



Writing a Rigorous Qualitative Journal Article: Tips for Authors

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Abstract: Rigor and quality in a qualitative research project go hand in hand with writing a rigorous, informative qualitative journal manuscript. Given today's pressure on researchers to get published, their papers are often rejected or must undergo major revision because of poor information or structure, lack of formatting to a journal's requirements and misunderstandings about what constitutes rigor and quality in a qualitative paper. In the author's long experience as an editor and reviewer, some problems in writing qualitative manuscripts are common, no matter what part of the world the author(s) come from. This brief paper is aimed at qualitative researchers who are novices at getting their research reports published in journals. Using a personal narrative style, the author highlights common issues in the writing process across various sections of manuscripts connected to a qualitative study's design, conduct, and reporting. Tips are given to help novice authors write better in the future.

Keywords: Journal articles, Manuscript writing, Novice authors, Qualitative research, Quality, Rigor, Writing

Received 25 July 2024; Revised 14 August 2024;
Accepted 17 August 2024

Introduction

Over many years, I have reviewed thousands of manuscripts submitted to journals. This experience has taught me important lessons about my writing and enabled me to advise authors who want to be successful in getting published. However, many of these manuscripts get rejected or sent back to the authors because of gaps in the writing or formatting problems. These problems can be read as a practical checklist of dos and don'ts, which I have repeatedly mentioned to different authors. For example, I keep repeating advice to:

Read and adhere to all the author guidelines.
Attention to fine detail is important.

Draft and redraft to make your writing clearer.

Look at other articles published in the journal to understand the depth and quality of writing required for publication.

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Clearly explain the research problem.

Your research question is stated differently in several parts of the paper.

Your study methods need to be better explained.

Getting a well-published person to review your manuscript would be helpful.

Your literature review needs to be updated (too long, too short, or unrelated to the research problem).

Discuss and analyze more recent literature relevant to your topic.

And so on....

For two or three decades, other editors have described these writing problems in many journal articles, books, leaflets and presentations. Resources are freely available online to novice authors, researchers and more experienced authors to help them write

effectively for journals. If you are a novice writer of journal articles, you are advised to read some of these resources to help you be successful. This is critical. Lately, impact factor journals have been publishing their journal metrics on the home page, and you can find that the acceptance rate of articles can range from only 8% to 20%, so putting your paper among the best to be accepted is vital.

For the rest of this paper, I focus on the process of writing a rigorous qualitative journal report rather than on the general issues involved in getting a manuscript published. Some problems in writing qualitative manuscripts seem to occur commonly.

Qualitative Research

Many qualitative research philosophies and methods focus on answering “how and why” questions.¹ Qualitative research approaches and reporting styles often fall in and out of favor depending on the disciplines, notably social, health and education, and the powerful global publishing industry. And every year, there seems to be a new qualitative variant, a new method of undertaking a study, analyzing the information, or writing up the report. Qualitative researchers face many challenges in their studies, including “issues relating to rapport development, use of researcher self-disclosure, listening to untold stories, feelings of guilt and vulnerability, leaving the research relationship and researcher exhaustion.”^{2(p327)} Writing a qualitative report after dealing with such challenges, undertaking many interviews, and having a large database and complex research processes are often difficult for novice authors.

A strength of qualitative reporting is the uniqueness and richness of an excellent report’s narrative. The experiences and stories people tell us are at the heart of qualitative research, so this must always be at the heart of your manuscript. So, too, must the cultural context in which the study has been located. Understanding the culture of the phenomenon

is vital, so authors need to explain to the reader facets of their culture that have a bearing on the phenomena being explored, for example, the organizational culture, cultural matters surrounding childbirth, or student nurses learning in different cultural environments or being from different cultures.³ Bringing these experiences and stories to life is a skill that often takes many years to master, but succinct writing for journals is also essential. Succinct writing for people from backgrounds where English is not a first language is often tricky. It can also be difficult for people whose language is English. Writing succinctly takes practice, drafting, and redrafting so that fewer words are used to describe something. The message is that getting feedback and sticking to word limits are essential. For example, students attempting to get their graduate studies published often have had “the luxury” of having the space to write a long thesis but find it quite a challenge to write much more briefly within a manuscript of around 4–5,000 words. Additionally, many qualitative researchers need help keeping their rich data collection manageable and find it hard to trim a manuscript to the journal’s word requirement.

