



Essentials of Publishing Qualitative Research

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Chapter 4

Writing, Reviewing, and Revising Your Article



There's a plan in place. You've done enough research to know which journal you wish to send your article to and have several backups if that one doesn't accept it. You've labored over the abstract so that you have a good idea of how it will play out. You've talked with the journal editor and have a good idea what she wants from the piece. Now it's time to sit down and get it done, accepted, and published.

Writing

There is a standard format for the traditional scientific research article that stretches across most fields. This is so engrained in graduate education that I won't elaborate on it here. But if you've never heard of the sequence, Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, or IMRAD (www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/manuscript-preparation/preparing-for-submission.html), then you probably need to find a new mentor or doctoral advisor. By following the template that most researchers use most of the time, you are probably taking a safer route toward getting published.

We know, though, that qualitative research and writing is somewhat different than the standard scientific model. And here is where

authors of qualitative articles struggle. Those struggles appear typically in several areas.

Alternatives to the standard model. Your doctoral advisor or your English-major friend is suggesting you be more literary in writing up your study. After all, you've seen Carolyn Ellis and Ron Pelias produce non-linear pieces that truly shine. How far from the standard science model can you stray? It depends on the project. It depends on the journal. Some more applied, more positivist journals will accept qualitative work, but only if it follows the standard article format. Others will give you leeway to develop the piece as you wish. Your interview with the journal editor will clarify the expectations of her journal for you in advance. Skimming the last several years of articles will do the same. If you want to zig but the journal only accepts zags, try a different journal or limit your creative impulses for this piece.

Ultimately, this is your career, your body of work. If you want to experiment with alternate forms, you should do so. With all those journals out there, a little research will tell you where your work might find a sympathetic home. But know that working on the margins does marginalize you and limits your publication options. You need to decide what being different is worth.

Length. This is a perennial problem for qualitative researchers: all those words. The journal word limit is 6,000, but you have 2,000 words of transcripts alone that you want to include. You want to describe the rich social setting in which they were gathered. Your findings are important for policy makers and represent significant improvements to method and theory. How are you going to fit it all in?

The journal's instructions will usually indicate the maximum length of an article. If you really need more space, find out from the journal editor how rigid their guidelines are. In most cases, they are firm except for the most exceptional articles. Journals are given a budget of pages each year, which they cannot exceed. If your article is twice as long as the limit, that means someone else doesn't get published. And you'll be judged twice as severely because of the amount of space you are asking for. Sometimes there are options of separate print and online versions, where the latter is allowed to be longer. Maybe you just need to send it to a different journal that will allow you more leeway. Or shorten it. If you've structured your research program to

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include multiple publications from the project to multiple audiences, it should be possible to steer some of the material away from this piece and into another one you have on the drawing board.

Coauthorship. You and a friend decide over coffee at University Caffeine how much fun it will be to write something together. After all, you're both studying the lived experience of tuberculosis. But you are doing a mixed method study of a poor urban population and your friend an arts-based piece on the shape of a TB molecule. Things don't go well. You churn out 30 pages of texts and references, your friend a single drawing. Each of you claims your piece required six full weeks of work. Who gets first billing for this piece? Not an uncommon problem. In cases where coauthors ask me to adjudicate order of authorship, I am told by each that he or she did 65 percent of the work. The only way to solve this is to have the division of labor established at the beginning and the order of authorship established before you start. That may be done by the anticipation of who will do the most work, in alphabetical order, or by who needs a publication more for his or her next promotion. Saving this decision until the end can result in catastrophe or lost friendships.

You had better take a close look at your friend before you start. If she never turns in anything on time, you can be sure that this behavior will carry over to a writing partnership.

A more complex form of coauthorship exists in large scale projects where many people are involved in running a laboratory or institute, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up the findings. This occurs often in health research, for example. Who has final say on the article's contents? Who gets credit for the article on which you wrote every word? You are included, of course. But what about those who did the data collection, the coding, those who provided the funding, leadership, and ideas for the overall project? Janice Morse suggests that the order of authorship depends more on the conceptual contributions to the work than on the individual who wrote the piece (Morse 2009, p. 3). This too should be worked out with your colleagues before you sit down and write those 30 pages.

