

Enhance Your Qualitative Analysis with Writing: Four Principles of Writing as Inquiry

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Sometimes life still surprises. And in good ways too. The unexpected response to our editorial: “5 Steps to Writing More Engaging Qualitative Research” (Mitchell & Clark, 2018) compels us to share more on how to use writing not just as a means to communicate research, but as its very aid. Writing not just of research but as research.

We had aimed in that editorial to consider strategies those doing qualitative research could use to enliven and create spark in their qualitative research paper-writing. To not only help participant stories to better shine but for qualitative writers themselves to feel and be transformed by their data. Writing, for us, is more than passive impartation of research results: rather, we sought researchers to be freer to express themselves in their qualitative writing and be liberated from the boxed-in confines of objectivism implicit in many accounts of what writing is and should be in research writing genres.

What we did not expect was for researchers to *need* our paper to give permission to take risks in their writing. The need for and nature of this permission was evident in how the editorial has been cited. Citation practices, after all, reveal clues to tacit institutional structures, the adept ways research writers navigate nuanced disciplinary expectations of knowledge-display (Swales, 2004) and ultimately stake their position (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). In the case of methodological citations, they elucidate signs of research hegemony—alerting the reader to when the writer perceived the need to justify precedence (Swales, 2004). Citations to our editorial edged to supporting the methodological—being cited as personal justification for a researcher not being beholden to objectivist principles privileged in the research community (McCormack et al., 2020), to identify the importance of developing your own research voice (Wise, 2021), and the importance of writing and language as a tool for expressing

humanity in qualitative data (Dubovicki, 2019). Other possible uses may be to justify writing with a particular voice or style; or in a letter to an editor to justify a writing decision in response to a reviewer comment that criticized the presence of a writer in a text through use of first person or other voice writing.

Here’s the Catch: Permission was Right in Front of You All Along

Those writing qualitative research appear to hunger for pragmatic writing strategies to stimulate their thinking and further enhance their methods. Those who have cited us present our strategies as novel, which risks obscuring substantial work that has advocated for writing’s place not only for reporting research, but in and as research unto itself.

Indeed, exploration of writing as an act of method in the research process is well-established. When writing and interpretation are deeply intertwined (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005), writing in qualitative analysis can transform data into a meaningful human experience for readers. Writing does not just report—but adds to and becomes part of the research method. Laurel Richardson’s chapter describing, “Writing: A method of inquiry” has been present in the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* since its first edition in 1994. The chapter has undergone revisions in every edition since, with Elizabeth St Pierre joining Richardson as chapter author for the 3rd edition (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). In Richardson

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and St Pierre's work, writing is no mere functional act but an expression of advocacy for those writing qualitative research which situates power in writing as a method of transforming qualitative research data. Richardson and St Pierre legitimize the use of writing in ways and with a voice that those with a well-established writing identity already often embody. Moving their ambitions for writing beyond the abstract or idealistic, their chapter also helpfully provides writing exercises researchers can use to discover how writing can *enhance* their research methods.

More recently, Kakali Bhattacharya (2017) promotes writing as part of qualitative research methods in her book designed to accompany a qualitative research course and help novices plan their studies as reflective practice. Writing here is part of the process of critically reflecting on data: sorting out codes, categories, and themes. Writing is discovery. Using writing as an analysis strategy can make analysis a dynamic process where analytical thinking can be brought to life.

Recognizing many researchers may already use writing in their method, we now will delve deeper into how writing enhances qualitative analysis.

Principles of Using Writing as Part of Qualitative Methods

What, then, are the principles of using writing as a method of inquiry? Writing, indeed, can be used in many ways. I (Kim) used writing as a method of inquiry in my own qualitative research as I sorted through 20 interviews with nursing students describing their experiences of navigating the writing context in nursing education (Mitchell et al., 2021). Some of my writing exercises were of my own design. One of them was forced by format—a three-minute thesis. The final act of writing inquiry occurred while preparing my manuscript for publication, because even preparing a paper for publication, is an act of analyzing your data into a reader-based form.

In some of my past workshops (Alex) on writing qualitative papers for journals that are general or “mainstream” and higher impact, the “MARKET” writing exercise (Clark & Sousa, 2018) for participants encourages them to break their paper down—then explode it up into a structured format that steers (aka forces!) writers to identify: Key (M)essages, knowledge community (A)udience, (R)hetorical moves justifying the paper, (K)ey journals, (E)nveloping of frame, and (T)itle. MARKET is about using writing to tell your story in a very different way to reflect the genre-norms and disciplinary debate of often unfamiliar territory. It is also a means for participants to realize, often for the first time, they can engage with new and different communities in writing without compromising their values or scholarship.

How to start using writing as qualitative analysis? Here we offer some useful principles.

