In the previous chapter we saw that the basic aim of Foucault’s analyses is to interrogate and problematize the exercise of contemporary forms of power. I also accounted for the key concepts employed in this critical endeavour. In this chapter I account for some of the methodological challenges that we face when trying to pursue the said goal and employ the said concepts. How can we undertake analyses of assemblages of knowledge, power and freedom? In particular, I am interested in the challenges raised by using Foucault’s concepts in analyses that directly targets contemporary forms of government, rather than their historical antecedents.

Foucault’s analyses are renowned for their almost complete absence of systematic methodological guidelines or procedures of investigation. Even if we do find a number of reflections in various interviews and seminars of Foucault, it seems as if he took an honour in adopting a kind of Nike’s just-do-it approach. One could take this as a case of neglect or outright sloppiness. Yet, it seems more credible to see this eschewal of an explicit formulation of a methodological framework as part of a deliberate attempt to avoid turning his analysis into a theory (of power), i.e. a more or less universal truth about what power really is and how it really works. Rather than establishing a new truthful discourse (a science) about power, he aimed at analysing the ‘politics of truth’, i.e. the exercise of power enabled by the production of certain forms of truthful knowledge (Foucault 2007, p. 3). Accordingly, he deliberately avoided a more or less universal method or schema for the analysis of power. Foucault insisted that his analyses be taken as a flexible toolbox to be used for localized interrogations and contestations of power relations. In a discussion with philosopher Gilles Deleuze, Foucault agreed with him that ‘A theory is exactly like a box of tools. ... It must function
and not for itself’ (Deleuze 1977, p. 208). Both Deleuze and Foucault were indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche’s reflections on the political role of theories and history writing (genealogies) as instruments for unsettling the ways in which we think and act in the present.

While Deleuze would go on and use Nietzsche’s insights for the shaping of a philosophical approach that favoured the making of new concepts in order to grasp and act upon the world differently, Foucault engaged in a series of genealogical analyses of madness, medical power, penal institutions, sexuality and governmental rationalities under the precept that the knowledge produced by these analyses ‘is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting’ (Foucault 1977b, p. 154). Like concepts and theories, the methodological principles applied in concrete analyses should be designed not to provide more or less universally accepted truths or schemata of causal explanations, but to provide a kind of knowledge that would challenge and provoke current ways of thinking about current issues in general, and the exercise of power in particular. Foucault thus rejected adopting a more or less standardized method or analytical procedure, because it would easily turn sterile and unable to grasp whatever assemblages of knowledge, power and freedom that he or others wanted to put under scrutiny.

Notwithstanding Foucault’s deliberate avoidance of a standardized methodological framework, attempts to extract certain broad analytical guidelines have been made. Perhaps the most systematic attempt is that made by Mitchell Dean who develops eight positive and two negative guidelines (Dean 1999, pp. 27–38). I find all of these guidelines more or less consistent with Foucault’s analyses. However, none of them specifically addresses methodological challenge raised by directly targeting contemporary forms of governing. Moreover, I think that some of the guidelines may be merged. For example, the usefulness of distinguishing between the rational and utopian dimension of government seems to me not entirely clear. Accordingly, the guidelines developed below are largely in line with Mitchell Dean’s positive ones, though I have merged some of these and added a guideline (focusing on similarities) in order to address the challenge of undertaking non-historical analyses of government.

This chapter then first explicates what it entails to adopt Foucault’s nominalist approach and why we may want to do so. This is followed by an account of how and why to focus on problematizations. Thirdly, I explain how it is possible to analyse assemblages of knowledge, power and freedom. I then account for the merits of looking for similarities in the present in order to expose the hegemony of contemporary