Confidentiality and ethics. Don't you wish you could just be a statistician some times and not have to worry about this? When you turn humans into numbers, the people you have studied are faceless,

rounded into a 5 or an 8. But that's not qualitative research. You have interviewed only a few people, and the richness of their lives makes keeping their identities secret difficult, often impossible. Anthropologists, the original qualitative researchers, rarely worried about this in the old days. But then they started studying our own culture. People who could read what they wrote about them. Add the internet and no ethnographic study is immune from community knowledge and feedback. That has its consequences, just ask William Foote Whyte about the reaction from the street corner society (Adler, Adler, and Johnson 1992) or Carolyn Ellis (1995) about blowback from the fisher folk. So how do you keep your subjects confidential while expressing enough of their stories to make them come alive? Morse and Coulehan's (2015) suggestions include using group data instead of individual, pseudonyms, hiding as many descriptive identifiers as possible, obtaining written consent if the details can't be hidden, placing mosaic patches over faces in photos. Other researchers go back to the subjects of their study and offer it to them to read before submitting for publication. Still others choose to collaborate with their subjects so the subjects' perspectives on the topic are heard directly. This still doesn't solve the problem of autoethnography—you probably don't have more than one or two sisters, and they'll know whom you're talking about. If anyone had easy answers about qualitative ethics and confidentiality, there wouldn't be so much written about it.¹

Blinding. This is the academic version of the confidentiality question. If you are deeply embedded in your work, how do you blind it for reviewers in double blind review setups? Blinding is the process of hiding the identity of the author or the reviewer during the journal review process. In open reviews, the identity of the reviewer and author are known to each other. In single blind reviews, the reviewer knows who the author is but not the reverse. Double blind reviews are supposedly more legitimate because neither reviewer or author is influenced by the identity of the other. The qualitative field runs the full gamut from open (*Qualitative Inquiry*) to double blind (*Qualitative Health Research*). There are advantages and disadvantages to each, as its proponents will tell you. No matter, each journal will have its policy, and you will be expected to follow it. But what if you, like many qualitative researchers, are splashed all over your pages and need to blind your work? Beyond the obvious ideas of removing your name,

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affiliation, and grant # from the piece, Morse's (2014) suggestions for *Qualitative Health Research* include writing in the third person, replacing self citations with a third person author and date, and citing only your published work, not things in press or conference presentations. The journal's position on blinding could be one of your criteria for deciding which journal to submit your article to.

While these issues are important ones for qualitative researchers who are submitting their articles to refereed journals, there are certainly many other issues in writing qualitative research. I'll talk more about these in chapter 7 and provide a number of other sources for you to consult in appendix A.

The Journal Review Process

You finally pushed the button and sent off that article to the journal, knowing a sympathetic editor would be lovingly receiving it after the numerous conversations you've had about the piece. If it is a solidly managed journal, or if the journal uses one of the manuscript flow software programs, you will receive an acknowledgment of receipt of the article and maybe some vague time frame for its review. If it's not an automated process, you should ask for a confirmation and approximate schedule for decision making.

And then... you wait. And wait. And wait some more. Did we already talk about waiting when we discussed the journal decision-making process? No worries, we can discuss it again. We have a lot of waiting time.

You dutifully teach your classes. Listen to the litany of student psychological problems, sexual issues, financial stresses, and, occasionally, field a perceptive question during your office hours. Spend endless time on meetings with the facilities committee. Try the new Italian restaurant downtown. Collect information on the next grant you're aiming for. Outline the next article in the queue.

And wait. How long can this possibly take?

How long should you wait? You should know the answer to this question if your interview of the journal editor was properly conducted. Or if the journal gave you a time frame in their acknowledgment to your article submission. The simple answer is, "Too long." The more complete answer is that the schedule is generally no longer in the hands of the journal editor.

