# Chapter 25 Writing in a Qualitative Way

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## Skill

Write your qualitative study using good description, the coherence of ideas, similes, and short quotations.

## Why the Skill Is Important

The idea behind good qualitative writing is to develop a storyline or narrative that engages readers and draws them into the study. A detailed description will bring them in. So also will passages that coherently relate and flow. Writing techniques, such as similes, are often part of good qualitative writing because they can take an unfamiliar situation and relate it to a familiar situation. The use of quotations, especially short ones, also brings a qualitative narrative to life, and they can capture the essence of what many words might be used to describe a theme or to illustrate a theme. Another important part of qualitative research is to position yourself in the study by writing reflexively. I will cover this idea in Chapter 26. In short, there are several writing strategies in qualitative research that should become part of your approach to writing.

## Use "Thick Description" When You Write

> A description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details, and possibly cultural complexity, but it becomes thick description if it offers direct connection to cultural theory and scientific knowledge. (Stake, 2010, p. 49)

Writing detail into a qualitative study is called "thick description." It means writing in a way to provide details about the setting, about people, and about events. The term comes from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (Geertz, 1973). Qualitative books address how to write using "thick description," and these discussions are typically about comparing a "thin" description with a "thick" description. We can also view examples of "thick" description to see how it is written by authors.

## Where to Place Detailed Description

Detail can go into many places in a qualitative study, but it is especially important in describing the setting, which typically goes into the "findings" section as the first passage. It is also important to place the detail into the theme passages to provide an element of realism to the discussions. Here are some examples of detailed description that you might place in your qualitative study:

- A place or physical description of the setting that might begin by circling outside of a place and then moving inside, such as we used in our study of the soup kitchen in a homeless shelter (Miller, Creswell, & Olander, 1998)

- An emotional description based on the faces of individuals (see the New York marathon example of studying the emotions on faces as presented in Chapter 19's activity)
- An artistic description, such as found in music or in comic books (see Millhauser's [2007] opening cartoon description, called "Cat 'n' Mouse")
- A taste description (or draw on all of the senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, or other senses, such as balance, temperature, pain, and others)
- An activity description, such as the description of adolescent students using tobacco (McVea, Harter, McEntarffer, & Creswell, 1999)
- A movement description, such as our assessment of the development of the mixed methods movement in South Africa (Creswell & Garrett, 2008)
- A description that goes from broad to narrow, such as the description in our "gunman" case study where we talked about the region of the country, the campus, the building, and then the classroom (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995)
- A description that educates the reader, such as the qualitative health account of the needs of AIDS-infected victims in rural China (Lu, Trout, Lu, & Creswell, 2005)

Qualitative studies are written using detailed description, coherence of ideas, and literary techniques such as similes and good quotes.

## Examples of "Thick" Description

To best understand the use of "thick" description, it is helpful to see some examples where "thin" language has been changed to "thick" language, and how "thick" description has been used in qualitative projects.

### Example 1: From Thin Description to Thick

- Thin: "I had trouble learning the piano keyboard." (Denzin, 1989, p. 85)
- Thick: "Sitting at the piano and moving into the production of a chord, the chord as a whole was prepared for as the hand moved toward the keyboard, and the terrain was seen as a field relative to the task. . . . There was chord A and chord B, separated from one another . . . A's production entailed a tightly compressed hand, and B's . . . an open and extended spread.... The beginner gets from A to B disjointly." (Sudnow, 1978, pp. 9–10)

### Example 2: Activity and Setting Description

> Daniel feels it is important to approach the experience of materials through aesthetics rather than explanation. He stresses the ordinariness of many of the things he uses: starch, soap bubbles, milk cartons. "You've got to get teachers confident enough to get the materials into the hands of students, and to tolerate them playing around with them."... Around the room are some samples of the work that is going on in Daniel's courses. A tray of starch has dried out to leave characteristic crack lines. In a plastic bucket is a water wheel made out of milk cartons. When the wheel turns, it winds up a winch. (cited in Stake, 2010, p. 50)

This passage includes a description of an activity, and it also includes a physical description of the setting.

### Example 3: A Chronological Description

> George bought a broken clock at a tag sale. The owner gave him a reprint of an eighteenth-century repair manual for free. He began to poke around the guts of old clocks. As a machinist, he knew gear ratios, pistons and pinions, physics, the strength of materials.... He could replace the worn tooth on a strike wheel by hand. Lay the clock facedown. Unscrew the screws; maybe just pull them from the cedar or walnut case, the threads long since turned to wood dust dusted from mantels. Lift off the back of the clock like the lid of a treasure chest. Bring the long-armed jeweler's lamp closer, to just over your shoulder. Examine the dark brass. See the pinions gummed up with dirt and oil. Look at the blue and green and purple ripples of metal hammered, bent, torched. Poke your finger into the clock; fiddle the escape wheel (every part perfectly named—escape: the end of the machine, the place where the energy leads out, breaks free, beats time). Stick your nose closer; the metal smells of tannic. Read the names etched onto the works: *Ezra Bloxham-1794*; *Geo. E. Tiggs-1832*; *Thos. Flatchbart-1912*. Lift the darkened works from the case. Lower them into ammonia. Lift them out, hose burning, eyes watering, and see them shine and star through your tears. File the teeth. Punch the bushings. Load the springs. Fix the clock. Add your name. (Harding, 2009, pp. 14–15)

This passage, from Paul Harding's 2009 Pulitzer Prize–winning book *Tinkers*, includes a chronology of steps in fixing a clock and the use of documents to add depth, and it educates readers about a task they may not know.

