

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of this University are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA Licence which allows you to:

- Access and download a copy
- Print out a copy

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this module or course of study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the University.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Title of extract: **Get Going**

Name of Author: **Wolcott, H.E.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Writing Up Qualitative Research 3rd edition Wolcott, H.E.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Sage.**

Pages scanned: **9 - 43**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Researching Contemporary Cosmologies AHAN7035**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning: *E. L. Hamb*

Date authorised: 04.05.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

CHAPTER TWO

Get Going

Writing comes more easily if you have something to say.

—Sholem Asch

This chapter presumes to help you begin writing. “Get Going,” by the way, is a poor title. It offends my ear, and I hope it offends yours. If it does, there’s hope for you as editor of your own material, catching phrases during the rewriting process that somehow slip by on your first or second editing.

Some questions that come to mind for organizing this chapter relate to sorting and organizing data: focusing, or deciding where, when, and how to begin. I will touch upon each of these. First, some practical considerations for getting you started.

The moment you generate sentences that *might* appear in your completed account, you have begun your writing. Whether your earliest efforts survive your subsequent pruning and editing is quite another matter and not of major consequence at this point. If what you are writing could *conceivably* make it into the final draft, you can look anyone in the eye and insist that the writing is (finally?) under way. There are all kinds of fancy words you can use to describe what you are doing prior to writing—organizing, conceptualizing, outlining, mulling, or “cranking-up,” as Peter Woods describes it (1985:92–97; 1999:15–22). Until your pen or pencil forms sentences on paper, or you achieve the equivalent effect through some miracle of modern technology, you have no basis for

claiming either the sympathy or admiration of your family, friends, or colleagues that you are *really* writing.

GET SET

In addition to having something of consequence to write about, the basic requirements for beginning the writing task include setting a time and place for working and, depending on your personal style and the well-formed-ness of your thoughts, either an idea to develop or a tentative plan for proceeding. With a plan, you can start writing for your intended audience. Be discerning about the minimum conditions you require to sustain your efforts. For example, although I still prefer to know there's an adequate supply of Triscuits and cheese on hand when I begin the day's writing, they are not absolute necessities. On the other hand, I cannot write with real—or even threatened—distraction. For me, uninterrupted quiet is essential.

For productive scholarship, I always found working at home more satisfactory than trying to accomplish anything at my university office, which was a place of constant interruption. For some colleagues, home does not provide sanctuary; they use their offices strategically and productively by carefully protecting or scheduling their writing time. Those who must do their writing apart from either home or office seem to survive, so a practical bit of advice is that if you don't have a natural workplace for writing, create or commandeer one. When I must write without interruption while at the university, I gather my materials and head for the library, but I choose a spot in the library, or even a different library (the law library, the science library) where neither the books nor their readers offer much distraction.

Whenever I show visitors around my house, I especially enjoy showing off the room I designed as my study—an attractive, cedar-paneled room featuring a low built-in countertop for my computer and a high built-in countertop that serves as a desk, and with a sliding glass door that opens onto an outside deck. I command a vista of trees and hills through the steady light of north-facing windows, my professional library on crowded bookshelves just steps away. But these are accoutrements of age and resources, not absolute prerequisites. Much of my earlier writing was done with Bic pens on lined yellow pads at a cleared kitchen counter or table, especially during

periods of field research conducted far from my accustomed work station. Whenever the going gets tough—the words won't come or don't seem to make good sense—I still revert to those “old ways,” writing with a Bic pen on lined yellow paper. Perhaps those comforting reminders help reassure me that I *can* do it, even when the relentless whirring of my computer hums its menacing note of doubt.

Given a choice, I prefer to write where I can spread before me (and leave undisturbed) the materials I want immediately at hand: one or two dictionaries (including an unabridged one), a thesaurus (I prefer looking through a bound copy to the one on my word processing program), and an extra tablet for jotting down thoughts or working through a complex phrase or idea before committing it to the developing manuscript on the screen. In spite of the inconvenience of having to “clear the desk” each mealtime, even if you take all your meals at home, the kitchen table ought to be free for about 22 hours out of every 24, making it one inviting possibility. Plus, the coffee pot and Triscuits are conveniently nearby.

My point is not really about coffee and Triscuits. You must recognize your own writing-related idiosyncrasies and assess their importance. Pamper yourself. What does it take to get you to sit down to write and keep you productively engaged at it, and to ensure that you will turn to it again, preferably at the same time tomorrow? Given realistic options, what is your best workable combination of time and place? Only to the point that coffee, background music, or whatever become distractions need you be overly concerned. I did have a colleague who found writing at home distracting because it was *too* comfortable and convenient, especially with the kitchen nearby. He needed the austerity of his campus office to keep his writing from becoming fattening as well.

Develop as much routine as possible in order to capitalize on the precious moments available for writing. There will never be enough time, or, conversely, everything will take longer than you think. Routine can help you make efficient use of the time you have. Buffer against interruption. Make yourself sufficiently comfortable that you look forward to your writing time rather than dread the thought. Our newspaper carried a story about a local author who writes with his cat on his lap and his dog at his feet. He doesn't like to disturb them, so he credits them with keeping him at the computer for extended periods. If you have enough pets, you might try that, but old-fashioned self-discipline seems preferable.

I attend to chair and desk heights, overhead lights, air circulation, and room temperature. I like adequate space for the ever-expanding body of materials I want close at hand. I finally realized years ago that I tended to bring my work to the kitchen counter in the old house after breakfast because I found the *height* of the counter and kitchen stools to be so accommodating. When I designed the new house, I included a study with a two-level built-in countertop, one a bit higher (39") than the customary kitchen counter, the other conveniently lower (27 1/2") for the computer. Each level has its own chair: a typing chair at the computer and a high drafting stool at the desk. I like to be "up" and sometimes stand rather than sit as I work.

I was amused to discover in Howard Becker's neat little book *Writing for Social Scientists* (1986) that most of us perform some ritual either as a final act of avoidance or as a physical marker for getting started with the day's writing. Some of his students—and some of mine—reported that they showered, sharpened pencils, or vacuumed prior to writing and, as Jan Lewis noted, "There's always the ironing." A new breed who appear able to sit in front of a monitor and go right to work were early to recognize that the inherent playfulness and ever-expanding capabilities of computers offered a whole new set of distractions ("computer fritters," as Jeffrey Nash [1990] referred to them) able to divert the attention of author/researchers with consequences more devastating than the computer viruses that can attack their programs.

Email offers such a compelling source of distraction—especially for anyone who has elected to receive an announcement of each new message as received—that the time-saving features of the computer can be totally frittered away. My initial resolution to that dilemma was serendipitous. The aging computer in my study did not have a built-in modem, so when I decided (years ago and rather reluctantly, it now seems strange to admit) to succumb to email, I received messages on a different computer located in another room. My own computer was connected only to a source of electricity, and my personal warming-up ritual was limited to the time needed to "boot it up." On days when I had a manuscript in progress, I opened immediately to where I left off the day before; there were no messages waiting for me, and there was no way for me to "get out." If it isn't too late, you might consider this arrangement, dedicating one computer solely to manuscript writing. You won't be tempted to see if you've got email waiting if your "writing" computer doesn't deliver it. But I finally upgraded. I now find it almost impossible not to take

the email detour before I settle down. I also yield to the temptation to "check my email" anytime I get stuck.

For years, I continued to use the old computer for my back-up files, and with each new virus scare I breathed a sigh of relief: They couldn't reach me there! (Alas, I doubt that anyone would think of using a second computer to back up data these days.)

Go!

I assess the importance each of us assigns to writing by the priority we give it in terms of competing options and responsibilities. My best time for writing is immediately after breakfast, with the promise of several uninterrupted hours. I consider myself to be "really writing" when writing gets that prime time and priority. The important thing is not that writing must occur first in the day, but that it receives first *priority* in scheduling the day's activities. My hat is off to those who arise at 4:30 a.m. to write, or others who do their writing after everyone else in the household is asleep. I am able, and much prefer, to make writing part of my daily routine that takes place during normal hours, rather than making my schedule a constant test of mettle.

