

METHODS IN CONTEXT



SUPPORT BOOKLET

Introduction

The methods in context question appears on Paper 1 of the exam, it is worth 20 marks and you should spend around 30 minutes on it.

In this question you are expected to demonstrate your awareness of the issues surrounding researching different areas of education and evaluate the usefulness of different research methods in researching this area.

The key questions to think about are:

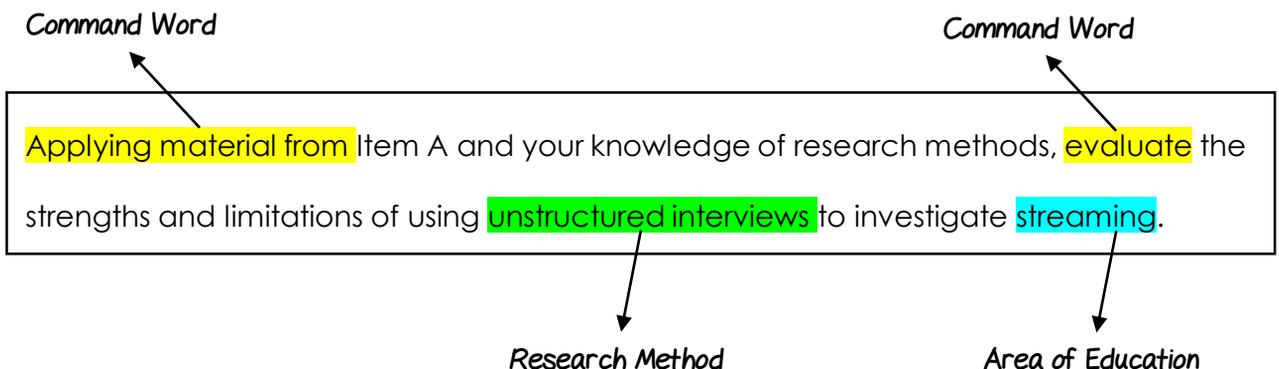
- What are the considerations I would need to think about if I were to conduct a study into this area of education?
- Why is this a consideration that needs to be considered?
- How would this research method help me to overcome these issues?
- How would this research method hinder my investigation?

Therefore the focus in this question is the research considerations **NOT** the research method. This is a common mistake that is made and will limit the answer to band 3 or about 10 marks.

Understanding the Question

Deconstructing a methods in context question is similar to any other question; you need to identify the key elements:

- Command Words
- Area of education
- Research Method



Deconstruct each of the questions below identifying the 3 key components of the question.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using self-completion written questionnaires to investigate unauthorised absences from school.

Applying material from Item C and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using structured interviews for investigating the study of teacher attitudes and ethnic minority achievement.

Applying material from Item D4 and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using self completion written structured questionnaires for investigating girls attitudes to science in school.

Applying material from Item D5 and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using structured interviews to investigate the role of parents in pupils achievement.

Strengths and Limitations of Research Methods

In order to be able to assess if the research method will help or hinder a study you need to be able to identify the general strengths and limitations of all types of research methods. You need to be able to identify the Practical, Ethical and Theoretical strengths and weaknesses.

For each of the research methods below identify the strengths and limitations and colour code them by practical, ethical and theoretical.

	Strengths		Limitations	
	Practical	Ethical		Theoretical
Postal Questionnaire				
Web-Based Questionnaire				
Closed Questionnaires				
Open Questionnaires				

	Strengths		Limitations	
	Practical	Ethical		Theoretical
Structured interviews				
Unstructured Interviews				
Group Interviews				
Covert Participant Observation				
Overt Participant Observation				

