

How to write a qualitative article

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Qualitative research

- Usually fewer observations than in quantitative studies
- The researcher's preconception of a phenomenon not as determining for the results: results often used for studies of social processes, or reasons behind behaviour, "the why and how of social matters"

Variation is good: this is a guide for the cautious

- Qualitative articles can be very different: from historical studies to treatment outcomes
- There is a tendency in the world of scientific journal publishing to standardisation and superficiality
- Some structural and technical features are always good to follow; and especially for a less experienced writer

Increasing demand and special challenges

- Qualitative studies used f.i. in policy evaluation, program implementation
- Growing interest in mixed methods: two data sets which are collected and analysed to complement each other

Qualitative writing demands the same general skills as quantitative, but prejudices and communication barriers are additional challenges

For instance: few competent referees, fewer journals and "quantitative" hegemony in science

What Editors Want

Quality

Originality

Good methods

A good fit to the journal

No trouble

Structure of chapter

- Some characteristics in the quali study process that impact the reporting
- Common criteria for good qualitative research
- Evaluation principles for journals
- Practical advice to writers

Similarities and differences between quantitative and qualitative research

- All social research aims at an adequate description of an historically specific topic, subject or target; behavioral and medical science aim more at generalizability
- In qualitative research the determination of the study subject is as important as the choice of a population in a statistical study
- The description of the subject of a study in both cases requires a conceptually well organized analysis (theoretical task)
- Classification, deduction and interpretation fundamentally similar

Characteristics in the quali study process that impact the reporting

- Collection and processing of data more intertwined in quali studies – often interpretations during study process, methods can change due to interim results, the relation to the study object can be a challenge, the handling and storing of the data often not self-evident
- The dataset is not so clearly demarcated

Researchers, referees and editors evaluation criteria for qualitative analyses

- Significance of the data set;
contextualisation and production
conditions
- Sufficiency of the data
- Coverage of the analysis
- Transparency and repeatability of the
analysis

Significance: contextualisation and production conditions

- Argue for the importance of your data
- Discuss the production conditions of cultural products: who produced, in what situation, with what intention, with what impact on the surrounding
- Contextualise your data and show their cultural representativity (and how they can be compared to structural counterparts in other cultures)
- In discourse analyses: what discourse have you caught with your data (of all the ways a person can discuss a certain thing)?
- Consider possible power structures and gender relations in the social situation of data gathering

Sufficiency

- Difficult to know in advance how much data is needed for "saturation"
- Do not collect too little but not too much data either – divide the analyses into small parts and you will have manageable results for a publishable report
- Group the data collection around the varying production conditions that you think are of importance

Coverage of analysis

- Base your interpretation on the whole data set, not on intuition

Transparency and repeatability of the analysis

- The reader shall be able to follow the argumentation: either be convinced or be able to challenge the conclusions. The reader must not feel that she is left at the mercy of the researchers intuition
- Present the rules of interpretation clearly:
 - a) Enumerate the data
 - b) Divide the interpretation into small steps
 - c) Make explicit rules of decision and interpretation

Common reasons for rejection of qualitative papers

- * Research question not clearly stated
- * Unclear structure of paper
- * Theories, methods and data analysis not consistent
- * Central concepts not presented or used consistently
- * Poor methodology
- * Not convincing defence of size of dataset
- * Data set not contextualised, selection bias
- * Poor data collection (validity)
- * Methods and analysis not explained properly
- * Unsound conclusions or unfounded generalisations
- * Violations of ethical rules
- * Text too long

Format and structure of the paper

If you target a specific journal, be sure to follow the format they prefer

If you want a broader choice of journals:
maybe a very traditional article structure

Title of the article

- The research question
- Maybe also indicate your data set
- Give realistic expectations

Research question

- Present it early on, maybe under a special subtitle
- Check that you don't present new research question later on in text
- Concentrate on one question and formulate it so that it orients the readers interest and poss. links it to your methods and ambitions: do you explore, discover, present a perspective, raise consciousness, evaluate, test etc
- Readers are not as a rule interested in if and when you changed your research question

Review of earlier research

- Shows that you want to take your place in the research community, in dialogue with other researchers
- Be careful: cover the culturally relevant literature, but do not limit yourself to that
- Not only descriptive: position yourself vs earlier research. What has not been missed by earlier writers? Why do you want to build on someone else's work?
- The literature review naturally leads to your theoretical and methodological position and choice of data. Choose the literature that has theoretical relevance
- Do a thorough review and you avoid unfavourable referees

Presentation of methods and data

- Justify the choice of methods, possibly by explaining why not alternatives
- If several methods, explain how they complement each other
- Describe the content of the method: readers will probably not know it.
- Show that the method has been used systematically, on the whole data set. Use your central concepts consistently
- Argue for the size of your sample and be precise in describing it. Position it, but economically. Why this data set and not alternatives?
- What criteria did you use for picking the sample? What were the variations within the sample? If you use only a part of your total data, describe the rest of the data briefly
- How was the data produced and collected? How was the study for instance introduced to the participants?
- Describe the analysis step by step. Maybe a detailed description of one observation/item to show how your analysis and interpretations were done. Show how you argued for saturation, handled diversity and contradictions.
- Describe how you handled your data (transcription, coding, grouping etc)

Results

- Make it easy for the reader: link the presentation to the research question, following the logics of your theory and methods, with consistent concepts
- Present your data systematically: quotations, field notes and other documentations shall be easy to identify
- Give enough, but not too much, raw data. Avoid very short quotations. Use maybe appendices
- Do not present new kinds of data which were not introduced in the data and methods section. Be open about contradictions

Discussion

- Start with repeating and motivating very briefly the research question and stating the main results of your study in one sentence.
- How do your findings relate to earlier research (including quantitative)? Can your results change the picture and understanding of something? How can the results be generalised to other situations?
- What are the limitations of your study? Problems with sample and data collection so that your question was not fully answered? What data or method could possibly have complemented it?
- What questions do you recommend for further research?

Some general advices

- Save your good data for scientific articles
- Choose the right journal: 30 addiction journal publish qualitative research
- Suggest suitable referees