

Tips for Writing Qualitative Research¹

[most of these apply to other types of writing as well!]

Sukriti Issar²

Sciences Po, Paris

- Leverage the unique strengths of qualitative research when writing it up (mechanisms, processes, particularities, the experiences of people, studying hard-to-find populations – what cannot be achieved through other research methods)
- Understanding what role your case plays in theory development or testing is important for framing your paper. Is your case an *extreme* case, a *typical* case, a *deviant* case, a case that provides a strong *test* of some theory? (see Flyvberg on the *Five Misunderstandings of Case Study Research*, or Seawright and Gerring on *Case Selection* Strategies or Collier on process tracing and smoking gun tests).³
 - There are a range of ways to use qualitative research - to engage with theory, to apply theory, to test theory, to develop, or extend it. It helps to be clear about which one your research is focusing on.⁴
- The scope of the argument; what other groups and situations does your argument apply to? Working through this question helps you do the important analytical work of figuring out what your case is a case of (see Ragin on *What is this a case of?*).⁵ This framing should be stated early on in your paper as it establishes the audience and scope of your research.
- Have a core **argument** on page 1. Include a research question on page 1; sometimes it helps to have a real question that ends with a question mark. The research question and argument are the two most important sentences in the paper and should be pitch perfect.
- Repeat the argument through the paper; exclude irrelevant materials that do not advance (support, disconfirm, or qualify) the core argument.
- Ensure that **secondary data** is relevant to the question and the argument. That is, if background information or what some refer to as ‘context’ doesn’t add to the argument, delete it. Context is seemingly endless so it helps to be somewhat brutal about this step – it helps reduce redundant information, and eliminates filler.

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² I am Assistant Professor of Sociology, OSC, Sciences Po, Paris, sukriti.issar@sciencespo.fr.

³ Flyvbjerg, B. 2006. Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12 (2): 219-245; Seawright, J., & Gerring, J. (2008). Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options. *Political Research Quarterly*, 61: 294–308; Collier, D. 2011. Understanding Process Tracing. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44 (4): 823–30.

⁴ There is a long-standing debate on the role of qualitative and case-study research in testing vs. developing theory – see, Rueschemeyer, D. 2003. Can one or a few cases yield theoretical gains? In J. Mahoney & D. Rueschemeyer (Eds.), *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (pp. 305-336). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Ragin, Charles C. and Howard S. Becker (eds.). 1992. *What Is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Look for and analyze the **exemplars** of qualitative writing in your field. Read these exemplars carefully to understand the strategies of writers, and not for content. Focus particularly on the first few pages – the way that the abstract is written for example. The abstract is what is read first and is critical to the review process.
- All sections of a qualitative research paper include **theory and evidence** but in different proportions.
 - The theory section should include references to abstract generalizations of your data. ('The literature highlights the importance of x... but my fieldwork suggests that y is more important'). Even though it is the 'theory' section or the literature review, this section must contain some indication of your case and/or findings. Think of each paragraph in the literature review as ending with implications of that chunk of theory for your research. This will also help to delete extraneous 'good to have' bits of theory that you can do without – if you can't find a good connection with your case or findings, then its not needed.
 - The empirical section demonstrates the argument and goes into the empirical details – it must still refer back to the theory but not with as much detail as you did in the 'theory' section.
- Theory as **frame** and theory **foil** – important to distinguish these two because the frame cannot be challenged (e.g. 'I apply Bourdieu's theory of...') but the foil is meant for that ('The existing literature says that x causes y but I find that ...'). It's with reference to the foil that your real contribution comes through; the foil is the alternative explanation or competing perspective from the literature. The foil is also useful in identifying the puzzle or in heightening the puzzle of your research.
- **Analytical generalizations** are important – e.g. 'I identify three factors that...using these empirical materials, I develop a broader account or theory of...'. This is an analytical generalization, it is not so much a theoretical conclusion. You are taking your empirical findings and adding one layer of generalization and abstraction to them. If you read abstracts of qualitative research, you will see that many studies advance what I'm calling here analytical generalizations.
- Think of the objections to that might be raised to your arguments (use that to sharpen your argument, think of negative cases and **disconfirming evidence**, or alternative explanations). Ask yourself how you might be wrong, or what other interpretations might be applied to the data.
- The final step after writing your first draft or even when you have drafted a section or two is to elicit feedback from your colleagues and mentors. Build a supportive network of other writers who will provide moral and technical support, and constructive criticism.