

Writing It Up

When the time comes to write up your research, there are many different ways to proceed. Sitting before that computer, you may not know where to begin. What is most frightening is feeling out of control; that is, you do not know how to choose the right words, construct sentences, modulate active and passive voices, or organize your presentation so that the written product reflects your intentions. You can gain control, however, if you think about your writing as a series of discrete decisions rather than as one enormous undertaking that must be accomplished all at once.

Writing from qualitative data is somewhat easier than writing, say, a conceptual piece. The fieldwork, analysis, and preliminary interpretation produce files of coded description that provide a starting point—some words on the screen. Not only do you have the descriptive data in front of you, you have a host of observer's comments and analytic memos that may serve as beginnings of sections for your paper. You have a foundation you can revise and expand as you work toward the production of a finished report, paper, article, or book.

What you plan to produce with your data will affect what you write and how you organize your writing. If you are doing a dissertation, for example, you need to attend to certain conventions. Articles and research reports usually offer more stylistic freedom. There is room for choice and innovation, but whatever you write always needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning tells what you will do in the paper; it lays out the contents. The middle section develops, argues, and presents your findings. You discuss your insights, marshaling your data to convince the reader with evidence for what you claim. The conclusion may summarize what you have said, it may draw a few disparate points together, or it may suggest the implications of your findings for more research or practice; it is a tidying up, like dessert or coffee after the meal. (Some helpful classic handbooks on writing include Baker, 1966; Kierzek & Gibson, 1968; Strunk & White, 1972; see also Friedman & Steinert, 1989; Williams, 1990.)

While these are the bare bones of what a paper might look like, you may approach your task in a variety of styles and ways of organization. While sometimes what you must do is dictated by your assignment (i.e., you are assigned to undertake original research and write it up in the manner of a particular journal), usually within an assignment enough latitude exists for you to have some choices about how to proceed.

"evidentiary warrants"

Where do you start? You have already started. If you have followed our advice—if you narrowed your focus, looked for themes, made decisions about what type of study you are doing, wrote memos and observer's comments, and mechanically sorted the data and read in the literature—you are on your way (Atkinson, 1991; Wolcott, 1990). But what about the actual writing: the style, form, and content? In the sections that follow, we construct the writing project as a series of choices. We describe some of the most important choices you need to make and offer examples that illustrate alternative possibilities.

Writing Choices

The writing you produce depends on the choices you make about how to construct the piece, for whom to write it, and a number of other issues. You gain more control when you consider the different possibilities you have and consciously choose the option that looks like it will work for you. In what follows, we describe some of the decisions you will need to make. We have written about these choices as if they were separate from each other, but they are not.

Decisions about Your Argument

A piece of good nonfiction writing has a clear focus. It states a purpose and then fulfills the promise. Coming up with a focus means deciding what you want to tell your reader. You should be able to state it in a sentence or two. We refer to this focus as an *argument*. The argument in a paper, chapter, or article is the point of view that the writer takes on the issue. Having an argument, which is central to all good academic writing, does not always mean being argumentative. It means that when someone reads your piece, he or she can say, "She says in this piece that talk shows about adolescent girls' experiences of sexuality always rely on experts to define the situation"; or "He says in this piece that earlier in this century, you could buy postcards that pictured institutions that housed people with disabilities because the institutions were seen as important parts of the community"; or "They argue that there are three major themes that characterize their study of high school mathematics students."

When you have an argument, you are making a point. Your writing should not take the reader on a tour of your changing perspectives on your topic. You want to avoid writing in a way that says, "First I thought this, and then I thought that, and then I realized that..." Your point is different from what motivates you (Williams, 1990, p. 98). Unless you are writing about how perspectives on data change, or unless you and your views are the topic of the paper, this tour of your coming to see the topic as you do is not strong enough to be your argument.

There are many types of arguments. One kind is a thesis, a proposition you put forth and then argue. The thesis can be born out of a comparison of what your research has revealed and what the professional literature says about the subject (e.g., "Researchers have taken the position that..." or "Our research has revealed another dimension..."). Or, it can contrast what practitioners claim and what your research has revealed (e.g., "The model of... presented in the manual takes quite a different form when implemented in the classroom"). The thesis might argue that the unforeseen consequences of a particular change instituted by outsiders is more important than the planned effect. The thesis is a good focus;

it is argumentative and can build interest. But people who start arguments are often attacked. In developing a provocative thesis, there is a danger of overstating your case; you attack a position that no one would actually take. (This is called setting up a "straw man.") If you choose something to attack that has already been refuted, your statements sound droning. Academics are particularly critical of the trumped-up thesis. They take the assertion literally rather than as a matter of style. Use the thesis cautiously in writing them.

An argument can also take the form of a theme. It lacks the overtly combative tone of the thesis, although it shares some of the "big idea" quality. A theme is some concept or theory that emerges from your data: "some signal trend, some master conception, or key distinction" (Mills, 1959, p. 216). Themes can be formulated at different levels of abstraction from statements about particular kinds of settings to universal statements about human beings, their behavior, and situations (Spradley, 1980). We presented some potential themes in our discussion of data analysis. The "teacher's pet principle" and "diagnosis of the third party" are potential themes that could serve as the focus for papers. Academic researchers interested in generating theory see the development of "generic themes" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the most laudable goal for researchers. As Lofland put it, a *generic theme* (frame) is "when the structure or process explicated is chosen and brought to a level of abstraction that makes it generally applicable rather than applicable only in a given institutional realm or ideological debate, or other localized concern" (Lofland, 1974, p. 103).

The topic provides a third possibility for an argument. Like the theme, the topic is pervasive in your notes, but it is more a unit of a particular aspect of what you were studying than an idea about it. A theme is conceptual; a topic is descriptive. We suggested some topics in our discussion of data analysis; for example, "What is a good teacher?" and "Communication on a Hospital Ward."

For the purposes of presentation, we have made the distinction between thesis, theme, and topic as examples of forms your argument can take. Arguments often are hybrids, having elements of all three. We have not stated all possible types; there are others. The argument of a paper, for example, might illustrate the usefulness of concepts or themes that others have developed. If you are involved in evaluation research, very often the argument responds to the question you agreed to explore when you entered the contract to do the work. No one, though, uses one type to the exclusion of the others.

Making a good decision about what type will work for your material will depend on how familiar you are with the field in which you are working. What is needed? (Of course, your decision may also be determined by what you are asked to do by your professor or contractor.) If we do not have good descriptions of, for example, what a day in the life of a teacher is, a paper with this as a topical theme would be an important contribution to the study of teaching. If, on the other hand, you are working in an area where there is already good description in the literature, a theme or thesis as an argument would make your writing more valuable. Framing your argument around a well-known conceptual scheme that others have used in studies similar to yours may provide you with an easy writing solution and a good research experience, but it will not generate much interest. (No one would be interested in publishing it.) A theoretical theme paper might not be well received if you agreed to do an evaluation of a program's effectiveness for a particular contractor.

The type of argument you use also depends on your skills. The novice often cuts teeth arguing in the form of topics or themes. Most experienced writers, and people with

broad backgrounds in research and in their substantive fields, tend to write with a thesis or theme, but they choose from the topical realm also.

Most crucial in deciding on what your specific thesis, theme, or topic will be is the data you have collected, analyzed, and coded. You cannot choose a focus in an area in which your data are thin. One simple way of finding a focus is to look over your coding categories and see which have yielded the greatest amount of data. All computer software designed for working with qualitative data provides a way of getting counts of the number of units of data as well as the total number of words you have under each code. If you have chosen the "folder method" of hand sorting the data, look through the folders and pick the fattest ones.

If you have a few codes that have a lot of data under them, start reading through the data and see if they have some common thrust. Also, read over the memos you have written to see if you can make connections between codes, or if you have already noted themes.

While you start your writing with a search for a focus, what you first embrace may not work as you proceed with your writing. Your initial selection should be seen as a hypothesis that has to be tested. You have to see if it works. Expect false starts, reformulation, and refinement. Be open to discovery and to flashes of insight that were unattainable in the field or while doing analysis because you were too close to the data. At times a draft of the paper is needed before you see the light of a workable focus.

The title should reveal your focus. In "The Judged Not the Judges: An Insider's View of Mental Retardation" (Bogdan & Taylor, 1976), the authors presented the views of a person labeled "retarded" on special education and other aspects of programs for people labeled "mentally deficient." "Be Honest but Not Cruel: Professional/Parent Communication on a Neonatal Unit" concerns what professionals tell parents of children who are patients on an intensive care unit for infants. "Be Honest but Not Cruel" is a perspective the staff share on the unit regarding communicating with parents. Although titles are decided after you finish writing, the attempt to come up with them before you start can facilitate your search for an argument.

