

Five Steps to Writing More Engaging Qualitative Research

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Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?

Annie Dillard

Qualitative data speak to some of the most profound and transcending human experiences. As researchers we write, we teach, or we engage to give voice to the voiceless, and we often seek to foster influence and understanding where none has been. Yet, despite the most human of subject matter, our writing of qualitative research often fails. It can be conventional, formulaic, and, sometimes, even stilted. Where can the potential of our qualitative work find place in our qualitative writing?

Respectful of disciplinary norms, perhaps we filter ourselves at source (Dolby, 2002). When our words are barely formed, the supposed objectivism of science, drilled into us from our first brushes with academic writing, exerts a stealthy influence. Invisible gatekeepers, our first university professors, a former advisor, and a cantankerous reviewer, leave us condemned with their scathing feedback, pejorative norms, and harsh judgments. We assimilate these barbs into our identities, and our writing suffers via safe, stilted, disengaged prose (Sword, 2012). Creative word choices, elegant turns of phrase, or heaven forbid, *saying exactly what we really mean*, are cast as risks that descend us into academic purgatory: labeled as biased, unprofessional, and not taken seriously (Mitchell, 2017). In a world in which academic writing matters to us so much, counts for so much in our work, but is often so unengaging (Sword, 2012), how can our qualitative research writing improve? Whatever your qualitative method, we present five strategies to foster more engaging writing.

Consider What You Are Writing

Writers write poetry, crime stories, mysteries, romances, literary works, or science fiction. No two categories carry the same voice. Academics also have many voices: the research paper, the grant application, the tweet, the journal review, the

textbook, the dissertation, and the editorial. These categories—or *genres*—draw readers in via repetitive familiarity (Paré, 2014). Genre shapes writing by demanding specific conventions, language and structural norms, and expectations (Hyland, 2003). In this way, genres are social: They pay homage to power structures and are simultaneously visible, yet tacit, as Paré (2014) states, “Everybody uses them, but almost no one pays any attention to the nature of their construction” (p. A-85). Successful writing requires a writer to pay quiet diligent attention to the construction of the genre they are working in. Each genre has its own sense of verisimilitude—the bearing of truth. Each places different constraints on the writer and has different goals, forms, and structure. As you approach your writing, consider more deliberately which genre you are writing in—and what defines successful writing in that genre not only in terms of its characteristics and appearance but also in terms of its effects on the reader.

Identify to Whom You Write?

Ferris turns to the camera and speaks directly to the audience in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and we are instantly enraptured. Effective writers envision their unseen audience who may be researchers, patients, practitioners, or government policy makers. Readers also envision the writer. Writers accept, once a reader is involved, that written words no longer have the meaning they imbued or intended (Palmer, 1969). The words, and

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their interpretation, are “out there.” Building the reader–writer relationship is where writing magic happens, but care must be taken in nurturing this complex relationship. A writer cannot know what the reader already knows or what their predisposition is, and writers must find a balance somewhere between defining too many details and not defining enough (Hayes & Bajzek, 2008). This is challenging because readers of qualitative research are also increasingly from numerous diverse disciplines. Misjudging, presuming, or most commonly failing, to take account of your audience, puts connectivity at peril and risks insulting, confusing, and bemusing readers.

Effective writing always anticipates audience. It fosters a relationship with the writer for readers. When you sit down to write, always ask yourself systematically “*who is my audience?*” Identify their most likely concerns, backgrounds, and receptiveness to what you are writing. Only then can you begin to write with connection in mind.

