

Writing to Learn: Why We Should Write, Rewrite, and Rewrite Again

International Journal of Qualitative Methods
January-December 2016: 1–3
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1609406916676150
ijqm.sagepub.com



Linda Liebenberg¹

When we view writing as a method, . . . we experience “language-in-use,” how we “word the world” into existence.

Richardson (2000, p. 923)

As researchers, we know that we write to share with others: share theory, share process, and share findings. What we may think about less often is writing to develop and refine our own thinking around theory, process, and findings: active and engaged writing. Active writing requires that we rethink *how* we write and the *impact* of that writing. These considerations are particularly important both for the quality of our work and our continued efforts to promote the publication of qualitative research (Clark & Thompson, 2016).

Part of the dominant approach to writing may stem in a large part from what we are taught about writing, and our ideas of what writing looks like. All too often we write thinking that what we are doing is spontaneously producing an end product to communicate with others and that good, accomplished writers sit down and simply write that finished product. Ernest Hemingway rewrote the end of *A farewell to arms*, his third novel, 39 times before being satisfied with it (Plimpton, 1958). Perhaps the lesson in this is to regard writing as a process and one through which we communicate with ourselves, facilitating our own learning. But how do we write for process and learning? Below are some of the tricks I’ve picked up along the way that have proved helpful.

What Is It You Want to Say and How Are You Going to Say It?

Many of us have experienced the intimidation of the blank screen; that all-encompassing space waiting to be filled with words that we know will be judged and hopefully approved of by others. One way of maneuvering around the blank screen is by writing what it is that you want to say in five sentences or less. Just bang it out! These words are for you and no one else. In a minute, you’ve entered into that blank space and shattered

the power of the white screen. And you’ve set a foundation for your work.

The next step is to use these few sentences to create the structure or outline for what it is you want to say. An effective means of creating this outline is to use a template. Select about three example articles from the journal you want to publish in and use these to get a sense of how your article should be structured in terms of sections, headings, and style (see also the suggestions made by Clark & Thompson, 2016). Combine this structure with what you want to say, developing an outline of your larger argument and the discussion that needs to be presented in each subsection. In this way, you form the skeleton of your article and continue to move beyond the intimidation of the blank screen. Perhaps most importantly, you develop a structure for your argument that is driven by you! The goal now is to hold onto that structure. So, as you work through your writing, keep revisiting your original statement about what it is that you want to say and how the particular section you are working on is intended to support your core message.

Using Active Reading to Support What You Want to Say

Part of successful writing involves active reading. Passive reading generally entails reading a document, sometimes underlining and highlighting, occasionally observing that something is interesting but not deliberately exploring that observation

¹ Faculty of Graduate Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Linda Liebenberg, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Dalhousie University, Suite 3201-1459, LeMarchant Street, PO Box 15000, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 4R2.

Email: linda.liebenberg@dal.ca



Creative Commons CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 License (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

further: Why is this particular point interesting? How does it add, detract, support, or challenge what your own findings?

Active reading means engaging with what you are reading as you read it; thinking critically about how this text aligns with your research focus and in what ways. If it is in opposition to what you are saying, how is it in opposition? What can you learn from the argument and implied critique? How can you use this information to avoid a potential pit fall in your own work and strengthen your argument? Similarly, how does the publication align with your work, and in what ways does it contribute to and support what you are saying?

Active reading requires making notes as you are reading and writing as you read. Importantly, these notes capture thoughts, ideas, and reflections as they come to mind. They are not final or even semifinal drafts of a finished product, but rather part of a conversation you are having with other authors, *and yourself*, regarding your own work. Later, these conversations will feed into what is published.

Using Active Writing to Develop What You Want to Say

At some point in the process—either before, during or after having reviewed the literature—authors start working in a concrete way on their article. A good place to start is by collating ideas, bringing them together in the manuscript, and positioning them in the relevant sections that were developed earlier. The best way to move forward with this process is to put what you have been reading aside, go back to the skeleton or outline document, and add your thoughts and insights to the relevant sections. People write in different ways. I like to just get my ideas out there. I have found this approach most helpful because it captures what I am thinking before I “loose a thought.” Other people I have worked with prefer to bring words to the article slowly, taking care in how even these initial thoughts are framed. Whatever your approach, the important point is to not feel compelled to get it right the first time. You probably won’t. Even if your first draft does emerge beautifully, there will always be some degree of polishing and editing required before submitting. So, take the pressure off and rather make space to capture your ideas, which can then be reviewed and refined. Once you have some points set out, you can (and should) go back and work critically through what has been written. In this way, you start using writing as a method of learning and as a method of refining your thoughts and argument.