Decisions about Your Presence in the Text

In the last fifteen years there has been a shift in preference of pronouns authors use to refer to themselves when writing qualitative research reports for academic journals or as scholarly manuscripts. The move has been from the less personal "we" or "the researcher" to the familiar "I." There are several reasons for this. One is the claim that the use of "I" is more honest and direct. Using "the researcher" is thought in many circles to be pretentious and is a device, which has since backfired, to gain authority. Another is that the use of "the researcher" connotes an objectivity that does not really exist. Since individual people with particular points of view designed and carried out the research, that should be reflected in the writing. Some authors still use the more formal style. Write in a voice you feel comfortable with but realize your taste might not match all your readers' dispositions.

Your presence in the text is also reflected in how much of your own situation you take up. Including the author's autobiographical, political, and self-reflections in qualitative research writing has gained in popularity (Ellis, 1995b, 1993; Krieger, 1991). Some authors see writing about themselves in papers and books as a way of separating themselves from or revealing to others their personal bias. Some see the reflective/confessional approach as

more honest because it shows and tells the reader that you are aware of your own subjectivity. It also warns the reader to take it into account. Others, who may be part of the group they are studying (a teacher studying teachers), use the approach to help the reader develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study (Karp, 1996). In some qualitative circles, the confession is used as a new device to gain authority with the reader.

All confessions are not equally effective in winning reader confidence. Confessions can be read as shallow and as a reason for not valuing the work as well as a reason for honoring it (Patai, 1994). Although confessions can be effective, there are many ways of convincing a reader that you are being honest in addition to telling them who you are. Personal bias is an important thing to worry about, but it should not immobilize you or so dominate your writing that it gets in the way of writing about other things. While some authors have successfully developed researcher reflection into a genre (Linden, 1992), too much reflection can bore the reader and set a tone that the writer thinks he or she is more important than the subjects. Readers are not passive sponges taking in everything you say uncritically. They can be just as critical of self-proclaimed writers' confessions as they can be of ethnographies where the writer writes as if he or she is not present. Like any style of writing, confession works if you can make it work.

Decisions about Your Audience

How much should I write about methods? How detailed should my review of the literature be? How specific should I make my argument? What style should I write in? As with so many questions you might ask about writing, approach answering them by trying to imagine your reader. If it is a journal article you are writing, think: "What would the reviewers or the subscribers of the particular journal I would like to publish in want to know in order to feel comfortable with what I am saying?" "What questions would they have that I have left unanswered?" If you are writing for a particular professor or a dissertation committee, do the same, only think about what you understand their perspectives to be. In a way, it is like thinking qualitatively about writing. Always be specific about whom you are writing for (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as you always write for an audience.

Groups and even individuals subscribe to different conventions about writing. When you think of the audience you write for, you take into account the conventions by which they abide. Then, you can either honor those conventions, or flout them. But you have made the choice. You can decide how theoretical to be in your writing, how much you need to explain about a specific topic, whether or not your readers understand anything about cultural studies, for example, by writing for a specific audience.

What about your informants? Shouldn't you write for them also? With the exception of some types of applied evaluation research, the potential audience for your article or book is not primarily your informants. That does not mean you should not consider them or involve them, or that one or all of them might not read what you write. Although far from mainstream practice, some authors recommend and perform a brand of research where their informants are as much partners in the enterprise as they are informants. They may read drafts and even alter the text. Some are even co-authors. This raises some difficult issues regarding authority, censorship, control, representation and misrepresentation, and the value and viability of such research. We do not have room here to explore the implications of this

approach in detail. In general the conventions concerning your informants and representing them is that the writer should try to present the informants as they see themselves. You should go out of your way not to demean them in the tone of your writing or in the vocabulary you use to describe them. Use the words the informants prefer in describing themselves (if your informants are gay and they prefer to be referred to by that word or by *queer* rather than *homosexual*, abide by this preference). While your informants are not your primary audience, you need to keep them in mind—think about what how they might react if they read what you are writing. You often adjust what you say with them in mind not in the spirit of censorship because they might sanction you, but in an attempt to be honest and fair. Thinking about your informants' reactions can make you more reflective and produce a better manuscript. Some authors share their writing with key informants and discuss it with them. On the other hand, often informants do not give a hoot about what you write and will not spend the time laboring over a lot of words. In the end it is the researcher/author who has to stand behind what is produced. The researcher/author may not see eye to eye with the informants on some items. The informants may be divided among themselves. The informants may want to appear in a more complimentary or heroic way than the author sees it. Sometimes, that means that the author has to hold his or her ground, write in ways that may anger people. (One way of dealing with this is to write about how you see it as opposed to how they see it.)

While you must guard against demeaning and objectifying your informants, be aware of the reverse tendency to romanticize them. When the people you are studying are powerful with many resources, you may take a stance of wariness toward them. When you are studying ordinary or marginalized people, you may imagine them as innocent and down-trodden, or the salt of the earth. Informants can be both oppressed and liars or cheaters who hurt people and do other vicious things at the same time. Be sensitive and honest; but there is no more requirement that you be your informants' public relations representative.

Decisions about Disciplines

When you write up your study, your vocabulary, way of considering the issue, and other concerns can either be done in a way that a specific discipline, such as sociology or anthropology, would approach it, or you can draw from a number of disciplines to frame your argument. If you stay within a discipline when you write, people in that discipline will be familiar with your vocabulary and with the concepts you use, even if you apply them in innovative or new ways. Words like *role*, *career*, and *professionalism* are commonly used among sociologists. Those in the fields of educational administration or anthropology might more commonly use other terms or concepts. If you are doing your work within a particular discipline, you often use the vocabulary and concepts common to your peers without being aware of how influential they are.

You may find, however, that the common words of a discipline do not enable you to get at an issue deeply enough, or that your work is "interdisciplinary." Amy Best (2000) found in her research on high school proms that both the language and concepts of cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field, suited the project better because they enabled her to explain her data on young people's preparation for proms. Feminists came to believe early on that feminist research had to have some multidisciplinary links. Your decision will be

influenced by the audience you want to reach and by the requirements of your graduate school program, your evaluation goals, or the journal you want to accept your article.

Decisions about the Introduction

While the tendency is to write the introduction first, we follow Becker's (1986c) advice to always write the introduction last. It is only then that you know what you are introducing.

The introduction usually begins with the general background needed to understand the importance of the focus. Placing the paper in the context of the literature or some current debate is one strategy; stating the assignment that you are fulfilling is another. Often the introduction concludes with a description of the design of the rest of the paper. The discussion of research methods belongs in the introduction, but its length and specific location vary. When writing in a journalistic mode, you are not likely to include it. In research articles, it is imperative that you tell your readers things such as the techniques you used, the time and length of study, the number of settings and subjects, the nature of the data, researcher—subject relations, checks on data, and other information that might help them evaluate the soundness of your procedures and the nature of your subject. Sometimes such information is provided in an appendix. This is especially true of books. Some important contributions to the methods literature can be found in the appendices of such classics as *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1955) and *Tally's Corner* (Liebow, 1967).

Some direct advice about the introduction: On the first page of any manuscript you write, directly and succinctly tell the reader what you are writing about. "What follows are the results of a participant observation study of elementary school children at play on school playgrounds." "This manuscript is the report of a two-year study I conducted of teenage friendships in a suburban high school on the outskirts of a medium-size city in the midwest." Readers lose concentration if they do not have the larger picture to relate to what they are reading. We encounter the violation of this advice in at least a third of the manuscripts we read and often become extremely frustrated trying to follow the text. Sometimes we read for twenty-five, even fifty pages, before we are told in a concrete way what the manuscript is about and why we are reading what is before us. By then we have forgotten what we have already read.

A good way to start a paper is to tell a brief story from your research that captures the essence of what the paper is about or something central to what you are studying. For example, in an article published on the neonatal study cited earlier, the authors started the paper thus:

Stones

The second time we visited an intensive care ward for infants (neonatal unit) we witnessed an event that foreshadowed the focus of the research reported here. A couple had come to visit their three-quarter-kg, critically ill, premature son. They were rural poor, in their early 20's and had driven 128 km that morning for the visit. They taped the carnation they bought at the hospital gift shop onto the heavy steel pole that held a heater over the open plastic box in which their child lay. Both stood near the child talking to each other and to the fragile infant, "You be home soon fella," the father said to his son. His mother added, "Everything's all ready for you." A nurse, standing within hearing distance, approached the couple and said, "Now, you have to be realistic, you have a very sick baby." That night the baby died.