In defense of journal editors everywhere, they too are spending a lot of time waiting. Waiting to get through the queue of submissions to look at each piece. Waiting for time between their other professional commitments to research appropriate reviewers. Waiting for reviewers to respond to their email and agree to review your article. And then waiting on those reviews. Usually three reviews, sometimes more, sometimes less. The process moves as quickly as the slowest reviewer. Most journal editors will give their reviewers a time frame in which they want a response. Most reviewers will do it when they can, or when they want to. If your reviewer has been called away by a sick mother or two weeks of fieldwork in South Africa, you won't know that. Generally, the journal editor won't either. So cut her some slack.

And so we all wait. Good journal editors will pull the plug on a recalcitrant reviewer after a certain number of weeks and send your article to a backup person. Or do with fewer reviews. But all this takes time.

How long should you wait? As long as they told you to in their initial contact. Then feel free to gently remind them of the schedule they promised. It might prompt a reminder to the reviewers from the journal editorial office. If nothing happens, ask again in two weeks. Gentle, sympathetic (remember, they're hostage to the reviewers, too) pressure is likely to get the most expeditious results.

And shit happens. A reviewer blows off the assignment. The journal editor gets refused by half a dozen reviewers she asked. The journal is coping with a huge influx of manuscripts that all arrived with yours during the week that summer vacation ends. The semester ends and the editorial assistant goes to Tahiti for the holidays leaving no one with the new password for the review database. The editor had pneumonia. But most times, your subtle pressure gets you the kind of activity that will result in an answer.

What Kind of Answer Will You Get?

The journal review process, when it works, is truly a wondrous system. Some smart, hard-working strangers are volunteering to read and critique your work so that it is better than what you were able to construct alone. For all the complaints about the system, a set of good reviews is golden to a junior scholar. Receiving the differing perspectives on your ideas from incisive readers should resonate to the qualitative researcher,

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no matter how hard it is to swallow what often seems to be unwarranted criticism. It may be difficult to sit and wait for people to tear your work apart, but if the goal of the critique is to provide you with advice on making your work better, it is worth the wait.

Finally, after that endless amount of time, the terse email arrives.

- “NO. We don’t believe the article is appropriate for our journal. Here are the reviews.”
- “YES. We are accepting your article. It is scheduled for the fall issue.”
- “YES. We will publish your article with a few minor emendations, as follow... Please address these points and send the article back in.”
- “REVISE AND RESUBMIT. Your article undoubtedly has merit but is not yet ready for publication. Here are the reviews. Please make these changes and resubmit.”

Let’s take each response separately.

No! 😞

If the answer is no, go to the next journal on your list created from your research of appropriate journals. Life is too short to mourn over a no answer, and you have 100,000 journal options. Most journals have a rejection rate of over 50 percent, some well over 90 percent, so you’re not alone. Rejection is part of this process. As we have discussed, there is more than one appropriate journal for any article. This journal has done you the service of providing you with feedback on your article. Pick what you think useful from the reviews and incorporate it before sending the article on to the next publication. Then take one further step: Thank the journal editor for her consideration and, if possible, ask the editor for an explanation of what led to the negative decision. Don’t think that this will cause her to change her mind, but it should give you more insight on what you need to do to revise the article. It also leaves the door open for the next article you wish submit to this journal and gives you a better idea of what the journal editor is looking for.

Before sending it to journal 2, remember to review the guidelines for that journal and your notes from discussions with the editor. You may have to tinker with the article a bit to fit the second journal editor’s requirements.

But what if journal 2 and journal 3 (and 4, 5, 6) also reject your piece? If no one wants it after multiple tries, then it's time to rethink what you've presented and how. You should have lots of feedback between the reviewers' comments and your dialogues with the journal editors. Put it aside, let it sit. At worst, you may have to drop the piece. You will write more than one article in your career, so this is not a life threatening decision. But some distance from the piece might allow you to reimagine it in a fashion that will make it more palatable the next time you try to publish it.

