

# Chapter 28 Publishing a Qualitative Journal Article

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## Skill

Learn how to publish your qualitative journal article.

## Why the Skill Is Important

I encourage all of my students to publish their qualitative projects. This applies especially to those going into academic positions, but it is useful, too, for those working outside of academia in that by writing up and publishing their studies, they learn about how research is composed, a skill useful when they need to read research articles. Most people feel that publishing a study is difficult, and it indeed may be for some who are less experienced in writing up articles for publication. Often individuals select journals that have low acceptance rates. They may not give enough attention to how they should present their studies to maximize the potential for publication. Some people simply do not understand the publication process. This chapter will review this process and how to organize your manuscript so that it will receive the best review possible.

## Publishing During an Academic Career

As you think about publishing from your qualitative study, you might consider how publication relates to the unfolding of an academic publishing career. Here are the stages I have found helpful (realizing that the exact order of these stages may vary and that they may, at times, overlap).

### Stage 1: Publishing in Journals From a Dissertation or Thesis

Typically students emerge with doctoral dissertations or theses as the research products of their graduate programs. In the first few years of their academic careers, they need to spend time publishing from their dissertations or theses because it is the research they have just completed. Often they publish with the chairs of their committees or with established faculty who have name recognition and can be easily published. In these early years, they also start developing conference papers from their dissertations or from research they have had time to collect during their early academic careers.

### Stage 2: Publishing Conference Papers or Posters

As faculty move on with their careers, they begin to present their research at conferences. Many conferences are open to new faculty or recently graduated students who need to disseminate their research. Regional conferences would be the easiest to be accepted for, and these conferences require that an abstract or a short summary of the research be presented. Typically these abstracts or summaries are reviewed by individuals in the field for acceptance of presentation at the conferences. One form of conference presentation is to share a poster of your research, and there are good models for how to organize your information for a poster. At a more sophisticated level, your conference research paper may be selected for a research panel, in which three or four people share their research studies, and these studies are organized under a common theme. Sometimes there will be a discussant

at the research panel who critiques the papers and provides helpful feedback. Some individuals take this feedback role seriously; others do not. Also available at conferences would be an invited panel of individuals who have all completed research on the same topic, and the invitation may bypass the formal review process and be organized by one or more individuals who have written on the topic. Finally, at a conference, papers may be further reviewed for inclusion in a published proceeding, and authors may need to decide whether they want proceeding publication or publication in a recognized journal.

### **Stage 3: Publishing Journal Articles**

I always field-test my manuscript first at a conference before I submit it to a journal. When I look at the résumés of colleagues in the academy, I am suspicious of those résumés where individuals have long lists of conference presentations and short lists of published journal articles. Those individuals obviously do not subscribe to my field-test idea. There should be a one-to-one ratio (roughly) of conference papers to journal articles. This is my first step for publishing in journals. Journals stand at a more advanced level of publication than conference papers. My next step is to locate two or three appropriate journals for my qualitative research. How to select and “research” those journals as appropriate for my study is the subject of the next section of this chapter. But for now, I look for national, refereed journals to publish in, and I may start, as an early-career faculty member, in a “third tier” journal that has a lenient acceptance rate (say 20%).

### **Stage 4: Publishing Book Chapters and Books**

At the next level of rigor in my career would be to publish book chapters in edited volumes. At this point I hope that editors will invite me to compile a chapter. Sometimes these chapters are thoroughly reviewed, and often only the editors of the volume review them. I certainly look at this point for distinguished publishing houses, either university presses or large commercial publishers. When choosing a large commercial publishing house, I am most concerned about whether it has a large marketing list that spans a substantial geographic region. For example, I can look to see if a publisher has offices around the world and a catalogue of publications that goes out to faculty and students at many campuses. A related topic is writing a book in your career. This is a substantial undertaking and is probably reserved for midcareer phases of your work life. Again, finding a publisher with a large marketing list and a fair review process is central to publishing books. Often books come about from compiling multiple journal article studies in a field, from developing a conceptual framework or idea that is widely used, or from the need for a textbook for classroom purposes.

