Interpretive Research:

Methods & Questions for Humanities

**Metro State Writing Center** | Fall 2025

# What is Interpretive Research?

Also called analysis, exegesis, or close reading, this involves interpreting some kind of data in order to explain or illuminate it in terms of its place in culture or human understanding. This data is usually called a “text” or an “object” and may be books, movies, games, social media, archival artifacts, or anything set apart for interpretation. Interpretation involves the application or creation of theoretical frameworks, also called analytical frames.These are concepts or ways of understanding objects that are specific to a field of study and are used to draw conclusions from objects.

In short, interpretive research in the humanities applies an **analytical frame** to an **object of analysis** through field-specific **research methods**.

Some examples of interpretive research methods and the fields that use them:

* Rhetorical Criticism and Analysis | Rhetoric
* Conceptual Engineering, Conceptual Analysis and Exegesis | Philosophy, Theology
* Historiography | History
* Literary Analysis and Criticism | English
* Genealogy | Philosophy, Rhetoric, History
* Case Studies | All Fields

Many include primary research through methods like:

* Surveys
* Interviews
* Archival work
* Grounded theory
* Qualitative/quantitative coding
* Ethnography
* Logical argument

## Interpretive Research Questions

Research Questions may be about **collecting primary research objects** or **close analysis of secondary sources**. In both cases, questions involve applying analytical frames to the objects themselves and/or to the context they exist in to find evidence and draw conclusions.

# What are the Types of Research Questions?

Whether you are writing your own or responding to assignment prompts, determining if a question is internal, external, or both can be a great way to determine what kind of evidence you need to respond and where you should look for it.

**Internal** questions only consider the text or the object the of analysis. **External** questions are about the wider context the object exists in, such as when, where, why or how it was made, how audiences responded to it, or it’s place within a broader genre. Note that some questions might be a bit of both.

### **How Questions**

Use these to ask about the format or the function of specific elements in your object of analysis. For example:How does the author bell hooks apply rhetoric in *Will to Change* to establish common ground in her audience?

* **How Internal:** characters, point of view, dialogue, objects of praise/critique, argument structure, language style, evidence cited, defined terms
* **How External:** author’s biography, their place in the field or discourse community, historical time period, intended audience

### **Why Questions**

Use these to ask about the meaning or purpose of your object of analysis. For example: Why does bell hooks employ obvious rhetorical strategies in *Will to Change* to establish common ground with her audience?

* **Why Internal:** aesthetic, tone, themes, imagery, stated purpose, implied purpose
* **Why External:** authors biography, their place in field, who the author is responding to, intended audience, reception of the work, historical time period

### **So what? Questions**

Use these to ask about the relationships between claims and evidence or the reasons a reader should believe and care about those observations. For example: What can be learned from bell hooks use of rhetoric in *Will to Change* to establish common ground between different communities, and what evidence should I look for to analyze this?

* **So-what Internal:** stated applications, plot, narrative, themes, argument conclusions
* **So-what External:** contemporary events, applied research of topic, author interviews, intended audience, reception of object, historical time period, responses to object from other authors