Yes! ☺

If the answer is yes, pull out that special bottle of cabernet and exult at your good fortune. Congratulations, you'll have at least one of the 1.8 million articles this year. But stop after that first celebratory glass. Well, if it's a top-notch journal, have a second glass. Getting the acceptance, with or without revisions, is not the time to rest on your laurels. It's time to get the accepted article into print.

If you've been asked to make revisions, please do so. Quickly. Most journals have a queue, and your place in line is determined when they have your final manuscript in their hands, not when the acceptance letter goes out. If there is any concern about the revisions you still need to make, see the next section.

Revise and Resubmit

With trepidation, you open the email from the journal editor. It's the dreaded "revise and resubmit." And three reviews, each in a different funky font. Just like the Three Bears, Reviewer 1 says it needs more theory; Reviewer 2 thinks it had too much. Reviewer 3 describes the critical realist article that she would have written if she had your data to work with. But that's her article, not yours. The journal editor's instructions are to make the changes and resubmit the article, preferably within 30 days. WTF do you do now?

Start by having a glass of that good cabernet. Yell at the wall, at your dog, at your BFF about how stupid and inane reviewers are and how the entire peer review system should be damned to hell, and why you should have stayed tending bar where you can collect good tips and go home after your shift and not have to think about it till the next day. You won't be the first person to do this.

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Yeah, get it out of your system.

Then, return to your article. If the journal editor is good, her comments will be far more extensive than “make the revisions.” She will give you guidance on what is important in the reviewers’ suggestions and what can be safely ignored. Those journal editors will all go to heaven and sit at the foot of Saint Citation when their time comes.

More common is minimal guidance from the journal editor. So you need to create your own. Read the reviews carefully, note their inconsistencies and contradictions. Note what is useful for your paper, both little things and big issues. Take the reviews seriously, someone took the time to read your piece and, in the best of worlds, is making suggestions to help make it better.

Then decide whether the suggestions are ones you can make, ones that meet your vision of the paper. If the work suggested requires you to throw away what you’ve done and start anew, it’s probably not worth trying to rework your paper. Write to the journal editor and withdraw it from submission. Politely. And give a brief description of why you are taking that action. After all, you don’t know if you’ll want to submit something else to this journal in the future.

But if enough of the revisions are doable, if the reviewers’ comments will result in a better paper than your original submission, come up with a revision plan. A written one. What points of reviewer 1 will you incorporate and how do you plan to do it? Ditto reviewers 2 and 3. Highlight the inconsistencies between the reviews. Point out the ones that don’t seem germane to your vision of your paper; explain why you feel you should ignore those specific comments. And send your plan to the journal editor along with your thanks for the careful, useful reviews.

“Hey, editor, here is my revision plan. This is what I plan to do and why. This is what I plan to ignore and why. Does this plan sound okay to you?” At a minimum, the journal editor will have to reread your paper and the reviews to write you a response. She might have a better feeling about it on second reading. She might give you the benefit of her own suggestions while assessing the reviewers’ comments to you. But you already have a relationship with the journal editor, so it shouldn’t be difficult to have a discussion on this issue. Negotiate your revisions with her so that you’re both clear on what is expected, get her to bless your revision plan.

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Then make your revisions. You now have a clear idea of what is expected in your revised manuscript. Having blessed your revision plan, the journal editor will have a harder time saying no if you resubmit the article with those changes made. When you submit the revised paper, include the reviews and the revision plan you and the editor agreed upon. She will probably send the article back to one or more of the reviewers, so ask her to send your revision plan along with it so the reviewers know what you've revised and why (and that she has blessed your revision plan). If you have followed through with your part of the agreed-upon plan, there is a greater likelihood of an acceptance letter coming back from the journal. After all, she told you what you needed to do to create an acceptable article, and you did just that.

It's a social process. Use those skills you've developed as a qualitative researcher to help build your publications record. Then you can break open that bottle of cabernet and celebrate the acceptance of another article. Welcome to the 1.8 million!