

Introduction to Research Methods in Accounting

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Designed as a quick-reference guide for students and practitioners.

1. Why Research Matters in Accounting

Purpose	What It Achieves
Decision-making	Provides evidence for policy, standards, and managerial choices.
Standard-setting	Supplies data to support new accounting standards (e.g., IFRS, GAAP).
Performance evaluation	Helps assess profitability, risk, and compliance.
Innovation	Identifies emerging issues (e.g., blockchain, sustainability reporting).
Academic contribution	Advances theory and builds a body of knowledge.

2. Core Research Paradigms

Paradigm	Ontology (Nature of Reality)	Epistemology (How We Know)	Typical Methods
Positivist	Objective, measurable reality.	Knowledge through observation & testing of hypotheses.	Experiments, surveys, archival data analysis.
Interpretivist	Reality is socially constructed.	Understanding emerges from participants' perspectives.	Interviews, case studies, focus groups.
Critical	Reality shaped by power and ideology.	Knowledge reveals inequities and aims to change them.	Discourse analysis, ethnography, action research.
Pragmatic	Multiple realities; choose methods that solve the problem.	Knowledge is practical and context-driven.	Mixed-methods designs (quant + qual).

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3. Research Design Options

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Design	Key Features	When to Use
Exploratory	Open-ended, low-structure; often qualitative.	Little prior knowledge; generating hypotheses.
Descriptive	Systematic description of phenomena; often cross-sectional.	Mapping current practices, frequencies, or trends.
Explanatory (Causal)	Tests relationships; may involve experiments or longitudinal data.	Seeking to explain “why” or “how” something occurs.
Comparative	Examines differences across groups, firms, or jurisdictions.	Studying the impact of regulatory regimes, cultures, etc.
Case Study	In-depth investigation of a single entity or event.	Complex, context-rich issues (e.g., fraud investigations).
Action Research	Researchers collaborate with practitioners to solve a problem.	Real-time improvement projects within an organization.

4. Data Sources in Accounting Research

Source	Description	Strengths	Limitations
Financial statements	Balance sheets, income statements, cash-flow statements.	Publicly available, standardized.	May hide off-balance-sheet items.
Audit reports	Auditor opinions, management letters.	Direct insight into audit quality.	Limited access for non-public firms.
Regulatory filings (e.g., SEC Form 10-K, 20-F)	Detailed disclosures, MD&A.	Rich qualitative and quantitative data.	Time-consuming to extract.
Surveys & questionnaires	Structured instruments for practitioners, managers, regulators.	Tailored data, large samples possible.	Response bias, low rates.
Interviews & focus groups	Semi-structured or open-ended discussions.	Deep insight, context.	Small samples, subjectivity.

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Source	Description	Strengths	Limitations
Experimental data	Lab or field experiments (e.g., decision-making tasks).	Causal inference, control.	External validity concerns.
Big data & digital traces	Transaction logs,		