | 57 | 1.8 | Quantifying the sample |
| informed consent | 56 | 1.7 | Reporting consent procedures |
| the sample consisted/comprised | 14 | 0.4 | Describing sample composition |

Key finding: Ethical reporting (*ethical approval + informed consent* at a combined 7.7/10k) is notably **higher**. This reflects the prominence of human-subjects research in the humanities corpus. If your research involves human participants, include ethical clearance details as standard practice. Sample specification using $N =$ (5.0/10k) is also prominent, appearing roughly once every 200 words.

CORPUS EXAMPLES:

“Ethical approval was sought and approved by the appropriate committee within the university.”

“Participants were recruited through general medical practitioners (GPs) (95% of probands) and via word-of-mouth or direct publicity.”

“Data were collected in transmission mode applying 30 readings, over a wave length range of 4000--370 cm^{-1} ; with a precision of 4 cm^{-1} at 1 cm^{-1} intervals.”

Humanities-specific data vocabulary: The humanities corpus reveals a broad range of data types. In addition to participants and surveys, writers describe *materials, specimens, samples, artefacts,*

remains, assemblages, datasets, corpora, archives, and collections. Terms related to *sites*, *fieldwork*, *excavation* and *surveys* appear frequently (1,154 instances), reflecting the importance of archaeological and geographical fieldwork. *Radiocarbon dating* and related chronological methods appear 291 times, highlighting the role of absolute dating in some types of humanities research.

MOVE 3: INSTRUMENTS AND MEASURES (4.6/10K)

This move describes the tools used to collect or process data: questionnaires, scales, laboratory instruments, imaging systems, or software.

| Usage | Count | Per 10k | Function |
|---|-------|---------|--------------------------------|
| reliability/Cronbach's alpha/internal consistency | 72 | 2.2 | Reporting measurement quality |
| was measured/assessed using/by/with | 53 | 1.6 | Linking variable to instrument |
| scale/questionnaire/instrument [was used] | 12 | 0.4 | Naming the measurement tool |
| Likert [scale] | 10 | 0.3 | Specific instrument type |

Key finding: Move 3 density (4.6/10k) reflects diverse vocabulary. In the humanities, your instruments may include not only psychometric scales but also laboratory equipment (spectrometers, microscopes, GPS receivers), software platforms (123 named software instances: SPSS, NVivo, Stata, ArcGIS, MATLAB, ImageJ), and interview protocols. *Semi-structured interviews* (74 instances, 2.3/10k) and *focus groups* (129 instances, 4.0/10k) are prominent data collection instruments.

CORPUS EXAMPLES:

“Aircraft attitude was measured by a Honeywell CUS6 IMU at a rate of 200 kHz and positional data was logged at 2 Hz using a survey-grade L1/L2 GNSS receiver.”

“Significance was assessed by permutation analysis of above-chance clustering between experiments.”

Writer’s note: The key construction is *was measured/assessed using/by/with* --- it names the variable being measured and the tool used to measure it. For quantitative work, reliability reporting (*Cronbach’s alpha* at 2.2/10k) signals methodological rigour.

MOVE 4: ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES (THE PROCEDURAL BACKBONE) (93.3/10k)

This move describes how data were processed and analysed. It is the longest and most detailed move, and the density is striking.

| Usage | Count | Per 10k | Function |
|---|-------|---------|---------------------------------|
| was/were + past participle (passive procedural) | 1,365 | 42.5 | Procedural backbone |
| following/prior to/after/then/subsequently | 1,115 | 34.7 | Temporal sequencing |
| coding/coded | 240 | 7.5 | Qualitative data processing |
| we performed/ran/conducted [analysis] | 107 | 3.3 | Active procedural statement |
| thematic/content/discourse/statistical analysis | 100 | 3.1 | Naming the analytical approach |
| was/were analysed using | 38 | 1.2 | Linking data to analytical tool |
| regression/model [was/were used] | 31 | 1.0 | Statistical modelling |

Key finding: The passive past participle (*was/were* + *past participle*) at **42.5/10k** is the grammatical backbone of the Methods section, appearing roughly **once every 24 words**. Temporal sequencing markers (*following, prior to, after, then, subsequently*) at 34.7/10k create the chronological structure of the procedural narrative.