A good indicator of commitment is whether you are able to either ignore the telephone's ring or, if others are present to answer on your behalf, you have instructed that you simply are **not available** during the period devoted to writing. I assume that night writers make difficult choices when members of the household review the evening television fare, particularly the specials. Might you record them and reward yourself by watching later?

FOLLOWING A WRITING PLAN

If you need help in organizing your material—or yourself—let me suggest three components that for me comprise a workable writing plan. Two aspects of this plan need to be spelled out explicitly; it is not sufficient to have them floating around as vague ideas you are "mulling" in your head.

A Workable Writing Plan: Your Statement of Purpose

The first component of the plan, we might even label it the First Commandment, is to commit to paper your **statement of purpose**.

You have your purpose well in mind when you can write a critical, clear, and concise sentence that begins, "The purpose of this study (chapter, monograph, article, assignment) is . . ." Although structurally that is a most uninteresting beginning, I know of no better way to help academic writers find, declare, and maintain a focus than to have this sentence up front, not only in their thoughts but in their manuscript. I am impressed by authors who are able to get the message across more eloquently, but the creative rewriting of your statement of purpose can come later. In any writing over which I have been able to exert an influence (as dissertation director, journal editor, or reviewer), I make a strong case not only for putting that flat-footed statement of purpose into the text but also for making it sentence number one of paragraph number one of chapter number one.

A Workable Writing Plan: Your Table of Contents

The second element of the plan is a *detailed written outline* or **list of major topics** arranged in the **sequence** in which you intend to introduce them. Schooling ruined formal outlining for me, with misplaced emphasis on indenting, numbering, and rigid rules of unknown origin (e.g., no single item in a subset, there had to be at least two). But the *purposes* accomplished by an outline are what every author needs: a clear distinction between major points and subordinate ones and an orderly progression for presenting them. The point of this step is to develop a sequence for unfolding a story "bird by bird," not simply to get something written down. I realize that there are fieldworkers who claim to carry their studies entirely in their heads, committing no prior outline to paper. After you are properly seasoned, you may want to try it. Not at first.

Developing a proposed **Table of Contents** (subject to constant revision) accomplishes the same purpose as an outline. To me, preparing a Table of Contents also "feels" more like writing than outlining does, particularly for material that may require several major sections. Tables of Contents are also free from the constraints of formal outlining. I am so convinced of their value as a way to organize any major writing project that I asked each of my doctoral students to include a tentative Table of Contents with their dissertation *proposals*! Proposals are ordinarily prepared before the research is begun, so the usual reaction was, "How can I propose a Table of Contents when I haven't even started the research?" Unbowed, I note

further, "And I'd like you to estimate the number of pages you intend to devote to each of your proposed chapters."

The lesson to be learned from this exercise is different from what students expect. Their first attempts often reveal more rigidity in their perception of the structure of a dissertation than actually exists. For example, although Chapter Two of every thesis or dissertation ever to be written seems destined to remain the preferred location for a traditional literature review, there is no ironclad rule—even in the otherwise inflexible graduate school at my university—that Chapter Two must be a literature review. Nor is there any rule insisting that an entire chapter be devoted to that topic at all. (I return to this issue in terms of the need to link your study with the work of others, the focus of Chapter 4.)

Another benefit of assigning a seemingly arbitrary number of pages to a nonexistent chapter for a hypothetical table of contents is that students realize they *do* have an *intuitive* sense of the account they intend to develop. Making an estimate of the number of pages to be devoted to each major topic proves not so ethereal an exercise after all. Qualitative/descriptive studies often exceed reasonable expectations for length. Anticipating how to apportion the account among the topics that need to be covered not only helps achieve a sense of the whole but may prevent initial overwriting in introductory sections that argue the "Significance of the Problem" or provide a historical background that eventually must compete for space with the substantive account.

The out-of-pocket expense of copying multiple drafts of a lengthy study gives real meaning to and incentive for an economy of words for students inclined toward lengthy dissertations. Little do they realize that they are unlikely ever again to be completely at liberty to set their own limits as to length. Journal editors often specify maximum lengths and almost invariably return manuscripts (well, return *my* manuscripts) with the comment "Needs to be cut." Book review editors give assignments in terms of a maximum number of words. Publishers typically tell authors how lengthy a book can be, although conventional wisdom would suggest it is the other way around. My instructions for preparing a monograph for the SAGE Qualitative Research Methods Series were to observe "a strict limit of 100–120 double-spaced manuscript pages, which translates to 80–90 printed pages." Given that the second edition was to be "enlarged and expanded," I assumed I could go on and on—until the

editor questioned whether I really had *that much more* to add to what I had said originally.

By the time one identifies the topics that *must* be addressed, and assigns a seemingly arbitrary number of pages to each topic, the message is clear and clearly different from what one might have expected. Before the writing has even begun, it is apparent that the space available for the descriptive material will be limited. Given the level of detail ordinarily associated with qualitative study, how can adequate description be incorporated into the study?

For qualitative studies based on observational or interview data, projecting a Table of Contents, complete with estimates of the length of each chapter, leads to one of the most important and paradoxical circumstances of our work. The major problem in writing up descriptively oriented research is not to *get* but to *get rid of* data! With writing comes the always painful task of winnowing material to a manageable length, communicating an essence rather than compiling the bulky catalog that would provide further evidence of one's painstaking thoroughness. The greater one's commitment to letting informants offer their own interpretation of meanings and events—the emic emphasis, as it is referred to in anthropological circles—the greater the proclivity to provide lengthy accounts that dampen the enthusiasm not only of readers but of potential publishers as well. The lengthier a study, the more costly to produce it, and, correspondingly, the greater the risk if it does not attract a wide readership.

A Workable Writing Plan: Your Story and Voice

The third element of the plan need not be written out but does need to be carefully thought out: Determine **the basic story** you are going to tell, who is to do the telling, and the representational style you intend to follow for bringing observer and observed together. An extended discussion of three such “narrative conventions” for reporting qualitative studies—Realist, Confessional, and Impressionist—appeared in John Van Maanen's popular *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (1988) and was followed by a decade of lively debate on a topic largely unrecognized prior to that time.

The question of **authorial voice** is critical in qualitative research.¹ When the focus is on the life of one or a few individuals, the problem is compounded when informants are capable of telling their stories themselves, raising doubts about whether we should make our presence known. In quantitatively oriented approaches,

and among the more self-consciously “scientific” qualitative types, researchers typically desert their subjects at the last minute, leaving folks and findings to fend for themselves, seemingly untainted by human hands and most certainly untouched by human hearts.

One of the opportunities—and challenges—posed by qualitative approaches is to treat fellow humans as people rather than objects of study, to regard ourselves as humans who conduct research *among* others rather than *on* them. Fieldworkers have usually found it more efficient to assume the role of narrator than to present an entire account through informants' own words (notable exceptions that were groundbreakers in their day include such classics as Leo Simmons' *Sun Chief* [1942] and Oscar Lewis' *Children of Sanchez* [1961]). There is a long-standing preference for having informants render the *narrative* part of the account in their own words, particularly in life history (e.g., Behar 1992; Crapanzano 1980; Shostak 1981; for an article-length example, see HFW 1983a).

Because the researcher's role is ordinarily an integral part of reporting qualitative work, I write my descriptive accounts in the first person. I urge that others do (or in some cases, be *allowed* to do) the same. I recognize that there still are a few academics and academic editors on the loose who insist that scholarly work be reported in the third person. On two earlier occasions, I have had a journal submission edited into impersonal, third-person language without my permission and without the editor even bothering to inform me. I think the practice reflects a belief that impersonal language intensifies an author's stronghold on objective truth.

