9

Writing Up Action Research

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

9.1 Describe the value of writing about action research.
9.2 Utilize strategies for writing about action research.
9.3 Describe guidelines for submitting your action research write-up for publication.

There is little point to writing up qualitative research if we cannot get anyone to read what we have to report, and no point to research without reporting.

(Wolcott, 2001, p. 7)

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks confronting teacher researchers is finding the time and inclination to commit to paper what they have learned about their area of focus. For university researchers who live in a "publish or perish" world, the motivation to write up and publish their research is far more extrinsic. However, teacher researchers are more concerned about the pressures and complexities of daily classroom life—after all, their number one priority is the planning, implementation, and evaluation of engaging learning experiences for the children in their classrooms.

Still, teacher researchers can help fellow teachers as well as themselves by writing about action research in a prescribed way—in an organized report. Think of this last step as helping to close the gap that has historically existed between research and practice. It is important to be familiar with a form that is most commonly accepted for publication in journals and certainly for satisfying traditional university course requirements.

There are two primary motivations for writing up your action research:

1. *The act of writing helps each of us better understand the story we are trying to tell.*
2. *A written account provides us with a permanent, accessible record for our professional and personal use.*

Many of my students find themselves writing not by choice but by mandate (you may well be in the same situation!). In fact, some of you may see the very act of writing up your studies as unpleasant—just one more term paper to complete, another hoop to jump through. On the other hand, you may not mind writing but still may be frustrated by some of the nuts-and-bolts issues associated with writing and finding an audience for your work. Read on! I can't guarantee that the outcome of your writing journey will be publication in a prestigious journal or text. I can guarantee, however, that if you invest the time and energy into writing your research story, you will at least benefit your students as well as give yourself the opportunity to have it read by like-minded folks. And what could be more altruistic than helping other teachers help their students? What's that saying about if a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, did it make a sound? The same is true for writing up our research efforts. If you don't share your stories, how will anyone know you ever did anything that contributed to the teachers' body of knowledge?

Before our discussion about formally writing about your action research, we need to discuss the value of writing up your action research experience and findings.

Why Should I Formally Write About My Action Research?

Perhaps one of the most difficult concepts I have to "sell" to teacher researchers is the importance of "writing up" their research efforts; they struggle to see the value of it. These teachers are focused on understanding the impact of what they do in classrooms and on how and what their students learn. In short, these professional teachers are committed to improving their own practice but do not necessarily see the purpose of sharing what they have learned with a wider audience. Often teacher researchers have declared to me,

> I developed my action plan based on what I learned. . . . I am making a difference in my own classroom for my own kids. What does it matter if somebody else reads about what I did and learned?
>
> Writing up what I have done and trying to publish the story is not rewarded or recognized as important by my school and district. Why bother if nobody cares?

Again, this is a difficult argument to win when one argues on the basis of giving back to the profession and contributing to the knowledge base, and blah, blah, blah! Yet as members of a profession, we have to get beyond the point that writing up research is something that is done by academics in ivory towers.

The value in writing up your research is that the process of writing requires the writer to clarify meaning—to choose words carefully, thoughtfully describe that which is experienced or seen, reflect on experiences, and refine phrasing when putting words on a page. You may learn something important about your students and their learning—something you may have missed had you not considered your words on the page—as you formally write about your research. Furthermore, the act of putting information on paper for your peers necessitates honesty, accuracy, clarity, and thought, thereby encouraging you to create a better product than if you had simply made a mental note of your action research as you left school at the end of the day. So keep this reason in mind as you engage in this writing phase of your research:

- *Clarification.* Writing your research requires clarity and accuracy of expression. Writing about your research activities encourages thought and reflection and perhaps creates new questions that are resolved, a process that shapes and completes your research.

Other reasons to write up your research include the following:

- *Validation.* Publishing your research and the feedback you will receive from your reviewers and readers will validate who you are as a professional educator and what you do.
- *Empowerment.* Reflecting on your practices through writing will empower you to continue to challenge the status quo and be an advocate for your children.
- *It is generative.* Writing is a generative activity that culminates in a product, something tangible that you can share with colleagues, supervisors, and parents.
- *Accomplishment.* Writing up your research will provide you with a sense of accomplishment. It is both humbling and exciting when colleagues read your work and compliment you on your accomplishments!

Format and Style

Format refers to the general pattern of organization and arrangement of the research report. The number and types of headings and subheadings to be included in the report are determined by the format used. Style refers to the rules of grammar, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and word processing followed in preparing the report. Formats may vary in terms of specific headings included, and research reports generally follow a format that parallels the steps involved in conducting a study. For example, although one format may call for a discussion section and another format may require a summary or conclusions and a recommendations

section (or both), all formats require a section in which the results of the study are discussed and interpreted. All research reports also include a condensed description of the study, whether it be a summary of a dissertation or an abstract of a journal article.

Most colleges, universities, and professional journals either have developed their own required style manual or have selected one that must be followed. Check with your instructor about the style used in your institution. Do this before beginning writing, because rearranging a format after the fact is tedious and time consuming. One such manual, which is increasingly being required as a guide for theses and dissertations, is the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2009), also called the *APA Style Manual* (currently in its sixth edition). If you are not bound by any particular format and style system, the APA manual is recommended, as it is the most widely accepted academic format and style system used by colleges, universities, and journals. In addition to acquiring and studying a copy of the selected manual, it is also very helpful to study several reports that have been written following the same manual. For example, look at existing action research write-ups to get an idea of format and what is expected. To the degree possible (e.g., with respect to tables, figures, references, and student examples of tasks), this text you are reading reflects APA guidelines, as does the following discussion. Are you sold on the idea of writing? If so, let's forge ahead with examining an example of an action research article.

Sample Annotated Action Research Article

The following research article is reprinted here so that you may examine the general structure and components of written action research. I hope that you will refer to this example frequently as you write your first action research report. Just as you'tve been trained to observe your students, be observant as you read the following article and consciously note the various components of this written report: the headings, some of the phrases that are characteristic of particular sections of the write-up, and the meaning of each section. As you will soon see (or perhaps you came to this realization earlier), the organization of an action research write-up is not rocket science. In fact, the sections that follow predictably mirror the core chapters of this text and the Steps in the Action Plan: the Area of Focus Statement, Research Questions, Review of Literature, Data Collection, Data Analysis, and the Action Plan. (Look at the Contents of this text—look familiar?)

Now that you'tve seen a sample of something you might produce, let's discuss some nuts-and-bolts ideas on writing up action research.

Catchy Title →

"Come to My Web (Site)," Said the Spider to the Fly: Reflections on the Life of a Virtual Professor

Geoff Mills

This paper was presented at the Third Conference of the Self-Study in Teacher Education Practices group at Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex, England, July 2000, and is included in the proceedings for the conference.

Abstract

Intervention or Innovation →

The purpose of this paper is to share the results of a 2-year study that focused on the effects of teaching action research via a web-based class. In a market-driven economy in which many universities now find themselves, web-based delivery of education classes has become increasingly popular. This paper will share the findings of a study that looked at the experiences of teaching and learning action research in a web-based environment.