When the parents were told they were overpowered with grief. The mother said that the news took her completely by surprise. Staff/parent communication became the focus of our field research study of neonatal units. Specifically, we became interested in developing an understanding of: Who talks to parents about their child's condition? What do they say? What do parents hear? (Bogdan, Brown, & Foster, 1992, p. 6.)

Stories, as part of the introduction, can involve the readers early, ground them in a concrete way in the subject matter, convey some of the emotion of the setting, and provide a feel for what it might be like to be there. Such stories must be tied directly to the paper in order to be effective—tell the readers why you are telling it and how it is tied to the paper. While a few years back starting an article with a story might jeopardize your chances for acceptance in some academic journals, things have loosened up considerably in the last few years, with some journals encouraging more engaging styles and alternative formats.

Decisions about the Core of the Paper and Strategies for Communicating Evidence

You have a number of choices about how to organize the main part of your paper, the part we call the *core*. The core of the paper makes up the bulk of the manuscript and gets its direction from the argument. You proceed to do what you proposed to do in the introduction: advance your thesis, present your theme, illuminate your topic. The test of your argument is your ability to carry it through in the middle. You may find you do not have sufficient data to write the middle, a situation that forces you to enlarge or change your focus. You may discover, on the other hand, that you are flooded with data and have too much to write in the length of paper you had planned. Here the focus has to be narrowed.

In writing the middle, the argument keeps you on track. Everything that is included should be directly related to it. Cores have sections—parts that have headings. The test of whether to include each section is your answer to the question, “Does this section relate directly to my focus?”

The nature of the sections, what you include in them and how they relate to each other, grows out of further analysis of your coded data. After you have singled out a few coding categories embodied in your focus, you should begin working with them, reading them over, and looking for patterns, parts, or elements. You can treat them as you treated the whole when you mechanically sorted the data for the first time. The amount of the material will be much less and, therefore, easier to handle. It is the purpose of mechanical sorting to get the data in small enough files so that you can physically manage them.

In looking through data in a particular coding category, you should look for further divisions (subcategories). For example, one of your coding categories in a participant observation study of a classroom might be “teacher’s definition of students.” Reading through the material under this code, you might notice that the teacher used different phrases to describe the students. The teacher may have had a typology in mind—a classification system of “kinds of students”: “good students,” “brats,” “poor souls,” “dropouts,” “pests,” and “troublemakers” might be phrases you notice repeating. You can work on developing the teacher’s classification system. Here “teacher’s definition of students” is the cover term; “kinds of students” is the subcategory coding system, with phrases such as “good students”

being the "subcodes" (Spradley, 1980). These categories can become the major and minor headings for different sections of your paper.

⇒ You can do the kind of analysis that we just discussed from many different types of coding categories. "Kinds of" subcategory coding systems are commonly used, but others, such as "steps in," "ways to," "parts of," "results of," "reasons for," "places where," "uses for," and "characteristics of" can be used to work coding categories as well. The subcategories system is a tool that can help you further organize the data because it facilitates thinking through how the sections in the core will look. The middle of your paper, for example, might present the typology and its elements. But do not become obsessed with developing typologies. It is one way to proceed. With a thesis as a focus, your sections might take a different form—a point-by-point presentation of the aspects of your study that support your thesis.

Whatever the specific content of the middle, each section should be structured in a way similar to the entire manuscript. Each should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning tells you what the section contains and links it to the focus and the parts that come earlier. The middle provides what the introduction promised, and the conclusion summarizes what was in the section, linking it again to the focus and providing a transition to the next section. To keep section content relevant, you ask whether what you are writing relates to what you said you were going to do in the beginning of the section.

There are several ways of considering what qualitative researchers do when they write up a study. Spradley (1979) called it a translation. This way of understanding suggests that what researchers do is to take what they have seen and heard and write it down on paper so that it makes as much sense to the reader as it did to the researcher. Alternative modes of conceptualizing this process suggest that the translation metaphor is too close to portraying the researcher as an empty vessel transposing the informants' perspectives on paper for the reader (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Clifford (1986) argued that the writer can capture "partial truths," which are shaped not only by the evidence but also by the language the writer uses.

★ The evidence makes the generalizations take hold in the reader's mind. The qualitative researcher, in effect, says to the reader, "Here is what I found and here are the details to support that view." The job involves deciding which evidence to use to illustrate your points; it is a balancing act between the particular and the general. Your writing should clearly illustrate that your generalizations (actually summaries of what you saw) are grounded in what you say (the details that, taken together, add up to the generalizations). Let us look more specifically at some choices you have for balancing the particular and the general: the use of quotations and how to lead into examples.

A good qualitative paper is well documented with description taken from the data to illustrate and substantiate the assertions made. There are no formal conventions used to establish truth in a qualitative research paper. Your task is to convince the reader of the plausibility of your presentation. Quoting your subjects and presenting short sections from the fieldnotes and other data help convince the reader and help him or her get closer to the people you have studied. The quotations not only tell what they said, but also how they said it and what they are like.

In the following example, the author of an article on how Italian immigrants experience schooling in Canada mixes quotations from informants with her own description and analysis within the same paragraph:

For children who have learned to respect school and to take their academic responsibilities seriously, the experience of total immersion in a foreign language environment is nothing short of devastating. "I felt like a piece of wood," says a fifteen-year-old boy. And a thirteen-year-old, from Cantanzaro: "It was as if I couldn't understand that I didn't understand English and couldn't get their messages in my corner." Even the simplest question was torture: "The teacher would ask me my name and I was afraid to say my name because they said it so much different from how I would say my name, and it was awful." This from a twelve-year-old girl from Molise. (Ziegler, 1980, p. 265)

The quotations and the author's interpretations intertwine to form a flowing paragraph that nicely modulates the particular with the general.

Another way to present data is to make a statement and illustrate the statement with several examples. Frequently, this way of illustrating abstract material is chosen in more formalized research, as in a dissertation. What follows is an example of this style from a dissertation based on interviews with adult women recalling their elementary school experiences. The particular example is from a chapter on their recollections of their teachers.

Another bit of evidence subjects used to evaluate their teachers was whether the teachers' concern and interest in their job was visible to their students. Teachers were judged as poor if students felt that they did not like children or teaching:

"The teacher I had the following year was a Mrs. Lolly. And she just didn't enjoy kids at all. She was really a mistake for the teaching profession." (#104)

"Second grade was a young woman who was pregnant and I guess she was just not up to teaching at that stage of her life and she had two or three favorites, both boys and maybe one girl, and she and I got along horribly." (#320)

"Fourth grade, Miss Aldan. I don't know what to say about Miss Aldan. Again, she was a woman who was in the role of teaching without caring a lot about it and she made it very boring. She had a monotone voice and she would go on and on. I did a lot of day-dreaming." (#325)

Each of the examples offers a slightly different aspect of the general point to be illustrated (Biklen, 1973). In this case, the data are separated from the generalizations. In the previous example, the particular and the general were alternated. In the examples we used to illustrate how to intersperse the particular with the general, you can also see how to lead into data. Again, you can intermix analysis and example (as in the discussion of Canadian schooling) or you can set the examples off from the general statements. In either case, you must always indicate for what purpose you are using the data. The following are a few examples to give you an idea of the variety of ways you can lead into presenting description and quotations.

In this excerpt, the author relied on the "as so-and-so said" method, which she then reinforced with another example:

But in her position as traffic cop she was limited to dealing with that which was observable. As Mrs. Preston said furiously to Lewis when he talked back to her on the playground, "I don't care what you think. Just don't say it and don't look it." Or Mrs. Crane, "I wish Joe wouldn't always insist on the last word. If he would just not argue I could ignore him." As

long as the pupil conformed outwardly, as long as he did not defy her directly, the teacher could be in control. (McPherson, 1972, p. 84)

You will also notice that after the author presented the example, she rounded it out with a concluding interpretation. This concluding sentence can either reinforce the interpretation or offer a slightly newer twist.

The next example indicates another method of presenting data—the use of the colon. The colon implies that the material presented after it will illustrate the preceding sentence(s):

The observer, too, has had impact on the system. Geoffrey has been reluctant to be as punitive as he sometimes sees himself being. Geoffrey himself admits this in his notes:

“When problems arise in class, such as Pete’s behavior, the fact that an observer is there seems to affect my behavior to a greater degree than normally. Starting tomorrow, conscious though I may be of what he thinks, I am going to behave as I normally would, or as close to that as I can.” (9/11) (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968, p. 61)

In this example, the participant observer in the class, Louis Smith, records an entry from the teacher’s (Geoffrey’s) diary as an example of data. With the use of the colon, the transition does not have to be as carefully constructed as it would if one were to depend on sentence construction.

