2 BEGINNING THE STORY

Now that you are underway with a starting point in your writing, the importance of positioning yourself in the study needs further consideration. In this chapter, several activities are offered to assist you in clearly expressing your intentions as a qualitative researcher. Writing offers you a platform to position you, the social science researcher, as a central voice advocating for the quality of your work.

2.A FINDING YOUR PLACE IN YOUR RESEARCH BEFORE YOU WRITE

In the recursive process of qualitative research writing, it is now time to circle back to the perspective of researcher-as-instrument as you begin to inquire more deeply into how you are driving this story of your research. Everyone has something useful and interesting to say which draws upon the sum of their own experiences. Related to this, everyone sees the world from their own point of view. A researcher's role is to be clear about who they are and what they bring to any study. Your challenge as a writer is to find out who you are, where you come from and how best to share this voice. Always be genuine and be clear how your values and world view frames your writing.

2.A.1 Who Are You in This Research?

To write well about your research you must understand who you are, what you know, and what you bring to your research. Think about how your own values and view of the world may affect how you write, and what you have to say in your work. Take time to consider thoughtfully where you have come from, who you are both personally and professionally, and the unique views you bring to the world as you see it. These insights will shape how you conduct qualitative research. By thinking about, and answering these questions, you will be better positioned to thoughtfully express your written research

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message. Writing can help you with this as through writing you can find your voice. Use the following to get you started on this path relating to your research:

- What relevant scholarly or professional work have I done?

- Which of my own life experiences might be relevant?

- How can this research strengthen my professional or academic agenda?

There are many ways to communicate your story in your work. High quality writing requires you to demonstrate your ability to articulate knowledge and experience. You will need to sound reasonable, thoughtful, and confident. In other words, you need to find your academic voice. You need to structure and argue your ideas and opinions based on evidence; and present yourself either as objective or as reflective about, and responsible for, your own subjectivity. Your voice will reveal your thought process to your reader. Remember that you must write with clarity and an active voice that avoids jargon. Convoluted sentences and stilted language will only confuse your reader. Strive for an authentic voice which your readers will accept as credible and trustworthy.

2.A.2   Articulating the Story in Your Research

To communicate clearly with your reader, you must create a core message which is the story arc for your research. Considering a story arc and the signposts that show the reader the way through the general structure of any story as a whole is brought to the forefront. Even though you might dig into the details when sketching an outline for your story, the story arc is a way to look at the whole from a distance. Find a way to connect and share this passion with your audience.

A really important point is that every story needs a great beginning, with clear structure and a strong ending. You won't know, or be able to tell, your story until you have finished your research. For now, you can start writing and capturing your thinking as it develops along the way (see Section 3.C.1 for ideas about version control and keeping all the work safely you create along the way). When you know the end of your story, you can go back to the beginning and design a great start that foreshadows the ending. Remember that it is your job to excite the reader and show the audience how they will benefit from reading your research. Everyone's time is important—how will reading your work help, or excite, the reader?

Becoming conversant with academic writer blogs can help the new writer stay connected to their reader audience. There are many writer blogs for you to discover; the following two are popular sites for you to consider:

● Chronicle of Higher Education blogs

● Inside Higher Ed—GradHacker

A related issue to placing yourself into a qualitative story arc is deciding how and where to place yourself in the narrative. Qualitative research writers commonly ask if it is acceptable to use a first-person singular style when representing the writer's voice. Although once forbidden, the use of "I" has become more acceptable in academic writing (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 59). This growing acceptance is particularly evident in qualitative writing as the researcher, through their voice, drives the inquiry. Consider your position in the narrative as you decide on your usage of "I" in your work. Researchers with a more empirical emphasis may choose to limit usage primarily to describing the purpose of their study and their role as the researcher. Researchers using their own subjectivity as part of their critical lens may choose to use first person singular throughout their work. That said, overuse may distract from the flow of story arc.

2.A.3 Engaging Your Audience

Identifying the audience for your work is crucial to communicating persuasively. When you know your audience, you can tailor your content, tone, style, and language and make constructive decisions about what to include, how to organize your work and how best to support your line of argument.

For any good writing, you must be very clear about your main idea, as the main objective of your writing is to persuade your audience to accept this idea. To begin, consider who is most likely to be interested in your research. Next, try to better understand your audience by considering if your readers are undecided about your main idea; or how your writing may be linked to a trending topic in your field. Make sure to clearly frame the social problem you are investigating and identify the boundaries of the problem from within your topic of interest. Make an effort to explain to your audience what the problem is and the value of investigating this social problem in context.