Science may be better served by substituting “participants” for “we,” or “the observer” for “I,” but “this writer” has yet to be convinced that that is our calling. A more compelling guideline can be made for matching the formality of the writing with the formality of the approach. Recognizing the critical nature of the observer role and the influence of his or her subjective assessments in qualitative work makes it all the more important to have readers remain aware of that role, that presence. Writing in the first person helps authors achieve those purposes. For reporting qualitative research, it should be the rule rather than the exception.

READERS AND WRITERS

I have come to the (obviously oversimplified) belief that people whose lives are involved with the written word can be divided into roughly

two groups: those who mostly read and those who mostly write. Obviously, many literate folk do neither, and a few are remarkable for their accomplishment at both. In the main, however, I believe that people whose occupations require continuing engagement with written words gravitate toward one of two positions. They become preoccupied either with *consuming* words or with *producing* them, not both.

How about you? Do you consider yourself essentially a reader or essentially a writer? Recognize that my dichotomy may be little more than rationalization, for I do not consider myself a reader. That is not to suggest I do not read; rather, in a professional community of readers (scholars, teachers, researchers, students), and speaking relatively, I am neither a voracious reader nor am I “well read.” I have always been obliged to read thousands of pages a year—student papers, dissertations, reports, manuscripts, and proposals from publishers, colleagues, funding agencies, and tenure review committees; professional journals and texts (thank goodness for book reviews); and the magazines and books one reads in the effort—or pretense—of keeping up. Except for the daily newspaper, most of my reading is professional, and much of my professional reading is tedious. Only now that I am retired do I find time to read for pleasure.

I read what I must; I write whenever I think I have something important to say. That probably explains why I find field research so appealing: I become actively involved in the process, seeing and hearing and pondering everything firsthand rather than getting it passively and secondhand. I do not envy colleagues whose research forays take them only to the library or keep them glued to a computer screen. Not surprisingly, I regard my most effective reading as the reading I do while I am engaged in fieldwork and/or preparing a manuscript. Writing gives purpose and focus to searching for new sources and reviewing old ones. It provides pegs on which to hang relevant ideas and a basis for deciding what to retain, what to let go.

EARLY WRITING

Hear this: You cannot begin writing early enough. And yes, I really mean it. Would that mean someone might write a first draft before venturing into the field to begin observations or interviews? Absolutely. Read on.

The conventional wisdom is that writing reflects thinking. I am attracted to a stronger position: that writing *is* thinking (see also

L. Richardson [2000] on this point). Stated more cautiously, writing is one form that thinking can take (see also Becker 1986:ix, who in turn cites Flower 1979; Flower and Hayes 1981). Writers who indulge themselves by waiting until their thoughts are “clear” run the risk of never starting to write at all. And that, as Becker explains, is why it is “so important to write a draft rather than to keep on preparing and thinking about what you will write when you start” (Becker 1986:56).

Writing is not only a great way to discover what we are thinking, it is also a way to uncover lacunae in our knowledge or our thinking. Unfortunately, that means we must be prepared to catch ourselves red-handed whenever we seem not to be thinking at all. The fact should not escape us that when the writing is not going well, our still-nebulous thoughts cannot yet be expressed in words.

This is the point where I think “readers” and “writers” part company. Readers compulsively search for more. They are never satisfied that they know enough, and they are hesitant about addressing the writing task until the “knowing” is complete, which it never is. They are intellectually honest. In addition to our awe and respect, they also deserve our understanding, perhaps even our sympathy. Their easily identified counterparts among fieldworkers are those who falter as fieldwork deadlines approach, insisting that they still don’t “have enough” to begin the write-up. The familiar rationale has an admirable note of humility: “I’m not *quite* ready.”

Do you recall Richard Warren’s characterization of writing as an act of arrogance? Can you enter into arrogance and begin writing in spite of the fact that you *know* you do not know as much as you ought to know? Are the words of Clifford Geertz sufficiently encouraging, that it is “not necessary to know everything in order to understand something” (Geertz 1973:20)? If your answer is that you need first to consult six more volumes in the library, or spend six more weeks in the field, before you will be ready, you may possess an enviable capacity for thoroughness, but I have doubts about you as a writer. If you have something to say, can you sit down right now (why not today?) and turn your hand to writing? (No need even to finish this reading just now. However, if you’re browsing in the bookstore, you might want to buy a copy to read later. Otherwise, won’t you always wonder how it ended?)

An idea I offer to anyone contemplating a qualitative/descriptive study, and especially to those who express concern about how they will write up a study before the research has even begun, is this: Write a preliminary draft of the study. Then begin fieldwork.

You understand that if you follow this advice, the writing you do is only for yourself. But I earnestly believe **you cannot begin writing too early**. Virtually everyone who writes about writing offers similar advice. Hear Milton Lomask's counsel to would-be biographers: "Irrespective of where your research stands, start the writing the minute some of the material begins coming together in your mind. . . . Get the words down. You can always change them" (1987:26, 27).

For a long time, I believed that this idea of writing before even *beginning* fieldwork was original. More recently, I discovered that anthropologist Sol Tax was giving similar advice to his students more than half a century ago. His former student, Edward Bruner, mentions the idea in his own writing (Bruner 1986:147) and subsequently expanded on what he felt to be Tax's intent:

The spirit in which it was presented was to emphasize that we should say what we know, and then go into the field to test/check/develop the ideas further or to discard them if they were off the track. . . .

At the time, I did not actually write my dissertation before going to the field, but Sol's suggestion stuck in my mind. . . . It turns your attention to what is new that you are going to discover by fieldwork. So the suggestion was a serious one but I don't think anyone actually did it. [Edward Bruner, personal communication, 1999]

Turning attention to *what you expect to discover* is among the several possible advantages of early writing. Like the "tentative Table of Contents" exercise described earlier, it calls attention to matters of format, sequence, space limitations, and focus. It also establishes a baseline for your inquiry, your own starting point. You will have documented what you believed to be the case, thereby making a matter of record certain biases and assumptions that might otherwise prove conveniently flexible and accommodating were they to remain only as abstractions. Early writing encourages you systematically to inventory what you already know, what you need to know, and how you can go about looking for it.

You also may discover that describing how you believed things were when you began your study offers a good way to begin your written account, especially if "what everybody knows" turns out to be inaccurate or inadequate. We all know, or have preconceived opinions

about, far more things than we realize on virtually any topic of professional interest. Writing is a way to access that personal fund of information—and misinformation. Conversing with colleagues is another way, although it is not necessarily as effective. We should not be hesitant to try our ideas with colleagues or encourage them to share ideas with us. But those of us in the word business are smooth talkers—we can worm our way out of a non sequitur almost as effortlessly as we can find ourselves trapped in one. Writing offers a precise and personal way to capture and give concrete form to sometimes conveniently elusive ideas.

Do I follow this practice of "early writing" myself? Yes, in somewhat modified fashion. Except for my initiation into long-term fieldwork—my dissertation study of an Indian village and its school on the west coast of Canada (HFW 1964), from which I returned without the least idea of how to proceed with the writing—I have always turned to writing early. Writing offers a way of tracking what I have understood and calls attention to what I need to find out. However, early writing also presupposes a willingness to let go of words as easily as you generate them, and I find that hard to do. Therefore, my advice for anyone hesitant about writing is to begin immediately, but because I find myself almost too eager to get started, I try to *delay* the moment when I begin writing anything other than field notes. I focus my effort on an immediately prior stage, "tight outlining," getting sources, concepts, examples, sequence, everything lined up and ready to go. I no longer worry whether I can get something on paper; I know I can. Until you enjoy a comparable sense of confidence, consider starting earlier.

Here is how early writing worked for one of my more skeptical doctoral students, Ben Hill:

Beside the tentative table of contents, which I had written at Harry Wolcott's suggestion, the greatest impetus for my ethnography-as-writing orientation was Harry's subversive suggestion that I complete a first draft of my dissertation before beginning fieldwork.