Another way to present data is to incorporate them directly into the text, so that they almost become part of a story you are telling. In this technique, you incorporate dialogue and description directly into the narrative. To the reader it appears as if you are telling a story; you are much less distanced from the material you are presenting. The following example reflects what the author learned after interviewing children in jail, in this case, “That kid (who) will end up killing somebody”:

Bobbie Dijon was always the tallest girl in her class; only a few boys were taller. Some of the children laughed at her in the third and fourth and fifth grade. But by the time she was twelve, she was so strong and so big, nobody ever teased her for they feared that Bobbie would haul off and pound them with her fists, which she was known to do. It was not, her teachers said, that she was a tough girl, or a bad girl. There was a tough part of her, but it was a small part that lived inside her, content not to show itself unless seriously provoked. (Cottle, 1977, p. 1)

In this example, the descriptions gained in the interviews are not isolated and presented separately in the narrative; they flow with the story line to create an atmosphere of informality of presentation.

Clearly, there are many different ways to incorporate examples from your data. Relying on more than one means will give variety to your writing. At the same time, to achieve control over your writing, you need to make certain that your style reflects your intent in writing, the audience for whom the piece is intended, and most importantly, what you want to convey.

We said that your paper should be well documented with data taken from your field-notes and other materials. That does not mean you should include large sections of data with no discussion or clear reason for their incorporation. Some novices get so intrigued with the richness of their data that they think what they are is self-evident and important to the reader as is. They say they do not want to ruin the feel of the description or the infor-

ments' statements. The reader is often left cold. Writing and using quotations is hard work. Presenting raw fieldnotes is usually a cop-out from taking that next step of refining your thinking and sharing with the reader the intricacies of what you have learned.

There is a place for pure narrative in reporting qualitative research. It is most often used in presenting first-person life histories. In that case, the whole manuscript may be virtually the informant's own words with the author providing only a short introduction and perhaps the conclusion. But even with first-person life histories, the material is carefully edited and rearranged prior to publication.

Decisions about the Conclusion

You must conclude. What choices do you have? You can do a number of things. Often the argument is incisively restated and reviewed. The implications of what you have presented can be elaborated. Many research reports end with a call for further research. There is nothing that does not need further research; it is this belief that makes a researcher's life meaningful. But psychiatrists think that more people should have therapy, and television manufacturers think that people should buy more TVs. The sincerity of your belief does not erase the fact that you are dealing with a cliché. It is a dangerous cliché because this trite conclusion can substitute for a definitive statement of what you have come to understand and why the work is important. The call for more research is often a tactic used by writers when they have run out of steam, when they do not have enough energy to finish the trip to the end of a uniformly good paper. In the conclusion, the end is in sight; keep at it.

Sometimes qualitative researchers become myopic in their writing. They fail to step back and think and write about how what they are studying is part of the larger social units in a society. When writing up findings, especially in the conclusion, you should remind the reader that what you are presenting is only a piece of the puzzle, a close-up of one aspect of one segment of a larger world. For example, in studying the neonatal unit of a hospital, one could be mislead into believing that decisions about health care, about who should live and who should die, how we should allocate our health care resources were only made on hospital wards. In the conclusion of the published paper on the study we have discussed throughout this book, the authors specifically confronted the reader with the idea that the unit had to be understood in the context of the medical care system in the United States of America. They pointed out how this system emphasized cure and crisis intervention rather than prevention. They also mentioned how an economic analysis was not done, or who, if anyone profited from the high technology approach used on the unit studied. Smith (1987) has been particularly important in pointing out how in our research we need to link people's perspectives and micro studies to the systems in which they are enmeshed. If this is not a part of your study design, you need to warn your readers of the limitations of what they are reading. ★!

More Writing Tips

Call It a Draft

Hopefully some of our discussion of what makes a manuscript has given you some suggestions on how to proceed. Breaking the task down into manageable parts about which you make decisions is very important. First try to come up with a focus, then begin an outline of

the core. Try writing a section. Tell yourself that what you are writing is not the final product, but that you are just working on a draft. Force yourself to start, putting your thoughts down on paper. You can always rewrite and change later. Calling something a "draft" can be a device to relieve tension, a way to suspend your overly critical reading of what you have written, a way of putting aside your feelings of inadequacy. Often "drafts" are easily converted into final products by some editing and erasing of words.

Styles of Presentation

Qualitative researchers are blessed in not having a single, conventionalized mode for presenting findings (Lofland, 1974; Richardson, 1994). Particular schools of qualitative research produce manuscripts with a distinct style; you can identify them by the particular phrases they employ. Diversity, however, reigns. You might want to choose a particular school to associate with, like groups who do "ethnographies," "constitutive ethnographies," or "micro-ethnographies," to refer to a few types. Study the school's style and model your writing after it (Van Maanen, 1988; Richardson, 1990b). This technique is a good one to follow if you are unsure of your abilities to develop your own style. With practice, your own mode of presentation will emerge.

Styles of presentation can be visualized on a continuum. At one end of this continuum you find the more formal or traditional ways of organizing a presentation. These styles may be didactic. At the other end of the continuum you find more informal and non-traditional modes of writing. Articles using these styles may tell a story first and draw conclusions only at the end; they are inductively presented. Let us look at what you would be choosing were you to work toward either end of this continuum.

There are some established formats in which to present information. If you choose one of them, your form will require you to cover certain materials and organize them so as to touch certain bases. If, for example, you choose to do a micro-ethnography, you will focus on intimate behaviors in a single setting. In your research efforts, you narrow in on more specific aspects of interactions in order to break down the setting further and further. To write out this micro-ethnography, you can take advantage of this organizing factor—this continual breaking down and dissection of events—using it to organize your written presentation. (Some good examples of micro-ethnographies include Florio, 1978, and Smith & Geoffrey, 1968.)

Similarly, in a macro-ethnography, you lay out the whole realm of a complex situation, making sure to cover all aspects that have relevance to your theme. It is not as if simply choosing a particular format automatically organizes the paper for you, but rather that you can take advantage of the particular conventions of these modes of qualitative research to order your presentation.

In more traditional forms of presentations, the findings or points of view are usually presented didactically. The author announces near the beginning what the paper, chapter, book, or dissertation will argue and then proceeds to show the readers by presenting key aspects of the perspective, documenting it with examples from the data. In this style, interestingly enough, the data are discovered inductively, but presented deductively, so the author must make a real effort to show that he or she did not collect data to prove a point of view already held.

A good example of a style that clearly depends on the deductive method of presentation is the illustration of some existing theory. The theoretical perspective may have been chosen after data collection was completed because it seemed to explain what the re-

searcher found (see, for example, McPherson, 1972). There are many examples of theory illustration in contemporary qualitative research in education conducted in Great Britain (see, for example, Sharp & Green, 1975). What has been called *labeling theory* is also a popular concept of illustration (see Rist, 1977b).

At the more nontraditional and informal end of the continuum are modes of presentation that might be called *portrait writing* or *storytelling* (Denny, 1978b). These kinds are more controversial in academic settings, and if you were to attempt one of them for a formal paper at your university, you would be well advised to check with your instructor ahead of time to see if it is acceptable. Reading this kind of research is almost like reading a story; the writer creates atmosphere. In his book on busing, for example, Cottle portrayed the feelings of people involved in both sides of the busing issue in Boston. He helped readers understand conflicting perspectives. In the following example a parent reacts to the news that his son will be bused:

If Ellen McDonough was upset by the news, her husband, Clarence, a tall handsome man with reddish curly hair and a long straight nose, was outraged. "They did it to me," he yelled one evening when I visited their home. "They went and did it to me, those goddam sons of bitches. I told you they would. I told you there'd be no running from 'em. You lead your life perfect as a pane of glass, go to church, work forty hours a week at the same job, year in year out, keep your complaints to yourself, and they still do it to you." (Cottle, 1976a, pp. 111-112)

The author has drawn a portrait in words.

Much of the material in fieldnotes makes good dialogue for plays and short stories (Reinharz, 1992; Paget, 1990; Turner, 1982; Richardson, 1994b). Some have even advocated for qualitative research poetry (see Richardson, 1993, 1994a, and Schwalbe, 1995 for a critique). Others are practicing performance science (McCall & Becker, 1990). Our discussion of writing has not included this form of presentation. The possibility of using qualitative data in these ways is exciting. But as a novice you should master more traditional forms first.

