

Teaching Medical Writing

Learning to write a good story: Academic writing for qualitative health researchers

Since 2014, I have offered a four-day course on academic writing for qualitative health researchers at the University of Southern Denmark. I tell the participants, mostly PhD students with backgrounds in the health professions, that “learning to write a good story” is the central aim of the course. But why is a good story important? What makes a good story? And how can one learn to write one? In this article, I explore these questions in the context of teaching academic writing to qualitative health researchers.

The importance of a good story

Qualitative research is gradually being accepted in the medical and health sciences as a valid mode of knowledge production, and a variety of medical journals are willing to publish findings derived from it. In these contexts, qualitative research is often part of a mixed methods approach that prioritises quantitative methods, e.g., a randomised controlled trial complemented by a nested qualitative study with a small number of in-depth interviews or focus group discussions. Qualitative health research also of course stands alone, reflecting the broad range of academic disciplines that draw on qualitative research, including medicine, nursing and the health sciences, medical anthropology, sociology, philosophy and geography.

The strength of qualitative research methodologies lies in their ability to bring to the foreground the diverse perspectives of the many players involved in healthcare – patients, relatives, health professionals of all kinds, policy makers, etc – and their multifaceted relationships and practices. These perspectives are critical in developing a deeper understanding of everyday life with illness, and they add important dimensions of knowledge and evidence to improving care, services and policy.¹ Compared with quantitative research, however, qualitative health research tends to be undervalued, and hence underused, in medical and health sciences. A good story with a compelling argument can contribute towards shifting the balance.

Building blocks of a good story

Wolcott emphasises that, especially for qualitative researchers, “writing well is neither a luxury nor an option ...; it is absolutely essential”.²

However, as Sandelowski³ notes,

...qualitative researchers may offend with turgid prose, seemingly endless lists of unlinked codes and categories, dangling participles, and dizzying arrays of multiply hyphenated and, sometimes, nonexistent words that convey nothing more than the writer's willingness (albeit unintended) to destroy the English language (p375).

This is harsh criticism, particularly for researchers writing in their second or third language, as many authors do when publishing in international peer-reviewed journals.

Sandelowski also points to two early main challenges facing qualitative researchers when writing up their research.³ First, writers must decide how to tell their story by identifying the style most suitable to the research, purpose, and audience. Unlike the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) format that dominates in medicine and the health sciences, one size does not fit all in qualitative research writing.³ Second, researchers must choose which story, of the many possible stories based on their data set, to tell. That is, they must determine a story's central point or story line,³ and the argument they wish to make. They have to move from retelling participants' stories through summarising the data, to transforming the data through analysis and interpretation. As Coffey and Atkinson note, “Data are there to think with and about”; but “the generation of ideas can never be dependent on data alone” (p153).⁴ Instead, through the selective use of data, writers exemplify and illustrate the story they aim to tell.⁴ A “good story” includes the formulation of an argument that runs like a red thread through the text, while also holding it together. This requires writers to “construct a well-designed story that involves the reader along the way and results in a compelling message” (p115).⁵

Many of the participants I teach are not aware of the crucial difference (and tension) between writing as a form of thinking² or a method of inquiry⁶ – where we *reflect* on our research and data – and the writing up of the final product as a peer-reviewed article, monograph, or book chapter – where we move beyond our data to *present* what our research and data mean.^{2,4} For

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this reason, I use the writing process and its many associated phases and activities as the overall structuring device for teaching the writing of a good story.

Learning to write a good story

The course material comprises selected reading for each day, together with a real-life writing example based on one of my articles.⁷ This example illustrates the entire writing process from the early inception of a paper to its publication, and includes: i) a short conference paper and associated PowerPoint presentation, and the conference Call for Papers; ii) the developed manuscript submitted to a journal and the reviewers' comments; iii) the first and second revisions together with my responses to the reviewers; and iv) the final published paper.

The course format is interactive and discussion-based. It combines short lectures that introduce key points about academic writing and the reporting of qualitative research with discussions and individual and group exercises that form an integral part of learning how to report qualitative research. Throughout the course, different strategies for *writing* and *writing up* are practised, including those that can be useful in overcoming procrastination and writer's block. The real-life writing example is used extensively during the 4 days; for example, to analyse how the manuscript title evolved over time; to explore the development and presentation of the argument; to see how paragraphs are constructed; and to learn how reviewer feedback can be integrated into the manuscript. Some class exercises and the homework assignments focus on the participants' own manuscripts, thus enabling participants to improve their own work in a supportive environment.

The 4-day course is run over 4 weeks, with one 5-hour day (including breaks) each week. On Day 1 the writing process is introduced: We examine the characteristics of academic writing in general and in different academic disciplines; we also begin to explore the characteristics and

demands of reporting qualitative research for different audiences and start to discuss the selection of a suitable journal.

Day 2 focuses on the structure of the manuscript: how to write abstracts for different disciplines, journals, and purposes; how to configure arguments; and how to draft an article outline, or what Wolcott refers to as “The Plan”.² Participants also practice writing about a theoretical concept or analytical perspective.

Day 3 shifts the focus to the various text elements and how to revise a draft. We discuss how to build strong paragraphs, use quotations (from other authors and from research participants’ stories), and include signposts throughout an article. Strategies for avoiding “plagiarism by mistake”⁸ and for extending vocabulary are also tried out. Participants who are writing up qualitative research in their second or third language find this particularly important, as they often struggle with limited vocabulary and a resulting sense of flat writing.

Day 4 starts with text revision, moving to how to edit and polish drafts. We then discuss the article submission process: the do’s and don’ts when submitting an article; how to survive the review process and use reviewer feedback constructively; responding to reviewers’ comments; and how to resubmit (or search for another journal). A discussion on what it means to be an (academic) writer concludes the day.

By the end of the course, we have explored key stages in the writing process, analysed texts of various lengths and purposes, and discussed and practised a variety of writing strategies and writing tasks. Most participants value the opportunity to make progress on their own text while also stepping back from their own writing and to engage with the development of a real-life manuscript from inception to publication.

Concluding remarks

Good stories come in many forms, but they all have a central story line and aim to engage the reader. Although my background is in anthropology, my aim is to demystify the writing process and the writing up of qualitative research without limiting it to a particular disciplinary field or writing style. This includes acknowledging that writing can be learnt and offering strategies for when the going gets rough, as it so often does for PhD students – especially for non-traditional students and those not



writing in their mother tongue.⁹ Teaching academic writing also entails the acute awareness that “writing is not an innocent practice”; rather, “the technologies of writing create gendered social texts where desire, intimacy, power, class, race, ethnicity, and identity come alive” (p568).¹⁰ This combination makes teaching academic writing for qualitative health researchers both stimulating and satisfying. Moreover, the participants appreciate the chance to critically reflect on their writing in sympathetic surroundings, given the unrelenting pressures to publish or perish.

References

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