The very idea—not that I seriously considered executing it—that an ethnographer might write before doing fieldwork dramatized to me that I was not starting with a blank slate. I had definite preferences on the contents, organization, and style of ethnographies in general and mine in particular. I had expectations, some

warranted and some not, about what I would encounter and learn in Japan. I had biases which inclined me toward interviewing certain types of informants and drawing certain types of conclusions. In some sense I already possessed a draft of the study, an unwritten “zero draft,” from which my completed study would emerge through a process more akin to textual editing than to pristine search and discovery. [Hill 1993:102–103]

Freewriting

There are different approaches to ensure that you “get going” with writing. The recommended strategy for anyone whose style has not yet evolved is simply to let the words flow: make no corrections, check no spelling or references, don’t even reread when you are on a roll (see Becker 1986, Chapter 3, for elaboration on this technique, known as “**freewriting**”—forcing yourself to “write without stopping for ten minutes”; see also Elbow 1981:13–19). With the miracle of word processing so conveniently at hand and so forgiving about mistakes and changes, freewriting has become possible for everyone. Whether you prefer to “talk” to (freewrite for) only yourself, to save systematically all the bits and pieces for later review, or to pursue every idea to final prose form, your computer awaits your command.

Of course, word processing has created some problems of its own, one of which has become evident in reading student papers (and sometimes colleagues’ papers as well). The ease of production can result in faster rather than better writing. Computer capabilities for easy revision and checking for spelling errors are often ignored. Hastily written and hastily proofed first drafts are tendered as final copy; printout is equated with “in print,” the sketch proffered in lieu of a more careful rendering. Writing done in student status is unquestionably the worst circumstance for learning to write well. Student writing is usually done on a hurried, one-shot basis, with neither time nor motivation for the reflection and revision that lead to better drafts. The entire process is short-circuited. We want our students to become accomplished writers but seldom provide opportunity for them to develop or practice better writing habits.

As a teacher, one way I found for improving the quality of written work was to offer an “early bird” option for students in classes in which a term paper or research report was required—and a good deal of writing

was required in all of them. (I stopped giving exams years ago; I am interested in what students can do, not what they can memorize.) Students able and willing to meet an early deadline had the option of submitting a working draft of their term paper for appraisal well before the final assignment was due. My editorial suggestions may have been of some help, but the real advantage was the preparation of an early draft while time still remained for reflection and revision.

The Methodical Approach

The opposite of freewriting is observed by writers who are sometimes referred to as “**bleeders**.” I do not know the origin of the term, although it brings to mind an observation attributed to sports journalist Red Smith, “There’s nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.”

Bleeders are methodical. Their approach reflects a combination of confidence and command about writing, along with some personal qualities (hang-ups?) about having everything just so. They worry over each sentence as they write. They do not press ahead to the next sentence until the present one is perfected. Once properly in place, each sentence is viewed pretty much as a finished product. In the old days, bleeders usually wrote with pencil or pen to facilitate cross-outs and “interlining,” squeezing corrections between existing lines. Bleeders tend to be slow writers, but they get the job done. Often, they set a number of words or pages as their daily objective, such as Peter Woods’ “standard ‘production rate’ of five written pages, or a thousand words a day” (1985:93).

Most of us fare better by committing ourselves to blocks of time rather than to a predetermined number of words or pages. In writing up qualitative research, page production by itself can prove a deceptive goal. One might draft ten pages of descriptive narrative one day and struggle with ten sentences of interpretation the next. Nevertheless, if you recognize the bleeder tendency in yourself and cannot imagine romping through an early draft, subsequently discarding material with abandon, then perhaps a tightly detailed outline (or Table of Contents) is sufficient to get you started on the slow-but-steady production of a first draft.

Most likely you will shift back and forth between these approaches. Your progress may depend on mood and energy level, but is more likely to reflect the type of material you are writing and

your previous experience. My writing sometimes flows easily, yet it can slow to a snail's pace whenever I encounter trouble at making good sense or am wrestling with an interpretation. When the words don't come easily, I find myself turning from the computer keyboard and retreating to my Bic pens and yellow pads to squeeze words onto paper one at a time.

In *Writing for Social Scientists*, Howard Becker has a chapter seductively titled "One Right Way" (1986: Ch. 3). His point, as experienced writers will recognize, is that there is no such thing! For a comparable chapter in *Writing With Power*, author Peter Elbow takes no risk that anyone might misunderstand; his title is "The Dangerous Method: Trying to Write It Right the First Time" (1981: Ch. 6). Whatever combination of steps and strategies works for you is "right" as long as your ideas are put to paper. Given time, they can be transformed into a more coherent and polished statement. Restrict your hasty writing for email—but hey! even email messages deserve to be proofread.

WHERE TO START THE ACCOUNT

If you have a good sense of how your writing project is to proceed, or you actually prepare a rough draft of a study before beginning your systematic research, then writing is already an integral part of your research agenda; you are in the so-called catbird seat. But don't expect the parts to come together that easily, the writing simply to "flow." If such results could be achieved effortlessly, there wouldn't be so many how-to books and courses about writing, or audiences anxious to have the secrets and recipes of successful writing revealed.

Suppose you are an ultra-conservative researcher who takes seriously the challenge for exploration and discovery inherent in qualitative research. You begin with a broadly defined purpose, acknowledging that you are not sure exactly what you are looking for. To convince yourself of your objectivity, you steadfastly refuse even to acknowledge your hunches, your suspicions, or, to borrow anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's oft-repeated phrase, your "foreshadowed problems" (Malinowski 1922:9). Only when the fieldwork seems virtually complete do you feel it appropriate to turn attention to writing. (Too bad to have garnered this impression from Malinowski. He actually suggested that the writing should begin

earlier, through a "constant interplay of constructive attempts and empirical checking" [p. 13].)

Returning to advice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, I suggest that you begin at the beginning, continue till you reach the end, then stop. That may be sound advice for how the completed work should read, but it won't prove helpful if you haven't figured out just where your account does begin. Let me suggest possible places for starting.

POSSIBLE PLACES TO BEGIN

One possible place to begin is at the point when you first entered the scene and then to report chronologically from that moment. Another is to begin with description but to underplay your own presence or involvement. Yet another alternative is to begin by writing how things turned out. However, if you can start there, either you are an old hand at this or you have confused qualitative research with gathering support for a position paper. If you are pursuing social reform in an activist mode, in an effort to make research useful and relevant, then you must examine and reveal the sources of your passion with the same scrutiny.

Or you can start with a personal narrative through which you introduce the study in the manner that you actually experienced it, reaching as far back as you feel necessary to put things in context. Your description can begin with how you happened to become interested in the underlying issue or how you approached the setting initially. You know how you went about the study, and your readers might be interested to know, too. Drawing readers into the account the way you were drawn into the setting offers a natural way to unfold the story, with a ready-made sequence to follow.

Starting With Method

You may find writing about fieldwork so inviting that you are tempted to go on and on about it. No harm done if you overdo it a bit at first, especially if the writing helps you find your "way in" to the substance of your study. However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, I recommend that you not devote undue attention in the *final* version to discussing "methods." If you feel the urge for an extended discussion, either about method in general or about how you conducted your research or analyzed the data for a particular study, consider

presenting that material in a separate account. There is no longer the need to defend qualitative research or to offer the detailed explication of its “methods” that we once felt obligated to supply.

Such was not always the case. In 1966, I began fieldwork that culminated in *The Man in the Principal's Office: An Ethnography* (HFW 1973). One year later, while continuing fieldwork on a more limited basis, I began writing. Not only did I begin by writing a (cleverly titled) method chapter, “A Principal Investigator in Search of a Principal,” I also made it the opening chapter in the completed monograph. In those days, I felt that I first had to explain—and in a sense, to defend—the ethnographic approach I had taken. In a separate article based on that fieldwork, I did the same thing again, carefully explaining my fieldwork procedures before introducing any descriptive material (HFW 1974b).