Overwriting

First drafts often suffer from being overwritten. They are too wordy and contain more than the reader could possibly be interested in knowing. Authors have a tendency to think that everything is important, and it may be to them, but not to the reader. It is most difficult for a writer to throw away something he or she has written. Start a file for sentences, paragraphs, and sections that you have written in the process of producing a paper, but have not used. Read through your manuscript ruthlessly looking for material to put in this file. Try to make your paper short. Although the initial fear of the writer is that there is not enough to say, the concern of the reader is often that it goes on and on. If the paper gets to be over forty pages, you probably should have written two papers, or you are on your way to a book. Try to decide roughly how long the paper is going to be and then make a decision about focus and the core, shooting for that limit. Go through your draft looking for words and sentences that can be eliminated without changing the meaning, or that through elimination will make meaning clearer (Becker, 1986c).

We have often been given papers to read that are very long and told by the author that the reason for the excessive length is because the text is based on qualitative data. This is not a legitimate reason. Often long papers are documents that have not been worked on

long enough. They are drafts rather than finished products. It is often easier to write longer papers than shorter ones. Get back to work.

Say it once! Another item related to overwriting: Tell the reader what you have to say once, clearly, and be done with it. Do not repeat again, again, again, and again the same point over and over again. Novice writers often give the impression that they are either insecure in making their point or think their readers are dense. Whole paragraphs, even sections, are just rewordings of points made earlier. Only repeat when you are elaborating on a point or are making transitions. But even here acknowledge the repetition: "As I said earlier..." "This supports and elaborates a point I made earlier." "Summarizing what I have said so far..." When you engage in needless repetition you bore readers, numbing them so that they lose the attention they need to absorb the important things you have left to say.

"Yes. But...?"

In writing up qualitative research, you present your point of view, your analysis, your explanation, and your rendering of what the data reveal. The discerning reader might be skeptical. Their response is "Yes. But..." Even if you illustrate your discussion with quotations from the data and in other ways present evidence for the plausibility of your analysis, people will have questions: "Isn't there an alternative explanation for what you have found?" "That is your way of presenting it, what about this as an alternative?" "Did all the subjects express that point of view all the time?"

It is important that you raise questions the reader might have and address them in your paper. This is usually done in the core. Present alternative points of view and discuss why the one you chose was more consistent with the data. If there are subjects with a minority point of view that you did not discuss, mention them. You should pretend you are your paper's worst critic—raise all the tough questions and then deal with them one by one. Whatever style you choose, make sure that it permits you to confront alternative explanations for your findings.

Keep It Simple Up Front

Do not give the reader too much complex and/or detailed information too soon. The writer is familiar with the material he or she is presenting and often forgets that the reader is not. Start where the reader is, not where you are. Be simple and direct in the first sections of a manuscript, laying the necessary groundwork for the reader to understand the more complex and detailed arguments and information later. If you want the very sophisticated reader to appreciate your knowledge and understanding of complex matters, reserve such information for later. You also might consider footnotes or appendices for such material. Keep the manuscript moving.

Whose Perspective Are You Writing From?

In qualitative research you often report the subjects' ideas, perspectives, and ways of thinking. Studies often involve different categories of subjects—students, teachers, administrators—and each category has variations within it with regard to how the subjects see things. You, as the researcher and writer, have ideas about the subjects' ideas. We usually call your

perspective on their perspective analysis. It is crucial when you are writing to make clear whose perspective you are writing from—theirs or yours. And if you are writing from your subjects' perspective, you also need to clarify which subjects. In addition, when you write, you have to watch imputing motives to your subjects based on observed behavior. For example, you can observe a teacher talking to a child and asking the child to sit in the corner, but you cannot say why that was done without consulting with the teacher and getting deeper into his or her thinking. You cannot say the teacher was punishing, or controlling, or setting an example, or protecting the child, based just on the observation (although if you are able to listen to the teacher talking to the child, you may know more). If you do this, you are substituting your way of thinking for their way of thinking. Be on your guard against this in your writing.

Jargon and Code

Our personal preference is for clear writing, writing that engages people not only in your specific field, but also those who may not know much about the substantive issues you discuss, but who are interested in the larger concerns you address. So when we write about using jargon, clichés, platitudes, truisms, and code words, we are also writing about the importance of considering your audience.

Jargon refers to a highly specialized or technical language (e.g., subject positions, symbolic interaction). *Clichés* are words that denote ideas that have lost their originality and force through overuse (e.g., multi-cultural, role). *Platitudes* are hackneyed statements that have an air of significance or profundity but have lost their meaning through overuse and imprecise use (e.g., burn out, strategic planning). *Truisms* are words that are so self-evident that they need not be stated (e.g., society is complex, power is pervasive). Watch out for the commonplace, ideas that are so well known that there is no reason to repeat them (e.g., teaching is difficult, all children have the potential to learn).

We are on dangerous grounds providing examples that we think fit the above definitions (Katz, 1995). While there may be quibbles over whether we placed the correct phrases under the right headings, there are deeper issues at stake. To some extent one person's jargon, cliché, platitude, or truism is another's significant concept (Hewitt, 1995). Take the phrase *strategic planning*, or *social construction*, or the word *discourse*. While these may be esoteric to the layperson, they have been used in precise ways by particular academic specialties and serve as important means of communicating. But they have also been applied widely and used by many in different ways so as to blur their meaning. In addition, they are regularly substituted for words that are easier to understand in the game of academic abstraction. Do they fit the definition of jargon or should they be considered basic and sacred social science concepts that have been misused? We do not advocate a ban on such words, only caution when using them. Particularly be concerned when you find yourself using the same abstract words over and over again—more than once in a paragraph, several times on a page, more times in a paper than there are pages. If you are attracted to particular concepts or ideas try to understand them, internalize what they mean and their implications, and then write from that perspective, but perhaps using your own words. If you are going to use words and phrases that your reader is not familiar with or phrases that are so widely used that their meaning is not clear, discuss your vocabulary with the reader and tell what you mean by certain words and phrases. When you define

concepts, do not rely entirely on the quotations from those who have coined the words. Say it in your own words clearly so that your reader gets your understanding and you are sure you know what you mean.

What in one situation is jargon, in another is a kind of code. Sometimes, we use words in our writing that serve as a kind of code word. When we say "raced and classed identities," for example, these words become code words that are shorthand for announcing rather than describing that our identities are intertwined with race and class in deep, specific, and lingering ways. Or when we talk about "academic" writing—the word *academic* serves as a kind of shorthand to refer to how academics are taken with appearing as intellectual, or how academics live in an "ivory tower." Code words are useful, important, and also sometimes irksome. They are important because, like other codes, they signal to your readers a particular way of presenting yourself, and your political, activist, or theoretical affiliations. In addition to being a signal, they also stand in as shorthand for longer and more detailed descriptions of the thing you are discussing. And sometimes it is important to speak in this kind of code.

There are also limitations. When readers see the same code words again and again, they sometimes slide over them because they have become too familiar, or clichéd. They may also begin to signal meanings that you do not intend because the words have taken on more assumptions than you mean. And, readers who do not know the code will not be able to communicate well with you. These are some of the decisions you make when you write.

On Giving Voice

In the last fifteen years, the expression "giving voice" has come to be associated with qualitative research. The expression comes from feminist and other liberation movements and refers to empowering people who have not had a chance to tell about their lives to speak out so as to bring about social change (for examples of problematizing the concept of voice see Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1991b; McWilliam, 1994; Orner, 1992). In addition it has been used to refer to making these voices available in written form.

In the beginnings of qualitative research, researchers recognized and wrote about how their work allowed people to be heard who might otherwise remain silent. The anthropologist Oscar Lewis, reflecting on his famous studies of poor Hispanic families done in the 1950s and 1960s stated: "I have tried to give a voice to a people who are rarely heard" (Lewis, 1965, xii). Early Chicago School sociologists made similar statements in regard to their studies of juvenile delinquents, hobos, and immigrants. Howard Becker in, "Whose Side Are We On," written in the sixties, pointed to the political nature of giving the perspectives of people who are not privileged equal status with those who are normally on the higher end of the hierarchy of credibility. While qualitative research provides readers with access to the world of people they would not otherwise know and to some extent allows these people's stories to be told, the informant never really tells his or her own story. Although you might attempt to, and to some degree succeed at, conveying to a reader what it is like to be the person you are studying, you are always the one doing the telling. The romanticized view of purely giving voice is not an accurate description of what researchers do.

Qualitative research is attractive, though, to under-represented groups because it provides a metaphorical space for stories not always available. Critical race theorists are at-

tracted to qualitative research because they emphasize the significance of narratives usually not heard. Used this way, giving voice means providing a space for particular narratives, not necessarily enabling authentic, unmediated voices to end up on the printed page.

