1 THINKING BEFORE WRITING

Get your head straight and get yourself organized before you get going writing

1.A THINKING ABOUT WRITING

Our core intent in writing this book echoes one from Harry Wolcott's (2009) classic work *Writing Up Qualitative Research*: "The moment you generate sentences that *might* appear in your completed account, you have begun writing" (p. 9). We provide specific and actionable steps which aid you, the researcher, in moving from design thinking to writing up a qualitative study. Said another way, this book assists researchers in building connections between *thinking about research design* and *writing about research*.

As a first step, we ask researchers not just to think, but to think about the ways that they think. For example, connections in qualitative research are often built inductively, in a recursive process: Researchers cycle through thinking, design, and data many times as meanings slowly emerge, accrete, and interconnect. Expect that what you may think of as a straight line from your beginning thinking to your end write-up may sometimes be more like a spiral, circling again and again through meanings, deepening your understanding each time. This book is structured like that, both linearly and recursively—as you walk a straight line through the chapters, there will be terms and ideas (author voice, focus statement, purpose statement, data) that will be cycled through multiple times, with changing angles and deepening meanings. As you will in your own research, follow the story as it emerges and trust it.

These opening chapters are offered as strategies for getting underway by thinking through your plan of attack, sorting out how you want to approach your story arc, and organizing a writer's road map. However, before even getting to research design, you must start, here in Chapter 1, with some foundational thinking. Building a sound inquiry involves upfront thinking about exactly what the study is attempting to achieve. Framing the central focus of a study begins with knowing exactly what social problem is under investigation. Part of answering these questions involves some reflection into who is asking these questions—the

researcher, whose perspective is the lens through which the world of both social problem and study is understood. Dwelling in this planning stage of a study takes discipline and a willingness to push yourself to think outside the box.

How will you do that foundational thinking? By writing. As Wolcott (2009, pp. 18–19) explained, "The conventional wisdom is that writing reflects thinking. I am attracted to a stronger position: that writing is thinking. Stated more cautiously, writing is one form that thinking can take." He goes on to share his belief that "you cannot begin writing too early" (p. 20). We will only qualify that statement by suggesting a few topics with which that early writing-as-thinking process could best begin.

Given the importance of writing in expressing your early thinking, however, it is useful to think just a little about writing itself before you get started.

1.A.1 Writing as a Process

Before you even begin your qualitative research, take one step back and consider writing not as a product, but as a process. Some of the ways to support your writing process are listed in Table 1.1:

TABLE 1.1 ■ Strategies for Getting Started

Possible Strategies to Get Started Writing
Locate a good working area (free of distractions) to use for writing
Find what time of day you are most productive
Remember your brain has finite resources—keep it fueled with healthy food, power naps and relax as needed
High stress equals less work; aim for low stress for good writing
Set aside at least 30 minutes each day to write; write something every day
Remember as you start this process that what you write is not the finished product
A blank page is only blank until you write something
Try free writing about how you feel about the research
Give yourself a reward after successfully writing, say 500 words
Put things you are not sure about into footnotes that can be worked into the text later
Develop a structure/template/plan for your writing
Write your introduction and abstract last
Small steps are great; small steps are essential; small steps keep you moving forward
Things go better if you believe in your work and enjoy your writing

It also helps to prepare your mind for the academic writing process you are about to undertake. Take time to recognize that this process began long before—and will continue long after—you first thought about your topic. The writing process is built on a set of fundamental elements, described in Table 1.2, and understanding these can help you to produce strong and thoughtful work.