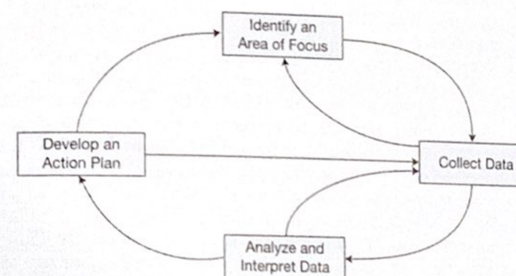
Introduction

In recent years, Oregon universities have moved to decrease the amount of "satellite" time associated with distance learning classes and to increase the amount of support made available to students "on-line." As a result of the Learning Anywhere, Anytime Project (LAAP) grant by the Oregon University System, the Education Department at Southern Oregon University is pioneering the development and implementation of completely web-based graduate classes in education. This paper is based on my experiences of teaching a web-based version of action research for two terms in 2 consecutive years.

Context →

The Action Research course is a 10-week introductory, graduate level class focused on the development, implementation, and evaluation of action research. One of the goals of the web-based class is to maximize the interaction between the instructor and the students, and among the students. In order to encourage this interaction, students "post" their responses to weekly tasks as well as respond to other students in the class. Additionally, the class utilizes a listserv and a discussion board (chat room). In order to complete the course, students are required to write a review of related literature, respond to weekly postings and tasks, and complete an action research project. Students register for the class and request a copy of the required text by calling a toll-free number or registering on-line. The course is based around the text *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher* (Mills, 2000) and is supplemented with PowerPoint presentations that can be downloaded from the course web site. A complete overview of the class can be accessed at the following URL using the password "research" to enter the class: http://www.collegecourse.com/sou/ed/ed519/.

Action research involves teacher researchers in a four-step process that includes the following: identifying an area of focus, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and action planning. In doing action research, teacher researchers have developed solutions to their own problems and as such are the authoritative voices as to what works in their particular settings. They exhibit a professional disposition that is encapsulated in their willingness to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that influence their daily instructional practices. By modeling the action research process for my graduate education students, I believe that I am able to nurture the development of a teacher researcher professional disposition and, in some ways, to demystify the process. My students are able to witness the development of an emerging action research project that involves them in the data collection process. They are also able to see a teacher who is committed to improving his own teaching through the use of an action research model. For many of my students, this is a revelation in itself—that someone who teaches at a university would actually want to improve his practice! Therefore, this paper is structured using the action research conceptual framework I use to teach action research: The Dialectic Action Research Spiral.



Area of Focus Statement

Area of Focus Statement →

The purpose of this study was to describe the effects of web-based instruction in a distance learning action research class on student outcomes and attitudes. This area of focus statement satisfies my central tenets of action research in that it involves teaching and learning, is something that is within my locus of control, is something I feel passionate about, and is something I would like to change or improve (Mills, 2000, p. 27).

Research Questions

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of web-based instruction on students' communication with each other? With the instructor?
2. How do students' learning styles affect their success in a web-based class?
3. How do on-line resources meet students' needs to access course materials?

Literature Review

Review of Related Literature

As an expatriate Australian, I am positively predisposed to distance learning. As a young teacher in a small rural "outback" town in Australia, my only option for continuing my education was via correspondence education. In the United States, correspondence education is not widely accepted as an acceptable form of education by those of us working in universities. But why is this the case when other developed countries (like Australia!) have wide acceptance of distance learning via correspondence? I believe that this issue gets to the heart of the propositions many of us hold about effective pedagogy, whether it is in a live or web-based learning environment, and provides the framework for the related literature to be considered here.

There is a dearth of literature that addresses what is for me one of the most critical aspects of classroom learning environments—the nature and quality of the interaction between teachers and students, and between students and other students. This pedagogical concern can be viewed in broader terms to include "the identification of learning goals, philosophical changes in teaching and learning, reconceptualization of the teacher's role, evaluation of student and instructor, and the stimulation of interactivity" (Schrum, 1998, p. 56). In order to foster interaction in a virtual classroom, Berge (1999) points out that teachers must utilize interactions of a synchronous (communication occurs in real time) or asynchronous (technologically mediated in time) nature. I taught my action research class based on an asynchronous model—students who registered for the class could take it anywhere, anytime—although they were encouraged to follow a 10-week outline of tasks and activities. Similarly, the class was characterized by asynchronous communication—there was never the expectation that the class would meet in "real time" or with any face-to-face interaction. But as I will discuss later in this paper, this kind of communication provided me with a significant challenge in the way I developed rapport with my students. Levin (1997) characterizes this challenge in the following way:

> I can neither see the puzzlement in an online learner's eyes or the "aha" twinkle when a student gets the point. One of the attractions of asynchronous computer mediated communication also poses another challenge: anytime, anywhere, but alone. If you believe as I do that learning should be viewed as the social construction of meaning and knowledge, then this isolation poses a stiff challenge to learning. Online learning is conducted largely within text. (p. 6)

As you will see, I find this inability to see the twinkle of my students' eyes a drawback in my ability to develop a rapport and understanding of the complex worldviews they bring to the learning environment. However, there is little evidence in the literature to suggest that students of web-based instruction (WBI) classes perform differently compared with traditional classes.

Teachers and students who participate in WBI classes appear to hold somewhat contrasting views of the distance learning experience that are challenging to reconcile. For example, faculty are consistently concerned about the quality of the teaching/learning experience and the degree of interactivity that occurs. Alternatively, students are generally positive about the experience and report that the convenience of this medium meets the needs of the nontraditional (distance learning) student who balances work, family, and study (Daugherty & Funke, 1998). The same study reports that faculty perceptions of WBI can be categorized as follows: lack of technical support, lack of software/adequate equipment, lack of faculty/administrative support, the amount of preparation time required to create and grade assignments, and student lack of knowledge and resistance to the technology. Alternatively, students tend to acknowledge the utility of the Internet and the "discovery" learning that occurred through the use of Internet resources and, according to Daugherty and Funke (1998), "appeared genuinely impressed by the variety and quality of the learning materials offered via the Web" (p. 30). In an earlier study, Harasim (1987) reported an even greater list of perceived advantages of on-line learning, from an increased interaction in quantity and intensity to motivational aspects related to text-based communication (p. 124). Students value being able to communicate in a text-based environment to a far greater degree than they would in a traditional live class—a finding that is supported in my own study and to which I will speak later in this paper.

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection techniques were used as the primary research methods for this study. However, the traditional ethnographic technique of "participant observer" was limited to written communication and postings at the course listserv and discussion board (chat room). The only time I met with students "face-to-face" was in the rare instance when a student drove to the university to talk to me, or when I interviewed the students at the end of the course. There was never an opportunity to observe the students in their own learning environments at home (where all of the students "attended" the course).

Data Collection

Data Sources

- *Surveys*—Students filled out surveys throughout the class in order to provide insights into their experiences during the term in which the class was taught and follow-up surveys during which time they reflected on their experience in the class and its application to their regular teaching environment.

