

Advice on writing up a qualitative study.

Some of this applies to writing up *any* study ...

Abstract -

Your purpose here is to summarise the content of your paper as concisely as you can, for the benefit of a 'naive reader' (i.e. someone who knows nothing about what you've done). Allow about one (or at most, two) sentences each to make the following points:

1. Introduce the general subject matter.
2. Introduce the research question.
3. Explain what methods of data collection and interpretation you used, and explain *why* you used those methods.
4. Explain what you found
5. Explain what you think this *means*.

Introduction -

Remember that your goal in the introduction is to provide a rationale for your method (e.g. to explain why it is that you're about to do whatever it is that you're about to do). An introduction is *not* a literature review, but any literature review that you may have written *will* inform your introduction. Link your paragraphs together with comments which show how your argument for the rationale is developing.

Make sure that you:

1. Introduce the general subject matter *briefly* (a paragraph or two of general context will do). E.g. 'Relationship break-up is of interest to psychologists because ...'
2. Identify a particular area of interest with reference to the academic literature.
3. Use this literature concisely and critically to develop some picture of the current state of research into your particular area.
4. Identify a particular issue (one which is problematic in, or absent from, recent research) which your study will aim to address. Obviously, *you* will have identified this already, perhaps with some ideas about your preferred approach in mind, but you still need to make a case for it, for the benefit of your *reader*.
5. Explain the approach that you are taking to the investigation of this issue, giving due attention to explaining *why* this particular approach is suitable (this will involve some discussion of the *theory* behind your method - see below).
6. With qualitative work, you won't be very likely to conclude your introduction with a hypothesis (you are not likely to be testing a prediction - instead you are exploring something - constructions, speech acts, language use, experience etc) but you should provide a paragraph which summarises your rationale, and re-iterates what it is that you hope to discover more about - you can think of this as clarifying your research question, rather than writing your hypothesis.

Note that point #5 requires you to introduce, justify and discuss your chosen methodology (yes, here - in the introduction). With qualitative research there are often two aspects to this issue, and they are both crucial. Remember, 'qualitative' is not a method in itself, it just presumes a general focus on differences in meaning (rather than on number):

- Firstly, how will you *collect* your data? Interviews? Focus groups? Observation? Diaries? Etc.

Its possible to be very creative here, if you have the inclination, but it is very important to explain why you think that your chosen approach is appropriate to your aims and to the phenomena under investigation.

- Secondly, how will you *interpret* your data? Narrative analysis? Interpretative phenomenological analysis? Discourse analysis? Conversation analysis? Grounded theory? Rational choice theory? Etc.

You will need to introduce a theoretical rationale for your chosen approach, and again, to explain how it is appropriate to your aims and to the phenomena under investigation.

Method.

Having explained and justified your choices, you can now give a report of what you actually, did. Make sure that you:

1. Explain how you developed any pre-collection materials (e.g. interview schedule)
2. Explain how you chose and contacted your participants.
3. Explain who your participants were.
4. Explain what instructions and information they were given.
5. Give some indication of your participants' responses to the collection process (this may involve some reflective comment from you - where there any problems, unforeseen reactions, dilemmas for the researcher etc.? This should lead you to discuss any relevant ethical issues, too.)
6. Give details of any processes of data treatment (note-taking, transcription, etc.)
7. Explain, how you analysed your data - give enough detail for the reader to understand how you developed your codes, themes or interpretations.

Analysis.

This will be much more substantial, and much more discursive, than the results section of a typical experimental report. Your purpose here is twofold - you need to give an account of your data (to communicate a sense of 'what it is like') and to offer an interpretation of (to make a case for 'what it means'). This should be based upon your codes and/or themes, but there is plenty of scope for you to be imaginative in both the way that you choose to structure your analysis section, and in the way that you choose to lay out your evidence. Many of your decisions will depend on your chosen approach. Here are some general tips:

Structure -

It makes sense to write your analysis section in a way that allows you to move gradually from the descriptive (i.e. identifying key issues on the basis of common themes) to the interpretative (i.e. having identified the key issues, you may then be able to make links between them, to give some sense of their context, and to discuss any interesting contradictions or underlying consistencies in the sorts). N.B At some point during that process you may feel that you are writing your 'Discussion' rather than your 'Analysis,' in which case, do so.

If you develop your account in this way, you can tell a 'story' about your data - make sure that you link and develop your points as you go along.