Having considered your writing as a process, and one with a long history, it is also useful to consider with the same care the person who is undertaking that process.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Elements in the Writing Process

Fundamental Elements in Writing	
Planning ahead	As you begin to develop your ideas, make sure that you are reading the writing of others in your field; develop ideas; draft an achievable writing timeline; develop a schedule; be flexible to accommodate changes around you; keep reading; find ways to keep on motivating yourself. Take all of this, try different things, try changing things around and find what works for you.
Brainstorming	Here you are planning, researching, gathering, and outlining ideas, and beginning to develop a working problem statement. What is your overarching topic? What do you want to say about this topic? Who is your audience? What is the "so what" factor about your reading? Why does your work matter? Gather ideas, both good and bad. Thinking and talking to others can help you to get started.
Getting ready	At this point, you are looking to better understand your topic and find authoritative sources to make your writing stronger. Then you create the outline for your story which will help you to map out and organize your ideas so that your writing will flow for the reader. Remember it is your job to help the reader navigate through your work and your thinking.
Building content	This is the time to start creating sentences and paragraphs to make your arguments. This draft does not need to be perfect but here you want to write your ideas in a way that's organized with strong transitions between sentences and paragraphs. Read your work aloud, either as you go or after you have finished, to help you hear gaps in information, and any awkward transitions.
Fine tuning	Here you are looking for a natural flow in your story and a chance to fine tune your writing. Does your draft writing give the reader a complete picture? Also take this time to simplify and clarify your writing by removing unnecessary words and making your writing more concise.

(Continued)

TABLE 1.2 ■ Elements in the Writing Process *(Continued)*	
Fundamental Elements in Writing	
Almost finished	This is where you are almost finished with your writing and focusing on proofreading for technical issues like spelling and grammar. Rereading your work at this point can be quite difficult as you have become very close to your work over the time you have spent producing it. Clear your mind and give it a complete last critical read (line by line might help)—see if you have built the connections needed for your reader to follow your story.

1.A.2 The Researcher as Instrument

As the writer, you are guiding the reader through the research design of your study from start to finish. In so doing, you are not only sharing the story of your research design and results, but you are also sharing your unique perspective on this story. Qualitative writing involves a reflective openness in sharing your perspective and voice: Who you are and what you bring to the inquiry are essential elements which help enrich qualitative research. In this sense, you are the researcher as instrument, critically examining your potential impact upon the naturalistic setting as well as the entire research process (Patton, 2015, p. 70; Schwandt, 2015, p. 268). You, the researcher, drive the inquiry including parsing the world into a particular order, focusing on a finite area within that order, identifying a problem area, articulating research questions, designing research methods, conducting analysis, developing findings, and interpreting meanings.

Knowing who you are as a researcher regarding any particular study is an important element of the study design. This first chapter is intended to challenge you to consider critically a key question. What, and where, is your voice in this inquiry? Finding and knowing your voice is essential to telling the story of your study. Having a better understanding of how your voice as a writer can be shaped by who you are as a person is part of this. For example, who you are as a writer can be fundamentally defined by the following:

- Who you are as a person in your academic field
- What your role is as a student, working professional, or a social science researcher
- How you are located in and shaped by your community and larger society

- How you position yourself with the people and phenomena you are observing
- How you position yourself in the research story you are telling

The very nature of social science research involves the study of society and social relationships. As a qualitative researcher, your inquiry into such human interactions places you into the role of shaping and defining the path of inquiry. This role raises numerous philosophical and theoretical tensions which must be carefully considered throughout your study. The questions above may be answered in a number of different ways—but they must be answered. In the end, you must share your purpose and role of researcher in a clear and articulate manner and show how this approach is a strength rather than a limitation. The chapters to come will circle back numerous times to this question of voice, so you do not need to end this inquiry now—you just need to begin it and to continue to be aware of it.

Having addressed yourself to writing in numerous ways, you are now ready to begin the kind of writing that will help you discern what you think.

1.B WRITING ABOUT THINKING

As you start to think about your research, your initial writing begins with you deciding where to begin your story. It is your job to outline your thinking for the reader. This can be done by thinking about your qualitative research writing as addressing a social issue by considering the following:

- Introducing the reader to the problem being considered
- Informing and updating the reader with relevant background research
- Presenting your methodological plan
- Discussing your findings
- Presenting recommendations you have drawn from your work

In this process, you start with your social issue—or more specifically, with beginning to articulate where you as a researcher intersect with the issue that interests you. Not only do you have a focus in addressing this issue, you also have a purpose.

