

WHO, WHAT and HOW?

One of the more difficult aspects of the methods in context questions is that students need to be able to explain a strength or limitation of a specific method in the context of education. Often students will explore practical, ethical and theoretical strengths and limitations of the given method without mentioning the topic being investigated or those being researched. This limits a student's response to the middle bands. To get into the higher bands, students need to write about at least 2 of the following three considerations:

WHO is the sociologist researching? E.g. parents, pupils, teachers

WHAT is the sociologist researching? E.g. material deprivation, setting and streaming

HOW is the sociologist conducting the research? E.g. the method used

In approaching a methods in context response, students should look to include at least two of these three considerations to get into the higher bands, and at least three to get into the top band. While this is not possible with every point made, each point made is usually annotated based upon whether the student has included elements of WHO, WHAT and HOW in their answer. In the table below, there is a summary of how points are awarded based upon how a student has responded.

Band	Description	Example
3	Student has mentioned only one of the following: a strength or limitation of method (HOW), a characteristic of those being researched (WHO) or a characteristic of the topic being researched (WHAT)	<i>A strength of using written questionnaires is that if there is no researcher present, respondents may be more inclined to answer honestly as they are not subject to social desirability bias</i>
4	Student has mentioned two of the following: a strength or limitation of method (HOW), a characteristic of those being researched (WHO) or a characteristic of the topic being researched (WHAT)	<i>One consideration for researchers when examining cultural capital is how to define a concept such as cultural capital. This is particularly important when both preparing the questionnaire and in the analysis of results, as if this is not clear, it could impact on the validity of the research. (HOW and WHAT)</i>
5	Student has mentioned all three of the following: a strength or limitation of method (HOW), a characteristic of those being researched (WHO) and a characteristic of the topic being researched (WHAT)	<i>One limitation of using written questionnaires to investigate cultural capital is that some parents may choose not to respond. Those with higher cultural capital would be more inclined to spend time on completing the questionnaire as they are aware of the impacts of engaging with their child's education, whilst parents with lower cultural capital may be put off by the questionnaire or embarrassed over their perceived lack of cultural capital. This could produce a biased sample in favour of those who are confident that they possess cultural capital. (WHO, WHAT and HOW)</i>

Students should therefore look to consider not only the method – but to also revise the characteristics of different individuals that have been studied on the course and some of the issues around researching different topic areas.

QUESTION 1

WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRES AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Item A

One explanation that has been offered for the underachievement of different social groups is the level of cultural capital that they possess. Sociologists have examined differences in skills, language, attitudes, and tastes between pupils of different social backgrounds and found differences in educational achievement based upon their knowledge of what is seen as 'good knowledge'. Research suggests that this is passed down from parents to their children. However, what constitutes 'good knowledge' is a matter of debate for sociologists.

One way in which sociologists have conducted research into this area is through written questionnaires. These can be administered quickly and across a broad range of parents and pupils. However, they do have a lower response rate than some other methods.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using written questionnaires to investigate pupils' levels of cultural capital. (20 marks)

When tackling a question like this, the first step should always be to think of the **who**, **what** and **how**. In the boxes below, identify **who** we could be conducting the research on, **what** topic is being researched, and **how** the research will be conducted.

Who?	What?	How?

It is important to consider each of these aspects of the question both separately and in combination when you are writing your answer.

Mining the item

The next stage to consider is the information that has been presented to you in the item. Unlike the apply and analyse-questions there is no specific requirement to use the item, however the item contains many hints, and the top-level students will be able to exploit these and expand upon them. In the item below, highlight some of the hints (or 'hooks') that you may be able to use in your answer.

