

The Data Collecting Instruments

If you decide that existing data do not meet your requirements, it is a good idea to look for existing instruments that might be appropriate for your purposes before considering creating your own data gathering tool. Are there other studies similar to yours that use the same data collection procedures?

If you find another instrument, you will need to seek out the person's permission who originally created the instrument. In some cases, the instrument you find may be available commercially, like many standardized tests. If you use commercial instruments, then you will need to factor in the costs of purchasing copies of the instrument or seeking qualitative instruments.

Don't assume that an instrument automatically will yield high quality data just because it has been used by someone else or is available commercially.

Take the time to think about whether the data that are generated from the instrument will meet your direct needs in a meaningful manner. If you have concerns about its validity or reliability, consult with someone, such as an experienced school principal or university professor, who may be able to review the instrument for you.

When designing the data collecting instruments:

- keep your overall research questions in mind as you search for instruments
- if working with a group, have a brainstorming session to generate ideas about different ways to gather your data
- keep your questions simple
- set priorities for the data you wish to gather
- make a distinction between "need to know" and "nice to know" data
- field test any instrument you develop and make modifications based on the experience
- visualize how you might analyze the data before finalizing any decisions about the specific tools you will use (e.g., make sure you can do it yourself)
- ask a colleague to review the content and procedures you plan to use for potential sources of bias and confusion
- use multiple sources of data when it is appropriate and feasible.