Principle 1: Listen for Earworms

Ever get an endless five-second loop of a song stuck in your head? Sometimes it is a favorite song. Other times, this five-second earworm is the most annoying song you've heard all year—that single line of any song that repeats itself over and over again to the point of distraction. Working with qualitative data, we become intimately enmeshed with the words of our participants. Listen and you might find participant quotes acting like that single line of a song playing over and over again in your thinking. The rhythm. The tone. The inflection. The emotion. I (Kim) listen to these data earworms as a sign my subconscious is sending me a message. *Data earworms* can be the core of your data.

I had several data earworms emerge as I relistened to the interviews with the student participants and explored transcripts. One earworm that emerged loud and early in the analysis process was the simple phrase, “It depends on the professor.” I was overcome by the notion that all of my participants spoke about how they had to adapt their writing to the needs of a teacher and then re-adapt over and over in every classroom. This earworm became the focus of my first writing as a method of inquiry exercise which took the form of a blog post exploring student hyper-focus on teacher preferences (Mitchell, 2019). Framing my analysis around this data earworm, led me to question the role of teacher power in manipulating what students write and alerted me to the interpretive possibility that students perceived having little control over their own writing success. I was forced to reflect upon what this meant for student learning in higher education. What damage were we causing?

The next earworm spawned a musical earworm because it reminded me of a song. “Follow the rubric, follow the rubric,” the student said, and there I was—*humming*—“Follow the yellow brick road.” This earworm spawned a metaphor. It not only spoke to the need to strictly follow rules as part of the student journey with writing in nursing but it also triggered me to reflect upon if there was some parallel between the four travellers in the *Wizard of Oz*, with their individual heart's desires, and the student behaviors I had heard about in my interviews. It was not difficult to latch onto this metaphor to inform my analysis. There was the student only concerned with grades (Scarecrow-Brain), the student who would not take risks (Lion-Courage), the student who only wanted to preserve their own sense of self and individuality (Tin Man-Heart) and the student who did not feel like they fit in (Dorothy-Home). This “follow the rubric” earworm became the core of my second writing as a method of inquiry exercise when I had to write a three-minute thesis script for an event within my doctoral program. I eventually turned that script into an animated video describing the results of my study (Mitchell, 2020).

Principle 2: Write Stream of Consciousness

If earworms are the place to start, they can initiate a domino interpretive effect on the wider narrative. After the earworm

was recognized, writing the rest of the narrative became about writing the next idea that popped into my head. “Stream of consciousness” writing is writing what comes to mind with no regard for cohesion or the fit of that thought with the previous thought or any sort of perfection of language. Your writing can and likely should be colloquial—phrased in the kind of frustrated slang you might use with a close friend or the emotional passion you might share with a lover. You pull no punches; you do not—DO NOT—self-censor. No one but you will see this writing in this state. You want to remain rooted in your data during the stream of consciousness process— but also—let go: and let your subconscious guide you.

Alluding to related literature is also acceptable while stream of consciousness writing. But stream of consciousness writing means not stopping to look things up or find sources even if they come to mind. For example, “You know, that *Happy Academic* book had some acronym for helping you figure out how to structure ‘selling’ your ideas.” (REF?). It does not matter if your earworms are an exact quote from your participant. In fact, I do not think a single participant exactly said, “It depends on the professor,” but they said many variations that held the same deeper meaning. For the animated video, I frequently chose words of participants to place in the thought bubbles attributed to an animated character. The essence is correct—keyword choices often belong to the participant—but they are rarely strung in the exact phrasing of the participants. If exact wording becomes important it can be corrected eventually. In stream of consciousness writing, you write and, if needed, edit later. You do not have to share your writing inquiries publicly but if you do (as I did), you can tone down the ranting, the four-letter words, the embarrassing gushing, the language shortcuts. But until that point, the writing must be raw and be organic.

Principle 3: Data have Plots

Where can this consciousness take you? Many years ago, I (Kim) participated in a creative writing mentorship through the Manitoba Writers’ Guild and an early conversation I had with my mentor was about Christopher [Booker’s \(2004\)](#) work describing the seven basic plots in fiction.

1. Overcoming the monster
2. Rags to Riches
3. The Quest
4. Voyage and Return
5. Comedy
6. Tragedy
7. Rebirth

Your qualitative data has a plot too. By virtue of my *Wizard of Oz* metaphor, I saw the data I was exploring as a journey (aka: The Quest). When working with writing as an inquiry, even if it is a cornerstone of your chosen method to code your

interviews down to micro segments, your writing exercises should work as story. Passages or sentences will inspire the plot points. If you are paying attention to your earworms, the themes that stand out for you will relate back to that plot.

To harness Booker’s plot typologies: your stream of consciousness writing will likely also outline the plot. In plots describing The Quest, the characters on the journey are seeking a valuable treasure. For my student participants, that treasure was often “making the grade.” The students were not on their quests alone. They were joined on the journey by other students on the same quest, taking different approaches. Their teachers, librarians, writing tutors, family, and other friends also appeared along the way to support (or sometimes thwart) The Quest. The plot points for Christopher Booker’s basic plots are easy to find using Google. Once you can identify the plot of your data, you can map that plot on paper and it may form a suitable outline for interpreting and then ordering the categories and themes from your analysis when writing your manuscript.