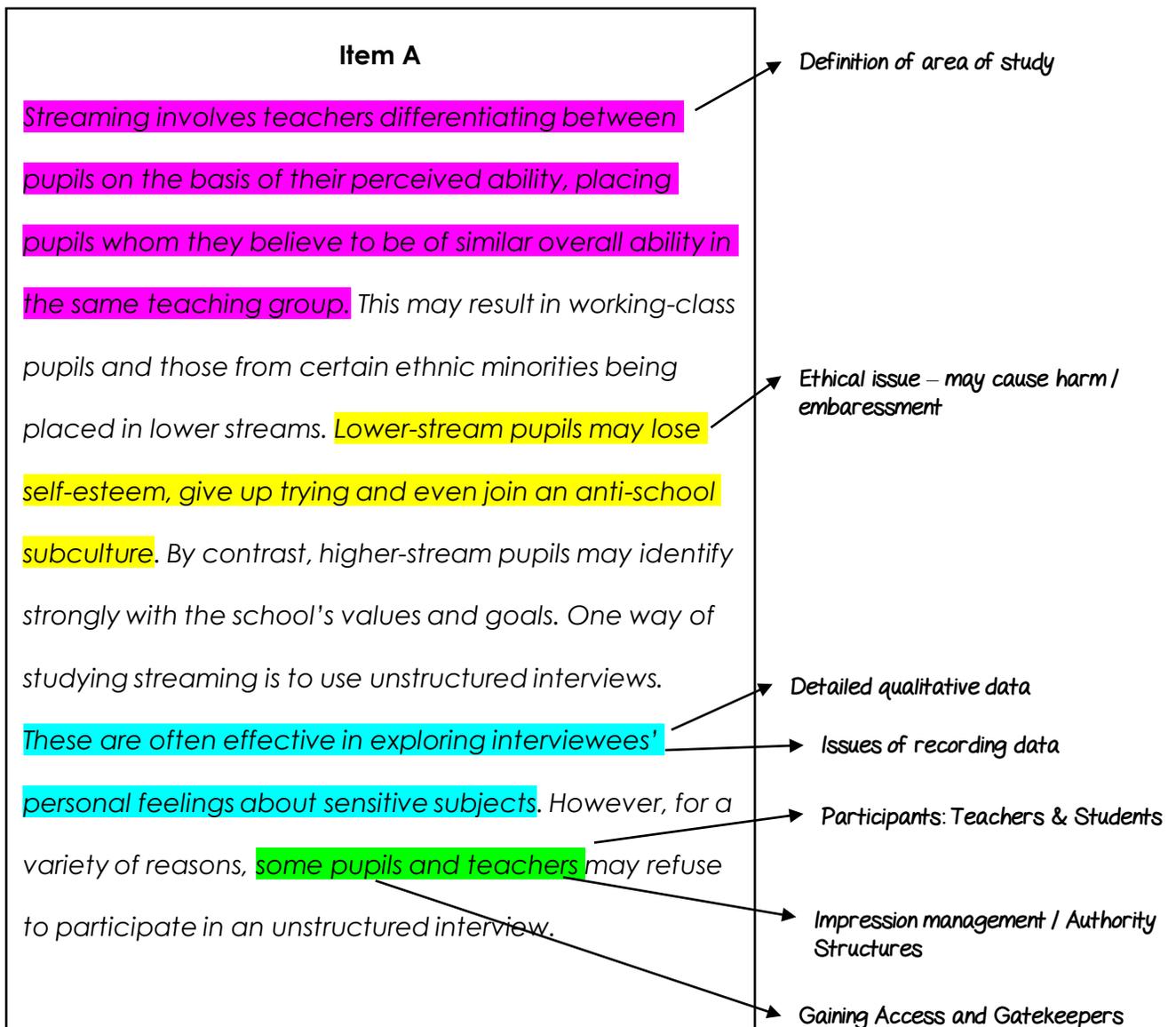
	Strengths		Limitations	
	Practical	Ethical		Theoretical
Overt Non-Participant Observation				
Covert Non-Participant Observation				
Official Statistics				
Documents				

Using the Item

It is important to remember that the question does ask you to apply information from the item that you have been given. The item will give you hints and guidance on the sort of points you could make in your answer, however it will not TELL you the answer you have to come to that conclusion on your own.

