

### ***Book Review***

## **The Illustrated Guide to the Content Analysis Research Project**

Reviewed by  
Laura Willis, Quinnipiac University

**Author:** Patricia Swann

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*The Illustrated Guide to the Content Analysis Research Project* introduces novice communication researchers to the fundamentals of social scientific research, with quantitative content analysis as the primary research method discussed, in a playful, approachable tone. Swann clearly demonstrates the value of research within the communication field and for communication students' career development. The textbook meets undergraduate students where they are, recognizing the apprehension that students bring with them to their first research methods course and providing them with the resources and support necessary to help them develop a research mindset. The book also provides examples from peer-reviewed content analysis studies to demonstrate what type of information belongs in each section of a research paper and how published authors present their research.

### **Structure & Organization**

The guide contains 13 chapters, ranging from getting started to picking your research topic, all the way through writing the different sections of a research paper, ending with a discussion of the various avenues available for students to share their research beyond the classroom.

Swann uses chapters one through five to encourage the reader to begin to appreciate the value in seeing themselves as a researcher, provide them with the foundations of social scientific research methods, and guide them through how to choose a research topic. This first part of the textbook defines key elements (such as conceptualization, operationalization, research questions, hypotheses, variables, reliability, and validity), distinguishes qualitative from quantitative research methods, reviews critical ethical considerations for research, and provides guidance on how to decide what their study should investigate. Wherever appropriate, the specific ways in which these topics directly relate to content analysis are highlighted, such as intercoder reliability, how

qualitative content analysis differs from quantitative content analysis, the ethical questions related to training coders or conducting an analysis of public behavior online, and examples of research topics appropriate for content analysis based on a reader's passions and career goals.

The remaining chapters are devoted to writing and formatting a content analysis research paper and sharing research beyond a course assignment: literature review (chapter six), hypothesis/research question (chapter seven), method (chapter eight), results (chapter nine), discussion and conclusion (chapter 10), the abstract (chapter 11), formatting, references, and appendices (chapter 12), and sharing your research (chapter 13). Chapters six through 11 begin with an explanation of what type of information belongs in each of the specific sections of a research paper. Guidance on developing and organizing this content is provided, as are excerpts from published, academic research articles to provide readers with high-quality examples of how others have presented their own quantitative content analysis projects. The final chapter overviews the different avenues for sharing research, including oral and poster presentations, research conference presentations, and academic and industry publications, concluding with advice for those interested in gaining more research experience and exploring research as a career.

From beginning to end, this book assumes zero-to-limited experience with designing, conducting, or writing about research. Swann (2021) states, "If you have never conducted academic research, this guide is for you," (p. 2). I completely agree; no prior experience with social scientific research methods is necessary, and much of the front half of the guide would likely feel redundant if assigned in addition to another research methods textbook's chapters on comparable topics. Swann's enthusiasm for training the new generation of communication researchers is evident, and the use of colorful illustrations throughout the book help to bring life to material that students tend to report having negative

attitudes towards (Earley, 2014). Due to the guide's focus on one specific research method, this book would be most suitable as a supplemental text for undergraduate, communication research methods courses. For degree programs that feature primary research-driven senior thesis projects, this could be an invaluable resource for a student planning to complete a quantitative content analysis.

### **Contributions to Public Relations Education**

As the first step in the four-stage processes that guide campaign development, research is critical to the success of public relations work. As such, public relations programs are expected to include research as a primary component in their curriculum to apply for Certification in Education for Public Relations, the global standard in public relations education (Public Relations Society of America, 2022). While quantitative content analysis is only one of many research methods to which public relations undergraduate students should be introduced, it is a common research method utilized within both the academic study of public relations and within the industry itself. Swann's text demonstrates the value of quantitative content analysis across communication sub-disciplines, referencing public relations only on occasion. That said, instructors of courses focused on research methods for public relations specifically could provide additional, PR-relevant examples.

### **Strengths & Weaknesses**

#### ***Strength: Tone***

The guide is written clearly, concisely, and with zeal. Swann's positive energy and commitment to preparing the next generation of communication scholars and practitioners is contagious. Her tone is conversational and approachable, encouraging the reader's confidence while developing their own identity as a researcher. The book concludes

with a “Let me hear from you” section, which welcomes new researchers to share their research experiences, as well as faculty to share relevant activities and resources. Additionally, each chapter ends with a brief “Dos and Don’ts section” to summarize the key takeaways succinctly for the reader, as well as class exercises that instructors could adopt or adapt for their classes.

***Strength: Relevance Beyond Content Analysis***

The title of the guide is a bit misleading: much of the textbook’s content is relevant to social scientific research methods broadly, not simply for content analysis work. While the examples throughout the guide are specific to quantitative content analysis, Swann’s plain language-breakdown of the fundamental components and considerations related to writing research papers feature helpful guidance for students embarking on their first research projects regardless of method. In particular, chapters two and six stand out to me. Chapter two defines research vocabulary, clarifies how the scientific method produces trustworthy results, and introduces the main parts of an academic research paper. Chapter six walks the reader through everything they will need to know when writing their first literature review. I deeply appreciate the recommendation of college library resources and staff, as well as all the tips for conducting an effective literature search.

***Strength: Cost***

When selecting required and recommended texts for courses, cost is one of many factors that faculty should consider. Textbook prices have risen by 812% over the past 35+ years, and between 2006 and 2017, textbook costs increased at a rate four times faster than the rate of inflation (Team iCEV, 2017). The guide comes in three format options (hard cover, paperback, and eBook). Two of these three options cost less than \$45, with the eBook as the most affordable at \$38.65.

***Neutral: Illustrations***

In my review of the guide, the illustrations contributed to the approachable, playful tone of the book more often than serving as visualizations of key concepts or providing a visual guide to the steps of conducting a content analysis. Beyond bringing color and energy to the text, the value of any given illustration in helping to visually communicate the material is limited. I was struck by how helpful the illustration presenting the difference between summarizing and synthesizing sources (in chapter 6) was, in part, because of how easily the visual demonstrates an issue that many of my students have struggled to understand over the years, but also because few other illustrations in the book were as effective.

***Weakness: Level of Detail***

Above, I discussed the relevance of this guide beyond content analysis work as a primary strength. The other side of that coin is that as a substantial portion of the guide's content focuses on social scientific research method fundamentals and research paper writing, the level of detail specific to content analysis itself is lacking. Based on the guide's title, I anticipated a step-by-step guide for the work of developing coding categories and codebooks, determining appropriate sampling strategy and sample size, training coders, evaluating intercoder reliability, selecting appropriate statistical tests, and interpreting the results with illustrations that provide visual aids and examples. However, the steps of a quantitative content analysis are presented in less detail than anticipated, nested within chapters focused on the various subsections of research papers. The examples provided are all content analyses, which is unique and very helpful to relating the content of the chapter back to the method of focus; however, the book reads more as a guide to developing a research study and writing the research paper with a focus on content analysis, as opposed to a guide to developing and carrying out a content analysis project.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the guide has an informal, approachable tone that welcomes readers to the world of communication research and encourages them to get comfortable and stay a while. Swann's language and tone are clear and reassuring. While I hesitate to suggest the guide would be appropriate as the only required text, it could easily be used as the primary text for an undergraduate communication research methods course if supplemented by materials that provide greater detail on the other key communication research methods.

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