General Advice

- Try to write in the active rather than passive voice.
- The dictionary and the thesaurus are important tools. Often the difference between being clear and vague lies in the choice of a word. If you feel that you are not saying what you want, look up the words to see if they can be replaced by something more precise.
- Try to get into writing groups or have a writing partner who reads your work (as you read theirs) with an eye for constructive feedback (Stall, Thompson, & Haslett, 1995). Beware of people who only compliment your writing. Try to assess how readers really react to your writing (Schwalbe, 1995). Try to listen rather than defend yourself—a very difficult thing for writers to do. People who really care about your development will engage you and discuss the good and the bad.
- ✱ • Read well-written qualitative research articles and books. This process will enable you to gain a sense of the variety of modes of presentation, as well as provide models of good writing. As we have said, the variety is enormous, ranging from the traditional presentation of research in a more formal mode to more nontraditional examples. Read widely to see how authors present data, how they construct their arguments, how they arrange their sentences, and how they organize their formats. When we think of contrasting but well-written examples of qualitative research, at the more formal end are Charmaz, 1991; Chase, 1995; DeVault, 1991; and Karp, 1996. In a somewhat more nontraditional (that is, personal and impressionistic) style are the works of Thomas Cottle (Cottle, 1976a, 1976b, 1977), and Robert Coles's series on *Children of Crisis* (see, for example, Coles, 1964, 1977).

Many authors have said that writing helps them to think. That is not, however, the only reason for writing. Most write for a product—a manuscript to share with others. While your first research efforts may be for your professor, there is no reason to stop there. Seek a broader audience. Do not let your status as a novice researcher keep you from thinking about publishing your paper.

Criteria for Evaluating Writing

We have offered an abundance of advice in this chapter about writing. In the last chapter we did the same for how to go about analysis and interpretation. Although we have written about these activities as if they were separate, in practice they are often part of the same process. The quality of the final product of a qualitative study—the dissertation, report, article or book—depends on the researcher's ability to integrate and deliver all simultaneously.

In the advice we have given for writing and analysis, we have hinted at criteria to judge the quality of the final product, but we have not explicitly described them. When you

read something based on qualitative research, how do you judge it? What do you mean when you say a piece of scholarship is well or poorly done? How do people who are knowledgeable in qualitative research make judgments about manuscripts? This has been an illusive topic; only in the last decade or so have people addressed it (Lincoln, 1995). One of the difficulties in talking about it was moving the conversation beyond the language, concepts, and conventions that quantitative researchers use—objectivity, proper procedures, reliability, and validity. While there are no standardized criteria to evaluate a piece of qualitative research, and we doubt that there will ever be, below we describe some dimensions to think about in evaluating your own work and that of others. We discuss whether your work is convincing, readable, and makes a contribution.

Is It Convincing?

Do you believe what the author is saying? Authors can employ a number of strategies to be convincing. First, they can give a specific account of the research procedures used and the nature of the data collected. How many subjects did you have? For how long did you interview or observe them? You are also convincing when you effectively display good data to illustrate and prove your points. We have discussed this point extensively in this chapter. Another effective strategy is to argue against alternative explanations. Your writing style and your skill at establishing the authority of your text also contribute to your ability to convince your readers. There are no simple answers here. As we just mentioned, telling about yourself, for example, can establish credibility, but if not done well, or done to the wrong audience, it can undermine what you have to say.

Is the Author in Control of the Writing?

All of the strategies we have listed in this chapter offer authors opportunities to be in control of their writing. When you are in control of your writing, you make your writing do what you want it to do, rather than getting pushed in directions you may not want to go because your writing is not working for you. When you are in control of your writing, you can make sure that the style of writing fits the audience. You can write up the same data in a more formal way for a dissertation chapter, and more informally for an article in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, for example. You can, in other words, shift styles of writing with the same data. You can write in a way that is easy to understand, or you can decide that you want to write for a more academic audience, and write more theoretically.

If you are in control of your writing, you can focus on developing a clear logic (this does not have to be a rationalist logic) that your readers can follow. You can develop the argument you want to make, and shift it around in drafts if it is not working for you the first time. Readers can tell if an author is in control of the writing. Readers can also ask whether or not the text is interesting and involving. If you are in control of your writing, you will be able to revise your work to make it read in these ways. Readers will remember stories you tell because the stories are interesting and they make your point. When you are in control of your writing, you can take the readers through your points at the pace you want, you can have the readers take scenic detours and always pull them back to the main road, and you can move from substance to theory to personal reflection as you write. Your readers will always know where they are.

Does It Make a Contribution?

You might read an article and say: "It is well written and I am convinced about what the author is saying but, so what?" When people evoke the "so what" question they are referring to the worth of the article in the larger sense of making a contribution to our understanding of human behavior. This dimension raises a number of questions; there are many ways a piece of writing can make a contribution. Usually the question of contribution has to be grounded in a more specific context: To what does it make a contribution? Is it to a particular body of literature, a particular research tradition, general understanding, a particular substantive field (i.e., nursing, special education), or our knowledge of human behavior? How does it make a contribution? Does it describe something that has never been described before, present voices that have never been heard, develop a grounded theory that is new, refute someone else's theory? In a small number of works, the author's contribution jumps out at you and does not have to be explained. For the rest of us, the author needs to tell the reader how to read the manuscript: what do they think its contribution is, and how does it relate to what has been done previously?

Another issue that is perplexing to new researchers involves the theoretical or conceptual contribution of a text. What do you do if you give something you have written to a reader who responds by saying: "It is good, but your writing is not conceptual or theoretical enough"? Qualitative researchers usually make a distinction between descriptive and conceptual qualitative writing. A piece of research is never exclusively one or the other, but in general a piece of writing is said to be descriptive when it concentrates more on describing the details of the specific setting and people you study. Conceptual or theoretical writing offers more ideas about the meanings of what you are studying and it relates what you are studying to larger conceptual or theoretical issues. Articles can be theoretical in two different ways. First, they can overtly use ideas from other people's theories to work the data, or they can use the data to contribute to particular theories. Second, the writing itself can develop theory generated by the data. The contribution generates grounded theory inductively. When readers comment that your writing is not theoretical or conceptual, they are probably referring to either or both of these ways. Conceptual writing usually is organized around ideas and concepts rather than around descriptive properties of the particular issue you are studying. Good description can make an important contribution to our understanding, but readers expect ideas about the description too.

Texts

Up until recently, people who wrote ethnographies and other varieties of qualitative manuscripts were not conscious of the fact that what they said and how they said it was influenced by factors other than the data they collect. Who they are writing for, the historical time and particular genre they are writing in, political and social forces, and their own biographies all enter into the construction of the text. Such things as whether you write in the first or third person ("I" or "the researcher"), your description of methods employed, whose point of view you take, the structure of your argument, what metaphors you use, and the authority you appeal to can be understood as a matter of text construction rather than of some immaculate outpouring of the "scientific" approach to knowing. In the last decade,

particular student or class. Sometimes experienced qualitative researchers can serve both applied and basic interests simultaneously; they can assume both stances. The data they collect may be used for both purposes. Of course, this does not mean that the same piece of writing can address both the practitioner and the theorist, but the material written and conceptualized for one purpose can be reworked for the other. In our own case, we have found ourselves returning to practical reports we have written for an evaluation contract and eyeing them with a more basic research frame of mind (Bogdan, 1976; Bogdan & Ksander, 1980). Similarly, much of what we have learned through doing basic research has practical applications and we have reformulated that information for those purposes.

When do people undertake applied qualitative research in education and the human services? Let us look at some occasions:

A federal agency funds ten school districts around the country to start experimental programs. They hire qualitative researchers to monitor progress and to provide the districts with feedback that might help them modify and improve their activities.

A national women's organization wants to promote models of what works for girls in schools. They hire an educational research company to evaluate which programs work for girls. The researchers design a plan to study urban, suburban, and rural schools around the country that represent themselves as serving girls well (Research for Action, 1996).

University staff members in a student affairs office feel dissatisfied with how a new university policy that is supposed to affect morale is working. They decide to put together a subcommittee of three staff members who will interview all of the members of the office, and the students who work in the dormitories that the staff work with, to see what the problem is.

A parent leafs through an elementary school reading textbook while waiting for a conference with her daughter's teacher. The book's descriptions of girls as "no fun to play with" and as "sissies," and its pictures of girls standing idly by while boys jump, run, climb, and throw surprise her. She had no idea that girls (and boys) still were represented in such stereotyped ways. She calls together a group of community women and explains what she saw and her angry reaction. The group decides to study all of the textbooks used in the elementary schools in town. They decide that they will look systematically at descriptions, pictures, and content relating to girls and women in order to raise public consciousness about their findings.