Today, your discussion of method might be relegated to an appendix in a monograph. For a chapter-length article, a single paragraph may be adequate. My hunch is that if you go on and on about method, whoever is looking over your shoulder (editor, dissertation advisor) is likely to want less rather than more. (If you are in doubt about such expectations, you could always ask!)

Your readers do not need a long treatise on how studies like yours are *usually* conducted. What they need to be informed about is the nature and extent of your *particular* data base. During exactly what period of time did you conduct your research? Assuming you did fieldwork, how extensive was your involvement? In the best of fieldwork traditions, did you reside at the site, or did you commute to it, as I have found myself doing in recent years? To what extent do interviews constitute part of your data base, and, for your purposes, what constituted an interview?

You may also want to say something about “**triangulating**” your data. The practice of checking multiple sources is often touted as one of the strengths of fieldwork. Triangulation is one of those ideas that sounds great in a research seminar but can pose problems in the field. Wait until your informants find out that you are double-checking everything they tell you! So, how did you go about confirming information without simultaneously antagonizing your informants?

Where and how to include such information is partly a matter of personal preference. The important thing is to be up front about it, but, as I argue in Chapter 6, that does not necessarily mean

putting it up front. Regardless of where you review your research strategy, I think it judicious to examine and, as appropriate, to qualify any and every statement a reader might perceive as a generalization that does not have a corresponding basis in fact. The phrase may get overworked, but scholarship does not suffer when a sentence begins with “As one villager commented . . .” rather than with “Villagers said. . .”

As a somewhat idealistic guiding principle, consider Taylor and Bogdan's restatement of this perennial concern: “You should give readers enough information about how the research was conducted to enable them to *discount* your findings” (Taylor and Bogdan 1984:150; see also discussions on establishing *trustworthiness* in qualitative inquiry in Lincoln and Guba 1985:289–331; Denzin and Lincoln 2000:158). Albert Einstein was properly cautious in his purported observation that “no amount of evidence can prove me right, and *any* amount of evidence can prove me wrong” (noted in Miles and Huberman 1984:242).

Starting With Description

Describing how you went about your research may be a good way to get *you* started, and it can be comforting to have a section completed, if only in draft. Unless you are going to develop the account chronologically, however, your reader is more likely to want to get right to the heart of your study. So although you may choose to *write* first about method, the account itself should probably begin with description. What is the problem you address? What is the setting or circumstance in which you addressed it?

Description provides the foundation upon which qualitative inquiry rests. Unless you prove to be gifted at conceptualizing or theorizing, the descriptive account will usually constitute the major contribution you have to make. The more solid the descriptive basis, the more likely it will survive changing fads and fashions in reporting or changing emphases in how we derive meaning from our studies. Give your account a firm footing in description.

If you are comfortable in the role of **storyteller** (and you *do* have a story to tell, if you can bear to regard the reporting of research that way), here is an opportunity to assume that role, inviting the reader to look—through your eyes—at what you have seen. Start with a straightforward description of the setting and events. No

footnotes or academic asides, no intrusive analysis, just the facts, carefully presented and interestingly related at an appropriate level of detail.

The vexing question as to just what the appropriate **level of detail** is in a descriptive narrative has no pat answers. Your purposes in conducting the inquiry are your best guide, although they may need to be tempered with attention to the *art* of storytelling. The reactions of invited reviewers may prove especially helpful once you begin revising your draft. Having been immersed in the research setting, you may be unaware that you have omitted details that have become commonplace to you but are not apparent to readers unfamiliar with the setting. It is easy to lose track of abbreviations, acronyms, and assumptions that prevail in professional dialogues and regional dialects.

Your description can begin either with the setting, giving an account of a specific event, or through introducing one or more key players, perhaps letting someone else tell a personal story if readers are not going to be privy to your own. You may be tempted to “wax poetic” in your opening statement, but it is always a letdown to discover that two paragraphs into an account, the tone changes. If you have only two paragraphs of flowery discourse in you, save them for another day and simply get on with some straight descriptive reporting.

An equally vexing problem, one that catches many an unwary observer by surprise, is the subtle but critical distinction between **observed** and **inferred** behavior. Here is an instance where interview data present less of a problem than reporting what we observe with our eyes. What people say can be relayed exactly as they said it. That does not necessarily make it true, but the words themselves can be transcribed and reported as stated (without the subtleties of inflection, body language, etc.). By contrast, what we *see* tends to be interpreted even as we see it. Although we mean to describe observed behavior, we all-too-easily slip into reporting inferred behavior, with action and intent colored by the eye of the beholder.

Only from your own perspective can you report how anyone “felt” about what was happening or the “meanings” they attributed. Unless others specifically express such feelings, what we report should deal with what we actually have seen and heard, never with what we infer unless we are careful to qualify our observations. There is a world of difference between reporting that there *was* a sense of excitement and apprehension in the air or that one *sensed* an

atmosphere of excitement and apprehension. Careful description calls for a sense of detachment. If you can’t achieve that detached state, or do not want to present your account from so dispassionate a perspective, then you will have to frame your observations in the first person: “Here is what I saw, presented in terms of what I made of it.”

Description, in the sense of attaining “pure” description—sometimes lightheartedly called the doctrine of *immaculate perception* (Beer 1973:49)—isn’t such straightforward business after all! Without realizing it, even as we describe we are engaging in analysis and interpretation. So the suggestion that you “stay descriptive” as long as possible presents a challenge, not so much to try to achieve “pure” description as to resist the urge to begin analyzing until you have presented sufficient data to support that analysis.

CONTINUING INTO ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In *Transforming Qualitative Data* (HFW 1994), I proposed a distinction between *analysis* and *interpretation* that I repeat here. This distinction gives analysis a more limited, more precise, and more clearly defined role than is suggested by its broader use as a cover term for anything we do with data. Contrasted with the somewhat freewheeling activity of interpretation, I restrict analysis to refer to the examination of data using systematic and standardized measures and procedures.

In spite of the philosophical musings of the postmodernists, there is a “there” out there. **Analysis**, used in this narrower sense, follows standard procedures for observing, measuring, and communicating with others about the nature of what is “there,” the reality of the everyday world as we experience it. Data subjected to analysis are examined and reported through procedures generally understood and accepted in that everyday world, among social as well as not-so-social scientists. Virtually all data amenable to statistical treatment or that can be plugged into a software package fall under the rubric of analysis in this definition of the term. The reliability (in any sense of the word) of such procedures derives from the standardization of procedures, not their rightness or wrongness, nor even their appropriateness.

Content analysis serves as a good example of analysis in this more restricted meaning of the term. In content analysis, material can be chunked into categories and reported statistically through procedures generally understood and accepted, in spite of whatever

discrepancies occur in coding. Even seemingly straightforward procedures like averages or percent figures can be manipulated and abused, but it is not because of disagreement about the ways that average or percent figures are derived.²

Interpretation, by contrast, is not derived from rigorous, agreed-upon, carefully specified procedures, but from our efforts at sense-making, a human activity that includes intuition, past experience, emotion—personal attributes of human researchers that can be argued endlessly but neither proved nor disproved to the satisfaction of all. Interpretation invites the reflection, the pondering, of data in terms of what people make of them. The basis of symbols and meanings upon which anthropologists derive patterns of cultural behavior, for example, can be described and examined analytically, but discerning the patterns themselves is a matter of interpretation.