In order to use the item effectively you need to be able to analyse and annotate the item in order to identify pertinent information.

Example: Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using unstructured interviews to investigate streaming.



Highlight and annotate the items below to show useful information.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using self-completion written questionnaires to investigate unauthorised absences from school.

Item B

There is a close correlation between frequent unauthorised absence from school and educational underachievement. Those pupils who are not doing well at school are more likely to truant. Similarly, those who truant regularly are likely to finish their school career with poor qualifications. Pupils may be absent without authorisation for many reasons, from caring responsibilities at home or dislike of school, to parents arranging family holidays in term time.

Sociologists may use self-completion written questionnaires to study unauthorised absences. These can be distributed easily to large numbers of pupils, parents or teachers. The findings of the questionnaires can also be used to establish patterns and trends in relation to unauthorised absences. However, self-completion questionnaires often have very low response rates, especially when they ask about sensitive issues.

Applying material from Item D and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using self completion questionnaires to investigate the impact of pupil subcultures on educational achievement.

Item D

Some pupils in school belong to subcultures, meaning that they share a similar set of values and behaviour patterns. Through processes in schools such as labelling and streaming, pupils may be polarised into either pro- or anti- school subcultures. Sociologists have examined how these processes are often based on class, gender and ethnicity. For example, anti School subcultures, where pupils in bottom sets may lack self-esteem and self-respect, are often dominated by working class, male students from certain ethnic minority groups. One way to investigate pupil subcultures is to use self completion written questionnaires. These can allow respondents to answer anonymously on the reasons why pupils join subcultures. Students and teachers are used to filling in questionnaires in school and pupils can give them to their parents to complete at home. However, respondents may find questionnaires difficult to fill in on their own, particularly if the subject is a complex issue.

Identifying the considerations

When researching education there are a number of considerations that need to be looked at when designing a study. Not just education as whole but also the specific areas of education.

These considerations are split into three areas:

- **The research characteristics of potential research subjects.**
 - Pupils
 - Parents
 - Teachers

- **The research contexts and settings.**
 - The Classroom
 - Schools
 - Staffrooms
 - Settings outside of school

- **The sensitivity of researching that particular area of education:** These will be specific to the area of education and can include:
 - **Access**-Are there any particular opportunities or difficulties with gaining and maintaining access to this group or setting?
 - **Gatekeepers** -Who, if anyone, controls access to this group or setting? in what ways and with what effect will this have on your research?
 - **Personal Characteristics** -Will the social and personal characteristics of the researcher cause any problems with the research?
 - **Peer Group Pressure** -How will peer groups impact the validity of your research?
 - **Ethics:**
 - Informed Consent -Remember that under 16's cannot give consent.
 - Confidentiality
 - Avoiding Harm
 - Privacy
 - **Time** -What is the time-scale of the group or setting? How might this affect the research?
 - **Vulnerability**-In what ways might your participants be vulnerable? Don't just think about pupils but also teachers and school staff.
 - **Authority Structures**-How will the authority structures of a school impact the research?
 - **Impression Management** -Front Stage Behaviour or Back Stage Behaviour.
 - **Detachment and Objectivity** -Is the nature of the group going to draw in or repulse the researcher?
 - **Language** -is communication going to be easy or difficult?
 - **Recording Data** -Any particular opportunities or difficulties?
 - **Complexity of the group or setting** -Is the research going to be straight forward? Public v Private settings

Example: Investigating Parental Attitudes to Education

The issue of parental attitudes to education and its impact on achievement is an area of research that is important to sociologists. There are important research characteristics that may make it easier or harder to investigate this area. Some of these include:

Participants: Parents

- **Personal Characteristics**
 - Parents may have had a poor experience with education or the school and associate the researcher with the school and refuse to take part.
- **Sensitivity**
 - Parents may see questions about parenting and parental support as 'getting at them' or attempting to portray them as bad parents and refuse to take part.
- **Access**
 - Parents may not be easily contacted so the researcher may have to rely on the school for co-operation.
- **Language**
 - Some parents may have literacy or language difficulties (i.e. English as a second language) or may find it difficult to articulate their feelings.