- *Interviews*—Following the surveys, students were invited to meet with me to further discuss their experiences throughout the class. As Agar (1980) suggests, information from interviews can serve as the "methodological core" against which observational data can be used to "feed" ongoing informal interviews. The interviews can best be categorized as informal ethnographic interviews that allowed me to inquire into the experiences of the students in the on-line class and to follow-up on comments individual students had made in response to survey items.
- *Matrix*—All of the listserv postings were printed and analyzed in terms of the number of postings and the types of communication that were occurring. This constant "lurking" on the Web was a valuable data source.
- *Artifacts*—Students submitted final action research projects in "display" form, which varied from multi-media presentations posted to the course's web page to audio and video presentations with accompanying poster boards.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The following themes emerged from the analysis of the surveys, interviews, observations, and students' projects.

Theme →

The Frequency and Type of Communication

The frequency and types of communication varied considerably throughout the length of the course. Frequently, students reported being "overwhelmed" with the volume of e-mail that was an integral part of the weekly class participation. Although not every e-mail required a response from the instructor, like the students in the class, I found the daily task of responding to e-mail quite daunting.

Theme →

The Benefits and Drawbacks of Listserv Communication

Students considered the benefits of listserv communication as follows:

- Comfort level of being able to give feedback in an on-line setting. Many students expressed high levels of satisfaction with being able to give and receive feedback without feeling pressured to "talk" in class.
- Frequency of responses individual students received appeared related to their area of focus and the frequency of responses they made to other students in the class, that is, if the content area was something a number of students had in common, they tended to gravitate toward each other. The matrix of frequency and kinds of responses indicated that quiet students received less feedback on their projects.

Students considered the drawbacks of listserv communication as follows:

- The overwhelming volume of e-mail messages. It did not appear to matter whether there were 10 or 20 students registered in the class—both groups described the volume of e-mail as "overwhelming."

- Delay in receiving feedback. Some students expressed frustration with not receiving "immediate" feedback from the instructor and/or colleagues in the class.
- Lack of nonverbal cues. A number of students requested that we "post" digital photographs so that we could "put a face with a name." There appeared to be interest in getting to know each other but a virtual classroom environment was not the ideal setting for establishing rapport.

Related to the use of the listserv and e-mail was the use of a discussion board (chat room) during the second offering of the class. My intent in implementing the discussion board was to cut down on the frequency and total number of e-mail postings. However, the use of the chat room appeared to cause more problems than it solved due to technical problems of access to the discussion board. Students were given the option of using one communication network or the other. Ultimately, this did not work and caused a division in the class that challenged the continuity of the communication among all students.

Themes →

Learning Styles and Traits for Success in a Web-Based Class

The completion rate for students in the first offering of the class was 50% and increased to 63% in the second offering. I believe that this completion rate raises questions about matching students' learning styles with the medium of instruction. For example, my traditional "live" offerings of this action research class average about an 85% completion rate. The majority of students (70%) indicated that if traveling distance to the university was not a factor, they would have preferred a "live" class.

On-Line Resources

Students indicated a high level of satisfaction with the availability and quality of on-line resources available on the Internet. However, there were some students who expressed concern about the "black hole" of time that accompanied searching for materials on the Web. Similarly, students who were new users ("newbies") expressed concern about the amount of time it took for them to acquire the skills to search the Internet in an effective and efficient manner.

Action Plan →

Action Plan

Based on the themes that have emerged from this study, I plan to make the following changes in the future offerings of my web-based, distance learning action research:

- Restructure the class tasks so that the interaction between students, and between the students and the instructor, are manageable. Any future use and implementation of the chat room strategy would have to come with an assurance that *all* students would be able to access the discussion board. This is critical for effective communication—perhaps the one aspect of a web-based learning environment that is critical to success.

- Learning styles—Although there appears to be a dearth of literature that discusses the importance of students' learning styles as they relate to web-based learning, I believe that it is critical that students are somehow screened in order to determine the likelihood that they will succeed in a virtual classroom environment. For example, in future offerings of the class I will interview all students prior to giving permission to register for the class to determine their comfort level with (a) the use of computers and the Internet, and (b) their comfort level with being an independent, "self-starter" learner who can work on tasks in a relatively self-directed fashion. I will try to identify an instrument that can assist with this task and for which there is predictive validity.
- On-line resources—I will continue to explore the use of on-line resources to facilitate independent teacher research, such as supporting students' efforts to retrieve copies of journal articles, which is an otherwise expensive activity.
- Rapport building—In order to build rapport with my students, and between students, I will include an interactive, face-to-face communication facilitated by distance learning technologies. Rapport may also be facilitated by the use of cameras mounted on the top of computers. Finally, I will incorporate the use of a dial-up teleconference during which time students can present their term projects. For example, students could "post" their projects to the listserv, which could then be downloaded prior to a designated class session. Using a toll-free university phone tree, students could participate in a teleconference and be able to scroll through each other's projects during a presentation. All of these strategies will function to facilitate the development of rapport and decrease feelings of isolation.

Final Thoughts

As I mentioned earlier, I am positively predisposed to distance learning modalities. I believe that it addresses issues of equity and access to education for all. This is particularly true at my university, which provides services to many teachers working in rural communities.

However, with spiraling tuition costs, many of these teachers also question whether or not they are getting "value for money" when they choose to learn in isolation. Do equity and access equal good pedagogy? How is it that on-line courses maintain the integrity of a graduate education? What characteristics distinguish an on-line course from a correspondence course? This study has raised more questions for me than it has answered. I am challenged by the opportunities that current distance learning modalities offer and strive to balance issues of equity and access against quality. Ultimately, perhaps, the responsibility for choosing to learn via an on-line environment rests with the learner. Similarly, the responsibility for overcoming some of the inherent problems associated with teaching in an on-line environment must rest with the teacher. Through the implementation of an action research approach, I have reflected on the limitations of teaching in a web-based environment and am committed to address them in future class offerings.

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Rituals and Writing

One of my favorite books on writing is Howard Becker's (1986) *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article.* As Becker points out, many writers hold certain irrational rituals as necessary precursors to the act of writing:

> From one point of view, my fellow participants (in the writing workshop) were describing neurotic symptoms. Viewed sociologically, however, those symptoms were magical rituals. According to Malinowski (1948, pp. 25–36), people perform such rituals to influence the result of some process over which they think they have no rational means of control. (p. 3)

A survey of friends and colleagues suggested that the following magical rituals were powerful predictors of successful writing sessions. How do they compare with your own?

- Writing can only occur between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m.
- At least six sharpened pencils and a yellow legal pad must be in place next to the computer.
- Writing can only be done longhand using a blue pen and white legal pad.
- The house must be clean before writing starts.
- Everything must be in order (materials, lighting, soft music, etc.) before writing can commence.

Establishing a Writing Routine

There is no easy way around the pragmatic issue of time—writing takes time, and we never have enough time to do all that we have to do, professionally and personally. The only advice I can offer here is to somehow make writing part of your professional life and responsibility. Capture the minutes and hours where they fall—before school, after school, preparation periods, canceled faculty meetings, failed parent conferences, and professional development days. Argue for the time as part of your faculty meetings and professional development days—and be prepared to ante up when asked to share the outcome of your efforts.

I know of no other way besides attacking personal family time to get my writing done. In the short term, our loved ones will put up with "I need to stay home and get this writing (or grading, lesson planning, or test development tasks that teachers take home) done. You go ahead and enjoy the movie (dinner, picnic, hike, river rafting, skiing)." We could all fill in the blanks based on our professional life as a teacher.