You are not married to Booker’s exact plot points. The success and popularity of his work resides in the fact that he has capitalized on common tropes of a plethora of famous stories. Tropes are clichés. Maybe your data has two plots? Maybe your data story has two parallel stories taking place? In my analysis journey, as what might happen in a novel, I decided to start with the device of introducing my four main characters. Those four “sheroes” and “heroes” were now each behaving differently in the environment where the most successful strategy for writing success was to “follow the rubric.” They each navigated successfully (or unsuccessfully) the need to figure out their teachers.

My readers needed to know who these characters were in order to connect them to the plot of The Quest and make meaning out of my data. However, my readers, as they read, will also layer their own interpretations on top of my interpretation of the plot. How does that happen? For that we can look to interpretive philosophy.

Principle 4: Imagine Your Readers Conducting a Transaction with Your Written Words or Principle 4: Interpretation is Inescapable

Meaning only comes through interpretation ([Palmer, 1969](#)). At this point, your work is specific enough to move to the abstract. There are a lot of parallels between qualitative analysis and literary criticism. Data are story. Successfully using writing as a method of inquiry means playing the literary critic and critical reader of your data. To do so, you must hold the epistemological belief that as you read the printed words of your participants, you must pay attention to the meandering scattered thoughts the reading stimulates in your mind, and those thoughts are contributing to an interpreted truth.

Your role then as reader is to interpret meaning—deliberately “bringing in” aspects of your own individuality to your “read” of your research data ([Crotty, 1998](#)). This

evokes the hermeneutical Gadamerian concept of fusion of horizons which posits that a reader only ever understands a text through their own personal positioning in relation to that text (Palmer, 1969). The meaning formed through a fusion of horizons is neither fully about either the reader or the text. The author is also present in the text but upon reading, the reader finds themselves present in the text through interpretation (Austgard, 2012).

Constructing meaning may require you take disparate pieces of information and interpret a new complex whole through integration. The disparate parts are the words the participant said in the interview, the words as they read on the page in a transcript of those interviews, and the personal history, culture, context, worldview, memory, and knowledge of language of the researcher as reader-analyzer-interpreter. The individualization which Gadamer views as your horizon is informed from what you know about prior literature, theoretical perspectives you have worked with in designing the study, and your own personal life experience and culture (Straw, 1990). These are all relevant forms of knowledge that inform interpretation both consciously and unconsciously in the qualitative analysis process.

When you write, as an author you may use language in such a way that your socially constructed perspective can be detected in the text via markers of identity which your future readers will interact with knowingly as they make their own transactional interpretations of your qualitative analysis (Ivanič, 1997). You, the author, might use first person, reveal a bit of your history, reveal biases and assumptions, or describe a personal connection to a research topic to trigger your presence in the text. Through writer and reader relations, “*stories become a constructed understanding of the constructed participant’s constructed point of view*” (Mantzoukas, 2010, p. 427). Hence, what a researcher establishes when interpreting qualitative transcripts into manuscript form is an interpretation of an already constructed reality of the participants, by a researcher who is constructing a reality from their research data. Interpretation is at every turn.

Palmer (1969) reminds that even writing down words as they were spoken instantly weakens the interpretations of those words because the symbols on the page take away inflection, emotion, and the embodiment of those words. The notion of verbatim qualitative transcription as anything but a highly porous vessel for meaning is undermined. Never discount how those transcripts you work from, were originally spoken words. You can often hear exactly the way the participants spoke the words when you read those passages, but your readers do not and cannot, and instead layer in their own inflection, emotion, and embodiment of those words. Readers cannot escape their own interpretation.

What then can you do to the text to help enhance the lost layers of interpretations? Can you describe their tone of voice, their body positioning? Can you use italics, all capitals, ... ellipses, or other strategies to represent, as inadequate as it may feel, the sound of your participant’s voices? Every time

you read (or listen to) your qualitative data it could elicit a different interpretation if for no other reason than you have already read (or listened to) the data once previously (Straw, 1990). Writing multiple writing inquiry efforts means you will record those multiple “reads” or interpretations of your data. Similarly, because all writing is connected to previous writing through the Bakhtinian concept of intertextuality (Artemeva, 2004), each text you generate, including the final writing of a manuscript for publication, will act as a record of how your data analysis grew into its final interpreted truth. Your reading of your data is a transaction, your writing of your data is another transaction, and the readers of your writing will engage in transactions of their own.

Does the centrality and inescapability of interpretation cast your well-intended efforts as an author to be irrelevant or futile? Indeed—it is the ultimate irrelevancy of the author’s intentions to meaning and interpretation that allows classical texts the power to be timeless—to be interpreted by readers of vastly different ages and circumstances to the author (Palmer, 1969). Yet, perhaps this inevitability, rather than leading to despondency, should liberate authors to creatively convey *their* meaning, play with genre as they see fit, and use writing creatively to explore and discover—to speak their truth or their horizon. To inquire.

We hope so.

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