1.B.1 Focus Statement and Purpose Statement: A First Cut

You may find it somewhat unsettling to accept the point that the driving purpose of your qualitative study arises from you, the research instrument. Given this charge, your writing must provide the reader with a clear and articulate message about your agenda. What brought you to this issue? What are the connections and reasons behind your interest in studying this topic and what do you intend to achieve?

As you are developing your thinking, it is essential to formulate and craft the focus statement for your research, which is then elaborated by writing a purpose statement. This pair of foundational statements will serve as constant touchstones, frameworks and guides from articulating your research design all the way through to writing up your results.

A focus statement is a carefully crafted sentence that expresses what your study is about and defines the parameters of your qualitative argument. Again, as with voice, later chapters will cycle back through the creation of focus and purpose statements, deepening them each time. For more about focus statements refer to Section 5.A.2, Connecting Research Focus and Research Questions, and Section 5.B, Building Your Research Argument. A purpose statement then alerts the reader to the direction your paper will take through that qualitative argument, with reference to methodology and research design. A qualitative purpose statement is not an explanation of what you intend to prove or disprove. Rather, it must be an open and reflexive explanation of your connections to the topic and social problem under consideration. For an example of a focus and purpose statement, please see Section 4.C.

At this point in your writing, though, consider who you are, and what is your own voice in the research. As you develop your writing, ask yourself about your research purpose: For example, is this a critical theory study intended to critique and liberate, or is this a program evaluation intended to explore and improve a specific service? How can you strengthen your style of writing to be more appropriate for the intended purpose of your study? What steps might you take to share your research agenda and strengthen your voice in your study for your audience?

A purpose statement may be written as a preamble to a section that presents the study's focus statement and key research questions. Another approach is to separate this discussion of your research purpose into a particular section that covers a broader discussion addressing your role as researcher. Regardless of the approach you take, this discussion must be developed sufficiently so that your audience has a clear understanding regarding your connections to the topic and to the social importance of the study.

This book is not intended as a qualitative research methods textbook. It is a textbook about getting underway and moving forward with your writing as your progress through the qualitative process of inquiry. Suggested readings are highlighted throughout this book providing more detailed discussions into qualitative research practices. As an example of more detailed readings, the following selections are provided to specifically assist in your exploration into *writing your focus and purpose*:

Brodsky, A. E. (2008). In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (Vol. 2). SAGE. **[Researcher as Instrument, pp. 766–767]**

Salmona, M., Lieber, E., & Kaczynski, D. (2020). *Qualitative and mixed methods data analysis using Dedoose*. SAGE. **[Framing the Purpose and Focus, pp. 16–18]**

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE. **[Clarity About Purpose, pp. 248–250 & Empathic Neutrality, pp. 58–62]**

1.B.2 Qualitative Memos

Taking the next step in your process of writing-as-thinking can be facilitated using memos. Qualitative memos share similarities with other forms of documenting research development such as diaries, journals, audio/video recordings, or blogs. The use of memos, however, stands apart from these other forms of documentation and is increasingly recognized in the research literature as an important step in qualitative inquiry. You are the qualitative researcher who is driving the inquiry. As such, you need a place for tracking your emergent thinking especially because as "the project grows . . . your ideas become more complex and, later more confident" (Richards, 2015, p. 92). Maxwell (2013) uses memos as a tool to stimulate thinking as well as a writing strategy for making early drafts. He offers the following insights into the importance of memo writing:

> [Memos] are ways of getting ideas down on paper (or a computer), and of using this writing as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic thinking. When your thoughts are recorded in memos, you can code and file them just as you do your field notes and interview transcripts, and return to them to develop the ideas further. Not writing memos is the research equivalent of having Alzheimer's disease; you may not remember your important insights when you need them. (p. 20)

For the purposes of this discussion, we put forward four types of memos (refer also to Table 1.3):

