**AN INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

**Definition and Process:**

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic. It is also a social research method, and an important research tool in its own.

Before actual document analysis takes place, the researcher must go through a detailed planning process in order to ensure reliable results. O’Leary outlines an 8-step planning process that should take place not just in document analysis, but all textual analysis (2014):

1. Create a list of texts to explore (e.g., population, samples, respondents, participants).
2. Consider how texts will be accessed with attention to linguistic or cultural barriers.
3. Acknowledge and address biases.
4. Develop appropriate skills for research.
5. Consider strategies for ensuring credibility.
6. Know the data one is searching for.
7. Consider ethical issues (e.g., confidential documents).
8. Have a backup plan.

**The Advantages of Document Analysis**

There are many reasons why researchers choose to use document analysis. Firstly, document analysis is an efficient and effective way of gathering data because documents are manageable and practical resources.

Obtaining and analyzing documents is often far more cost efficient and time efficient than conducting your own research or experiments (Bowen, 2009). And Also:

- documents are stable, “non-reactive” data sources, meaning that they can be read and reviewed multiple times and remain unchanged by the researcher’s influence or research process (Bowen, 2009, p. 31)

1. It is often used because of the many different ways it can support and strengthen research.
2. It can be used in many different fields of research, as either a primary method of data collection or as a compliment to other methods.
3. It can provide supplementary research data, making document analysis a useful and beneficial method for most research.
4. And can provide background information and broad coverage of data, and are therefore helpful in contextualizing one’s research within its subject or field (Bowen, 2009).
5. It can also contain data that no longer can be observed, provide details that informants have forgotten, and can track change and development.
6. In the end it can also point to questions that need to be asked or to situations that need to be observed, making the use of document analysis a way to ensure your research is critical and comprehensive (Bowen, 2009).

**Concerns to Keep in Mind When Using Document Analysis**

The disadvantages of using document analysis are not so much limitations as they are potential concerns to be aware of before choosing the method or when using it:

1. Documents are not created with data research agendas and therefore require some investigative skills.
2. A document will not perfectly provide all of the necessary information required to answer your research questions.
3. Some documents may only provide a small amount of useful data or sometimes none at all. Other documents may be incomplete, or their data may be inaccurate or inconsistent. Sometimes there are gaps or sparseness of documents, leading to more searching or reliance on additional documents then planned (Bowen, 2009).
4. Also, some documents may not be available or easily accessible. For these reasons, it is important to evaluate the quality of your documents and to be prepared to encounter some challenges or gaps when employing document analysis.
5. Another concern to be aware of before beginning document analysis, and to keep in mind during, is the potential presence of biases, both in a document and from the researcher. Both Bowen and O’Leary state that it is important to thoroughly evaluate and investigate the subjectivity of documents and your understanding of their data in order to preserve the credibility of your research (2009; 2014).

The reason that the issues surrounding document analysis are concerns and not disadvantages is that they can be easily avoided by having a clear process that incorporates evaluative steps and measures, as previously mentioned above and exemplified by O’Leary’s two eight-step processes. As long as a researcher begins document analysis knowing what the method entails and has a clear process planned, the advantages of document analysis are likely to far outweigh the number of issues that may arise.

References:

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. Qualitative Research Journal, 9(2), 27-40. doi:10.3316/QRJ0902027  
O’Leary, Z. (2014). The essential guide to doing your research project (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.