Can you think of any other research characteristics that might need to be considered with this research topic?

Which research characteristics would you need to consider when looking at material deprivation and underachievement in education?

Who are you possible participants?

Research Characteristic	Relevant	Why?
Access		
Gate Keepers		
Personal Characteristics		
Sensitivity of the topic		
Language		
Time		
Vulnerability		
Impression Management		
Objectivity		
Authority Structures		
Ethics		
Peer group pressure		

Which research characteristics would you need to consider when looking at the extent of parental choice in education?

Who are you possible participants?

Research Characteristic	Relevant	Why?
Access		
Gate Keepers		
Personal Characteristics		
Sensitivity of the topic		
Language		
Time		
Vulnerability		
Impression Management		
Objectivity		
Authority Structures		
Ethics		
Peer group pressure		

Application of the Research Methods

Once you have identified the research characteristics of the research area you need to apply the strengths and limitations of the research method in order to determine if this method is appropriate to use for this area of research.

Example: Investigating Parental Attitudes to Education using Questionnaires

	Why is it a consideration	Questionnaires: Help or Hinder?	Why?
Personal Characteristics	Parents may have had a poor experience with education or the school and associate the researcher with the school and refuse to take part.	Help	The researcher is not present when the questionnaire is completed so the parents may not make the association .
Sensitivity	Parents may see questions about parenting and parental support as 'getting at them' or attempting to portray them as bad parents and refuse to take part.	Hinder	As the researcher is not present they are not able to build a rapport with the parents. This may lead to the parents over exaggerating their involvement in order to appear better parents – Social desirability, which leads to a lack of validity.
Access	Parents may not be easily contacted so the researcher may have to rely on the school for co-operation.	Help	Questionnaires can be sent via post and not all the participants need to come from the same school, The addresses there for can be obtained via the census. Additionally the questionnaires can be sent to a large sample making it more representative.
Language	Some parents may have literacy or language difficulties (i.e. English as a second language) or may find it difficult to articulate their feelings.	Hinder	Without the researcher being present the questions may be misunderstood or misinterpreted if the parents has a low literacy level or English is not their first language.
Ethics: Confidentiality	This topic can be quite a personal one and participants will not want information about their parenting to be made public for fear or shaming or social services involvement.	Help	Postal questionnaires with a self addressed envelope to return them means that confidentiality is maintained as no names need to be put on the questionnaire itself and the responses are not linked to an email or student.

Answer to the Question:

Questionnaires are a good way to research parental attitudes to education.

Are group interviews a good way to investigate material deprivation and underachievement in education?

	Why is it a consideration	Questionnaires: Help or Hinder?	Why?

Answer to the Question:

Are official statistics a good way to investigate the extent to parental choice in education?

	Why is it a consideration	Questionnaires: Help or Hinder?	Why?

Answer to the Question:

Structuring Your Answer

The methods in context question is an essay questions so does need to be approach as one. This means that there needs to be an introduction and conclusion as well as a clear answer running through the response.

This structure strip outlines exactly what is expected from a methods in context question.