However you make it happen, I am assuming that there will come a time when you sit down in front of a keyboard or with a blank pad of paper and start the task of writing up your action research. I can picture you now—pencil in hand, keyboard at the ready—poised to pen the story of your action research! Go to that place for a while. Get ready to write!

In the spirit of sharing tips for successful writing, see Figure 9–1 for some tips on what *not to do*. You might identify with some of these.

figure 9–1 ▪ Geoff's Tips for Being Able to Avoid Writing

- Think about all the things at school that I need to do before tomorrow.
- Scan my desk to see if someone has left me a note about a meeting, sports practice, birthday party that I need to go to NOW.
- Check my voicemail.
- Check my e-mail.
- Check my checkbook to see if it is balanced.
- Call my wife/child/colleague/friend/enemy to see what they are doing.
- Walk down the hallway to see if I can find someone to talk to.
- Dream about winning the lottery.
- Make an appointment to see my dentist.

On a more practical note, here are some guidelines for writing and editing:

- Write at the same time every day, a time when you know you won't be disturbed.
- Write up your story as though you're sending an e-mail to a friend. Pretend that your friend needs it explained in simple terms.
- Tell a story as you write. Most teachers are good storytellers. Whether it is telling third graders about Columbus's voyages, how chicks hatch in an incubator, or an embarrassing incident that occurred "way back when" when you were in school, teachers are compelling storytellers who can capture the imagination of their students. This is true regardless of the content matter. These skills can be transferred to the way in which we share our action research stories. And I do not use the term *storyteller* in a pejorative sense here—storytellers can still employ rigor in their work.
- If you're having trouble getting started, "write it the way you talk." The editing can come later. Tell your story with an audience of colleague teacher researchers in mind, and the words will flow naturally. If you get hung up on writing for a larger "academic" audience, the words will not come easily, and sentences may be stilted and formal. There is also no reason to use big words.
- Organize your thoughts around an outline and tell your story in a way that stays true to the facts of your study. Make it coherent and make sure your story flows.
- In the early stages, don't worry too much about how well the text reads or whether it is full of grammatical errors. Write without consideration for grammar, syntax, or punctuation—just write. Concentrate on getting the story out. Look for progress, not perfection.
- Write whatever comes to mind. Then go back and hunt for what you are really trying to say—it's there.
- Have you ever thought to yourself, "I wish I had done that differently"? Writing is like that, and then you get to do it differently—editing your own work is a delight. Write boldly and then say it again—better.
- Writing, then editing, then rewriting, and then reediting clarifies thoughts into a coherent package. Even a gem needs to be mined roughly, cut ruthlessly, then buffed.
- Nobody knows my work better than I do. Writing is an exercise in learning about your own work. I'm always surprised how much better I know it when I've discussed it with my computer a few times.
- Edit after you have all your thoughts on paper. I may be a poor writer, but I am a fast writer! I churn out words faster than you can imagine. The problem is they take a lot of editing, wordsmithing, revising, rethinking, and replacing along the way. What you see here is not my first draft—or my last. It also has benefited from the collective wisdom and skills of a development editor, copy editors, people with Ph.D. degrees in English and literature, and friends who are pretty good writers. In short, as readers of research, we should not hold ourselves to unrealistic expectations of grandeur. Any of us can write well given the

time, effort, and assistance needed to produce "good" writing. Set realistic expectations for yourself somewhere between "The first draft is the last draft!" and "This will never be perfect—I'll just stick with it for another few years!"

- If you accept that your first draft is not your last draft, living with mediocre text becomes easier to accept. Put another way,

> The only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really sh— first drafts. . . . All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. (Lamott, cited in Wolcott, 2001, p. 55)

I am sure that you can add to these lists with your own rituals and tips. My advice to you is consistent with the advice I once gave to my third-grade students when teaching them to play the recorder: "Make as much noise as you want to for the next 2 minutes. Get it out of your system. When the time is up, we will focus on playing the music on the page. Go ahead and blow!" A suggestion: Write down your avoidance list and stick it next to wherever it is that you write. Check it occasionally but get the behaviors out of your system. Consider it therapeutic and try and catch yourself being "good," that is, staying on task with your writing. Think of a little reward system (if you are somewhat extrinsically motivated like me, that is). Here are a few things I "treat" myself to when I have dedicated myself to some writing time (not in order of preference): a run, time to play with my son and wife,

Voices from the Field

Establishing a Writing Routine

The teacher researcher in this vignette provides support for the other suggestions in this chapter and the importance of establishing a writing routine. For example, she dedicated some time every day to keep up with field notes and data analysis rather than waiting until later in the process to reflect on her data. Similarly, she "wrote as she went" and in so doing found the writing to be manageable. Finally, at the end of the process, she dedicated a block of time to read, reflect, and edit her work without other interruptions. There is no substitute for scheduling time to write!

ENHANCEDetext video example 9–1
Jureen, the action researcher in this video, describes her writing routine. Reflect on your own rituals and routines. How might you make your own writing more efficient?

something sweet (you know, some sugar to help with the fatigue!), an adult beverage, food, sleep, or all of the above.

Now that you have identified your avoidance techniques and treats, let's get down to the business of writing: structure, how to submit the write-up to a journal, using a consistent style, and assessing content. Later we'll discuss article length, choosing a title, getting feedback, and final editing.

An Outline for an Action Research Report

Review the following list. Does it look familiar?

- Area-of-focus statement ("The purpose of this study was to . . .")
- Related literature
- Defining the variables
- Research questions
- Description of intervention or innovation
- Data collection
- Data considerations (issues of validity, reliability, and ethics)
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Action plan (e.g., "Steps to Action Chart")

This is the basic outline I have used with teacher researchers for many years, and it has proved to be a valuable approach. You may need to adapt the structure of your article to fit your audience. This outline is not set in stone—a statement that will no doubt be supported by your own professor (if you are taking a class), school (if you are writing up your action research as part of an evaluation model), or journal editor (if you are submitting your story to an action research journal). Nevertheless, this outline is a useful way to start organizing your thoughts about your story. Later in this chapter, you will see a rubric of essential elements to include in your report and points to consider for each of the items in this list.

Other Structures in Action Research Reports

As an alternative to using this outline, you can look at the "Notes for Contributors" or "Author Guidelines" in action research and teacher research journals that you might want to target for publishing your story. These sections provide guidelines for authors to consider before submitting work to the journal's editor or editorial board. For example, *Networks*, an online action research journal, offers the following guidelines for submissions:

> When submitting a contribution, please indicate the section for which your submission is intended.

- Full-length articles (normally 2,000–3,500 words). These will typically report a completed investigation or offer a critical review of a number of investigations that share a common theme or topic.
- Shorter articles and notes (about 300–750 words). These might describe work in progress, raise issues arising from such work, or discuss general issues related to methodologies, ethics, collaboration, and so on.
- Book reviews (about 750–1,000 words). These will typically provide a sense of the main arguments and presentation style of the author. In addition, reviews will take the perspective of a critical friend in terms of the author's assumptions, arguments, and evidence—drawing, where possible, on other work on the same topic or issue.
- Resources for teacher research. These notices will keep teacher researchers informed of upcoming events, opportunities, and resources.