Item A

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One way in which sociologists have conducted research into this area is through written questionnaires. These can be **administered quickly and across a broad range of parents and pupils**. However, they do have a **lower response rate** than some other methods.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using written questionnaires to investigate pupils' levels of cultural capital. (20 marks)

Mark Band	Answer	Comments
Band 3	<p>Written questionnaires are a list of standardised questions that can be distributed to a range of different individuals. Depending upon the types of question asked, this method is often used by positivists (closed questions) and interpretivists (open questions). If closed questions are used, written questionnaires produce quantitative data which is seen as being more objective and hence preferred by positivists who look to approach the study of society in a scientific way. If open questions are used, then this method would suit interpretivists more as it would produce qualitative data.</p>	<p>Student has demonstrated a decent knowledge of the method and how it might be used. Band 3 because no mention of WHO or WHAT is being investigated</p>
Band 5	<p>A limitation of using written questionnaires to investigate pupils' levels of cultural capital is operationalising what sociologists mean by cultural capital. Cultural capital is usually drawn from people's tastes and attitudes, and this is difficult to measure in a questionnaire, particularly if the pupils that are completing the questionnaire are unaware of some of the concepts that researchers are looking to measure – such as the individual's habitus. However, this could be achieved through using open questions, such as asking students how they spend their free time and measuring their cultural attitudes in this way.</p>	<p>Student has clearly identified a limitation – operationalising cultural capital – which deals with the HOW and WHAT. WHO is developed through pupils being unaware of concepts</p>
Band 4	<p>As stated in item A, a limitation of written questionnaires is that they have a low 'response rate'. This could be an issue with investigating pupils' cultural capital as pupils from some social backgrounds may be less interested in participating. Working-class pupils, particularly those in anti-school subcultures, are less likely to return the questionnaire as they have less interest in education than middle-class pupils for example. This could lead to a sample bias, with middle-class pupils being over-represented in the findings of the questionnaire. However, this could be addressed through incentivising the return of questionnaires with a reward, such as entry into a prize draw.</p>	<p>Student has addressed an issue from the Item – response rate – clear limitation of HOW research is conducted. There is also a focus on WHO is being researched, with discussion of different pupils.</p>

Mark Band	Answer	Comments
Band 5	<p>A further limitation of using written questionnaires is their use with parents. When investigating the issue of cultural capital, parents of different social classes may have different levels of understanding about the aims of the questionnaire and respond accordingly. Middle-class parents are more likely to understand the importance of cultural capital, as they use this to gain advantages for their children, and therefore are more likely to respond in full to the questionnaire. Working-class parents, on the other hand, may be less likely to understand the importance, or if they do, become frustrated at the lack of opportunities they can present their children with. This may result in them not completing or returning the questionnaire, as they may feel judged for their lifestyle choices. However, a strength of using written questionnaires in this instance is the ability for them to be completed anonymously, which could provide working-class parents an opportunity to complete without feeling judged for their attitudes and tastes.</p>	<p>Two band 5 points. The first focusing on a specific limitation of parents (WHO) completing a written questionnaire (HOW) on their lifestyle choice (WHAT). The second, a strength of the method (HOW) in enabling working-class parents (WHO) to talk about their lifestyles (WHAT)</p>
Band 4	<p>A final consideration when conducting written questionnaires is the language used. As the topic of the questionnaire is cultural capital, in writing the questionnaire the language used needs to be accessible to both working-class and middle-class parents and pupils. As there is usually no researcher present with written questionnaires, potential misunderstandings can be a limitation, particularly given the differences in language skills between those of a middle-class and working-class background. Middle-class pupils and parents may be more likely to understand both the elaborated and restricted code, whereas working-class parents and pupils may not. It could present issues with the validity of responses if people do not understand the questions.</p>	<p>While cultural capital is stated in this response, it is not developed. If you substitute cultural capital with any other topic area in education, the response still makes sense. Therefore, only the WHO and the HOW are developed.</p>
Band 3	<p>In conclusion, written questionnaires have several limitations that could be addressed through adapting the method. This could be addressed using a pilot study beforehand. Furthermore, the effectiveness of written questionnaires will largely depend upon the types of questions used and the purpose of the research. While closed questions may present more reliable data, it can be argued that the findings of this research should be followed up with another method, such as unstructured interviews to address the validity of the findings.</p>	<p>Conclusion is focused more on the method than those being studied or the topic area. The introduction of an alternative method only scores Band 1, but this does show some ability for students to address issues.</p>

Overall, the essay above does show some good application of knowledge and understanding and analyses and evaluates the issues presented. With three band 5 points in the essay and a range of band 3 and 4 points, this would score in the top band of 16-20.