



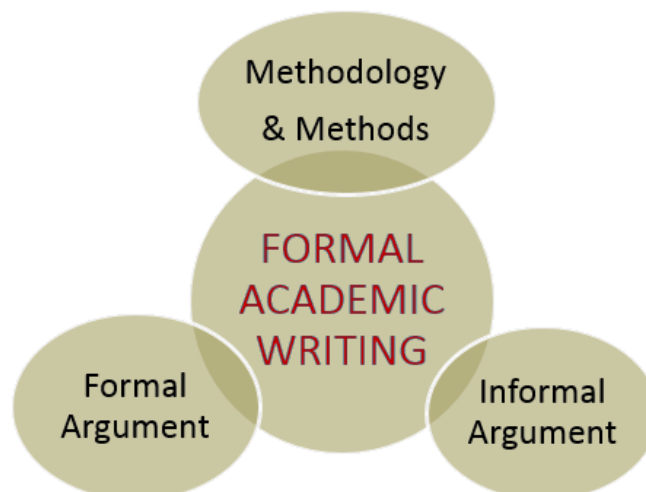
## 5.2 Critique of Three Aspects of Formal Academic Writing

Because critique is a form of evaluation, the question naturally arises:

when we critique a piece of formal academic writing, what are we actually evaluating?

A piece of formal academic writing has many aspects. Three of these aspects which are often subject to critique are:

- **Methodology & Methods**
- **Formal argument**
- **Informal argument**



**Figure: Aspects of formal academic writing**

The above diagram indicates that as well as looking at aspects of **formal** and **informal argument**, the evaluation of a piece of academic writing also needs to consider the **methodology** and **methods** used by the researcher.

Of course, all of these aspects are interrelated and overlapping. Therefore, although it is useful, in the preliminary stages of critique, to carefully evaluate each dimension in isolation,

**the effectiveness of a piece of academic writing will mainly be determined by the extent to which these aspects work in a coherent way to present a convincing case (i.e. a valid overall argument) to the reader.**



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### Critique of Methodology and Methods

#### (i) Critique of Methodology

A methodology is a particular way of approaching a research topic.

Each methodology will apply particular principles and conceptual frameworks, and privilege some theories and concepts to the exclusion of others. A methodology will always contain certain conceptual, ideological and philosophical assumptions – some of which may not be clearly stated.

Performing a critique of a methodology will require a comprehensive knowledge of the range of alternative methodologies available for researching a particular topic. For example, a researcher working in an area in the health sciences may favour a more ‘psychological’ approach which examines ‘individual’ cognitive and behavioural responses to treatment. Another scholar may be more interested in the ‘sociological’ dimensions of treatment, which are related to socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and gender.

**It is important to remember that no methodology can be entirely value-free.**

The choice of methodology will therefore influence the ways in which data is collected, analysed and interpreted. This, in turn, will influence the kinds of argumentation used, as well as the conclusions which will be supported by that argumentation.

So far, it has been suggested that the comprehensive critique of academic writing should consider important and interrelated aspects: methodology and methods, formal argument and informal argument.

Having considered the aspects of methodology and conceptual framework(s), in the remainder of this section we will consider the critique of formal argument.

#### (ii) Critique of Methods

**A method is the set of specific techniques and tools which are used to gather and analyse data in response to a research question or problem.**

Such methods may include:

- **Observation, recording and analysis of the results of a laboratory experiment**
- **Gathering information through interviews, surveys or focus groups**
- **Reading, summarising and comparing academic articles on a given topic**

One of the most common ways of grouping a methodology is to decide whether it belongs, primarily, to one of two main categories known as ‘**quantitative**’ and ‘**qualitative**’ methodology. These can be defined in the following ways:



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### Quantitative methodology

relies on the measuring of variables in large-scale samples, testing hypotheses, and quantifying and analysing results using statistical tools. Quantitative methodology often represents data numerically, and is frequently used in scientific enquiry.

### Qualitative methodology

relies on the evaluation of variables in smaller-scale samples using questions which may depend on individual, 'subjective' and affective responses, representing results in words and sentences. This methodology is often used in the human sciences, and sometimes combined with aspects of quantitative methodology.



#### Important note

It is important to note that some scholars see the 'quantitative'/'qualitative' division as a distinction which is not useful. This is because some forms of research use both methods in order to produce meaningful results, and the use of one method does not necessarily exclude use of the other.

The validity of the broad 'quantitative'/'qualitative' distinction is likely to remain a contested area of academic debate. For students, however, it may still be useful to describe processes of research as 'quantitative' or 'qualitative', because these terms broadly indicate the particular methodologies and methods which have been chosen for a specific research project.

In summary, the critique of a methodology can be characterized in the following way:

**A method is the set of specific techniques and tools which are used to gather and analyse data in response to a research question or problem.**

You can learn more about the methodologies used in your own area of study by reading widely over a range of sources, and comparing the methods by which data is collected, analysed and interpreted.

So far, it has been suggested that the comprehensive critique of academic writing should examine three interrelated aspects: methodology and methods, formal argument and informal argument.

Having considered the aspects of methodology and methods, in the remainder of this section and the following section, we will consider the critique of formal and informal argument.