Submission Preparation Checklist

As part of the submission process, authors are required to check off their submission's compliance with all of the following items, and submissions may be returned to authors that do not adhere to these guidelines:

1. The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the Editor).
2. The submission file is in Microsoft Word, RTF, or WordPerfect document file format.
3. All URL addresses in the text (e.g., http://pkp.sfu.ca) are activated and ready to click.
4. The text is single spaced, uses a 12-point font, and employs italics rather than underlining (except with URL addresses), and all illustrations, figures, and tables are placed within the text at the appropriate points rather than at the end.
5. The text adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements outlined in the Author Guidelines, which is found in About the Journal.
6. The text, if submitted to a peer-reviewed section (e.g., Articles), has had the authors' names removed. If an author is cited, "Author" and year are used in the bibliography and footnotes instead of author's name, paper title, and so on. The author's name has also been removed from the document's Properties, which in Microsoft Word is found in the File menu. (Visit the journal at http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks.)

Similarly, *Educational Action Research* (http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/authors/reacauth.asp) calls for contributions from practitioner researchers (in fields varying from education to nursing, medicine, and other "social settings") with the following guidelines:

> Two kinds of papers are particularly welcome: (1) accounts of action research and development studies; and (2) contributions to the debate on the theory and practice of action research and associated methodologies. Readability and honest engagement with problematic issues will be among the criteria against which contributions will be judged. The journal can be construed as carrying out, through its contributors and reviewers, action research on the characteristics on effective reporting, and the Editors will, therefore, welcome exploratory forms of presentation. (Notes for Contributors)

As a teacher researcher reading these guidelines, you are probably struck by one overriding feeling—anxiety! What is meant by "honest engagement with problematic issues" anyway, and how will it be judged? What are the criteria? To take this anxiety one step further, let's look at who the people are who publish in journals. My hunch is that 99 percent of articles published (and probably submitted) to **refereed journals** (a fancy way of saying that more than one "qualified" person reads the submission) are by teachers teaching and researching in higher education. However, this does not mean that it must continue to be that way, and I have been delighted with the teacher researcher articles published in *Networks*, a journal that seems to live up to its billing as a journal by teachers and for teachers. (For a comparison of action research journals that you may want to target for publication, see Figure 9–2.)

So, what do these "Notes to Contributors" and my outline have in common? Is there a rubric that will help me decide whether I am meeting the publication's benchmark? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this conundrum. I have a drawer full of rejection letters for what I thought were "reader-friendly" journal articles that addressed an "issue of significance"! I also know "published" academics who, despite their reputation and experience, still manage to get rejected on occasion. Of course, this is the magic of the **blind review** process, a practice by which articles submitted for publication are presented to reviewers without name and institutional affiliation to avoid bias. The editorial board wants to ensure that the article is accepted on its merit, not the author's reputation. Therefore, let me offer the following modest advice for attending to contributors' notes.

General Guidelines for Submissions to Journals

- *Attend to the context of your study.* Craft a narrative that guides your audience to the site at which your study occurred. For example, let's compare a good and a bad context narrative from the sample paper "'Come to My Web (Site),' Said the Spider to the Fly."

  Good example: "As a result of the LAAP grant by the Oregon University System, the Education Department is pioneering the development and implementation of completely web-based graduate classes in education. This paper is based on my experiences of teaching a web-based version of action research for two terms in consecutive years."

figure 9–2 ■ Action Research Journals

Name of Publication	Link to Publication	Description
Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research	http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks	An online journal that provides a forum for teachers working in classrooms to share their experiences and learn from each other. Also publishes book reviews and discussions on current issues in teacher research.
Educational Action Research	http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/reac20/current	A refereed journal that publishes accounts of action research in education and across the professions. Also provides a forum for dialogue about current action research issues.
Action Research	http://arj.sagepub.com	A refereed journal that provides a forum for the development of theory and practice of action research.
ie: Inquiry in Education	http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/	A refereed journal that provides a forum for scholarly work pertaining to practitioner research.

Poor example: "This study is based on my experiences of teaching a web-based class on action research."

The good example provides the reader with information about the setting (a university), the audience (graduate education students), the length of the study (two terms in consecutive years), and that the course development and implementation was funded by a grant (Learning Anywhere, Anytime Project grant). This brief statement provides the reader with helpful information about the study that is otherwise overlooked (in the poor example).

- *Use a clear, reader-friendly writing style.* Don't try to model your writing after the kinds of articles you have read in prestigious research journals. Be realistic in your goal and write using the same voice that you use to tell the story of your research to your colleagues. (See the guidelines for writing listed earlier in this chapter.)

- *Peruse the journals you are considering* for your submissions and notice the structure and writing style of the researchers whose work has been accepted and published.
- *Include a brief description of what you did.* Attend to issues related to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and data collection considerations (e.g., validity, reliability, and ethics).
- *Write in an honest, open manner.* Don't try to hide behind jargon and don't make statements that you can't substantiate. Let your data speak for themselves. In other words, what is the gist of what your data show? Say it. Remember what Kennedy (1997) said (see Chapter 1) about teachers not reading research because it is not accessible. Now is your chance to explain it as if you were discussing it over coffee with a colleague or with your Uncle Fred, who may not know about your research. Make it understandable.
- *Keep readers' attention.* If you are like me, you read something that is "published" and make a judgment like "Not bad," "Engaging," "Pretty bad," or "I'll give it another few pages before I put it in the round file." For whatever reason, we intuitively know what will keep our attention. For example, I read fiction books, not texts, for pleasure. Indeed, these are different genres, and we should not be surprised by the fact that we are engaged in reading best-selling novels and not academic writings. (I joke with my nonteacher friends that I know a good cure for insomnia—and its title starts with Action Research!) But does enjoyable, engaging reading (and, hence, writing) have to be mutually exclusive from academic writing? Consider writing up your teacher researcher studies in a way that makes them engaging for you and your audience.
- *Follow a style* (e.g., APA style) used in action research journals.

Perhaps the underlying lesson here is that if we have a story to tell and a compelling way in which to tell it, then there is a good chance that an editorial board will agree with you!

Choosing a "Journal" Style

Teacher researchers often ask me what "convention" they should follow when writing a term paper or preparing an action research study for publication. There is no simple answer to this. I usually suggest one of the following approaches:

- Choose an article from the journal you are targeting for your write-up and follow the conventions used by the author. Rationale: If the journal published the article using the conventions contained therein, then the editor will probably accept your mirroring of it!
- Follow the conventions outlined in the *APA Style Manual*. For those of us trying to publish in education journals, it is the most widely accepted style to follow.

At the risk of trying to oversimplify a complete style manual, the list given in the following section suggests conventions that you should attend to in your

writing; and remember, if in doubt, go to the manual itself or visit the APA style website at http://www.apastyle.org. The APA also provides a free tutorial for new APA users focused on how to structure and format their work, recommended ways to avoid bias in language, and how to avoid plagiarism charges and shows how to cite references (http://www.apastyle.org/learn/tutorials/basics-tutorial.aspx).

I now offer the following as a simple reminder of the conventions that most often plague my teacher researcher colleagues.