TABLE 1.3 ■ Different Types of Memos

Different Types of Memos	
Methods	• Describes the basis for design decisions • Provides a trail of design changes
Reflective	• Captures your developing thinking through critical contemplation • Self-monitors researcher as instrument
Analytic	• Explains preliminary understandings • Illuminates the researcher's interpretive processes
Inductive–Deductive Shifts	• Captures intentional/unintentional shifts in thinking • Notes differences between qualitative/quantitative reasoning

1. Methods memos provide a helpful means of capturing developments and changes in the research plan which often unfold in qualitative studies. A well-documented flexible emergent design is considered an essential strength when conducting qualitative inquiry.
2. Reflective memos are useful in capturing your role as researcher-as-instrument. Before a research study appears in written form, there is considerable prior work. The researcher has given the research topic considerable thought and discussion with others. This journey of thinking and talking needs to be captured in written form. Capturing developments in your evolving role as researcher provides a means to document this journey of inquiry. A collection of reflective memos will also prove useful when you write or refine your purpose statement for the study.
3. Analytic memos can explore and express many theoretical orientations and are key to the tracking of design and analytical thinking and development during any research project (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2013; Salmona, Lieber & Kaczynski, 2020).
4. Inductive–Deductive Shifts memos may also be adopted in a study where the researcher is exploring the unique challenges they may be experiencing as they view and interpret data. Knowing when and how you are interpreting qualitative meanings enhances your

awareness and improves your ability to articulate clearly how you are functioning as researcher-as-instrument.

The suggested length of a memo is usually one to three paragraphs to be most useful—shorter and you may not be able to adequately capture your thoughts; longer and you will find that you are likely memoing about multiple thoughts and ideas which are better described separately. You may find that short notes made during discussions, such as annotations, notes-to-self, or observer comments, may be expanded upon in greater detail through a memo. Short notes are useful bookmarks but are not a substitute for writing a memo. Conversely, when the length of a memo begins to grow you need to consider where one topic ends and another begins. In such a situation, break the memo apart into additional memos covering different topics.

As you write your memos, you are creating a documented trail of your developing researcher insights and decisions. This is particularly critical as your study progresses and becomes increasingly complex. As well as using your memos as a record of your research and data, you can also use your memos to recreate your thinking, and path taken through your inquiry, when you come to write up your research. Further, memos promote your ability to better communicate with your stakeholders over the course of a research project.

Of particular importance to this discussion is the value of using any number or type of memos as credible qualitative data. Because qualitative data represent items of social meaning, a memo discussing qualitative data and inductively building meaning *itself comprises a qualitative data point.* Later chapters discuss qualitative data and the ways that memos both interpret and comprise data; the point here is that writing memos creates multiple layers of value for a qualitative researcher.

A helpful rule to follow about memos is to *write early* and *write often*.

> Regardless of the number of memos you write, you will always think later that you could have written more.

1.C KEEP UP WRITING MOMENTUM

Now you have started writing, how do you keep your momentum? Memos are a great way to start writing; however, just as starting can be hard, keeping going can also be challenging. How do you stop yourself getting caught in the detail? At this point you need to be looking at the bigger picture and how things fit together. See Table 1.4 for some ideas and strategies for keeping your momentum.

TABLE 1.4 ■ Strategies for Keeping Going

Strategies as Your Writing Builds	
Start slowly and build	Developing any line of argument to weave through your story is always tricky and challenging. Take small steps at first and build a strong foundation for your story arc.
Start somewhere	Sometimes you don't know where to start. Don't worry it is ok to start anywhere. The beginning of your book is critical, but most writers don't write the beginning until the end anyway. Often you don't know how to start until you get to the end. So, get going, start anywhere.
Guide your audience	It is your job to help the reader navigate your work and there are lots of techniques that can help you with this. Signposting (preparing the reader for a change in the direction of your argument), topic sentences (showing the relationship of the paragraph to your central argument and outlining what to expect in the following paragraph), and the given-before-new principle (where the writer expresses known information before any previously unknown related information in their writing). These techniques are neither the first thing a writer needs to address, nor are they the last. They are proven strategies to help you present an argument with a logical flow that gives guidance to the reader.
Synopsis—Outline your story	Find a way to work out your story arc. If this doesn't make sense to you, it will never make sense to the reader. Addressing your central problem with the structure of an outline or with a synopsis can really help you to tell a strong story.
Just write!	Be gentle with yourself and allow yourself to write badly. Get something on to the paper, and later you can rewrite and polish your work. Much easier to work on something rather than nothing.