Analysis falls more on the scientific side of things, interpretation on the humanistic side. Your leanings toward one dimension or the other should be evident from the links you make with the literatures extant, your “quoting circle,” how you “chunk” your data, the relative emphasis you give to measuring and to measures. The processes are not antithetical. A well-balanced study can show ample evidence of attention to both the methodical results of analysis and the conjectural tasks of interpretation. But “well-balanced” does not mean trying to achieve a perfect balance between analysis and interpretation. The problem itself probably calls for attending more to one or the other. A clear statement of purpose(s) is critical for deciding what data need to be reported, what needs to be counted, what relevant literatures to cite or measures to use, and how broadly to draw implications or recommendations from one’s research.

We have outgrown the guiding maxim of the early positivists that if it can’t be measured, measure it anyway! But if you are relatively new to this work (and you probably are, if you are reading this), you are better advised to err by overdoing the analytic dimension rather than to assume that qualitative research automatically bestows poetic license! By exhibiting some analytic prowess, you validate your credentials as a systematic observer who has recorded and examined data with care and mustered the requisite evidence before proceeding ever so tentatively to offer your interpretation. Count and measure whatever warrants being counted and measured. Far better to offer too much measurement data than too little, as long as you aren’t using data simply for effect (see Chapter 5).

Don’t be surprised if, despite a concerted effort to keep them separate, description and analysis tend to meld as the account unfolds. It is only through the examination of data that data themselves take on meaning. To make sense, you have to start combining things, aggregating data, discerning patterns. But you can treat your initial analytic efforts lightly at first, in service essentially to description. Don’t be in a hurry to move beyond the descriptive task in order to get on with what may seem a higher order of business.

Once the descriptive account is firmly in place, I suggest that you proceed with analysis in a manner that keeps it distinguishable from the descriptive material on which it depends, easily identifiable as something you are doing to the data rather than something inherent in the data themselves. Use separate paragraphs or frequent margin headings as necessary to mark shifts in the presentation, especially if you are adding additional descriptive detail in support of the analysis. Otherwise, readers may feel they are being bounced back and forth like ping-pong balls when each new element of description is subjected immediately to heavy-handed analysis or linked with what some previous researcher has found or argued. Once you turn to analysis, any additional descriptive material ought to be immediately relevant to the account you are developing.

When you do turn to analysis, make that dimension of your study as strong and as systematic as possible, the justification for your effort. Be factual in what you report; save the controversial or contestable for your interpretative comments. You might think of the analysis you offer as earning merit that you can later redeem for the opportunity to offer your interpretations.

Sometimes, members of a dissertation committee may flat out advise that they are far less interested in what *you* make of things than with the original data you present and your tentative, close-to-the-vest analysis of those data. They will entertain a certain amount of speculation only after you have demonstrated that your study rests on a solid foundation of description and hard-nosed analysis. Ironically, should you learn that initial lesson too well, you may be surprised in subsequent writing to have an editor press for just the opposite, pushing for broad interpretive remarks when you assumed you were supposed to stick closely to your data. Thus, your “station” enters into what is expected of you or how much freedom you have to interpret your data. What you might not be allowed to do as a

beginning researcher may be expected of you once you are recognized as an experienced one.

Until the analysis is well under way, it may be difficult to know how much to include in the descriptive narrative. For starters, I think a good case can be made for drafting the descriptive part of the account prior to beginning the analysis, prior even to determining what the course of that analysis will be. (Extraneous materials can always be cut, because descriptions usually need editing for brevity.) Descriptive material written prior to intensive analysis can provide a check against the analysis itself: If the facts don't fit, something must be wrong with the interpretation. We may end up with *unexplained* findings in qualitative work, but we need not fear the *unwanted* ones that sometimes plague our more quantitatively oriented colleagues. Good qualitative research ought to confound issues, revealing them in their complexity rather than reducing them to simple explanation. If I have learned one thing from the experience of qualitative research—and the experience of life itself—it is that human behavior is *overdetermined*. Our studies should underscore that observation. Let researchers of other persuasions pursue single-issue answers to complex questions.

Whether and when to meld **interpretations** into the account as you develop it or to try to keep analysis and interpretation separate is, once again, a matter of storyteller strategy, personal style, prior experience, and “station.” Whatever your decision, do not pretend to be above the fact that there is no such thing as *pure* description. Distinguishing among description, analysis, and interpretation is a matter of emphasis. Were we not selective, and thus subjective, in our focus, we would not be able to construct our accounts at all. Without some preconceived idea of what is to be described, there can be no description. Every step of the way—from setting a problem and selecting an appropriate place, person, or group for studying it, to selective focusing within that setting, to decisions about what gets recorded and which elements of the recorded material find their way into the final account, to the style and authorial voice for accomplishing your purposes—reflects both conscious and unconscious processes of focus and selection.

The less theoretically inclined among us stake our reputations on solid (“thick,” whatever that is) description, but we all have been socialized into the subtle norms of the various disciplines that guide our resolution to the question of how much description is enough.

My assessment of qualitative studies in the field of education is that they reveal a tendency toward heavy-handed, intrusive analysis because that is what researchers in that field feel their readers expect. Schooling is so common an experience that readers are assumed to be impatient with lengthy accounts of “what everybody knows.” They do not expect or want to be told again. It is a testimonial to good reporting when a researcher presents so compelling an account that the descriptive material draws attention. The problem is further compounded by educational researchers who feel they not only know their educator audiences but know what is best for them. Informants in such accounts do little talking, the researcher does a lot. Each reported observation or quotation seems to prompt comment or interpretation on the part of the omniscient researcher, something like the chatty docent or guide who *becomes* rather than *leads* the tour and has assumed that without such a monologue, we would not know what to think.

I dub studies that exhibit intrusive analysis “Grounded Theory—But Just Barely.” In place of the careful grounding in observed behavior that we expect in qualitative inquiry, such studies seem only to skim the surface in their rush to explain how things mean. In a slight variation on this approach, researchers draw back the curtain to let us watch events unfold, but constantly interrupt with scholarly interjections, as if duty bound to remind us of their presence and superior vision.

To be able to meld description and interpretation is a worthy achievement, but at the least suspicion that your analytical or interpretive asides are interrupting rather than advancing the narrative, I suggest you make a renewed effort to keep them apart. Initially, you might set your interpretive comments in parentheses (or *italics* or **boldface**). If you are writing with a word-processing program, you can determine at a later time whether to leave them where they are, relegate them to footnotes, or collect them under a new heading where you mark a shift from descriptive to analytical mode.

If you have not become aware of how—and how easily—description segues into analysis, pay attention to the ways other researchers handle the interplay between observational or archival data and their academic tradition.³

You may be surprised, and perhaps disappointed, to discover that some of the studies you previously regarded as exemplars of descriptive work have built upon a conceptual framework apparently

well in place before the research began, with case study data playing only an illustrative role. (Small wonder, then, that data and analysis seem to blend so effortlessly.) That is a different, highly selective way to use qualitative data, something of a complement to the descriptively based approach I am discussing—and advocating—here. With conceptually oriented studies, a too-leisurely meander through descriptive material can be distracting, just as intrusive analysis can be distracting to a reader expecting a descriptive account. Remain clear in your own mind what you have set out to do, and make sure the reader clearly understands your intent.

A Reminder About Purposes and Delimitations

If you begin by devoting attention to the descriptive account, let me note as exceptions two short statements that can and should be drafted early, their location in the completed manuscript to be determined later. One is the previously discussed statement of purpose, a candidate for the opening sentence for all scholarly writing, “The purpose of this study is. . . .” The other is a broad disclaimer in which you acknowledge the limitations (or “delimitations,” as mentioned earlier) of your study: that it occurred in a particular place, at a particular time, under particular circumstances; that certain factors render the study atypical; that limited generalization is warranted, et cetera, et cetera.

Such a litany of limitations, generally applicable in all qualitative research, might bear repetition in reporting any element that could be misconstrued as unwarranted generalization. The idea behind making all of this explicit, and in doing it early, is that, having said it *once*, you do not have to repeat it for every new topic you introduce. You might think of it as a form of academic throat-clearing. Having stated your disclaimers emphatically, you will find it a great relief not to have to begin each sentence with, “Although this is a case study, and limited generalization is warranted. . . .”