All of my books (except one) have been written to address a pedagogical need in the classroom. My books have started from rough outlines of ideas that I share with students in class, and then they develop into PowerPoint presentations, and then into distinct chapters that I share as the final copy emerges. This book resulted from this process. When I use material from students, I seek their approval and have them sign a consent form to use their material. From student questions and comments, I have been the beneficiary of many fantastic ideas about writing research over the years.

### **Stage 5: Writing Proposals for Funding**

From conference papers to journal articles and book chapters, the next development in publishing for a qualitative scholar becomes writing proposals for extramural funding. These proposals may go to private foundations or to public federal or state agencies. The way to write a proposal for funding is a

topic in its own right and beyond the scope of this book. However, workshops exist on developing expertise in proposal writing. As with finding the right journal for your qualitative manuscript, you need to research the appropriate funding agency for your work.

## **How I Study a Journal Before Submission**

One aspect of this research publication trajectory is to publish in journals. In order to maximize the possibility of acceptance of your qualitative study in a journal, you need to conduct your research on the nature of the journal. Here are the steps I have used repeatedly to find the right journal and increase my chances of publication.

### **Step 1: Identify Two or Three Journals**

I search the large databases (e.g., EBSCO, FirstSearch) and begin by identifying two or three journals that might be interested in the content of my qualitative study. I look for national journals with boards that review manuscripts for quality before they are published. There is no definitive list of journals friendly to qualitative research, but more and more journals are opening up to this form of inquiry. However, you can find a list of qualitative-friendly journals that has been updated over the years at <http://www.slu.edu/organizations/qrc/QRjournals.html>.

Do your research on the format and structure of journal articles published in your selected journal before you submit your article. This will maximize the possibility of acceptance.

### **Step 2: Study the Editorial Board**

Once I have found these journals, I study the backgrounds of the editorial board members and editors of the journal. At the front of most issues of journals, you can find the names of the editors (typically one editor and several associate editors). The list of editorial board members can also be found on these front pages. I look through the list of editorial board members and search for individuals who may have published qualitative studies. I especially want my qualitative project to receive a fair hearing. I may also write a letter to the editor in which I briefly describe my qualitative study and ask whether the study would be a suitable topic for the journal.

### **Step 3: Examine Guidelines for Submission**

I next look for guidelines for submission that will provide information that I will need to submit, such as information as to what style manual to use (i.e., the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* [American Psychological Association, 2010] is probably the most popular one for social and behavioral science research), the maximum number of words permitted, the information necessary for the title page, and the proper formatting for tables, figures, and bibliographic references. Many journals now require electronic submission, so I am interested in how I will need to submit my manuscript for review.

## Step 4: Dealing With Feedback From the Review

I recognize the various acceptance categories and how I need to react to them. The review process for my submitted manuscript may take several months, and I will receive detailed reviews about my study. I look for what I call “pearls of wisdom” in the detailed feedback from the reviewers, and consider what points are legitimate and what points are outside the bounds of normal review. To make this determination I may call in my coauthors or someone experienced in publishing in the journal to examine the reviews and help me find the “pearls” to include in my revision.

Journals typically have three categories of acceptance: accept, resubmit, and reject. A “reject” means that my manuscript was not suitable for the journal or was considered too low quality to be published. A “resubmit” means that I need to revise the manuscript carefully on the basis of the reviewers’ and the editor’s feedback. I typically view a “resubmit” as an acceptance, and I take the reviewers’ comments seriously. An “accept” it seems is rare, and it means that there may still be some minor points to adjust before a manuscript will be published. If I receive a “resubmit” decision on my qualitative manuscript, I then make changes in the draft of the paper, and develop a detailed letter to send back to the editor when I return the manuscript. This letter takes each one of the critical points raised in the reviews, and point by point I discuss how each concern was addressed and where in the manuscript the editor can find my changes. It is typically then up to the editor to determine if the revised manuscript should be sent out for additional reviews.