1.C.1 Switch Modes to Keep up Momentum

Everyone works in different ways and has days where they are unable to crystallize their thinking and write. On such days it is still possible to move forward with your work by switching modes among thinking, talking and writing.

These three ways to handle ideas take place at different speeds. Generally, "just thinking" is the fastest, talking is slower than thinking, and writing is even slower than thinking and talking. Note that talking can serve as a bridge between the fast-flowing "just thinking" and the much slower stage of writing. When

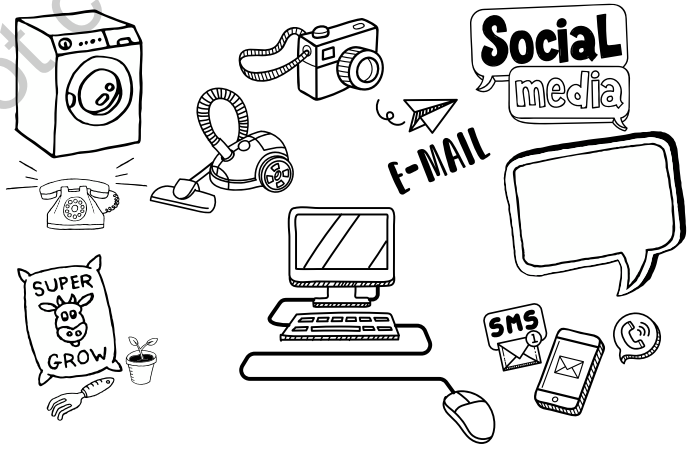
talking about your ideas you are verbally sharing your idea with others. You may find it helpful to make an audio recording as you verbalize your thinking. The recording can be used later when you transfer your thinking to writing. Effective verbal communication demands that you structure your message in a way that can be understood, yet retains flexibility, because if the listener is confused you can quickly amend and clarify the verbal message. Talking also provides you the opportunity to listen, gain feedback, and further refine your message.

Critically assess how you go about thinking, talking and finally writing about your research. You may find it helpful to consider the differences in your message as you shift between these three different speeds to express your research thinking. For example, you can start by developing a train of thought around an issue, then talk about it with others as you refine your thinking, and then finally craft it in writing.

1.C.2 Head Off Momentum-Killing Procrastination

As you consider how you organize yourself to write successfully, remember that distractions abound and can easily cause you to stray from getting going with your writing. No doubt you are well aware of some of your behaviors and habits that interfere with sitting down and getting on with it. Knowing this, take the time now to find ways to minimize and overcome distractions and blocks. Can you identify what may be stopping you writing? Take a look at Figure 1.1 and see if you can identify any of these daily distractions that may be blocking you from spending time writing and developing your writing routine.

FIGURE 1.1 ◧ Procrastination Opportunities



iStock.com/fleaz, jamtoons, Kittisak_Taramas, primiaou, youhhou

Plan now how you intend to change your behavior to avoid or deal with these distractions. It is important that you establish a productive routine and stick with it.

A tip for achieving a productive routine: Always keep forward momentum by setting yourself achievable goals. For example: Today I will write a paragraph on . . .

1.D THE CONTINUALLY EMERGING WRITING PROCESS

As your early writing begins to accumulate, your thinking will become more accessible to you. Connections and relationships will suggest themselves and an early framework will begin to emerge. You will write your way to more coherent meanings. Revision is part of this process. Badley (2020) outlines a number of important considerations about how academic writing can lead to ways of continuously learning to improve. As you revise and edit drafts of your work you will increasingly see improvements at each stage.