A persuasive account -

Support your account of the data with plenty of excerpts, quotes and phrases from the data source. Always give some indication of the location of your chosen excerpts (e.g. a

transcript and line number). It is important that your argument is persuasive, and that means, firstly, that there is plenty of evidence to back it up.

Secondly, try to make your case *transparent* - this means try to make it so that the reader can see how the data has been coded, how codes have led to themes, and how themes have been incorporated into your interpretative account. You can do this easily by including this kind of information along with most of the quotes that you use. Thus in brackets along with each quote - much in the manner of a conventional academic reference - you could include transcript name/number, line number, and an indication of its code and theme. E.g. ('Paul,' lines 72-88, theme 4, code 4.2.1). N.B. Provide a 'key' for your codes and themes if you choose to number or abbreviate them. The use of quotes also has the advantages of giving the participant a 'voice' in your research (often an aim of qualitative approaches), and of offering your reader the chance to make some 'validity checks' of your interpretation of the data against the data itself. Finally there may be ways in which you can communicate to the reader how extensive your evidence is (e.g. is your theme unique to just one of your participants, is it common across an identifiable sub-group, or is it actually found in most of your data?)

The third requirement of a persuasive argument is that it is *plausible* - this means that you have to be careful that you don't take your interpretation too far away from the data. You will be less likely to make this mistake if you are in the habit of showing evidence for your claims, but qualitative researchers often try to show that they have 'triangulated' their claims in some way. This can sometimes mean that you compare the findings using more than one methodological approach (which you probably don't have time to do), but it can also mean that interpretations have been checked with other researchers (validity check) and/or with the participants themselves (reflexivity check). This isn't a question of finding out whether your interpretation is the *right* one (other interpretations are always going to be possible), it is simply a question of determining whether it is *plausible*.

Even if you don't have a specific supervisor or a group of co-researchers with whom to discuss your findings, and even if you don't have the time or opportunity to access your participants again, you can still keep yourself in check by carrying out a few mental exercises. For example, picture yourself presenting your data to a particular member of staff - could you make a case for your interpretation, or do you think they would raise more questions than you can answer? Think about how you could alter your account to anticipate or deflect any such questions.

Similarly, ask yourself whether you would feel comfortable explaining your interpretation to one of your participants. Bear in mind that sometimes (especially with more technical approaches, like CA and DA) this hypothetical conversation might be a little difficult anyway, unless your participant is another psychologist. But if you allow for that, and it still seems like you and your participant would have some serious disagreements, then you may need to have a re-think. Of course, this *could* mean toning down your interpretation, but equally, you might be very confident that something interesting occurs in your participants' data which they themselves do not appear to have any insight into. This happens sometimes - it's what makes psychology interesting - and so you shouldn't abandon it, but you could think about how you might show more clearly or persuasively that your interpretation is based firmly upon the data.

Whatever you do to address these problems - make it clear to the reader by including a couple of examples as you go along. They will increase the reader's confidence in your account.

Discussion.

Not always necessarily a separate section from the Analysis - you may just move seamlessly through description and interpretation to discussion - but these are some of the issues to consider.

Begin by discussing your findings - what do they mean? Relate them back to the problems that you identified in your introduction. Now that you know what you know, can you add something to your original argument? Contextualise your analysis - what are the implications of your findings for the world 'out there?' It is possible to say plenty of interesting things about your work, even if your study is a single-participant case study - just remember that there is a difference between *generalising from* your data to the wider world (which you should not do), and *relating* your data to the wider world (which you should do). At the very least, you will have identified something about the cultural understanding of a particular psychological phenomena, and this understanding will have come from 'out there.'

Evaluate what you have done. Remember that qualitative work does not carry quite the same methodological concerns as the paradigm (experimental psychology) that you may be more used to dealing with - it is meaningless, for example, to include comments here about hypotheses, or adequate control measures. On the other hand, it may be worth considering issues of reflexivity, validity, triangulation or interpretation when you evaluate your findings.

Don't just finish - summarise what your discussion in a final paragraph, with some sensible thoughts and pointers for further developments (i.e. *not* a recommendation that the study be repeated with more participants ...)

What is reflexivity?

"Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us "to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research." (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p. 228).

"There are two types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity.

'Personal reflexivity' involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers.

'Epistemological reflexivity' requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found?' How has the design of the study and the method of analysis 'constructed' the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings."

Carla Willig, (2001) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (p. 10).