These examples show the qualitative approach at work. Although the goals are different in each case, in addition to being useful in the here and now, they all focus on change. In the case of the researchers with the experimental programs, the change is a planned, purposeful, initiated innovation. The educational research company is evaluating policies that schools have implemented to improve the experiences of girls who attend their schools. Change in the case of the student affairs staff at the university involves practitioners dissatisfied about their work lives. The mothers of the elementary school girls want gender equity in school readers. In these examples the impetus for change comes from different sources, the research itself depends on academic or amateur researchers, and the change may or may not be welcomed by officials.

Change is serious because the goal is to improve life for people. Change is complicated because beliefs, lifestyles, and behavior come into conflict. People who try to change education, be it in a particular classroom or for the whole system, seldom understand how people involved in the changes think. Consequently, they are unable to accurately anticipate how the participants will react. Since it is the people in the setting who must live with the change, it is their definitions of the situation that are crucial if change is going to work. These human aspects of the change process are what the qualitative research strategies discussed in this book study best. Their emphasis on the perspectives that people hold and their concern with process enable the researcher to sort out the complications of change. The qualitative orientation allows for the researcher to simultaneously deal with participants in change, whether in a single classroom or at the many different levels of the educational bureaucracy. The perspective directs us to see behavior in context and does not focus on outcomes to the exclusion of process.

We have organized our discussion in this chapter under three broad categories of applied qualitative research: **evaluation and policy research**, **action research**, and **practitioner research**. These distinctions serve our purpose by providing a useful way to organize our discussion, but each category should not be thought of as totally distinct, nor should our discussion be thought of as complete and comprehensive. As we shall see, categories in the real world are seldom as clear and unrelated as they are in books. The three types of applied research to which we refer have their own relationship to change and are participated in by different people and for different reasons.

In evaluation and policy research, the researcher is most often hired by a contractor (a government agency or upper-level administrator) to describe and assess a particular program of change in order to improve or eliminate it. Evaluation research is the best-known form of applied research. The product of such research is usually a written report (Guba, 1978; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1980, 1987; Fetterman, 1984, 1987). In policy research, the researcher is usually hired by a government agency or a private organization interested in some particular social problem, service, or aspect of the society. Typically, the task of the investigator is to conduct research that will provide information that will help people who have the authority to develop programs and make other policy decisions. The information is given to the contractor in the form of a written (or, less frequently, an oral) report.

Action research takes two different forms. In political action research, persons conducting the research act as citizens attempting to influence the political process through collecting information. The goal is to promote social change that is consistent with the advocates' beliefs. Using the data collected, they develop pamphlets, press conferences, speeches, congressional and legal testimony, TV shows, and exposés to influence change. In participatory action research, the research is done on a program or policy, like a literacy program for rural farmworkers (See Table 7.1), with the researchers and the literacy workers or the program staff collaborating on the design and process of research. People in the program, regardless of their status, participate in the different aspects of the research effort. The purpose is to improve the program or policy.

In practitioner research, the investigator is often a practitioner (a teacher, an administrator, or educational specialist) or someone close to practice who wants to use the qualitative approach to do what he or she does better. The person wants to be more effective in

TABLE 7.1 *Applied Qualitative Research in Education*

<i>Research Type</i>	<i>Who the Researcher Serves</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Form of Data Presentation</i>
Evaluation and Policy Research	Contractor	To describe, document, and/or assess a planned change. To provide information to decision makers.	Written reports. Oral presentations.
Political Action Research	Social cause	To promote social change	Pamphlet, press conference, congressional testimony, TV show, sociodrama, exposé, report
Practitioner Research	Learner or Program	To promote individual or group change through education	Training programs, workshop, curriculum, and plans for change

teaching or in clinical work, and aspects of the qualitative approach are used to reflect on how effective the person is and how he or she might improve. Or, a group of practitioners decide to do things differently. The recipients of change are the practitioners' immediate clients, students, or supervisors. The persons who engage in this form of research do not necessarily write reports. They translate them immediately into practical changes, they enter them into lesson books, or they reflect on the data to create training programs, workshops, and new curricula.

Some might charge that by including this broad range of activities under the rubric of research, we enlarge our definition so much that it loses meaning. We are encompassing more than most researchers would, especially with our inclusion of action and political action research. Clearly these are at variance with traditional research in a number of regards and deserve special consideration. However, our purpose here is not to adorn these activities with the title of "research" as much as to speak to the value of pursuing the qualitative perspective in these areas.

Up to this point, our discussion in this book has been based on the assumption that the reader is learning to conduct qualitative research and is undertaking a first study. One's first study is rarely applied. Learning the techniques before the application is attempted is most effective. Up to now we have, therefore, neglected applied and emphasized basic research, but the differences are not all that great. Most of what we have already presented directly applies to or can be modified for applied research. Some particular problems and differences do arise. In this chapter we examine each of the types of applied research, elaborating and discussing these particular concerns. We present case studies in two of the categories to amplify different aspects of the approach. In the discussion sections which follow each case, we respond to similar questions asked of each case in order to show how research strategies get modified or stretched for applied research. The questions in each case include the following: Who designed the study? Who was on the research team? What was the purpose of the study? What did people want from the study? What was the relationship of the researcher to the "client"? What were the researchers' assumptions about

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the research site, and the topic? Who wrote the report? Was the research effective? What was meant by "effective" in the particular situation? These questions address central concerns about the participants, purpose, relationships between groups, the assumptions, and the results.

Evaluation and Policy Research

Head Start: Description of a Case Study

Head Start, the nationally funded early childhood education program, was ordered by Congress, in 1972, to increase to at least 10 percent the number of handicapped children served in each program. Head Start program directors around the country received the directive that, among other things, broadly defined what was meant by "handicapped children," and set the fall of 1973 as the date for compliance. The goal of the mandate was to increase the services available to children with disabilities and to promote their inclusion in programs with typical youngsters. The federal agency for the program wrote an RFP (Request for Proposal) to look at the effectiveness of the mandate. The agency wanted to know if Head Start programs had complied. A company bid on the work and received the contract. The research was organized into two parts that were carried out more or less autonomously. The major thrust of the first part consisted of mailing questionnaires to program directors asking them the number and types of handicapped children they presently had in their programs and how this compared with the composition of the program the year prior to the mandate. On the basis of that data, it was reported that the number of handicapped children had doubled since the regulations went into effect and at least 10.1 percent of the children attending Head Start programs now had handicapping conditions.

A second aspect of the research consisted of a series of on-site visits to Head Start programs by teams of observers using a qualitative approach. Using an open-ended design, they went to the projects, observing and talking to parents and staff. The initial observations consisted of data collection around a number of general questions such as, "How was the mandate experienced by Head Start staff and parents?" and "What, if anything, had changed as a result?" The qualitative teams concluded that the number of handicapped children recruited had not notably increased; rather, there had been a change in how the children were defined. They suggested that the conclusion that Head Start now served 10.1 percent was misleading. The report took the form of a narrative that discussed a number of propositions concerning the mandate's effect. These included an account of the confusion generated by the term *handicap*, how staff perceived the mandate in light of their general view of "orders from Washington," programmatic variations in compliance (from "paper compliance" to "active recruitment efforts"), as well as the unanticipated consequences of the mandate (from the labeling of children who previously were not labeled to a general improvement in individualization in programming for all children).

The funding agency was unhappy with the qualitative report. They wanted to know the facts: "What was the percentage of handicapped youngsters being served by Head Start?" The funders wanted the report to Congress to be clear and unambiguous, and, as the researchers also learned, they wanted the findings to be complimentary to Head Start.

Head Start: Discussion of a Case Study

The qualitative section of this evaluation was designed by the researchers in light of the government's request for narrative data. The research team consisted of a professor and graduate students who traveled to the different sites to interview the directors and observe the programs. The purpose of the study was to evaluate whether or not Head Start had been successful in including children with disabilities into their programs nationwide. But as the case makes clear, the funders wanted to deliver a report to Congress that found "successful" compliance with the new regulations. In this case, the researchers had been hired through a public competition through the RFP, so they did not have a personal relationship with the funding agency. This is one of the most common kinds of relationships between researchers and their clients. The research team thought qualitatively about the project, so they assumed that the different people involved in the project would have varying perspectives on what the problem was and how to respond to it. The professor wrote the report in collaboration with graduate students and then delivered it to the funding agency.

These responses suggest some of the tension points in doing qualitative research. The goals of the funders and the researchers may be at stake, and applied research is always conducted in the world in the midst of change. Also, contradictions may exist between the stated and hidden goals of the project. All of these pressure points usually result in the need for more negotiation in the applied research report.