APA Publication Manual Conventions

Punctuation

- *Period.* Use a period to end a complete sentence.
- *Comma.* Use a comma between elements in a series of three or more items.
- *Semicolon.* Use a semicolon to separate two independent clauses that are not joined by a conjunction.
- *Colon.* Use a colon between a complete introductory clause and a final explanatory phrase or clause.
- *Dash.* Use an em dash (—) to indicate only a sudden interruption in the continuity of a sentence.
- *Quotation marks.* Use double quotation marks to introduce a word or phrase used in an ironic comment, to set off the title of an article or chapter, or for a direct quotation of fewer than 25 words.
- *Parentheses.* Use parentheses to set off structurally independent elements, for citations, and to introduce abbreviations.

Preferred Spelling

- *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* is the standard spelling reference for APA journals and texts. (Consult http://www.apastyle.org for current information.) For example, appendix, appendices; criterion, criteria; phenomenon, phenomena; curriculum, curricula *or* curriculums.
- *Check part of speech.* write up (verb), write-up (noun).
- *Hyphenation.* Refer to the dictionary to determine whether you should use a hyphen. For example, is "follow-up" or "followup" the correct form to use?

Abbreviations

- APA prefers that authors use abbreviations sparingly.

Reference Style

- *Periodical.* Mills, G. E. (1999). Teacher research and the professional disposition of teaching. *New England Mathematics Journal, 31*(2), 5–17.
- *Book.* Mills, G. E. (2000). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

- *Online reference.* Hansen, L. (2000). The inherent desire to learn: Intrinsically motivating first grade students. *Networks, 4*(2). Retrieved January 15, 2002, from www.oise.utoronto.ca/nctd/networks.
- Six or more authors in a reference, use "et al."

This listing of APA editorial style cannot really summarize a chapter on editorial style! Once you identify the journal you are going to target for publishing your work, find out the preferred editorial style for your manuscript. Consult the complete *APA Style Manual* for specific details. Most of the teacher researchers with whom I work, however, struggle with simple issues related to punctuation, spelling, and references. To this end, I offer the guide just presented—for everything else, go to the source.

Like other aspects of an action research project, there are technology tools to help you manage your citations that will save you an enormous amount of time when it comes to preparing your research report. A few of these tools are outlined in the Digital Research Tools for the 21st Century: Managing Citations feature.

DIGITAL RESEARCH TOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Managing Citations

The Internet offers a variety of reference management software choices, depending on the needs, operating system, and budget available to you. Here I will discuss three of the most commonly used and accessible citation management software packages available to you.

RefWorks

Many universities have adopted RefWorks as an online citation management tool that they make available to their students at no cost (otherwise, you will need to purchase a subscription). RefWorks is a commercial citation manager that provides users with the ability to manage and store references online at a personal database that can be accessed and updated from any computer. It also allows users to link to electronic editions of journals to which universities subscribe (perhaps as part of a consortium agreement) and to easily capture and format bibliographic information.

Zotero

Zotero is a free plug-in for Firefox that allows users to instantly pull bibliographic information from websites into Zotero. For example, if you are browsing Amazon.com and find a book you want to add to your reference list, you simply click a button in your Firefox browser window, and whatever bibliographic information is available from the site is instantly downloaded to your personal Zotero account. You can later return to your account and quickly generate citations and references in whatever format you choose. Similarly, if your source is an online journal article, Zotero can store a copy of the source for you. Did I mention that this is free?!

(Continued)

DIGITAL RESEARCH TOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Managing Citations (*Continued*)

EndNote

EndNote is a commercial (read as pay-to-use) reference management software package that allows users to manage bibliographies and references while writing a research report. Also, EndNote X4 now meets the complete *APA Style Manual* requirements as well as offering quick links to create footnotes, all while creating lists of references in Word documents (Mills & Gay, 2016, p. 537).

Self-Assessing Your Write-Up

The following rubric (Figure 9–3) may be one way of self-assessing whether your write-up is ready to be sent to a journal for consideration. If you rank yourself with 3s on all of these categories, you are probably ready to submit your article for publication. What follows is an example of how the rubric was applied to the article "'Come to My Web (Site),' Said the Spider to the Fly."

Assessing an Article Using Rubric Criteria

In the following outline, I have self-assessed my article reprinted in this chapter using the criteria in the rubric.

a. *Organization and Use of Conventions*—3. The article complies with an acceptable format and uses correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
b. *Area of Focus*—3. The article includes a clear area-of-focus statement: "The purpose of this study was to describe the effects of web-based instruction in a distance learning action research class on student outcomes and attitudes."
c. *Data Collection*—3. The article includes a clear statement outlining the data sources used for the study: surveys, interviews, matrix, and artifacts. This section might have been improved by including a data collection matrix (see Chapter 4).
d. *Review of Literature*—3. The article includes a succinct literature review that is directly related to the area of focus. Specifically, the review focused on the challenges of synchronous and asynchronous components of online courses. This section might have been strengthened by the use of subheadings to guide the reader or by the inclusion of a literature matrix (see Chapter 3).
e. *Context*—3. The article provides the reader with a context for the study and how it is related to the Learning Anywhere, Anytime Project grant.
f. *Writing Style*—3. I wrote it so it must be good, right?! The narrative is reader friendly.
g. *Action Plan*—3. The article includes an action plan that clearly outlines the next steps in the search for excellence in online teaching and learning. There is a clear connection between the data and the suggested future changes.

figure 9–3 ▪ Action Research Write-Up Rubric

Category	1	2	3
A. Organization of Conventions	• Write-up does not follow any format • Many errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation	• Write-up partially follows a format • Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are generally accurate	• Write-up follows a format • Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are free of errors
B. Area of Focus	• There is no clear area of focus for the study • Research questions are vague (e.g., "Is on-line learning good?")	• The area of focus is too broad or too narrow • Research questions are poorly written (e.g., "What is the effect of on-line learning?")	• There is a clear area of focus statement ("The purpose of this study was to . . .") • Research questions are clear and appropriate (e.g., "What are the effects of web-based instruction on student outcomes?")
C. Data Collection	• Few data sources are evident • Data sources do not match the research questions	• Multiple data sources are evident • Data sources roughly match the research questions	• Multiple data sources are evident and there is an attempt to triangulate the data • A variety of data sources is used • Data sources match the research questions
D. Review of the Literature (Refer to Chapter 2 "Writing a Review of the Literature" for suggestions about writing this section)	• There is no attempt to connect the study to existing research	• Five recent sources (within the past 3 years) are cited • One or more sources that do not relate to the study are cited • One or more sources are incorrectly cited	• Five or more recent sources are cited • Irrelevant sources are not cited • Citations are made correctly, per APA style or another style required for the audience
E. Context	• No context for the study is provided	• Context is provided but is vague	• Context is well-written and provides the audience with a clear understanding of where the study was conducted
F. Writing Style	• Narrative is hard to read	• Narrative uses headings that guide the reader • Writer uses jargon	• Narrative is clear, coherent, and reader friendly • Evidence is provided to support statements (e.g., see reprinted research paper in this chapter)
G. Action Plan	• There is no action plan	• Components of the action plan are missing or incorrectly stated • There is not a clear connection between data analysis and the action plan	• There is a clear connection between the findings of the study and proposed changes in practice (e.g., an action plan may start with the following: "Based on the themes that have emerged from this study, I plan to make the following changes. . . .")

After you've completed the second draft of your write-up, consider each of these points to assess whether you are ready to share your work with others.