### Example 4: A Mixture of Details

> "One thing about life in New York: wherever you are, the neighborhood is always changing. An Italian enclave becomes Senegalese; a historically African-American corridor becomes a magnet for white professionals. The accents and rhythms shift; the aromas become spicy or vegetal. The transition is sometimes smooth, sometimes bumpy. But there is a sense of loss among the people left behind, wondering what happened to the neighborhood they once thought of as their own. (Leland, 2011)

This passage, from John Leland's 2011 *New York Times* article "A Community of Survivors Dwindles," shows good description of a geographical space: music, smell, geometry, and emotion.

## Writing Coherently

"'A lot of critics,' Vonnegut would later say with some asperity, 'think I'm stupid because many sentences are so simple and my method is so direct; they think these are defects. No. The point is to write as much as you know as quickly as possible'" (Buckley, 2011).

You have probably read a journal article or a research report that is easy to read, and that flows smoothly so that you can quickly read through it. If so, this is because the author threads the parts together carefully, and one idea builds on another. The author is writing coherently with all parts closely tied together to make a logical whole. We need to write research articles and studies the same way. In short, we need to write coherently.

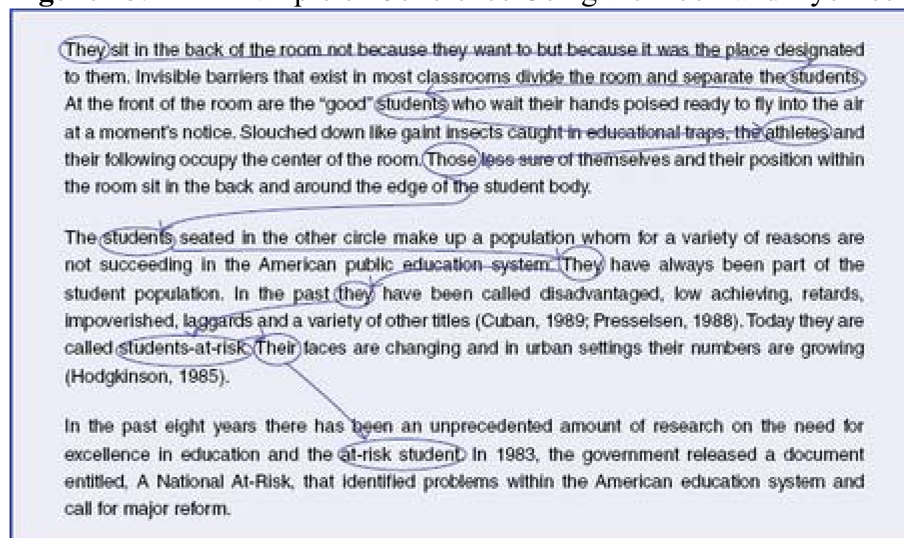
## An Example of Good Coherence

Coherence means that the writing is seamless, and one thought flows to the next. The reader does not notice disjunctions between thoughts, and the reading proceeds effortlessly. Wilkinson (1991) wrote, “Coherence is the ordering of words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and so on, so that they develop a closely reasoned, logical, line of thought, both within and between units” (p. 66). How can a writer build in congruence? Wilkinson went on to state that “connectives,” *externally* connected transitional words or phrases, can help build this unity. Also, she recommended *internal* connections in which one sentence is explicitly connected to the preceding sentence. So in your writing:

- Connect sentences—key words, phrases, synonyms
- Connect paragraphs—connect the first and last sentences of the paragraph
- Use transitional phrases and words, such as *therefore*, *moreover*, *hence*, *consequently*, *on the contrary*, *in spite of this*, and so forth
- Have an overall logic to your narrative

Look at the following example, called the “hook-and-eye exercise,” in Figure 25.1. This was an approach to viewing coherence in a written passage first introduced by Wilkinson (1991) that I incorporated into my section on writing strategies in my text (Creswell, 2014). When you look closely at Figure 25.1, you will see that this qualitative passage has good coherence. The author stays focused on “students,” and each hook and eye connect the word *student* or synonyms for *students* in each sentence. So the reader follows the central thread of students through a paragraph. Then each paragraph is connected as well, to keep the focus on “students.” The writer intentionally included the word *students* in each sentence and across paragraphs to provide coherence to the writing. This is an example of good writing.

**Figure 25.1** An Example of Coherence Using the Hook-and-Eye Technique



They sit in the back of the room not because they want to but because it was the place designated to them. Invisible barriers that exist in most classrooms divide the room and separate the students. At the front of the room are the “good” students who wait their hands poised ready to fly into the air at a moment's notice. Slouched down like gaint insects caught in educational traps, the athletes and their following occupy the center of the room. Those less sure of themselves and their position within the room sit in the back and around the edge of the student body.