THE PROBLEM OF FOCUS

I keep returning to the importance of the critical sentence, “The purpose of this study is. . . .” What if you can’t complete that sentence, because that happens to be the point at which you are stuck?

If that is where you are stuck, writing is not your problem. Your problem is conceptual, one that George Spindler labeled “the *problem* problem.” If you don’t feel you can make adequate headway with your “*problem* problem” by simply staring into space, you might try either of two approaches.

One approach is to invite a colleague with a good analytical turn of mind to have lunch with you. Order lightly so you can dominate the conversation, chatting about research concerns. Solicit help for your problem of focus. Your colleague may not prove as helpful as you hoped, but giving words to previously unexpressed thoughts may help *you*. When other people, with other thoughts on their minds, offer feedback, even if what they say widely misses the mark, you may discover that you are closer than you realized to pinpointing your ideas. Do consider drawing upon a wider network of colleagues than those who may first come to mind. Graduate students can be a great sounding board, not only for fellow students but for professors. Similarly, professors can be helpful to students, including students who are not their advisees. I’m serious about lunch, to get you away from interruption and from locales where status is fixed. What I said to students in my office always sounded a bit stilted; over lunch, my ideas had to fend for themselves (as well as compete with the french fries).

The other alternative (you might consider both) is to reinterpret the writing task as a way to *resolve* your “problem problem” rather than as the source of it. With only yourself in mind as audience, try the freewriting described earlier. Think on paper. Pin down your thoughts by giving them what Becker calls “physical embodiment” (Becker 1986:56). You may discover that a scholarly explication of the *problem* is necessary prior to proposing new empirical research. Possibly, you can develop a stimulating article (or organize a good symposium) because the problem itself has never been well formulated.

It may be helpful to think of research as problem “setting” rather than problem “solving.” In much applied research, the outcomes do not set well because the problems addressed are not well set. In this regard, we old-timers miss opportunities to model good research practice for our students. Renewed enthusiasm for a qualitative approach, especially as it has come to invite more open-endedness in what we look for and how we proceed, has exacerbated the problem of problem setting (also referred to as problem finding or problem posing—see HFW 1988). It makes no sense to go off to “do research”

without an idea of what is to be researched, even if the research is subsequently redirected or refocused. Empty-headedness is not the same as open-mindedness.

My bias may be showing, but it has always seemed to me that ethnographers have it better than most other qualitative researchers in this regard because they have such a broadly stated mandate to guide them. They study culture in general, particular aspects of it in particular: cultural themes, culture change and adaptation, political economy, social structure, worldview. I have described this broad charter as “ethnographic intent,” arguing that purpose rather than method lies at the heart of all research (HFW 1987, 1990a, 1999a, 2008a). In some quarters, qualitative research—even ethnography itself—has become synonymous with “going to have a look around.” No wonder inexperienced researchers have trouble writing up their studies when they set out with objectives so loosely defined or settings mistaken for problems.

I do not mean to create an impression that a research focus is something sacred, that once declared it warrants unwavering commitment, or that, once fixed, the course of a research project cannot be altered. Part of the strategy of qualitative inquiry—a key advantage of the flexibility we claim for it—is that our research *questions* undergo continual scrutiny. Nothing should prevent a research question or problem statement from going through a metamorphosis similar to what researchers themselves experience during the course of a study. Data gathering and data analysis inform the problem statement, just as the problem statement informs data gathering. A research proposal is only that: a *proposal*, a beginning, a starting place, literally a point of departure suggesting how one might proceed. We are burdened with strictures that we ourselves have built into our expectations about the proper conditions of research. A statement attributed to biologist Paul Weiss helps me maintain perspective in these matters: “Nobody who followed the scientific method ever discovered anything interesting” (quoted in Keesing and Keesing 1971:10).

PROBLEMS OF SORTING AND ORGANIZING DATA

If your data remain in essentially the same form in which you originally collected them, pages and pages of notes and interview protocols, I hope you don’t attribute your problem to “writer’s block.”

Your blockage has occurred at an earlier stage. If you have embarked on a descriptive broadside, you had better get back to some very basic sorting into some very basic categories and then see if you can discern some very basic questions to guide the development of your account.

Some questions that guide me (but may not work for you) are: What is going on here? How do things happen as they do? What do people in this setting have to know (individually, collectively) in order to do what they are doing? And, in the absence of explicit instruction, how are necessary skills and requisite attitudes transmitted and acquired?

Such questions guide my thinking because they address processes of culture acquisition, the underlying concern in my academic work. I do not have a problem with focus. Any problem I have is with people who do not share my sense of excitement that these are wonderful questions or who have no equally wonderful (to them, at least) questions of their own to examine. What are the questions that guide you, either of the intermediate sort that guide your current academic pursuits, or the overarching type that shape an entire career?

When you are ready to begin some initial data **sorting**, start by identifying a few of the broadest categories imaginable. How about place and/or time and/or actors as a start? You might begin your study with a snapshot in which you set the scene and introduce major actors one by one, much as if you were writing a play. Continue presenting “still shots” until you have enough elements on hand (or actors figuratively on stage) to put things in motion. This is how George Foster went about examining processes in applied anthropology in a book by that title written years ago (Foster 1969). Foster looked first at what he called the target group, the people targeted for change. Next, he did a predictable anthropological turnabout and directed attention to the innovating organization or donor group, the so-called agents of change. What was it these change agents hoped to achieve, both for the target group and for themselves? Having examined each of these two groups separately and in detail, he was then ready to turn attention to the arena in which they interacted.

You might introduce some important players, then put the scene in motion. Foster’s approach offers a straightforward way to organize a study of directed change. An awful lot (both literally and figuratively!) of dissertation study and funded research has focused on the topic of directed change, although such studies typically lack

adequate attention to the full context of it. In terms of sorting, one might begin with the very categories that Foster identified: Target Group, Innovating Organization, and Interaction Setting (Foster 1969: Chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively). Those categories not only provide an excellent way to organize a study of change processes, they also provide a model for organizing any field study focused on the effects that those in one status want to produce on those in another.

To sort your data, begin with a few categories sufficiently broad to allow you to sort *all* the data. Remember that you are only sorting. If you are having problems with what ought to be a simple, straightforward task, you are probably beginning (or hoping) to develop theory, regardless of how modest. You are trying to take two steps at once. Try taking them one at a time!

I first encountered this dilemma as I began to organize the material from my huge (in terms of pages of notes) ethnography of a school principal. I kept adding more and more categories, and the sorting became increasingly complex. I had the good luck to meet Howard Becker at the time, and he suggested that if I was having trouble sorting things out, I must be doing more than sorting things out. Was I, perhaps, beginning to develop theory, a next step? Once I simplified the system, the sorting became easy. With my data adequately sorted, I could consider some refinements.

Becker's advice in those pre-word-processing days was to put important bits of data (quotes from informants, an observation, a vignette, an insight recorded during note taking) on individual 3×5 or 5×8 cards, or half-sheets of typing paper. The sorting was literal: one sat at a table (or on the floor) and physically sorted a stack of data "papers" by putting them into smaller piles according to categories that allowed a first run at the organizing task.

The big technological breakthrough of the day was the keysort punch card, an index card ringed with holes that could be punched open according to whatever coding system the researcher devised. With your keysort cards lined up, each card code-punched to index the data contained on it, you had only to insert one or more rods through the entire deck of cards and then give them a good shake. Your coding and punching system allowed the rods to separate the cards containing selected data from the rest.

