

THE CONDITIONS RESEARCH CHECK-IN

A conditions-attuned guide for educational inquiry

The Conditions Research Check-In is a simple way to help a researcher pause before explaining, categorising or drawing conclusions from what they see, hear, record or analyse.

It begins with one grounding question:

**What conditions are shaping
what I am encountering here?**

This guide can be used during research design, fieldwork, observation, interviewing, documentary inquiry, analysis, supervision, collaborative interpretation or reflective writing.

It is not a coding framework.

It is not a fixed sequence.

It is not a substitute for disciplinary knowledge, ethics, method or researcher judgement.

It is a way of keeping attention open to the conditions through which a phenomenon becomes visible and through which the research itself becomes possible.

HOW TO USE THE RESEARCH CHECK-IN

The Research Check-In is designed to be used by you. Read it, print it, annotate it, keep it beside fieldnotes, or discuss it with a supervisor or research team. Return to the questions when an interpretation begins to settle too quickly.

Use it simply: start with what is present, widen only where useful, and stop where the evidence stops. You do not need to answer every question or move through the sections in order.

The aim is not to produce a perfect or total explanation. It is to strengthen attention, make interpretation more accountable, and keep uncertainty visible when uncertainty remains.

USING THE RESEARCH CHECK-IN WITH AI

The Research Check-In is designed first for human use. It can be read and applied without AI. AI is an optional support, not a requirement for using The Conditions Lens.

If using AI, provide the current Conditions Lens materials and this Research Check-In before describing the research question, material or situation you want to explore. Ask the AI to support the inquiry rather than decide what the material means for you.

**AI can support the inquiry.
It does not become the researcher.**

AI may help you notice, question, retrieve, compare and reflect. It should keep observation, evidence and interpretation separate, and treat possible explanations as possibilities unless the evidence supports something stronger.

AI can still step outside the Check-In. It may invent conditions, overstate a possibility, infer a relationship that has not been established, or sound more certain than the evidence allows. Treat AI output as material to examine, not as a research finding.

Return AI suggestions to the same questions you would ask yourself: What is actually present? What have I interpreted? What evidence supports this claim? What remains unknown? Do not replace one unsupported explanation with another.

Where web access is available, AI may help locate relevant research, policy, historical or contextual material. Check the sources yourself and keep claims proportionate to the evidence available.

Keep examples anonymous. Do not enter names, identifying details, confidential research material or sensitive participant information into AI systems unless this is permitted by the research protocol and the tool being used.

AI does not replace ethical review, methodological responsibility, supervision, disciplinary expertise or researcher judgement.

The aim is to strengthen the researcher's own conditions-attuned judgement, not create dependence on an interface.

1. WHAT AM I ACTUALLY ENCOUNTERING?

Begin with what is present before deciding what it means.

This might include:

- an observed action or interaction
- an interview account
- a repeated pattern in fieldnotes
- a document or policy text
- an image, object or material arrangement
- a statistical pattern
- a silence, absence or refusal
- a contradiction between accounts
- a change over time
- a researcher response or moment of uncertainty

Try to describe before explaining.

Before moving on, ask:

What did I directly observe, hear, record, read or measure?

What have I already interpreted?

What assumptions have entered my description?

What remains unknown?

What would I need to know, ask, observe or locate before drawing a stronger conclusion?

The visible phenomenon may be important. It should not automatically be treated as self-explanatory.

**What is present in the material —
and what have I added to it?**

2. WHAT CAME BEFORE THIS?

Look backwards.

What histories, prior events, relationships, decisions, routines or accumulated pressures may have helped shape what is now visible?

Consider:

- earlier interactions or experiences
- institutional histories
- policy decisions
- changes in routine or staffing
- previous expectations or labels
- material or economic constraints
- social and cultural histories
- earlier research decisions
- events that participants may know but the researcher does not

The aim is not to build an endless causal chain. It is simply to notice when the present may carry conditions that began elsewhere or earlier.

3. WHAT IS HAPPENING AROUND IT?

Look around the phenomenon rather than only at it.

What relationships, spaces, timings, materials, technologies, expectations, rules or wider structures are participating in what becomes possible here?

Ask:

What is happening in the immediate setting?

Who else is present or absent?

What expectations or routines are operating?

What material conditions matter?

What wider institutional or system conditions may be reaching into this moment?

THE FOUR SITES OF INQUIRY

When it is useful to widen, the Conditions Lens offers four sites from which to look. These are not boxes that must all be filled. They are places of attention.