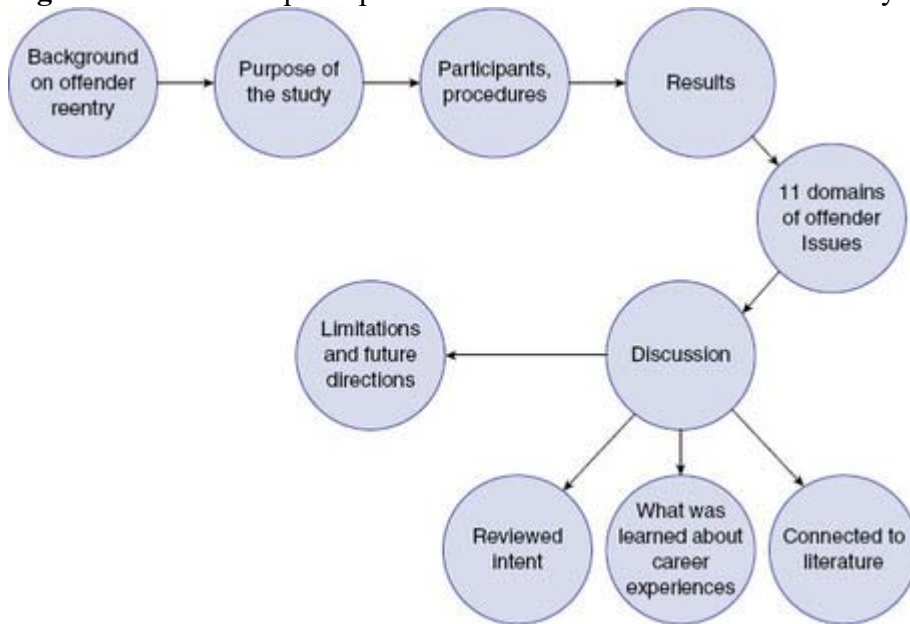
## Step 5: Study the Structure of Articles Published in the Journal

I study the overall structure of articles published in the journal. This means that I will find two or three published articles in each of the one to three journals I have selected as possible outlets for my qualitative study and look closely at the organization and structure of the articles. I will look at the types of headings and the flow of topics to determine the extent to which they are written in a more scientific way or a literary way. A scientific way would include the standard headings of introduction, literature, methods, results or findings, and conclusions or discussion. A literary way would contain headings or topics that essentially tell a narrative story. Regardless of which structure prevails, I want to compose my qualitative article to look identical to what has been published in prior issues of the journal. To see the difference between a scientifically structured qualitative article and a literary one, I provide two concept maps.

The first map, in [Figure 28.1](#), illustrates a scientifically structured article by Shivy et al. (2007). In this project the authors used qualitative methods to understand the reentry-related personal experiences of offenders (six men and nine women) at 1- to 3-day reporting centers, a nonresident form of community corrections. As you can see in [Figure 28.1](#), a concept map of the flow of ideas in the article illustrates the progression of topics from the purpose, through the sample and the results, and then on to the discussion.

An alternative concept map or flow of ideas using a literary structure can be seen in [Figure 28.2](#), from a study by Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf (2006). This qualitative study presented a case analysis of a fourth grade boy’s experiences (before, during, and after) writing a story about a boy whose struggles in writing led directly to his death. The flow of ideas is quite different from the structure of the scientific article illustrated in [Figure 28.1](#). As shown in [Figure 28.2](#), the authors began with personal experiences and moved on to a description of the boy, a theoretical framework, the methods, the story of the boy’s experiences, and then the discussion and implications. The concept map of [Figure 28.2](#) portrays this flow of ideas.