Orienting the reader to your study: Starting your qualitative manuscript

In the first instance, keep your audience in mind, whether academics, clinicians, the public, government, business, or lay people in a particular area. How you write your research report depends on this audience, but you must always conform to the journal’s guidelines. The message here is to write concisely about the research problem and engage the readers in its importance. Such writing takes practice because it is vital to convince readers that your study has been necessary, that it is different to other studies on the topic and that your findings are significant to the field.

Many authors need clarification about what to include in a qualitative report, and depending on the journal and your audience, the manner of your writing may vary. Some journals have free-flowing narrative

styles, while others, such as this journal, have more structure to the content of a qualitative article.

A considerable number of journals require authors to complete and submit a checklist to help ensure the completeness and rigor of writing. Some have criticized using these checklists or universal criteria because they stifle flexibility to adapt to the diverse range of qualitative approaches and interpretative styles.⁴ However, I have found that, in general, these checklists help novice authors to include the vital information needed by many journals. One commonly used checklist is the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ). This 32-item checklist can assist authors in reporting the essential attributes of the research team members, the study context, methods, the findings, analysis and interpretations.⁵ Even if the journal does not require the submission of such a checklist, I encourage novice researchers to use one to write their report.

Remember, you must persuade the editor and the reviewers that your contribution is the study's strengths, originality,¹ and usefulness to growing knowledge. Describing the research question clearly and keeping the message about this consistent throughout the manuscript is vital. This can be the starting point of a manuscript, or the research question may be written at the end of the introduction or literature review.

Another common issue is that researchers have based their qualitative study on closed questions. Open questions, such as "What are your experiences of living with kidney disease?" are at the heart of qualitative research because you allow the person to explain the experience on their own terms.

However, you must explain the research problem and background and give evidence about the phenomenon: what is known or unknown. There are exceptions to this, such as in the phenomenological writing of well-known scholars who explicate in specialized journals about a person's conscious experience of a phenomenon as the ultimate source of all meaning and value.

Remember, clear, straightforward writing always wins over obtuse and complicated language. In any report, it is best to describe the known global "picture" of the phenomenon succinctly if it is relevant to the topic and then explain the national or local issues. However, different styles of writing literature reviews in qualitative studies depend on the philosophical approach. For example, in phenomenology, authors may only briefly outline the topic, describe the methods, and then let the participants' narrative describe what is known from their experience. After this, the findings are compared to the literature in the discussion section. However, many qualitative papers provide insightful discussion and analysis of the topic in a literature review at the beginning of the paper. For novice authors, it is always best to consult the journal's articles to see what is usual for that journal.

Explaining your methodology

I find that novice researchers need to understand the difference between methodology and method. Quite simply, the methodology of your study is the school of thought underlying your study or the systematic approach to your study. At the same time, the methods are the practical steps you chose to explore and analyze the phenomena.

After the introduction/literature review, describe your methodology. This involves presenting the research paradigm and theory (theories) used to consider and explore the phenomena and why you chose these in connection to your research question. It would be best if you referenced your methodology using literature, for example, the original work of the scholar who developed this. For example, you might have chosen grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, case study, or qualitative description. As a researcher, you might have used different lenses or conceptual frameworks for exploration and need to explain how these fit together or complement one another, such as in a mixed-method study. Although this section could be long and complex, writing succinctly about it in a journal manuscript is essential. Once you have

discussed the philosophical assumptions, you need to explain the methods you used in the next section of your report.