To build interest for your audience, make sure that you know which aspects of your work might attract their attention. Consider how you can promote the strongest supporting points for persuading your audience. Make sure that you present a balanced argument and carefully consider any significant opposing views in your field. When you explain a counterargument

in your writing and then refute this opposing view, you will strengthen the credibility of your work. Always keep in mind how your writing will serve your audience and how your readers might react when reading your work. Also consider what sort of evidence your audience will expect that may best convince them that your work is valuable and credible. Review Table 2.1 for ideas about identifying and describing your audience.

One of the most important things about writing is to be clear about the "so what" factor. What is important about your research and why will the reader care enough to read it? Once you are clear about this, you will have a better idea who your audience is and can write something that people will want to read.

2.B KEEPING YOUR RESEARCH DESIGN CONNECTED TO YOUR WRITING

Your research design will guide the writing of your work. This includes identifying your research approach, research questions, and methods of collecting data. When you are telling the story of your research, your reader will want to

TABLE 2.1 ■ Strategies for Identifying and Describing Your Audience
Identifying Your Audience
Be clear about your central idea as the main purpose of your writing is to persuade your audience to accept this idea.
Who is most likely to be interested in your research?
Understand your audience for instance, are your readers undecided about your main idea? Can your writing be linked to a trending topic in your field?
Clearly frame the social problem. Identify the boundaries of the problem from within your topic of interest. Explain to your audience what the problem is and the value and benefits of investigating.
What is it about your work that might interest the audience?
What are the strongest supporting points for persuading your audience?
Are there any significant opposing views in your field? Explaining this counterargument in your writing and refuting this opposing view will strengthen the credibility of your work.
How will your writing serve this audience?
How might the audience react to your writing?
What sort of evidence will your audience expect to convince them?

make sure that your research design is robust and trustworthy. One of the ways you can strengthen your writing is to make connections in your story between your research focus, your research questions, and your data collection methods. To do this, make sure to keep track of your thinking and how it develops. What you are aiming for is a transparent description of the steps you take in your research from start to finish. Maintain records of every step you take in your research investigation using memos, diagrams, or spreadsheets.

2.B.1 Building a Trail

Creating, and documenting, a trail through your work allows you to track and build upon developments in your research. As you go through your research, from design to analysis to writing up, you will come to decision points. It is very important that you capture these decisions and the paths taken, so that you can revisit and review as you continue on your research journey.

Consider creating an electronic record of your journey through your research that will do a number of things:

● Catalog events chronologically.

● Keep track of ongoing descriptions of your research procedures.

● Provide an historical record of your thinking throughout the research.

● Maintain a log of communications with others (e.g., colleagues, team members, participants, research supervisors).

Keeping a record of this trail throughout your work will help you backtrack to the origin of your thinking as you go through the writing process. This will be particularly useful when writing up your analysis, and a trail of your data analysis path will make it much easier to report and explain your actions. It will help you keep track of all the things you do, and change, throughout the process. Make sure you collect all useful and necessary information, and that all this work is protected and stored safely in a secure location. Also, regularly back up your work multiple times in different locations to ensure reliable redundancy in your backups.

2.B.2 Knowing What to Gather and Use

New writers are often overwhelmed trying to determine what information to gather and use. What if I fail to document something important? How will I

know what will be important? How will I know if I have gathered enough detail? Not to worry—just keep in mind that you are embarking on a journey and will want to tell that story, as richly as possible, as your research inquiry evolves. As the final project becomes clearer to you, you will find improved clarity in your message.

As you work through your project, remember to always keep your research goals, research questions and research focus at the front of your mind. This will help you when thinking about how to document, your actions and thinking, as you move through the process. How is your thinking changing over time? What decisions are you making about what will be included or excluded from your story? At each of these moments, are you recording sufficient information to communicate a clear story line? How are things unfolding and becoming clearer? Remember to capture details as you write. When in doubt, look at your study focus statement. Keeping track of changes in your research design is very important, and it is always better to have too much recorded documentation rather than too little.

