

Methods of studying writing

Input-output methods

Studying the effect of input variables on the writing product (usually: the finished text)

Inferring properties of the process

Process-tracing methods

Behavior protocols

Recording only what the subject does, not her mental processes

Example: computer logging; video recording

Concurrent verbal reports (thinking aloud)

Subjects are asked to verbalize their thoughts while performing a task

Retrospective reports

Subjects are asked to explain how they performed a task after its completion

Stimulated recall: present the writer with parts of his texts or process in order to get explanations

Question-answering methods

Interviews and questionnaires (isolated from writing sessions)

Measures the writer's habits and attitudes

(Rule: ask about habits first!)

Problem: many questions about writing cannot easily be answered by the writer

Thinking aloud protocols

The method is controversial, but has yielded interesting results

- Advantages:

- Provides direct evidence about mental processes

- Yields rich data

- Can detect processes which are not available by other methods

- Disadvantages:

- Records are incomplete

- Individual differences in ability to verbalize

Does thinking aloud give a true picture of a writer's mental processes?

- “Yes - but the process is somewhat delayed”

- “No, the process is changed”

1. Verbal task to which the writer is consciously attending

2. Non-verbal task to which the writer is consciously attending

3. Task which does not involve the writer's attention

Using think-aloud protocols as data

Data collection

How to get the subject to think aloud

Instruction and practical exercise

Reminder necessary

After how many seconds?

(Why does the writer stop talking?)

Audio or video recording?

Transcription

How detailed?

Segmentation

Dividing the transcribed record into “thought units”

Where to stop? How long are the thought units?

Coding

Classifying statements in the protocol according to which mental process the subject is engaged in

depends on:

general writing model assumed

particular question to be answered

Establishing intercoder reliability

Retrospective protocols

Advantages

Does not disturb the writer during writing

Can reveal the writer's motives and decisions when solving problems in the text (Greene & Higgins)

Can give detailed information about how writers have performed a task

Disadvantages

Writers often forget low-level goals after achieving them

They may fill in with general knowledge when they do not recollect their experience

They may answer questions in a way which pleases the experimenter

Keystroke recording

Advantages:

Reliable

Non-intrusive

Disadvantages:

No direct information about mental processes

A lot of data generated

Difficult to segment and interpret protocols

Video recording

Advantages: see keystroke recording

Also: capturing external events, movements and gestures

However: difficult to segment, describe and interpret the records

Combinations of methods are often the optimal solution

Example:

Logging + retrospective interviews (Exercise 3)

Think-aloud protocols + logging or video recording
(Levy & Ransdall)

Texts + interviews (if writers are distant or cannot be
observed directly)

How to study writing depends on the question!

Examples:

What are the differences between writing on paper and writing with a word processor?

Which writing tools are used by academic writers, and how?

How do writers experience writing tool A compared to B?

Can writing tool C contribute to writer's learning about writing?

What are academic writers' attitudes towards using computers?

How does the way of using computers for writing change over time?