Tips for Conducting Primary Research

Primary research is that which you go out and conduct yourself. There are several types of primary research, and what follows gives you some general tips for getting the most out of each.

Observations: Observations help you to understand people, events, and different environments. It is important to take effective notes when observing, so you can use the information later.

- Pay attention to the details of the situation, but remember that you will not be able to catch and write down everything happening around you. Focus on the big stuff.
- Plan a way to document the observation in advance (record it, take notes, etc.)
- Think about the pros and cons of your observational approach: will you actively participate, interact occasionally with the participants, or sit quietly? Each approach will affect your observational experience in different ways.
- Acknowledge your own biases and take steps to ensure that bias is not reflected in your research.

Surveys: Surveys provide a number of questions to obtain information from a large group of people.

- Plan the survey in advance:
  - How long will your survey be? (Remember that very long surveys can be rather tedious)
  - How many people will take your survey?
  - What questions will you ask?
  - How will you survey people? Will you survey face-to-face, on paper, via email?
- Keep the survey short and focused
- Keep the questions clear and straightforward (it’s a good idea to have several people proofread them in advance and note which questions, if any, seem confusing)

Interviews: Interviews are one-on-one/small group conversations in a question/answer format. Interviews provide expertise or opinions about a given subject.

- Plan the format of the interview in advance (Will you interview face-to-face, via email/online?)
- Come to the interview prepared. Take time to do research about the person beforehand if possible.
- Take time to build a rapport before you begin questioning. Do not push for answers.
- Listen carefully, and ask follow-up questions whenever possible.
- You do not have to stick exactly to your questions, but do not let the interviewee stray from topics too much.

Keep in mind:

- Do not overgeneralize your findings/results. You should never assume what you found is only what exists or always exists.
- Do not create biased survey or interview questions. You will receive biased answers.
- Consider other related factors and how they might affect your survey results. Even if you do not present them in your research, you should still acknowledge them.
- Validate your data carefully. Be especially cautious with survey results. Some people do not take them seriously, and they can then throw off your research. Examine your data and decide if it can be used.