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# Philosophy of Research

You probably think of research as something very abstract and complicated. It can be, but you'll see (I hope) that if you understand the different parts or phases of a research project and how these fit together, it's not nearly as complicated as it may seem at first glance. A research project has a well-known structure -- a beginning, middle and end. We introduce the basic *phases* of a research project in [The Structure of Research](#). In that section, we also introduce some important distinctions in research: the different *types of questions* you can ask in a research project; and, the major *components* or parts of a research project.

Before the modern idea of research emerged, we had a term for what philosophers used to call research -- logical reasoning. So, it should come as no surprise that some of the basic distinctions in logic have carried over into contemporary research. In [Systems of Logic](#) we discuss how two major logical systems, the inductive and deductive methods of reasoning, are related to modern research.

OK, you knew that no introduction would be complete without considering something having to do with assumptions and philosophy. (I thought I very cleverly snuck in the stuff about logic in the last paragraph). All research is based on assumptions about how the world is perceived and how we can best come to understand it. Of course, nobody really *knows* how we can best understand the world, and philosophers have been arguing about that very question for at least two millennia now, so all we're going to do is look at how most contemporary social scientists approach the question of how we know about the world around us. We consider two major philosophical schools of thought -- [Positivism and Post-Positivism](#) -- that are especially important perspectives for contemporary social research (OK, I'm only considering positivism and post-positivism here because these are the major schools of thought. Forgive me for not considering the hotly debated alternatives like relativism, subjectivism, hermeneutics, deconstructivism, constructivism, feminism, etc. If you really want to cover that stuff, start your own Web site and send me your URL to stick in here).

Quality is one of the most important issues in research. We introduce the idea of [validity](#) to refer to the quality of various conclusions you might reach based on a research project. Here's where I've got to give you the pitch about validity. When I mention validity, most students roll their eyes, curl up into a fetal position or go to sleep. They think validity is just something abstract and philosophical (and I guess it is at some level). But I think if you can understand validity -- the principles that we use to judge the quality of research -- you'll be able to do much more than just complete a research project. You'll be able to be a virtuoso at research, because you'll have an understanding of *why* we need to do certain things in order to assure quality. You won't just be plugging in standard procedures you learned in school -- sampling

method X, measurement tool Y -- you'll be able to help create the next generation of research technology. Enough for now -- more on this later.

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