In addition to the points made above, the Head Start experience illustrates a number of aspects of the qualitative approach to evaluation and policy research. These characteristics reflect the qualitative approach in general as discussed in Chapter 1. The data that are collected tend to be descriptive, consisting of people's own words and descriptions of events and activities. The presentation of findings also employs description. The research tends to be conducted in the places where programs are actually carried out. While usually not as extensive as in basic research, the researcher spends time with those he or she is evaluating on their own territory. The analysis and design proceed inductively. Rather than starting from predefined goals or goals extrapolated from official program descriptions, the researcher describes the program as he or she observes it working. There is an emphasis on process—how things happen—rather than whether a particular outcome was reached; and there is a concern with meaning—how the various participants in the program see and understand what happened. Here people at all levels and all positions in the program provide data concerning what the program meant to them. Administrators' views of what was supposed to happen or what went wrong are given neither more nor less weight than what the staff think of what happened. The emphasis is on telling what happened from many points of view and on the unanticipated as well as the hoped for consequences of the intervention.

Getting Funds

How do you get to do evaluation and policy research? As the example suggested, the most common way is through the **RFP (Request for Proposal)** route. You write a proposal to an agency that has requested that evaluation work be done and compete with other applicants for the contract.

One problem for qualitative researchers seeking funding is research design. Some RFPs that come out of Washington give a clear message: Qualitative researchers need not apply. The specific nature of the research questions exclude the qualitative approach from consideration. Those interested in seeking funding have to spot the signs and know that to pursue these funding sources is futile.

While some agencies are clearly antagonistic to qualitative research, they are becoming fewer in number. Some have expressed a real interest and commitment to the qualitative approach. It is to these groups that proposals should be submitted. One problem even here, however, is that proposal reviewers for these receptive agencies may not have been trained in qualitative approaches and, therefore, do not understand important aspects of qualitative design. How do you educate such reviewers? How do you go about describing your research methodology and research questions in detail when your inductive approach requires that the specifics of how you proceed evolve in the course of the research? We addressed this question briefly in Chapter 2 by suggesting that you might conduct a pilot study before you write a proposal so that your design is clear. Obviously, this does not work in evaluation. RFPs have to be responded to quickly. Yet reviewers without extensive training tend to be skeptical if a would-be researcher cannot depict in detail a study's progress beforehand, show his or her command of the technology to be employed, indicate clearly what contribution the findings will make, and indicate on the basis of what criteria the treatment will be considered effective. Obviously, you cannot satisfy such a reviewer, but you can address this challenge by conducting a broad-based and substantive review of the literature before you write a proposal, using your review to generate a list of fairly specific questions that you will use to begin your research.

You can discuss how you will proceed in relation to those questions, but make it clear that the design may change if the questions lack usefulness. Be more explicit than you might normally be about data analysis and other such procedures so that the proposal reviewer unfamiliar with the approach can gain a concrete sense of what is entailed. Remember that writing a research proposal to conduct a qualitative study and doing qualitative evaluation call for two separate approaches. The proposal represents a hypothesis on how to proceed in order to give the reviewer an idea of what you will accomplish. It is not a rigid blueprint of how you will conduct the research. When you enter the site, you may want to act as if you know little about schools so that your mind is fresh; but when you write a proposal, you want the reviewer to see you as a competent, knowledgeable person who will make a contribution to improving educational practices.

Relations between the Contractor and the Researcher

What puts evaluation and policy researchers in a different position than most other investigators is that their services are contracted for payment. They are guided not only by the canons of research, but by the contractor's expectations as well. While not inevitable, and certainly avoidable through careful negotiation and explicit understanding, the researcher's standards concerning rigorous and well-conceived research can conflict with the contractor's expectations. "Hired hands" have an obligation to the contractor that they must balance with the responsibilities of a researcher. Here we sketch some of the areas of disagreement

contractors and qualitative researchers often face, and we offer some suggestions on how to avoid or handle them.

1. *Ownership of the data.* If not agreed upon specifically before the study begins, who owns and has access to the fieldnotes and other qualitative data can become a source of disagreement. It is understandable that the people who have paid you should consider these materials theirs, but research ethics suggest an opposing position. Subjects should be protected from the scrutiny of people who may make decisions about their future, and what transpires between the researcher and subjects is confidential. In order to collect rich data, subjects should feel that what they say to you will not be attributed to them in reports or in your conversations with others. For them to think that what you say will go directly to people in authority will skew their responses.

2. *Making program goals an object of study.* The canons of good qualitative research design suggest that research should not be conducted to answer specific questions such as, "Is the program successful or not?" The contractor who insists that you answer the question "Is the program working well?" has to be satisfied with the answer, "That depends on how you look at it." Some contractors feel violated when the goals of the program are questioned. After all, they feel that as the administrators, they establish the goals. They want you to make judgments about their goals because that is why they pay you.

There are several ways to avoid this conflict. First, the best cure is prevention. Make it as clear as possible at the outset of your research that the focus of your work is description or documentation rather than judgments of success and failure. In other words, try to reiterate in your agreement that your goal is not to provide information on whether the program is good or bad (Everhart, 1975).

3. *The hierarchy of credibility.* The qualitative researcher, taking all sources of data as important, often shakes up the **hierarchy of credibility** in an organization. This can be a source of contention between the contractor and the researcher. Sometimes reports juxtapose, say, a high school principal's view of a school with the students' views. Students' perspectives appear as credible as the principal's and often sound as logical. Authority and organizational structure symbolize to some that the words of people at the top are more informative and accurate than the words of those at the bottom, even when the people at the top are telling us about those at the bottom. To present the views of the "other side" in a credible way can make authority figures defensive and angry at the messenger with the conflicting news.

Qualitative researchers can present views of those holding different hierarchical positions tactfully. Researchers who want their work to be seriously considered, therefore, must monitor how they present their findings, avoiding inflammatory language on the one hand, and obsequious public relations writing on the other.

4. *"All you do is criticize."* The qualitative approach to evaluation and policy research critically examines organizational practices, but that does not mean that it has to be overly negative in its tone. Many times organizations are not doing what they say they are doing or what their goals indicate they should be doing. What they actually do, however, may be both substantive and laudable. Contractors often get upset with reports that only emphasize what is wrong, with no attempt to present accomplishments. All people perform better

with positive reinforcement. You do not have to lie to be helpful, but an optimistic and positive tone is not a compromise.

5. *Contractor-enforced limits.* Qualitative researchers are dedicated to seeing subjects in context. When they study a program, they want to see how it relates to the larger organization of which it is a part. At times contractors put limits on what can be studied. The limits can sometimes exclude the higher echelons of an organization from scrutiny. When evaluation tasks are narrowly defined to include only the internal operations of a program, the evaluation report can present a distorted view. It may blame the victims of upper-level organizational bumbling. Contractors may become upset when the investigator strays too far from the specific program, but this avenue of investigation may be important. Negotiating broad access to programs when the research undertaking is still under discussion can protect the researcher from this source of conflict.

6. *Who owns and gets the report?* Evaluation and policy research can be a double-edged sword for contractors. Often they do not want the unintended consequences or actual workings of an organization to be publicly revealed. Sometimes they want to conceal certain knowledge even from organizational members. Who should get the final report? Does someone own it? This can be a particularly touchy issue. Again, establishing an agreement with the sponsor may forestall later problems. We would advise you, however, not to sell off too many of your rights (to publish, reproduce, and the like).

The reports that evaluation and policy researchers write have political implications and can affect funding, people's livelihoods, and the services they receive. It takes good judgment and a great deal of tact and integrity to conduct such research without making enemies. As veteran researcher J. W. Evans (1970) wrote, "It should be clear that the lot of the evaluator is destined to be a harassed and controversial one and those who contemplate a career in this field should be aware of this."

It is important for an evaluation or policy researcher to be aware of potential problems and to attempt to avoid some of them by careful pre-study planning and discussion. But researchers have a number of needs that make them vulnerable to pressure from contractors and other special interest groups that may lead them awry in their work. The first of these needs is money. Therefore, a good safeguard for keeping your integrity intact is to avoid contract research if you are (or will become) dependent on the research revenues for a livelihood. To put it another way, you can only afford to do evaluation or policy research if you can afford not to do it.

The Research Site

We have discussed how researchers should handle themselves at the research site in Chapter 3. Our discussion of demeanor, developing rapport, interviewing skills, and the like are relevant here. Because the setting is an evaluation or policy site, however, other issues arise.

When you are being paid to evaluate a program, you must evaluate a specific one and give feedback about the particular program to the agency that hired you. People feel uncomfortable being evaluated. They have something at stake. Some subjects may feel more