The students seated in the other circle make up a population whom for a variety of reasons are not succeeding in the American public education system. They have always been part of the student population. In the past they have been called disadvantaged, low achieving, retards, impoverished, laggards and a variety of other titles (Cuban, 1989; Presselsen, 1988). Today they are called students-at-risk. Their faces are changing and in urban settings their numbers are growing (Hodgkinson, 1985).

In the past eight years there has been an unprecedented amount of research on the need for excellence in education and the at-risk student. In 1983, the government released a document entitled, A National At-Risk, that identified problems within the American education system and call for major reform.

## An Example of a Narrative Needing Better Congruence

Now look at another example, which illustrates how the author did not provide much congruence in the discussion:

> The complicated phenomena in health care require a multifaceted approach to develop understanding and insight (Andrew & Halcomb, 2006). Quantitative methods aimed at producing generalizable results have long dominated the health sciences, while the essence of qualitative research is to explore and understand complex dynamic phenomena. The methodologies for health science research should be diverse and selected to suit the problems being investigated. Neither a qualitative nor a quantitative approach can stand alone if the research aim is to understand the richness of the communities we study (Baum, 1995). Therefore, health science researchers need to apply research methods to address complex, multidisciplinary research problems. Mixed methods research is such an approach, combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research. (From the introduction to a doctoral dissertation, Wanqing Zhang, "Mixed Methods Embedded Design in Medical Education, Mental Health, and Health Services Research: A Methodological Analysis," University of Nebraska–Lincoln, December 2011)

Look at this passage in terms of the transitional phrases—only one is provided, "therefore." Also see this passage in terms of the connection of ideas—what ideas are being connected? Finally, does the passage skip around from topic to topic? Build large ideas (often with a topic sentence) and draft sub-ideas under the large ideas.

# Writing Using Similes

If you notice, many prose writers use similes to convey thoughts. They often find their way into qualitative projects. Similes make a comparison between two things using words such as *like* and *as*. They can be distinguished from metaphors that do not use these words but still make comparisons ("this room is a refrigerator") and from analogies that provide logical arguments comparing one thing with another. Here are some examples:

> Like children leaving home, the fragmentation of qualitative methods from overviews to discipline-specific books has showed both a breaking away and remaining within the family of qualitative methods. (Creswell, 2009)
>
> The realization was like that of a first-time mother who at last fully understands that only she can give birth to the new life within: I knew I was the only one who could rebirth myself. (Cameron Plagens, qualitative doctoral dissertation, Institute for Transpersonal Psychology, 2009)

# Writing Using Quotations

Another aspect of good writing is to use quotations to provide evidence for the themes in the findings of a study. Quotations are not easy to use, and you need to consider whether you will use short, medium-length, or long quotations, and introduce them into the qualitative narrative.

In most of my qualitative studies I have used short quotations consisting of a few words or phrases. As mentioned in Chapter 21, I find the quotations in my qualitative database, and then tag with them a code called "quotation" during my analysis of a database using qualitative data analysis software. These short quotations do not take up much space, and they can be liberally used as evidence for each theme in a findings section. What might be quotable material may differ between your perspective and mine, but I consider phrases that seem to capture in a few words the key ideas of a theme and then tag them with a code ("quotation") in my data analysis.

Quotations of entire sentences or entire paragraphs are more difficult to use as evidence for themes. They take up much space in a manuscript, which may be a problem given the length requirements for some published articles of journals. For a dissertation or thesis project, they add to the overall length of the study, which already might be quite long. Most important, midsized or large quoted passages raise the difficult issue of focus—in a long passage, what should the reader focus on? The way around this is to lead readers into the passage ("here is what you should see...") and then lead the reader out of the passage ("here was the important point...") with words that focus their attention. Because long passages contain many ideas, this help for the reader is essential to work into your writing.

# Summary

Using writing conventions typically used in qualitative research is part of good writing. A qualitative study needs to convey detailed descriptions that provide a sense of place, an emotion, an artistic rendering, the senses, an activity, a movement, and an education for the reader, taking the reader from a broad perspective to a narrow one. A detailed, "thick" description will convey a sense of realism to a study. Writing coherently will help move the action along quickly, and sentences need to connect, as well as entire paragraphs. Similes are popular in good qualitative writing because they allow readers to make comparisons between two things using words such as *like* and *as*. Finally, short quotations help capture in a few words the central ideas of themes, and they provide important evidence to use in the theme passages.

## Activity

Select a theme passage from a published qualitative journal article. Use the "hook-and-eye" exercise to connect the sentences. See if you can find words that make this connection. Next, see if the paragraphs connect with specific words. In this way, judge the overall coherence of the written theme passage.

# Further Resources

See these excellent books on scholarly writing:

Wolcott, H. F. (1990). *Writing up qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Meloy, J. M. (2002). *Writing the qualitative dissertation: Understanding by doing* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

I would also recommend a book on qualitative writing and how it needs to be adjusted based on your audience:

Richardson, L. (1990). *Writing strategies: Reaching diverse audiences*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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