**Figure 28.1** A Concept Map of a Scientific Structure Based on Shiviy et al. (2007)



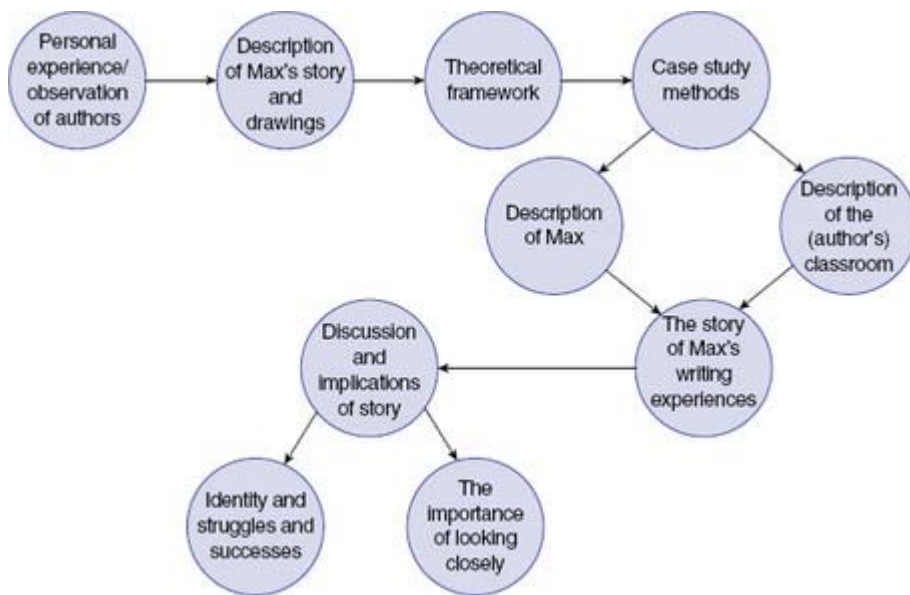
## Step 6: Consider the Length, Details Included, and Impact Factor

Other elements of the content of published articles must be considered. Some other factors I look at include the overall length of the manuscript; its use of quotations, figures, and tables (how many, how often); the extent to which some quantitative features are included (see [Chapter 25](#), on writing in a qualitative way); and the overall Impact Factor, a score that indicates the rating of the journal. The Impact Factor reflects the average number of citations to recent articles published in the journal. Higher impact scores indicate a higher quality journal, and these are compiled in *Journal Citation Reports*, an annual publication of the Science and Scholarly Research Division of the Thomson Reuters Corporation.

## Step 7: Look at the Qualitative Designs Used

I am also curious about whether qualitative research designs are used in publications in the journal or whether the authors take more of a basic, thematic approach to their study. These designs are discussed in some detail in [Chapter 30](#), and they include such designs as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.

**Figure 28.2** A Concept Map of a Literary Structure Based on Dutro et al. (2006)



## Summary

Publishing is not easy regardless of methodology used. I believe that the type of publication generally relates to the stage of an individual's career and proceeds from early publications related to graduate student research and on to conference presentations, journal articles, books, and then proposals for funding. Because publishing in journals is such a prized award during this trajectory, I have given thought to how I would research finding an appropriate journal for my qualitative publications. This process involves identifying potential journals for my content area, and studying many aspects of the journals using current issues. This study includes looking at the overall writing structure—scientific or literary; appropriate length; style; use of quotations, figures, and tables; and the level of sophistication of the qualitative methods, from a basic thematic approach to a more advanced use of a qualitative research design.

## Activity

Find a qualitative research journal article that has been published in a national refereed journal. Scan the article for the following elements, and note each element:

- Is the study scientific or more literary in its structure? Create a concept map of the flow of ideas.
- What approximate number of pages were typeset? (And if the typeset page equates to 70% of a double-spaced manuscript page, how many pages would the typed manuscript be?)
- What style manual was used for the article?
- How frequently were quotations, tables, and figures used?
- Was the article written reporting themes in the findings, or did the authors use a specific research design (e.g., ethnography, case study) and identify this specific design in the methods section?

## Further Resources

For help with writing qualitative reports in general, see:

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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