Describing the study methods

In the methods section, firstly describe the design of your study, for example, a mixed method explanatory sequential research design or a grounded theory design. Following this, a practical explanation of the sample, the sampling techniques, the setting(s), how you collected and analyzed the data, and the ethical considerations should follow. Be sure to include any specific ethical issues that occurred in your study. The final section of the methods section needs to carefully explain how you maintained trustworthiness in data collection, analysis, and validation of findings and maintained rigor in the study. This should include the criteria by which you judged the study findings trustworthy, dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability, as well as a practical discussion on how you achieved these criteria.

Again, you should include appropriate references in your methods section to explain or justify the steps you took. This includes discussing how you determined the codes or concepts in data analysis.⁶ A succinct way of doing this is to draw up a table, giving examples of how you determined these codes or concepts of the data analysis process and extracted them from the data.

I often find when reading qualitative reports that the authors need clarification or consistency in explaining their methods. For example, they claim to have employed a specific methodological approach, such as Colaizzi's phenomenology, but then explain that they used a content or thematic analysis method to analyze the data. Quite simply, this is a disconnection! Often, authors describe using a particular qualitative approach, but the theoretical evidence supporting this is missing, and it seems they have undertaken a straightforward qualitative descriptive study. Similarly, there might be a description of using Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory method, but the authors do not provide evidence of a theory; they provide only descriptive

statements.⁶ "Alignment between the methodology and the methods informs the consistency, transparency and plausibility elements."^{1(p3)}

Another common problem is that authors claim to have triangulated the data from multiple sources but do not clearly understand what triangulation is or overstate their ability to have done this within the confines of their methods. Triangulation is the comparison of findings from two or more different methods of data collection or data sources to seek convergence of findings and thus verify the interpretation of findings.⁷

Another issue in qualitative reporting in the methods section relates to data saturation. Not all qualitative approaches require that the report discuss saturation, such as in phenomenology. Simply saturation refers to the measures a researcher took to achieve a sufficient purposive sample size and to conclude they have undertaken enough interviews or focus group discussions to determine that no new information or theoretical constructs are emerging from the data analysis.⁸ Thus, "saturation is an important indicator that a sample is adequate for the phenomenon studied."^{8(p.ns)} Although many authors claim their study methods were rigorous, they often fail to justify how they determined their sample size.⁷

Presenting the findings

The most common problem I have encountered in the findings section of qualitative manuscripts is that the authors do not describe their categories or themes sufficiently. They often present the bare facts, and this is certainly not rigorous. Evidence must be given that a thorough and valid data analysis has occurred. Such evidence is demonstrated in quality discussions of the findings, not superficial discussions of themes or categories, supported by a couple of direct quotes from the participants. A clear explanation of the findings will help deepen the reader's understanding of the "perspectives, observations, experiences, or events evidenced through the behaviors or products of individuals and groups."^{8(p.ns)} This explanation needs

to be placed within the context or the circumstances of the participants in the study.

Sometimes authors describe a long list of themes and sub-themes or categories and sub-categories. Reviewers and editors, without having undertaken the study themselves, can find that data analysis has been prematurely concluded. For example, two or three sub-themes could have been consolidated because they are so similar in content. Such a finding is often cause for manuscript rejection and advice that the researchers continue their data analysis.

Another issue is that researchers fail to describe negative cases, that is, outlier situations where an event or experience does not fit most participants' experiences. Depicting negative cases can give readers a rich understanding since some participants experience a phenomenon very differently to others.

Discussing the findings and recommendations

The discussion section of a qualitative research report should not just focus on participant characteristics and comparing the findings to differences or similarities in other studies. Authors should also emphasize how their research contributes to knowledge and whether it extends or challenges such knowledge in or outside of a discipline. Too often, in my experience, authors do not attempt to answer the 'so what' question ('So you have done this research, so what?'). Roberts et al.¹ contend that authors must carefully explain the implications of their study findings so that actions can be formulated. This includes the "practical, theoretical, or methodological implications."^{1(p4)} In doing so, authors can engage with readers to enhance the relevance and plausibility of their findings. For example, in a nursing study, these implications may be actions that need to be undertaken by nurse administrators, health policymakers, nurse educators, or clinicians to address the unresolved issues highlighted by the study. Recommendations may also highlight that further research is warranted

on the topic since the findings may have discovered further gaps in knowledge.