Your job as a good writer is to uncover the chronology to your story, and the nature of how you capture this detail will be specific to each project. Take some time to consider what will help you keep the story clear. One of the best pieces of advice one of the authors of this book received from their doctoral supervisor was, "Tell it to me like you are speaking to your grandmother, or one of your parents". Remember, they are unlikely to have much experience around the nature of your project and your research methods. How would you break things down and what details would you include so your grandmother or parents can better understand your work, think it is interesting, and, of course, be proud to see how brilliant you are becoming?

2.C DIGITAL: HOW FAR DO YOU GO?

This is an important topic for any writer to think about. How far do you go along the digital path? Are you a traditionalist? Do you like writing with pen and paper? Do you like to be organized using electronic means? How do you manage your schedule? How do you like to communicate about your research? There are no right or wrong answers here; this is just part of better understanding who you are and what you bring to the research process. What is important here is recognizing that digital tools are just that, tools to help you improve your research and your writing. Knowing what you expect from a given tool is an important part of staying in charge and managing what you hope to achieve from your work.

Using digital tools throughout a qualitative study can support the research process by saving time and adding depth and robustness to qualitative

research. Digital tools can assist in collaborating with other researchers and stakeholders, managing time and the research process, data gathering, data management, data analysis, and representing and sharing your findings. In addition, an ongoing integration of digital tools for your data management and analysis can allow you to draw more widely from the data that you will work with in your study (see Section 6.A.3 for more on this).

2.C.1 Bringing Digital Tools Into the Conversation

Digital tools can be helpful to use throughout the research process to help you capture details for your later review. Any digital tools you may choose to use will not take the place of other activities that you will engage in such as reading, writing, thinking and talking with others about your emerging ideas (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2016); rather, they will supplement these processes. Digital tools may also help you distance (or separate) yourself from your data, helping you to appreciate what you actually see in your data rather than imposing deductive patterns in your data prematurely.

Table 2.2 lists some of the digital tools you might think about using in your research. This list is not exhaustive, just a place to start and help you on your way.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Digital Tools to Use Throughout the Process	
Digital tools	
1.	Digital recordings (phone/laptop)—to capture your thoughts quickly and brain dump from time to time. Lets you "flow" without the burden of typing, spelling, punctuating etc.
2.	Online storage—It's cheap, accessible anywhere, and easy to keep running record and maintain version control.
3.	Chat logs if you interact with others over the course of a project
4.	Memos in an analogue form, electronically, or by using features of data analysis tools
5.	Microsoft To-Do (or other to-do application) in order to keep on top of your list of things to do—These lists can be shared with others in a group.
6.	PowerPoint, or other presentation application, to generate images and flow charts both for yourself and for others
7.	Mind mapping software for brainstorming and research design (refer to Section 4.A.5)
8.	Reference management tools (can be online or local). Exports can be imported in data analysis tools for literature reviews.

Take a moment to think about what digital tools you might use and remember to use them thoughtfully in your research. Consider potential ethical issues that might arise and need to be addressed in your ethics application. Also take some time to ponder your own reflexive practice in your research and how digital tools may help you in your endeavors. Remember digital tools can allow you to think more creatively about data gathering, management and analysis.

2.C.2 How Can Digital Tools Help You Move From Thinking to Writing?

Consider how you can tap into the potential of the internet to support the development of your ideas and voice with the use of blogging, wikis, and other forms of social networking to support your research. You can take this opportunity to scan for key words, concepts, viewpoints, and emerging new ideas that may help you as you develop your own thinking—that is, help you express more clearly what it is you are trying to say. Digital tools that can support the writing process within qualitative research include both individual and collaborative tools such as Google Docs, Scrivener (discussed in Section 3.B.2) and Authorea.

Most universities provide on campus and online writing center support for students. In addition, there are many open-source writing resources available for your use. This is further discussed in Section 9.B.2, *Writing a strong abstract*. A few favorite websites which are particularly helpful for qualitative writers include:

- Purdue University, Online Writing Lab (OWL): https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html

- American Psychological Association (APA): https://www.apa.org/education/grad/research

- The Writer's Handbook at the UW-Madison Writing Center: https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/

Chapter 2 has offered ideas on how positioning yourself as a writer may assist you with starting the writing process and designing a plan of attack. This chapter has also encouraged you to give further consideration to the use of digital tools to advance your work. In the next chapter, the importance of organizing the overall direction of the writing process is considered. Strategies are offered to aid in enhancing the quality of the study and how to better communicate clearly through writing.