Integrating Teaching, Research, and Writing

Classroom teachers face a stressful challenge every day—they must inspire children in their classes for eight hours each school day, and, of course, the day doesn't end there—there is always planning, grading, perpetual cleaning of the classroom, organizing, creating, professional development, and parent-student-teacher conferences. No wonder that teacher researchers express concern about finding time to write.

So, if writing is not a way of life for teacher researchers, what advice can I offer that may help encourage and nurture writing? Let's assume for one moment that you have a story that you *want* to tell; then the issues become finding the time to tell the story to an interested audience and finding enjoyment in committing the story to words. So, as a teacher researcher, how can I find the time to write a story that I want to share with like-minded teacher researchers?

I believe that the secret lies in the ability to integrate teaching, research, and writing. For the teacher researchers with whom I have worked, the secret to writing has been a commitment to integrate the writing as part of their daily routine. It usually does not mean committing a large block of time to writing, but every little bit helps, especially when it is done on a daily basis. What follows is a list of creative strategies that teacher researchers have used to make time for writing.

- *Journal Writing Time.* Many teachers provide their students with dedicated class time to journal each day. Teacher researchers will often use this time to write their research. Furthermore, teacher researchers who practice this often tell me that if they model writing for their children during "journal time," children are more likely to spend the time writing! Keep your journal or legal pad within easy reach in or on top of your desk. Your observations should be fresh, so ideally you should jot down conversations or classroom observations while you're in school.
- *"Down Time" in School.* In rare cases, teacher researchers are able to carve out writing time by committing a planning period, a supervisory study hall, a period that might be freed up by student teachers or art and physical education specialists, or library time to writing. And although I would not recommend that teachers always leave their students during these times, it can be an effective way to find some writing time during the contract day.
- *Professional Development Days.* Many school districts have collective bargaining agreements that allow for a day per term for teacher professional development. Teacher researchers can negotiate with their building administrators to use some of this time for writing. This argument can be enhanced when teacher researchers incorporate action research as a component of their annual evaluation process.

- *Vacation.* A commitment of one day during each vacation period on the school calendar can make huge inroads into the writing task. I know many teachers who take a day out of each vacation period to simply clean their classroom. Writing could become the new "cleaning" or "catching up" priority.
- *Time Dedicated to Grant Writing.* Grants from professional organizations, such as the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, may be used to fund release time for the purpose of writing and publishing teacher research. The Teacher as Research Grants of the International Literacy Association provides up to $4,000 annually for a completed action research study. Details of the award can be found at http://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2012/09/13/teacher-as-researcher-grant-proposals-due-november-1. Similarly, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) also offers the Classroom Research Grants or Teachers of Grades Pre-K–6 and Grades 7–12 (http://www.nctm.org/News-and-Calendar/News/NCTM-in-the-News/NCTM-Accepting-Applications-for-Classroom-Research-Grants-for-Teachers-of-Grades-7-12/). The purpose of this grant is to provide up to $6,000 for classroom-based research conducted as a collaborative by university faculty, preservice teacher(s), and classroom teacher(s) seeking to improve their understanding of mathematics in pre-K–12 classroom(s).

How Long Should the Write-Up Be?

This is always a burning question for teacher researchers who are required to write up their action research projects in order to earn academic credit. My answer, "It depends," is usually not very helpful. It depends on the scope of the study, the kind of research that was conducted, the audience, the time allowed for writing, what the professor has stated in the syllabus, or what the "Notes to Contributors" for the targeted journal suggests.

For Submission to a Journal

Let's assume that you are targeting a journal for your write-up. The average length for a journal article typically is 2,500 to 3,500 words. I suspect that this is about twice the length of an average "term paper" (approximately 6 to 10 double-spaced, $8\frac{1}{2}" \times 11"$ pages). Again, don't worry about length. I know how overwhelmed I felt when I received the contract for the first edition of this text that stated it would be approximately 90,000 words! I couldn't conceive of the idea that I had 90,000 words to say on the topic, but like any teacher, I found that talking (and writing) about the focus of my writing, in this case action research, was easier than I had thought. If you break the task down into pieces of manageable length (as per an outline or table of contents), the task becomes less overwhelming.

For Distribution to Local Colleagues

The length of your write-up will also depend on your audience. For example, for colleagues in your school, you may want to keep it to an "executive summary" of a page or two. Similarly, if you are sharing your study with a school board, principal, or PTA, then a brief summary probably is appropriate. However, if you are developing a paper that will be presented at a professional development seminar or conference, you might think about something along the lines of 1,000 to 2,000 words in length. Ultimately, you are the best person to decide whether you have included enough context and detail in the write-up so that you can affirmatively answer the question, "What happened in this study?" If in doubt, err on the side of detail rather than be criticized for providing readers with an incomplete picture.

Seeking Feedback

I would recommend that you seek feedback from trusted friends and colleagues, with one caveat: Be careful what you ask for because you will get it! Interpretation: If you ask someone for feedback, they will probably give it to you; however, you may not like what they have to say and not know what to do with it! The feedback I receive from my family and friends is, "Why do you want to spend your leisure time writing and not playing with us?" I have a few trusted colleagues who work with me and who also teach action research. I know that when I ask them for feedback, they will be brutally honest with me. Similarly, I often ask my students for feedback on my writing (in an anonymous, nonthreatening way)—after all, they are the audience with whom the success or failure of the text rests.

The point here is simple: Different audiences will give you different kinds of feedback that, if taken seriously, will ultimately result in a better outcome. This process is no more evident than in the development of a commercial text such as this one. The publishers use folks who are experts in grammar and content experts who check the content validity of the material in an effort to get it right. But for teacher researchers, seeking feedback should be a far more pragmatic activity. You will know your study better than anybody else; therefore, you provide your own content validity to your write-up. The feedback you will seek is more along the lines of the following:

- Does the write-up provide a complete picture of the research?
- Is the write-up reader friendly?
- Is the write-up engaging?
- Will someone (besides loved ones!) want to read it?

I offer one last suggestion here: Do not expect your friends and colleagues (and professors, for that matter) to do your editing for you. Before you send them a draft, make sure that you have attended to the basic editorial needs of grammar and punctuation. Otherwise, you run the risk of focusing their attention on the structure of the narrative rather than the story itself.

What's in a Title?

When it comes to giving your write-up a title, I would suggest that you be somewhat creative. I think that we all probably underestimate the power of the title for attracting our readers. After all, if we can't get folks past the title, there is probably little chance that they will get into the story that follows. The following examples are illustrative of the importance of titles and the roles they play:

It's Memorable!

I have a friend who reads applications for competitive grants. His advice to me about successful grant writing has been this: Make sure you have a catchy title or acronym—something that the reader will remember. Now, I don't want to suggest that grant readers are so shallow as to be solely attracted to a title; however, folks are attracted to engaging titles and are more likely to pick up a text or journal article if their curiosity is piqued by the title. Of course, you are probably thinking, "Oh sure, what does this guy know? He came up with a really engaging title for his text"! I remember discussing the title with my friend and mentor Harry Wolcott. He suggested that I write down all of the descriptors that would convey the content of the text and try to organize them in a way that is engaging. With a text (or journal article, for that matter), you need a title that will also be found by a keyword search, such as on ERIC. I remember asking friends for advice and receiving suggestions like "Lights, Camera: Action Research!" I also think that I have written some pretty good conference papers that utilized catchy titles, such as the article reprinted in this chapter, "'Come to My Web (Site),' Said the Spider to the Fly: Reflections on the Life of a Virtual Professor," "Talking Heads and Techno-Pages: Reflections on the Development of a Graduate Distance Learning Program," and "Herding Cats and Nailing Jello: Reflections on Being a Dean of Education." You may also notice that I have a habit of using a colon in my titles. I tend to use a catchy opening and follow the colon with a subtitle that clarifies what the paper is about. I like to have fun with titles and hope that my readers will find them fun as well—enough fun so that they will at least pick up the report in the first place.