Now you have a routine (or are thinking about a routine) and are beginning to write. Take some time to think about writing skills and which areas will benefit from improvements. Table 1.5 (discussed again in Chapter 8) is drawn from the work of Ondrusek (2012, p. 179) who reviewed the literature and identified 12 core competencies which are considered essential for advanced writing skills.

This list presents key competencies in three main groups: mechanics and grammar (1–5); design thinking (6–7); and credibility and quality (8–12). You might find it helpful to think about your writing using these three groups when reviewing your work.

Start with mechanics and grammar as you develop your design thinking and move through to quality.

Break down each piece of your writing and review; consider where your strengths and weaknesses lie; and find out where you can find help to improve any deficiencies in your writing. It is interesting when reviewing this listing of writing abilities that although mechanics and grammar are important, the top three essential skills involve building a convincing argument with a clear voice.

In this stage of emergent thinking, you may notice yourself reaching for structure with which to further connect your thoughts. To minimize confusion, you may find it helpful to start with an advance organizer which allows

TABLE 1.5 ■ Core Competencies for Advanced Writing Skills

Core Competencies for Advanced Writing Skills	
1	organization
2	argument/evidence/logic
3	audience/voice
4	content
5	mechanics/grammar
6	conceptualization/developing ideas/prewriting
7	process
8	accuracy
9	scholarly identity
10	sources
11	expression
12	critique

Source: Adapted from Ondrusek (2012, p. 179).

you to introduce the context of your message to your intended reading audience. An advance organizer may be an analogy, a graphic figure such as a concept map (see Section 4.A.3), or a shared understanding that you offer to the reader as you progress your story about your work. It clarifies the presentation of the story in a way that makes it easy for the reader to make connections from the known to the unknown. For example, you may first direct the reader's attention to what is important in the upcoming text, then you highlight the relationships among the ideas presented, and finally you remind the reader of relevant new information that they have already encountered. Building and organizing these connections is an effective means of making it easier for your audience to follow how your thinking is developing.

As you are writing, you will continually make new drafts to improve your work. Try simplifying your language and being clear about what you are trying to say. Complicated sentences are difficult for the reader to follow. If a sentence appears long and/or complicated, it might be that you are trying to include too many ideas. So, go back to basics and make sure that only one idea is in each sentence. Be prepared to take some of your work out of the story arc if it doesn't fit. Pruning your written work can be difficult especially when you have invested

TABLE 1.6 ■ Helping You to Start Writing

General Questions to Help You Get Started Writing		
Explore	Explore the problem you are investigating, not the topic.	Identify your audience. Who will be reading your work? What is the purpose of your writing? How can you achieve this purpose? Where are you in this writing? Make a plan for your writing
Generate	Generate ideas through brainstorming.	Keep writing Be gentle with yourself as you write Try not to censor your writing at this point Always keep returning to the problem Think about your reader. What do they need to know? What questions might they ask? Will all your readers be the same?
Question	Keep asking yourself questions.	How? So what? Why does this work matter? Who? What? Where? When? Why? Define important terms and ideas What is the meaning or nature of the issue? Explore relationships and connections in your writing

Source: Adapted from Purdue Online Writing Lab (2021, prewriting section).

considerable time and energy into a particular section. Remember to keep all discarded material somewhere safe, as you may need to go back to it later.

Always push yourself to do more and challenge yourself. Remember you are trying to communicate your knowledge to your audience, so concentrate on that. Don't try and impress your audience with complicated writing and strive to keep connecting relevant content to your research.

The following Table 1.6 describes some general questions that you will revisit as your writing develops. Keep questioning, keep writing, keep talking, keep thinking and keep going.

Chapter 1 started you doing some foundational thinking about the writing process, as well as about who you are as a research writer and what you can bring to your writing. This is intended to help you structure your thinking through writing, beginning with your focus and purpose statements and with capturing your developing thinking through memos. The next chapter builds on this by helping you to further develop your place in your research and engage your audience. It also gives pointers about keeping your research design connected to your writing and brings digital tools into the conversation.