I have often stated that no research is perfect and that researchers need to examine their study processes and findings to carefully decide and explain how the study could have been carried out differently or highlight its limitations. Novice researchers are too often caught up in the quantitative and qualitative dichotomy and mention that one of the limitations of their study is that the findings cannot be generalized. Generalization of findings is more often a goal of quantitative research. Qualitative researchers need to consider whether their interpretations or conclusions about the findings can be transferred to other similar contexts.⁹

Conclusion

I have highlighted some common problems in qualitative research manuscripts in this brief paper. These often occur because the authors are novices at writing such reports. The background is that the authors often have not or could not get good support and feedback from well-published qualitative researchers. Many have not followed the author guidelines for a journal nor carefully examined that journal's published papers to understand the quality and depth of writing to be successfully published. Some do not have good knowledge of qualitative approaches, processes and formats. There is no substitute for drafting, redrafting, getting advice from experts, and then drafting and redrafting again to get a manuscript into the best possible shape before submission. I hope that some of the ideas in this article help qualitative researchers be more successful in publishing. Finally, Roberts et al.^{1(p1)} have important advice for authors that is worth quoting here:

"They should be mindful of "the golden thread," that is their central argument that holds together the literature review, the theoretical and conceptual framework, the research questions, methodology, the analysis and organisation of the data and the conclusions."

Understanding this golden thread and applying it in the writing of the manuscript will help novice authors produce better manuscripts in the future.

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การเขียนบทความวารสารเชิงคุณภาพอย่างเข้มงวด : คำแนะนำสำหรับผู้เขียน

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บทคัดย่อ: ความเข้มงวดและคุณภาพในโครงการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพนั้นมาคู่กับการเขียนต้นฉบับวารสารเชิงคุณภาพที่เข้มงวดและมุ่งให้ข้อมูล เมื่อพิจารณาจากแรงกดดันในปัจจุบันที่นักวิจัยต้องตีพิมพ์ผลงาน บทความเหล่านั้นมักถูกปฏิเสธหรือต้องแก้ไขจำนวนมากเนื่องจากการให้ข้อมูลหรือโครงสร้างที่ไม่ดี ขาดการจัดรูปแบบตามข้อกำหนดของวารสาร และความเข้าใจผิดเกี่ยวกับความเข้มงวดและคุณภาพในบทความเชิงคุณภาพ จากประสบการณ์อันยาวนานของผู้เขียนในฐานะบรรณาธิการและผู้ทบทวนบทความ พบว่าปัญหาในการเขียนต้นฉบับเชิงคุณภาพนั้นพบได้บ่อย ๆ ไม่ว่าผู้เขียนจะมาจากที่ใดก็ตาม บทความนี้มุ่งเป้าไปที่นักวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพมือใหม่สำหรับการตีพิมพ์รายงานการวิจัยในวารสาร โดยผู้เขียนใช้รูปแบบการเล่าเรื่องส่วนบุคคล ที่เน้นประเด็นทั่วไปในกระบวนการเขียนส่วนต่าง ๆ ของต้นฉบับ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการออกแบบ การดำเนินการ และการรายงานการศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ คำแนะนำที่จะช่วยให้นักเขียนมือใหม่เขียนได้ดีขึ้นในอนาคต

Pacific Rim Int J Nurs Res 2025; 29(1) 1-7

คำสำคัญ: บทความในวารสาร การเขียนต้นฉบับ นักเขียนมือใหม่ การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ คุณภาพ ความเข้มงวด การเขียนงานวิจัย

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