Methods in Context	
Introduction	
<input type="checkbox"/> Context Summarise the issue indicated in the question and define the method.	When looking at X in education, researchers are trying to find out about..... X as a research method means.....
<input type="checkbox"/> Content What are the research characteristics you are going to discuss?	There are many research characteristics that a researcher need to consider when looking at x, these include.....
<input type="checkbox"/> Answer Is this research method appropriate to study this area of education?	X method is there for useful / not useful when studying this area of education because.....
Main Body x3	
<input type="checkbox"/> Point State one research characteristic linked to this area of education.	One research characteristic that a research need to consider when looking at X is.....
<input type="checkbox"/> Explain Why is this a research characteristic for this area of education?	This needs to be considered because.....
<input type="checkbox"/> Apply Does the research method help or hinder dealing with this characteristic?	X method would be helpful / not helpful when considering X because
<input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation/ Link Is the research method appropriate for studying this area of education.	Therefore X method is not useful / not useful when researching X because.... OR Despite this X method is not useful / is useful when researching X because
Conclusion	
<input type="checkbox"/> Answer Reiterate if you think the method is appropriate or not	In conclusion X method is / is not useful when researching X
<input type="checkbox"/> Evidence Summarise your reasons you have come to your answer.	This is because.....
<input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation Briefly explain the counter argument.	However the most important reason is....