The combined Move 4 density of **93.3/10k** means that rough-

ly one in every 11 words participates in a procedural statement. This reflects the more detailed, step-by-step nature of humanities methodology, where laboratory procedures, field methods, and data processing chains must be described with precision.

CORPUS EXAMPLES:

“Data were coded and analyzed into a thematic database guided by our analytical framework; this was done by hand in the maternal case and using NVIVO9 qualitative data analysis software in the neonatal case.”

“The SRM NBS-981 Pb standard was run at regular intervals, and all samples were analysed in duplicate.”

“The social enterprises were identified using a combination of a dataset provided by a Glasgow-based enterprise support agency and then by drawing upon contacts and personal knowledge of the sector.”

“IRSL and OSL net signal intensities, depletion indices and their IRSL:OSL ratios were calculated as per Kinnaird et al.”

Writer’s note: Each step is a completed action: *data were collected* > *interviews were transcribed* > *transcripts were coded* > *themes were identified* > *results were analysed*. The passive voice is not merely stylistic; it reflects the procedural logic of the section. A notable humanities-specific feature is the use of *following [Author]* (247 instances, 7.7/10k) and *based on* (300 instances, 9.3/10k) to anchor analytical procedures to established methodological authorities.

MOVE 5: JUSTIFICATION (THREADED THROUGHOUT) (24.7/10k)

Unlike the other moves, justification does not occupy a distinct position. It is threaded throughout the Methods section, appearing wherever the writer anticipates a reader asking “Why?”

Key finding: Justification language (*because, since, due to, in order to, to ensure, according to, based on*) appears at a combined density of roughly **37.4/10k** --- a high density. This means your Methods section should justify choices almost as often as it describes procedures. Ground your choices in prior authority (*according to* 3.3/10k; *based on* 9.3/10k) and by stating practical purposes (*to ensure/avoid* 6.5/10k).

| Usage | Count | Per 10k | Function |
|--|-------|---------|---------------------------------|
| because/since [+ reason] | 372 | 11.6 | Stating reasons directly |
| to ensure/avoid/minimise/control for | 209 | 6.5 | Purpose-driven justification |
| due to | 172 | 5.4 | Causal explanation |
| in line with / consistent with / as recommended by | 40 | 1.2 | Appeal to authority/precedent |
| according to | 107 | 3.3 | Citing methodological authority |
| based on | 300 | 9.3 | Grounding in prior work |

CORPUS EXAMPLES:

“Although often present in large quantities at site, shellfish and crustacea have not been included because they are frequently not quantified within zoo-archaeological assemblages.”

“We used hillshade models with different illumination and azimuths because some landforms are less visible at certain illumination angles.”

“Different individuals were targeted by sampling the same skeletal elements from the same side of the body wherever possible to avoid repeat sampling of the same individual.”

Writer’s note: Every methodological decision — sample size, instrument choice, analytical technique — is accompanied by a reason. The high frequency of *based on* (9.3/10k) and *according to* (3.3/10k) reflects a humanities tradition of anchoring methodological choices in established scholarly or methodological precedent.

THE METHODS SECTION TEMPLATE

Design (Move 1, ~18.0/10k): Name the study type and state its purpose

Data/Participants (Move 2, ~19.5/10k): Describe the sample, recruitment, materials, and ethics

Instruments (Move 3, ~4.6/10k): Describe measurement tools, equipment, and software

Procedures (Move 4, ~93.3/10k): Detail the analytical steps in past passive sequences

Justification (Move 5, ~37.4/10k): Thread reasons throughout: because, in order to, due to, based on, according to