I grew accustomed to putting data on 5×8 papers, easily typed or handwritten, easily stored, and easily sorted. My stacks of cards or

papers must seem archaic in this computer age, but I describe them to help you visualize processes partially hidden by technology. I encourage students engaging in preliminary fieldwork exercises to do the same, manually manipulating actual bits of data—rather than electronic bytes—to get a physical feel for what they are trying to accomplish. Software programs make all this faster and less cumbersome today (for **further discussions** of coding and analysis, see Bernard 1994, 2000; Ryan and Bernard 2000; Weitzman 2000), but keep in mind the simple task you are trying to accomplish, and keep the task you are trying to accomplish simple.

I marvel at new programs available for data management and analysis with personal computers, particularly those programs that are especially suited to the requirements of qualitative researchers, such as text management.⁴ But I share with others a concern that most programs are better attuned to the almost limitless capacities of the microcomputer than to the finite capacities of human researchers. For example, in THE ETHNOGRAPH, one of the earliest programs developed specifically to handle the kinds of data obtained through fieldwork, and still going strong,⁵ a "line" of text—ranging from a single word to an entire interview—can be coded into as many as seven different categories. That was obviously a great convenience when one finally arrived at the categorizing stage, but it presented an almost irresistible temptation for anyone who had not yet reached that stage. For someone having trouble *sorting* data, a program that allows for no more than two or three categories proves a blessing in disguise. Moreover, computers are so engaging that they draw researchers away from the central task of thinking about their research focus and reorient them to a data-entering ritual that is often tangential to the research problem itself, a great opportunity for avoidance behavior and far more fun!

Again I note: The critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to "can" (i.e., get rid of) much of the data you accumulate. That requires constant winnowing, including decisions about data not worth entering in the first place. The idea is to discover essences and then to reveal those essences with sufficient context, yet not become mired by trying to include everything that might possibly be described. Audiotapes, videotapes, and computer capabilities entreat us to do just the opposite; they have gargantuan appetites—and stomachs. Because we can accommodate ever-increasing quantities of data—mountains of it—we have to be careful not to get buried in avalanches of our own making.

This problem of data overload has an earlier parallel in one of the unanticipated consequences of the copy machines now a common feature of everyday life. In my student days, when we were given a reading assignment, we went to the library and read the material, typically distilling key ideas by copying in longhand a few telling quotes. Today's students copy (or download) entire articles—even whole books—often without going to the library at all. Their visits to their sources, whether real or virtual, are more efficient than ours were, except in one important way: at the end of the visit, they have not yet begun to satisfy the assignment. When they do get around to their reading, they will probably underline or highlight huge passages of text, rather than identify key phrases and summarize the rest in their own words. That is not good training for doing descriptive research. The parallel style in fieldwork is referred to disparagingly as the “vacuum-cleaner” approach: the fieldworker attempts to see and record *everything*, and that simply cannot be done.⁶ There is a distinction to be made between researchers who try to impress us with how *much* they have observed and those who impress us with how *well* they have observed.

Let me bring this message home with the consequences of the vacuum-cleaner approach for a dissertation study that was being written while I was preparing the first edition of this monograph. I was a member of the dissertation committee, not the chair, but in some ways I felt responsible as the instructor who had “inspired” a capable doctoral student to embrace a qualitative approach on the basis of coursework taken with me. The student, Alfred (a pseudonym, of course), was a veteran public school teacher with particular interest in social studies. Alfred originally proposed an ambitious year-long study of his own social studies classroom, to include videotaping, diary-keeping, test results, student reactions, observations conducted by independent observers—you name it, he included it. I eventually realized that as members of his dissertation committee, we were remiss in not pressing him for a tighter focus in his proposal. We did not want to appear carping, so we lauded Alfred's thoroughness and capacity for detail when we might better have insisted on his doing less. Too, we already had at hand his massive review of the literature, which we mistakenly took as a good sign instead of a bad one, for it was exhaustive rather than selective. What a service a section on “delimitations” might have provided!

We didn't see Alfred on campus again for several years. He returned to classroom teaching, having used his allotted study leave to pursue coursework prior to doing his dissertation research rather than after it, the typical but unfortunate pattern of many doctoral programs in professional schools. We kept receiving progress reports that things were going well—for example, that the first three chapters were “already completed.” Realistically, that news didn't reflect as much progress as it seems. His proposal had been so extensive that it virtually overwhelmed Chapter One. The literature review constituted a ready-made, if tedious, Chapter Two. Chapter Three exhausted method. At that point, Alfred became so mired in data that, like Anne Lamott's brother trying to prepare a classroom assignment about birds, he was immobilized, caught in the trap of inadequately focused research. The face-saving element was that his problem was attributed to writer's block. He did eventually finish, but without the sense of satisfaction he had anticipated. It had been more like a prolonged and unpleasant experience in accomplishing something minimally satisfactory instead of a highly anticipated first step into a new phase of his career.

SUMMING UP: PUTTING IDEAS TO THE TEST

Let me pause to check on whether you feel you can “get going” before I turn to a chapter intended to help you keep going.

- Try drafting (or revising) a “statement of purpose” for a possible study that you might conduct or a descriptive article you already have in mind. Use your statement as a way to make the ideas discussed here pertain specifically to your professional interests. Now, can you winnow your written statement of purpose to 25 words or less?

- What if you happen to feel that I have overestimated you? You do not feel that you have any grasp of how to proceed or even how to propose a statement of purpose. Proceeding with any kind of writing seems out of the question. There is still hope.

Forget all the steps suggested above, and simply tell the story of what you did and what “they” did. Answer the question, “What is going on here?” If there was some sort of event or “treatment” involved, tell how things looked before and after the treatment. Describe what you observed in careful detail. Because you are

describing from one point of view only (your own), try describing the way you imagine it looked from the viewpoint of others at the scene. There, that gets you started, and with that much of a start, others might be summoned to help you couch the kind of issue you are trying to investigate.

- I assume, with Sholem Asch, that when you have something important to say, you can find a way to say it. Think of me looking over your shoulder, reading what you have typed onto the screen, perhaps pushing you with a prompt like, “In terms of what?” or “Then what happened?” or “Why are you telling us that?” Regardless of the explanation you offer, count on me to insist that you be more specific, more revealing, more . . . honest and direct? Don’t worry if you are perplexed; no one will insist that you have to know everything!

- Once you have something written that suggests your purpose, try to refine (and perhaps shorten) it. Then, from what you know, identify the major topics that you plan to address and the order in which you intend to address them. Assign each topic a tentative number of pages. Then begin your writing, using the writing process to help you continually to refine your statement of purpose.

- Find some relatively easy place to begin the writing—perhaps describing how or why you approached the topic. You don’t have to begin at the beginning. Write whatever parts seem ready to be written; you can plug in sections as they are completed. You don’t need an introduction until you have something to introduce. If you find the idea attractive, consider writing a very rough first draft before you begin the actual research.

NOTES

1. In a workshop on ethnographic writing held in November 2000, anthropologist Regna Darnell suggested “standpoint” as an alternative to the sometimes ambiguous term “voice.”

2. For instance, reporting percentage figures for the often tiny populations with which we work. Consider the difference in reporting that 23% of village households had washing machines or that 3 of the 13 households had them.

3. For an example and extended discussion on editing and using historical documents, see Stevens and Burg (1997); for internet inquiry see Markham and Baym (2009).

4. Text management is only one of the functions that software programs address. Weitzman identifies four additional software types: text retrievers, code-and-retrieve programs, code-based theory builders, and conceptual network builders (2000:808–810). The wide variety of programs serve different functions. Information on the web can be particularly helpful on this point. To learn what Wikipedia has to say about qualitative research, you might want to see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qualitative_research. See also Lewins (2009).

5. For the most recent updated information on THE ETHNOGRAPH, see <http://www.qualisresearch.com/>.

6. Howard Becker reports how he used to “drive students crazy” in his fieldwork seminars by insisting they report in greater and greater detail until they finally realized that it is *impossible* to observe and record “everything”; at that point, he wanted them to think about what they *really* wanted to learn from an observation, because “the trick in observing is to get curious about things you hadn’t noticed before” (Becker 2007:88–89).