Example: Investigating Parental Attitudes to Education using Questionnaires

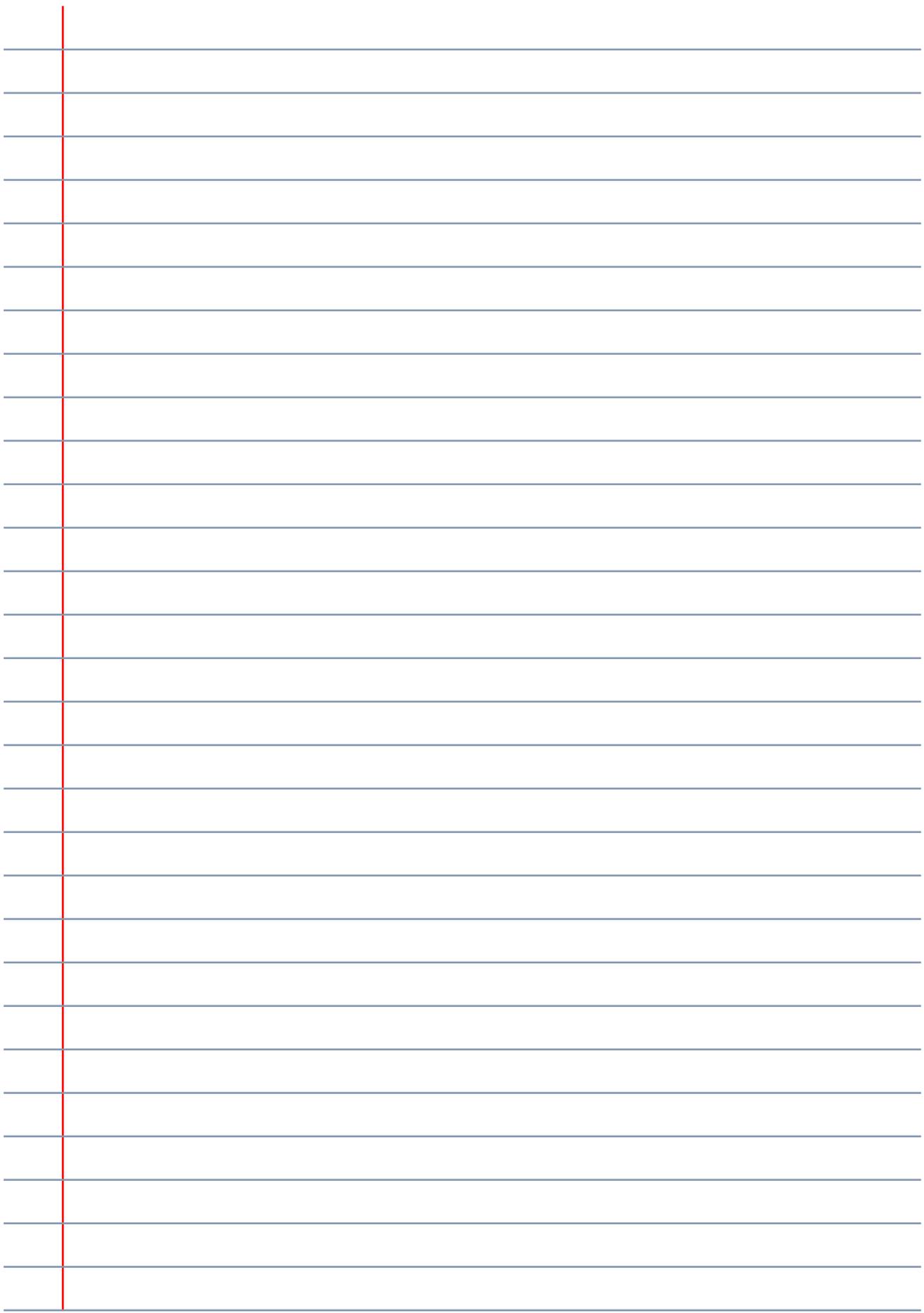
Introduction and first paragraph

When investigating parental attitudes to education, a researcher is trying to find out the impact that parental attitudes have on achievement. It is often believed that Working class parents place lower priority on education and this is then passed on to their children and leads to underachievement of working class students. Questionnaires come in many formats including having open or closed questions; and they can be distributed to large samples either by post or by email. Using questionnaires to research parental attitudes to education can be problematic due to the researcher not being present in case the parent doesn't understand the question and because parents may refuse to take part. However, the use of questionnaires is ultimately a benefit to the researcher as questionnaires can be sent to a large sample area and will ensure confidentiality which will lead to more honest and accurate responses.

One research characteristic that the researcher needs to consider when looking at parental attitudes to education is the impact that the personal characteristics of the researcher may have on the parents. This can be an issue as some parents may not have had a positive experience at school themselves or with the school their child attends, and they may see the researcher as an extension of the school thus refuse to take part in the study. Additionally, the researchers social class may intimidate parents who may then feel that they are being judged as a parent causing the parents to change their answers due to social desirability. Questionnaires could help to overcome these issues as the researcher is not present when they are completed and because parents are used to receiving paperwork from schools they are more likely to complete them. This therefore shows the usefulness of questionnaires in studying parental attitudes to education.

Using the plan on page 8 and the structure strip you have been given write the rest of the answer for this question.
3 paragraphs and a conclusion

The page contains a vertical red line on the left side, serving as a margin. To the right of this line, there are 25 horizontal blue lines spaced evenly down the page, providing a guide for writing the answer.



Bring it all together

Write a complete answer for each of the two questions that you have planned in this workbook.

Item A

Material deprivation is a widespread problem throughout the United Kingdom today. Some pupils experience material deprivation in the home background and this can have a negative effect on their educational achievement. For example, a lack of income with which to buy educational resources, or having to live in cramped conditions, can affect academic performance. Some parents may feel that they have failed if they cannot provide adequate income for their family. Sociologists may use group interviews to investigate material deprivation in pupil's home backgrounds. To use group interviews, sociologists need to identify and gain access to parents, but accessing a suitable database of contacts may prove difficult. Parents may also be unwilling to discuss such a sensitive issue as material deprivation. On the other hand, the in depth qualitative will provide the research with a more valid picture of the impact of material deprivation on educational achievement.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using group interviews to investigate the impact of material deprivation on educational achievement.

Item B

Supporters of marketization policies claim that an education market his parents greater choice over which school their children can attend. Sociologists are interested in investigating just how much parental choice they're actually is in the Education market. Some parents are much more aware than others of how to work the system comma even to the extent of manipulating the rules in their favour. Sociologists may use official statistics to investigate the extent of parental choice in education. Official statistics can show the impact of marketisation policies on parental choice. However some sociologists argue that official statistics are less useful for understanding the extent to which parents feel like they have a choice.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using official statistics to investigate the extent to parental choice in education.