Introduction:

In historical inquiry, it is very common for researchers to collect as much evidence as possible, in order to support later observations. Although primarily 'data-gathering', historical research interweaves 'evaluations' (data comparison) and 'narration' (description-emplotment-story) throughout. These 3 components of research are not contained in discrete phases, but go on in parallel much of the time.

History as Narrative:

The 3rd component, narration, is key to this kind of research for several reasons. Historical data tends to be reported in a narrative form because:

    ▪. History is a story: Historical accounts necessarily involve situations separated by time (and an observer who exists in yet another time). This is why history is associated as a species of the genus 'Story'. Like any story, it has a beginning, a development, and a conclusion. A touch of drama pushes it beyond the 'chronicle', and makes it enjoyable reading (and lends a 'validity of lived experience'). The role of the historian is to make stories out of mere chronicles.

    ▪. History is imaginary-comprehensive: The historian is always selecting, simplifying, schematizing, leaving out what he thinks unimportant and putting in what he regards as essential. The result is valid and robust knowledge, as long as it is analyzed and verified (each historical source must be closely evaluated).

Analysis and Verification:

Historical sources encompass every kind of evidence (each must be closely evaluated). Evaluation/ verification is accomplished through the following: textual authentication, validity of factual references, and weighing alternative interpretations. Today this is a specially difficult task, since electronic + televised media tend to offer a great deal of material, but at a low level of 'real truth value'. Good interpretation comes from good organization (note taking is an important first step, since it provides a step towards the first draft of the research study). Certain traits and habits are also useful here (love for order, honesty, dedication to accuracy,...). Triangulation is the main verification method (cross-checking various aspects of data). Finally, the strength of verification/ validity depends on the type of evidence:

    ▪. Determinative: the data can be fixed in time and space. Dates can be pinpointed through style or technology.

    ▪. Contextual: here data is also fixed in time-space, but primarily compared to other data (photographs are useful here, to reveal context).

    ▪. Inferential: there is no direct evidence, but determinative or contextual evidence seems to appear, due to date proximity, reasoned interpretation, deduction, etc.

    ▪. Recollective: here the focus is memory, as opposed to a present-day reaction. It can yield any (all) of the previous types of evidence. Since a lot of this evidence is inferential, it is important to test the credibility of the subject.

4 Interpretive Lenses:

Typically, there are 4 ways in which interpretive-historical research looks at is subject:

    ▪. Causal Explanations: At some level or another, researchers see no essential difference between the behavior of natural phenomena and the behavior of social phenomena. Some believe in large-scale predictions (CG Hempel), some believe only in small-scale predictions (Karl Popper), where the researcher always takes small steps based on available knowledge. The small-scale focus is useful because it looks for particular causes (cause-effect research).

    ▪. Absolute Spirit: History as the on-going evolution of a communal consciousness/ mind ('Geist'; a whole that is more than the sum of its parts; GWF Hegel). Any single research study is always enmeshed in a much larger, incomprehensible, 'spirit of the time'. This frame of thought is used to explain transitions from one style to

another (the instability of particular 'cultural shapes' through time). It is also useful to explain the uniformity of stylistic expression during a particular period of time (all Gothic or Renaissance things seem alike because of a common 'spirit'). Finally, this focus is useful to identify particular individuals and their actions as 'spirit-pertinent' ('world-historical individuals').

▣. Structuralism: Culture-independent rules cause the creation of forms (this is why items from separate cultures are similar; Claude Levi-Strauss). These rules emerge from structural systems that are self-contained, self-regulating, and self-transformative (visual and written languages are examples). Within these systems, meaning rests not so much in entities themselves as in the relationships between entities (in written languages, for example, letters or phonemes don't have meaning in-and-of-themselves; they are all simply 'different than the rest'). A derivative of structuralism, Noam Comsky's 'Deep Structure', is particularly useful in the field of design. The idea is that the human mind has innate orientations to frame visual languages (their purpose/ goal, such as 'design as communicator', 'design as aesthetic pleaser', 'design as cultural symbol',…). Basic geometry and proportion is also found at that level.

▣. Post-Structuralism: Here the order and stability of structural systems is questioned. There is no truth. Reality is a byproduct of discourse (rhetoric). In any particular historical period, any thought is categorized as any of a range of 'topical foci' (nature, pluralism, man, art, etc.) that are framed by particular 'ways of seeing' (economic structures, moral codes, etc.). Post-structuralist research takes a period of time 'as is', and identifies topical ways of seeing.

Data Gathering:
The following lists some of the data that could be gathered in interpretive-historical research: manuscripts, autobiographies, newspapers, records, corporate documents, correspondence, diaries, personal material, photographs, artifacts, patterns, buildings, artwork, crafts… (focusing on politics, biography, ideas, economy, society, and mentality). Gathered data is identified as primary vs secondary, published vs unpublished, general vs archival, books vs periodicals, public vs personal, official vs colloquial.

Strengths and Weaknesses:
Strengths:

▣. Interpretive-historical research is has managed to remain well balanced between the qualitative and quantitative fields, since it gathers particular data, but fills in the gaps through individualistic narrative.

Weaknesses:

▣. The object of research will never really be available for observation.

▣. Since the connection of data is mainly qualitative narrative, it is important to include multiple narrative perspectives.

Recommended Readings:
GWF Hegel, 'Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics' (1993): Text on Absolute Spirit.
Terence Hawkes, 'Structuralism and Semiotics' (1977): Text on Structuralism.
M. Foucault, 'The Order of Things' (1973): Text of Post-Structuralism.