It Provides a Focus

The other more practical purpose that a title can serve is to provide a focus for your writing. For example, the title for my article was both memorable and a focus for my writing. Specifically, the subtitle "Reflections on the Life of a Virtual Professor" kept me on track during the writing. That is, I was constantly reminded that I was writing about what it was like to be a "virtual professor. " However, it may also be that the title changes during the write-up—a fact that reflects the writer's better understanding of the meaning of the study.

Polishing the Text

Let's assume that you have made it to the point where you are ready to submit your write-up for publication or presentation and you want to take one last shot at

making the text as tight as possible. Wolcott (2001) provides a useful analogy to help with this process:

> Some of the best advice I've ever found for writers happened to be included with the directions for assembling a new wheelbarrow: Make sure all parts are properly in place before tightening. (p. 109)

I've never assembled a wheelbarrow, but if my experience with assembling a barbecue grill is anything to go by, I can relate to the analogy. The directions for the barbecue were quite explicit: "Ensure assembly is complete before igniting."

To apply the assembly metaphor to our polishing task, be sure to take the time to carefully read the narrative (instructions!) and attend to all details. Working with the narrative and getting it ready for publication is not the time to be in a hurry. You have endured many days, weeks, and months of doing action research. You are close to meeting your personal and professional goal and want to get the text off your desk (or hard drive). Now is not the time to be foolhardy and to try and light the barbecue before all the pieces are correctly positioned and tightened! Take time to do a word-by-word edit and delete unnecessary words and "excessive anythings" (Wolcott, 2001, p. 116).

In this chapter, I have provided some simple suggestions for getting the word out. There is no substitute for perseverance and perspiration when it comes to writing. Your commitment to getting your word out and the positive impact it will have on your students and colleagues is the ultimate reward.

SUMMARY

1. There are two primary motivations for writing up your action research:
   a. The act of writing helps each of us better understand the story we are trying to tell.
   b. A written account provides us with a permanent, accessible record for our professional and personal use.

Why Should I Formally Write About My Action Research?

2. Other reasons to write up your action research include clarification, validation, empowerment, that it is a generative activity, and accomplishment.

Format and Style

3. Format refers to the general pattern of organization of the research report. Formats may vary in terms of specific headings included, and research reports generally follow a format that parallels the steps involved in conducting a study.
4. Style refers to the rules of grammar, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and word processing followed in preparing the report.

5. Most colleges, universities, and professional journals either have developed their own required style manual or have selected one that must be followed.
6. One of the more popular style manuals is the *APA Style Manual*. Additional information about the APA manual can be found at http://www.apastyle.com.

Rituals and Writing

7. There is no easy way to get around the pragmatic issue of time when it comes to writing. One suggestion to overcome this issue is to somehow make writing a part of your personal and professional life.
8. Practical tips for writing include the following:
   a. Write at the same time every day, a time when you know you won't be disturbed.
   b. Write up your story as though you're sending an e-mail to a friend. Pretend that your friend needs it explained in simple terms.
   c. Tell a story as you write.
   d. If you're having trouble getting started, "write it the way you talk."
   e. Organize your thoughts around an outline and tell your story in a way that stays true to the facts of your study. Make it coherent and make sure your story flows.
   f. In the early stages, don't worry too much about how well the text reads or whether it is full of grammatical errors. Write without consideration for grammar, syntax, or punctuation—just write. Concentrate on getting the story out. Look for progress, not perfection.
   g. Write whatever comes to mind. Then go back and hunt for what you are really trying to say—it's there.
   h. Write boldly and then say it again—better.
   i. Writing, then editing, then rewriting, and then reediting clarifies thoughts into a coherent package. Even a gem needs to be mined roughly, cut ruthlessly, then buffed.
   j. Nobody knows my work better than I do. Writing is an exercise in learning about your own work.
   k. Edit after you have all of your thoughts on paper.
   l. If you accept that your first draft is not your last draft, living with mediocre text becomes easier to accept.

An Outline for an Action Research Report

9. An outline for an action research report may include the following headings:

- Area-of-focus statement
- Related literature
- Defining the variables
- Research questions
- Description of intervention or innovation
- Data collection

- Data considerations
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Action plan

Other Structures in Action Research Reports

10. As an alternative to using the outline suggested in this text, you can also look at the "Notes for Contributors" or "Author Guidelines" in action research and teacher research journals that you might want to target for publishing your story.
11. A refereed journal is a journal in which articles are reviewed by a panel of experts in the field and are thus seen as more scholarly and trustworthy than articles from nonrefereed or popular journals.
12. The blind review process is a practice by which articles submitted for publication are presented to reviewers without name and institutional affiliation to avoid bias.

General Guidelines for Submissions to Journals

13. Attend to the context of your study.
14. Use a clear, reader-friendly writing style.
15. Peruse the journals you are considering for your submissions and notice the structure and writing style of the researchers whose work has been accepted and published.
16. Include a brief description of what you did.
17. Write in an honest, open manner.
18. Keep readers' attention.
19. Follow a style used in action research journals, such as the *APA Style Manual*.
20. The following rubric may be one way of self-assessing whether your write-up is ready to be sent to a journal:
    a. Organization and use of conventions
    b. Area of focus
    c. Data collection
    d. Review of literature
    e. Context
    f. Writing style
    g. Action plan
21. The secret to writing lies in the ability to integrate teaching, research, and writing. Creative strategies that teacher researchers have used to make time for writing include the following:
    a. Journal writing time
    b. Downtime" in school
    c. Professional development days
    d. Vacation
    e. Grant writing to secure funding to support writing time

22. The length of the write-up depends on the intended audience. Journals are typically 2,500 to 3,500 words, while summaries of projects to be shared with colleagues might be in the 1,000- to 2,000-word range.
23. Different audiences will give you different kinds of feedback that, if taken seriously, will ultimately result in a better outcome.
24. A title should be memorable for the reader and provide a focus for the writer.
25. Be sure to take the time to carefully read the narrative and attend to all details. Working with the narrative and getting it ready for publication is not the time to be in a hurry. Take time to do a word-by-word edit and delete unnecessary words.

TASKS

1. Develop a list of your personal writing rituals and how they help (or hinder!) your writing.
2. Develop an outline for your action research write-up that includes the headings provided in this chapter with an accompanying brief descriptive statement that captures what you will include in each section.
3. Review the "Notes for Contributors" for the following journals and decide which journal you will submit your action research report to *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*, *Educational Action Research*, *Action Research*, or *ie: Inquiry in Education*.
4. Develop a writing schedule for the development of your write-up and stick to it!