**Research Paradigms**

Student Workshop Worksheet

Chapter 2 — Author: Dr Pauline Prevett, University of Manchester

From: Research Literacy & Design Interactive Web App (2026)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name:** |  |
| **Date:** |  |

## Quick Reference: The Six Paradigms

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 🔬  **Positivism**  Objective truth | 🎭  **Interpretivism**  Subjective meaning | 🔨  **Constructivism**  Socially built | 🗿  **Critical Realism**  Hidden mechanisms | ⚡  **Critical Theory**  Power & change | 🔧  **Pragmatism**  What works |

# Activity 1: Initial Self-Assessment

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **⏱ When: 15-25 min** | **📖 Chapter: Section 2.1** | **🎯 Slides: 5** |

Complete BEFORE the paradigm deep-dive. This captures your starting position so you can track how your thinking develops. There are no right answers.

**1. When it comes to research, I believe that truth is...**

1. Something 'out there' to be discovered objectively
2. Dependent on who is doing the looking and from what perspective
3. Created through social interaction and shared language
4. Real but only partially accessible — there's always more beneath the surface
5. Shaped by power structures in society
6. Whatever helps solve the practical problem at hand

**2. The purpose of research should be to...**

1. Discover laws and predict outcomes
2. Understand how people make sense of their experiences
3. Reveal how knowledge is constructed and by whom
4. Identify the underlying causes of what we observe
5. Challenge inequalities and promote social change
6. Find practical solutions to real-world problems

**My current leaning (circle one):** Positivism / Interpretivism / Constructivism / Critical Realism / Critical Theory / Pragmatism / Unsure

**What draws you to this position?**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

# Activity 2: Paradigm Characteristic Matching

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **⏱ When: 40-50 min** | **📖 Chapter: Section 2.2** | **🎯 Slides: 6-12** |

Complete AFTER the paradigm deep-dive (slides 6-11). Match each characteristic to the correct paradigm. Some characteristics may fit multiple paradigms — discuss with your partner why.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Characteristic** | **Paradigm** |
| Seeks to discover universal laws and causal relationships |  |
| Emphasises Verstehen (understanding) of subjective experience |  |
| Views reality as socially constructed through language and interaction |  |
| Believes in stratified reality: empirical, actual, and real domains |  |
| Research should be explicitly transformative and challenge oppression |  |
| Truth is whatever works in practice to solve the problem |  |
| Uses hypothesis testing and statistical analysis |  |
| Focuses on co-creation of knowledge between researcher and participants |  |
| Identifies underlying mechanisms that cause observed events |  |
| Quality criteria include catalytic validity and transformative potential |  |
| Associated with Frankfurt School, Freire, and bell hooks |  |
| Research can use any methods appropriate to the research question |  |

# Activity 3: Research Scenario Analysis (Group Work)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **⏱ When: 75-95 min** | **📖 Chapter: Section 2.4** | **🎯 Slides: 14, 17** |

Complete AFTER the break (Segment 3). Use the Selection Guide (slide 14) to help. In your group, analyse the scenario assigned to you. Identify the most appropriate paradigm and justify your choice. Then consider: what would change if you approached it from a different paradigm?

**Scenario assigned to your group:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Step 1: What type of question is being asked?**

* Causal/predictive? ('Does X cause Y?')
* Experiential? ('How do people experience X?')
* Construction? ('How is X understood/constructed?')
* Power? ('Who benefits from X?')
* Applied? ('What works to solve X?')

**Our answer:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Step 2: What assumptions about reality are implied?**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Step 3: What would count as evidence?**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Step 4: Our recommended paradigm and justification:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Step 5: If we used a different paradigm, what would change?**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

## Research Scenarios for Activity 3 (Group Work)

(Facilitator: assign one scenario per group at 75 min)

Each scenario illustrates a different paradigm. See the paradigm slides (6-11) for examples of research aligned with each approach.

**Scenario A:** A researcher wants to investigate whether a new teaching intervention improves student exam performance. They plan to randomly assign classes to intervention and control groups, measure pre- and post-test scores, and use statistical analysis to determine effect size.

**Scenario B:** A researcher wants to understand how doctoral students experience 'imposter syndrome'. They plan to conduct in-depth interviews with 12 PhD students across different disciplines, asking them to describe specific moments when they felt like a fraud and what those experiences meant to them.

**Scenario C:** A researcher is interested in how the concept of 'work-life balance' is constructed differently across cultures. They plan to analyse policy documents, media representations, and workplace discourse in three different countries to examine how the concept is produced and negotiated.

**Scenario D:** A researcher wants to understand why some professional development programmes work in certain contexts but not others. They plan to conduct case studies of successful and unsuccessful implementations, using interviews and observation to identify the underlying conditions and mechanisms that enable or constrain effectiveness.

**Scenario E:** A researcher wants to examine how assessment practices in higher education may disadvantage students from working-class backgrounds. They plan to conduct participatory action research with students, analysing hidden assumptions in assessment criteria and working with participants to develop more equitable alternatives.

**Scenario F:** A researcher needs to evaluate whether a new mental health app reduces anxiety symptoms. They want to use whatever combination of methods will give the most useful information for improving the app, including both user satisfaction data and clinical outcome measures.

# Activity 4: Personal Reflection

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **⏱ When: 110-115 min** | **📖 Chapter: Section 2.5** | **🎯 Slides: 15-16** |

Complete AFTER discussing paradigmatic coherence (slide 15). Thinking about your own research interests, reflect on which paradigm(s) feel most aligned with how you see the world. This is the beginning of your positioning journey.

**My research area/interest:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**The paradigm(s) I'm most drawn to:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Why does this feel like a good fit for me and my research?**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**One question I still have about paradigms:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

# Activity 5: Extension Challenge ★

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **⏱ When: After session** | **📖 Chapter: All of 2.1-2.5** | **🎯 Module: Paradigm Quiz** |

INDEPENDENT WORK — complete before the next session. For students wanting to deepen their understanding. Use the Chapter 2 Interactive Module (Paradigm Quiz) and the full chapter text to support your analysis.

**Task:** Find a published research article in your field. Analyse it for paradigmatic coherence.

**Article citation:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**What paradigm does this article seem to operate within? What evidence do you see?**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Is the article paradigmatically coherent? (Do ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods align?)**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**If you notice any incoherence, describe it and explain why it matters:**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

## Key Takeaways to Remember

1. A paradigm is a coherent framework combining ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods
2. There are six major paradigms: Positivism, Interpretivism, Constructivism, Critical Realism, Critical Theory, and Pragmatism
3. No paradigm is inherently 'better' — each illuminates different aspects of reality
4. Paradigm choice should be guided by your research question, not just personal preference
5. Paradigmatic coherence (internal consistency) is essential for rigorous research

Author: Dr Pauline Prevett • Research Literacy & Design Interactive Web App (2026)

© 2026 Dr Pauline Prevett, University of Manchester