<p>PERSON</p> <p>What is known about the person’s situated experience, history, agency, resources, constraints or responses?</p>	<p>OTHERS</p> <p>What relationships, expectations, interpretations, actions or absences of other people are shaping what becomes possible?</p>
<p>SETTING</p> <p>What features of space, time, material arrangements, routines, technologies, sensory conditions or institutional practices matter here?</p>	<p>SYSTEM</p> <p>What policies, funding arrangements, laws, professional norms, economic conditions, histories or wider structures are reaching into the situation?</p>

The four sites will not matter equally in every inquiry. Do not use them to manufacture complexity. Begin where the evidence is strongest and widen only where there is reason to do so.

Sometimes the person is highly influential. Sometimes the setting or system is doing more of the shaping. Sometimes the conditions interact in ways that cannot be cleanly separated.

Widening inquiry does not mean assuming the wider explanation is always better.

The question is whether looking across conditions changes what can reasonably be understood or claimed.

4. WHAT CONDITIONS ARE SHAPING MY INQUIRY?

The researcher is not outside the conditions being studied.

Ask:

- Why am I noticing this rather than something else?
- What does my method make visible?
- What might my method make difficult to see?
- Who decided what counts as relevant data?
- What concepts or theoretical assumptions am I bringing?
- What power do I hold in selecting, naming and interpreting?
- What conditions shaped who could participate and how?
- What might participants know that my design cannot access?

Reflexivity here is not only about describing the researcher. It asks how the research arrangement itself shapes what can be encountered, recorded and known.

5. WHAT CAN I REASONABLY CLAIM?

Keep different levels of certainty separate.

KNOWN	Directly observed, recorded, documented or otherwise established in the available material.
REASONABLY SUPPORTED	An interpretation supported by sufficient evidence, while remaining open to revision.
POSSIBLE	A plausible explanation, condition or relation that the current evidence does not establish.
UNKNOWN	What cannot presently be established from the available material.

Do not move a possibility into the category of fact simply because it fits the framework or feels coherent.

Do not replace one unsupported explanation with another.

Widening can reveal new possibilities, but a possibility remains a possibility until the available evidence supports a stronger claim.

6. WHERE IS CONDITION-SHAPING POWER LOCATED?

Ask who could shape the conditions being researched, who could not, and how much room different people had to act otherwise.

Consider:

- Who set the rules, timetable, environment or expectations?
- Who controlled resources, access, participation or interpretation?
- Who could alter the conditions and who had to live within them?
- What forms of agency remained available?
- What constraints were material, relational, institutional or structural?
- Am I placing responsibility on the most visible person simply because they are easiest to see?

Situated agency does not mean that agency disappears. It asks what action was possible within the conditions that were actually present.

7. WHAT BECAME NEWLY VISIBLE WHEN I WIDENED?

Return to the original phenomenon and notice again.

Ask:

Did widening strengthen my original interpretation?

Did it complicate or weaken it?

What became newly visible?

What remained unchanged?

What important uncertainty remains?

What new question now deserves attention?

The purpose of widening is not to prove that a wider explanation is better. The original interpretation may remain strong, become more precise, or change substantially. The inquiry should be allowed to do any of these.

**What changed in my understanding
when I changed where I looked?**

8. WHAT MIGHT THIS INQUIRY BE ASKING ME TO REVISIT?

Instead of asking only:

“What does this data show?”

Try also asking:

**What conditions made this visible,
and what conditions shaped how I came to know it?**

The inquiry might be asking you to revisit:

- a research question
- a sampling decision
- an interpretation
- a category or label
- an interview prompt
- a source of evidence
- a missing voice
- a theoretical assumption
- an ethical concern
- the scale at which the phenomenon is being studied
- a claim that has become too certain

Finding a gap in the evidence does not automatically mean collecting more data. The researcher may narrow the claim, leave the uncertainty visible, or decide that further inquiry is justified.

The aim is not endless hesitation. It is to make claims that are clear, proportionate and accountable to the available evidence and conditions.

THE CENTRAL QUESTIONS

When something in the inquiry becomes visible, pause and ask:

**What conditions are shaping
what I am encountering here?**

Then ask:

**What conditions are shaping
how I am able to know it?**

And before concluding:

**What can I reasonably claim —
and what must remain open?**

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The Conditions Lens™

For research reflection and methodological discussion. Not a diagnostic, prescriptive or stand-alone research method.