Persuade

Connection and persuasion are indispensable and interdependent. Centuries of proponents from the time of Aristotle have taught us that persuasiveness is the basis for engagement and influence. Accordingly, writers should use different means to persuade readers (Leith, 2012): *logos*, the soundness of logic; *ethos*, through an emotional connection with the message; and *pathos*, through coming to believe that the persuader has emotional authenticity and moral credibility (Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Compelling writing not only requires the skilful use of these three dimensions of persuasion but also their integration with conventions of your chosen genre and of your likely audience. Integration of genre, audience, and persuasive charisma is essential when writing compelling qualitative manuscripts to audiences less familiar with qualitative research, such as those who read mainstream clinical- or practice-focused journals (Clark & Thompson, 2016). Given tight word limits, it is challenging to convey the tenets of qualitative rigor and the nuances of qualitative data, all with connection and persuasion, and simultaneously avoid the pitfall of excessive simplification. Such questions can lead writers of qualitative research to lament: *Why should we even attempt to write under such undeniable constraints* (Clark & Thompson, 2016)? However, instead of being seen as onerous, such constraints can inspire us. For centuries, artists have worked with the curtailing limitations of their chosen medium, of commercialism, and of critical yet conservative judgments of their work (Bayles & Orland, 1993). The presence of the challenges of persuasion in the face of such constraints should motivate and inspire. Drawing on techniques to persuade others through our writing, we can better ensure that we bring the contributions of qualitative research to wider and new audiences (Clark & Thompson, 2016). This can win others to our cause, and by extension, our participant’s cause wins too.

Find Your Voice and Cadence

Personal connection drives the world, and writing voice is the catalyst. This voice is formed from readers’ sense of the person behind the words: the writer’s voice and identity. Expression of authorial presence takes many forms: from writing in “the first person” to take ownership of a statement, to describing yourself situated in your research context, to personal histories to help the reader understand why you are drawn to a topic or point of view, and to full personal confessionals (Ivanič, 1998). Finding the degree of voice allowable in a particular genre requires intuition and experimentation. Where can you bring your voice and stance more into your prose in ways that fit with the genres you are writing within?

Writing is a method of inquiry says Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), so developing your own reflexive sense of style is important. In reading, cadence is the rhythm and pace of words as they flow through a reader’s mind. Done well, cadence leads to writing that truly grabs us. Aaron Sorkin, awarded Oscars and Emmies for his writing of *A Few Good Men* and *the West Wing*, writes his scripts in meter. Each line has a rhythm to it and takes up a certain amount of space—doesn’t cut off too soon, nor drag too long. Cadence, if you are riding a bike, is how fast your legs turn the pedals. You spin along steadily occasionally adjusting your pace for obstacles, glide as the road slopes downward, or hammer to make traffic light. Misjudging cadence in your writing can cause your reader to crash or to never reach your intended destination.

Writers with strong cadence know when and how often they can get away with breaking the “rules” of style. Alternate short and long sentences. Can your work be read out loud with inflection or does it demand a dry monotone voice? Incomplete sentences can change the rhythm of your writing or emphasize a phrase. Very useful. When cadence is used appropriately, even selectively ignoring grammatical conventions will slip by unnoticed. Influence the intonation and pace with which your reader explores your words by using less well-known punctuation devices—like the double dash—or by italicizing words for *emphasis*. Remember, your participant quotes will lack grammatical perfection and uniformity. Good qualitative writing blends the numerous voices of your analysis, so that the transition from participant voice to researcher voice does not feel like an attack on the senses.

Take Creative Risks

All writing is creative writing. When the surface is peeled away, what traditional creative writers do and what academic writers do are not dissimilar. Both require emotions, insertion of the self, and connection with an audience. Logos, ethos, and pathos are all important tools. Creativity is the *je ne sais quoi* element of academic writing (Sword, 2012): You know it when you see it, but can you define it? Creativity in academic writing gives form to ideas using originality and innovation as defined by a social context (Kelly, 2012). To make your

writing more creative, give yourself permission to resist others (and your own) reservations: “that’s not how it is normally done.” This requires reflexivity and reading widely. Instead of looking at your work head on, take a step to the side and view it with a new lens. In research that might mean methodological creativity, borrowing a writing convention from another discipline, or combining seemingly diverse ideas to create a new whole. Writing well is often difficult, even messy. Tangled. It becomes untangled the same way a box full of wool gets untangled—one strand at a time. One word at a time. Let your reflections permeate, experiment, and expect to fail, then try again.

Life’s too short for bad writing. Readers don’t need it, and writers of qualitative research should not be part of this crime.

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