Effective ways of engaging in this process of writing to learn, and specifically through the act of rewriting and refining what has been written, is to again ask yourself what it is you are wanting to say and what it is you are actually saying. Does a paragraph fit with its neighboring paragraphs? Similarly, does a sentence fit with its neighboring sentences? What about the words you have used? How do these words, sentences, and paragraphs support your core message and demonstrate the reasoning behind it? Often the act of reflecting on the match between a sentence and your larger argument stretches your

own thinking on the topic at hand. In this way, the process of rewriting stimulates new understanding of the data and argument, resulting in thicker descriptions of the findings.

To ensure your content is meaningful, your argument well developed, and your conclusions sound, it is often helpful to remove the “trappings of language”; the big words and the flowery sentences that may sound impressive, but on deeper inspection may actually say very little. Drawing again, on the experiences of Hemmingway (1964/2009, p. 157), “Write the best story that you can and write it as straight as you can.” This advice comes from the *The Kansas City Star* style guide that Hemmingway used when working there as a reporter (1917–1918). Here, he learnt the value of using “... short sentences, ... short first paragraphs [and] vigorous English.” To sum up, use language you know and understand. Keep your sentences short and simple. In this way, you can stay clear on what you are saying and the argument you are constructing.

Write, Write, and Write Again

It’s not always about writing more, but it’s always about writing better! Returning to Hemmingway, he said of his own work (1964/2009)

Since I had started to break down all my writing and get rid of all facility and try to *make* instead of describe, writing had been wonderful to do. But it was very difficult, and I did not know how I would ever write anything as long as a novel. It often took me a full morning of work to write a paragraph. (p. 154, italics added)

Everything you write should carry meaning and have a point. This is especially crucial given word or page restrictions of journals. If the content of a sentence or paragraph does not meaningfully add to your larger argument, delete it; if a sentence or paragraph could add, but the meaning is unclear, edit it. Learning to write concisely ensures that your article is well motivated, that your argument well supported by your data, and that your conclusions well developed.

To ensure your argument has structure and flow, regularly revisit what you have already written: Have you grouped like ideas together? Do you have stray sentences or ideas? I find it helpful to print out a copy of my work and use different colored pens to “code” what I have written: what is this sentence about? What is this paragraph about? The use of different colors shows very quickly where sentences have lost their way, and how I can get them back to where they belong. Then, I repeat the process with paragraphs. In this way, you not only create a stronger and more cohesive argument but also remove redundancies.

Don’t be afraid to make changes: If you realize that a particular section doesn’t make sense, change it. Make sure content reflects headings. And, if what you are learning from your data and your reading suggests changes to your structure (e.g., to the content or a heading), make those changes too.

But Do Stay in Control of What You Are Trying to Say

As you actively read, make notes, and write, it's important that you as the author retain control of the manuscript. This may seem at odds with the goal of qualitative research: to ensure that the participant's voice remains central. However, without the author retaining control of the article, the voices of other authors can all too easily obscure the original intent of the manuscript—an intent that was shaped by the voices of participants and the resulting findings. As such, retaining control of the writing process is quite different from dominating and silencing.

If you feel like you are not at the center of your writing at any point, stop and ask “What am I wanting to say?” Answer yourself out loud, in one or two simple sentences. You may also need to ask “Do I understand the topic I am trying to discuss?” If the answer is no, go read some more. But be sure to read slowly and actively. If you can't express someone else's argument in your own words, take it as a sign that you don't fully understand the topic. Go back and read, and reread, until you can clearly express theories and ideas. Only then should you feel comfortable directly quoting someone else's work.

Earlier I mentioned putting reading aside and capturing your own thoughts and insights. This helps establish a first draft that, while reflecting the existing literature and the data, is driven by your voice. Once this initial draft has been well developed, add more specifics from the literature (through citations and references) and the data.

And in Conclusion . . . Writing and Ethics

In addition to promoting the publication of qualitative research in high ranked journals, we have an ethical responsibility to write in ways that are accessible to as wide an audience as possible. This pertains to our responsibility to work in ways that support communities and related transformation. Similarly, our work should be accessible to policy makers for uptake into policy and practice. In both instances, expecting readers to wade through cumbersome reports and articles is impractical if not unrealistic. Considered in this way, we have an ethical obligation to make sure that our work is readable and accessible. Hopefully, some of these strategies will help support your endeavors at promoting your qualitative findings!

References

- Clark, A. M., & Thompson, D. R. (2016). Five tips for writing qualitative research in high-impact journals: Moving from #BMJnoQual. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. doi:10.1177/1609406916641250
- Hemingway, E. (2009). *A moveable feast*. The Restored Edition. New York, NY: Scribner. (Original work published 1964)
- Plimpton, G. (1958). Interviews: Ernest Hemingway, The art of fiction no. 21. *The Paris Review*, 18. Retrieved from <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4825/the-art-of-fiction-no-21-ernest-hemingway>
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method for inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. (2nd ed., pp. 923–948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.