

## "No Data" to Manage? Think Again! Cheat Sheet for Humanities & Theoretical Disciplines

by Özgün Ünver, Ph.D., Data Steward: Social Sciences & Humanities, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

The poster ["No Data" to Manage? Think Again!](#) focusing on the types of data in humanities and theoretical disciplines was created to address a common misconception among some researchers in Humanities and theoretical disciplines who believe their work lacks underlying data.

Many researchers in humanities and theoretical disciplines struggle with Research Data Management (RDM), often thinking they have no data because their work primarily involve books, literature, or purely theoretical processes. This poster assists these researchers by providing a clearer understanding of how RDM applies to their work, even if it does not involve 'traditional' data.

The idea was born during a meeting with the Open Science representatives of large research groups at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). During one such meeting, while discussing the topic of data publishing, a researcher stated, "we recently did a meta-analysis, so we don't really have data". Another added, "I'm in performance studies; I have no data underlying my publications".

According to us, Data Stewards at VUB, research data includes all digital or physical data, regardless of how they are collected or stored, that are used or analysed to support research findings and validate results or are underlying a reasoning, discussion, or calculation in the research. However, the researchers in Humanities and many theoretical disciplines had not understood that the data they used were 'data'.

Since the release of this poster, we received lots of positive feedback about the way we approached the issue. Our researchers at VUB, as well as research support staff from other universities reached out to us to let us know that the information was very much needed and appreciated.

### Gathering Insight

Once we decided to create a more visual resource, the next step was to understand what researchers in humanities and theoretical disciplines consider when they think of data. We decided to ask some researchers to help us comprehend their fields of study better and sent an invitation to the abovementioned Open Science representative for a quick chat.

We were fortunate to have five professors reach out, agreeing to a 30-minute interview each. These researchers represented the fields of literary studies,

social sciences, educational sciences, theoretical mathematics, and theoretical computer science. During our interviews, we asked some or all of the following questions to understand their research and the type of data they use:

- Can you tell me a bit about your research and the type of data you use?
- Would you say that you use “no data” for your research? Why or why not?
- What are the challenges for you when it comes to Research Data Management?
- Do you experience any challenges regarding funder requirements (e.g., DMP)?
- Do you experience any challenges regarding journal requirements (e.g., data sharing or data availability statements)?
- What are other researchers in your field doing to overcome these challenges?
- What type of guidance would you prefer as an outcome of this project? (e.g., brochure, infographic, online course, seminar, workshop)

## Creating the Poster: Content

With a deeper understanding of what such researchers needed, we opted for a poster – which could be printed – instead of another lengthy document that might be overlooked. The last thing we wanted was our work to end up in the yet-another-never-to-be-read-document pile. Furthermore, in my work as a Data Steward, I have found that Humanities researchers are often a hard-to-reach group when it comes to RDM advice. A poster hanging on the office kitchen wall would be a more fun and straightforward way to reach these researchers. Now, the challenge was to create a poster that was engaging yet informative, concise yet comprehensive, and ‘lightweight’ yet insightful.

After some initial research on search engines and consultations with ChatGPT 4o, eleven unofficial and non-exhaustive categories of research methods were identified. They are as follows:

- (Systematic) Literature Review
- Web-based Review
- Literary Analysis
- Audiovisual Media Review
- Visual Analysis & Art Review
- Interviews / Focus Groups
- Archival Research
- (Participant / Natural) Observation
- Ethnography / (Ethno)Archaeology
- Meta-analysis
- Theoretical / Computational / Simulation Research

These eleven categories are partly my constructs, as some of them are not listed anywhere (in their entirety) as research methods. My conclusions of adding these as research methods and assigning data types to them were more of an 'educated intuition' based on my personal academic background as well as the testimonials of the researchers interviewed. Whenever we had doubts about what a certain research method entailed or the difference between two ways of naming something, we bounced ideas off of ChatGPT. Here are some of the questions asked to ChatGPT:

- What is the difference between historical research and archival research?
- Is fieldwork a research method?
- What are the similarities and differences between Theoretical, Computational, and Simulation research?
- I'm conducting simulation research. What would be the data I (re)use and what would be the data I generate? Give me examples.

When creating these eleven categories, the aim was not to develop an exhaustive list of research methods but to come up with a list of "headings" among which researchers would recognize themselves and their work and be interested in reading the next columns: examples of (re)used and generated data. Once the list was finalised, we then noted down some examples of data associated with these methods, thus creating the key content of the poster.

## Creating the Poster: Design

The next step was designing a neat and easy-to-read poster. We decided to use Microsoft PowerPoint for this. Taking inspiration from the designs, fonts, and colours used for VUB branding, we created our own design.

To complete the poster, a definition of data as we use it at VUB, a brief description of RDM, and the importance of RDM for researchers were included. We also added some critical RDM strategies: data safety, file naming and folder structure, proper data storage, and documentation and metadata. Furthermore, we suggested the use of simple RDM tools such as word processors, spreadsheets, reference managers, and electronic lab notebooks. The poster concludes with a QR code linking to the Vrije Universiteit Brussel's Research Data Management & Open Science Community on Zenodo, so that researchers can find an immediate link to further relevant information.

## How to Use the Poster

We recommend using the poster as a working guide, especially if one is not sure what their data might be. The examples provided expand *data* beyond 'traditional' datasets to the broader evidence that support your claims, such as

notes, code, equations, annotations, curated corpora, transcripts, and so on. One can adopt a five-step process to get the most out of the poster:

1. *Orient*: Read the top row entirely to familiarise yourself with the scope: what counts as data, what RDM means, and why is RDM important.
2. *Identify*: Find the method(s) relevant to your project (e.g., literature or web review, literary/audiovisual/visual analysis, interviews, archival work, observation, meta-analysis, etc.). Subsequently, identify the types of data that you reuse and/or generate amongst the examples provided.
3. *Contribute*: Try to come up with other types of data that you are using related to the method(s). Remember that the examples provided are non-exhaustive and active thinking and contribution is needed to get the most out of the exercise.
4. *Classify*: Separate *reused* data from *generated* data. Reused data are usually preserved elsewhere, while generated data are the ones you must steward.
5. *Decide*: Take a look at the “Top 4 Critical RDM Strategies to Consider” section at the bottom. For every type of data you use, decide how to keep the data safe, where to store the data, what kind of documentation and/or metadata you would need to produce, and how to name files and structure folders for ease of access.
6. *Apply*: Take a look at the “Simple Tools to Support Your RDM” section and start with the building blocks for good RDM: writing up a Data Management Plan (DMP), documentation using word processors, spreadsheets, Electronic Lab Notebooks, and bibliographic/reference management tools.

Different groups can use the same process. Lecturers can make a 30-minute class exercise: pick a method, list reused and generated data, draft a short DMP. Supervisors and PhD researchers can revisit the process at the time proposal submission, mid-project, and project submission stages. Ethics/legal teams can use the examples to flag personal-data, copyright, and database-rights issues early (web/social media, audiovisual, and interviews are frequent hotspots).

For the **poster**, click here: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15495601>

For *all resources* produced at VUB on *RDM and Open Science*, click here: [https://zenodo.org/communities/rdm\\_os\\_vub/](https://zenodo.org/communities/rdm_os_vub/)