

Writing Qualitative Research Essentials

I hate writing. I love having written.

—Dorothy Parker (*The New York Times*, 2016)

This book is groundbreaking due to *foundational areas in qualitative writing* (e.g., journal articles, dissertations), *aesthetic representations* (e.g., poetry, autoethnography), *transparency in publication, promotion of our research accounts*, and *reflexivity* essentials being addressed in one practical and engaging text based on real experiences. Part I of this book is foundational in nature. I frame Part I with a discussion of the daunting and hidden nature of writing, and my goal through this book to help writers complete and publish their research accounts. My goal is to support researchers as they *Publish and Persevere*. I explain the practical nature of the first half of the book regarding writing, dealing with writer's block, the politics of research writing, manuscripts, dissertations, publication, and promotion of research accounts. The idea that writers must understand the traditional writing form, in this case the qualitative research thematic article, to persevere and/or break the form is proposed.

Through the first six chapters, I cover the foundational qualitative writing essentials.

Chapter 1, "Introduction," is where I lay out what prompted me to write this book and describe the gap I am filling between the information available on writing up qualitative research for

PART I

course projects and dissertations and the resources on disseminating research to wider audiences. I describe the literary influences framing the book and advocate for qualitative writers to draw on these creative forms. Finally, I provide the path for the book and review features that have been developed from qualitative researchers' first-hand experiences to support readers' writing growth. In Chapter 2, "Why, What, and How We Write," I remind writers of the various reasons *why* we represent data, including (1) needing to publish and persevere, (2) believing that research can cause change for good, and (3) expecting that varied representations may allow the reader and writer to grow in understanding. I overview *what* qualitative researchers have historically and contemporarily written. Building on those who have written about qualitative writing, I center the book firmly in this context both in this chapter and throughout the text. Finally, I detail *how* successful writers ensure that they are productive—including time management and writers' groups. In Chapter 3, "Start Writing!" I assume that the readers of this text have analyzed qualitative data and have access to an analyzed data set. Then, I challenge researchers to represent the data set in different ways so they can deeply consider the importance of their representation choices. I advocate for creating a road map or chart of what we are writing and where we are in the process as a way of keeping the writing process organized. I cover ways to hone the craft of writing—pulling on top nonfiction writing experts. Chapter 4, "Qualitative Dissertations: The Three Rules" (disclaimer—there aren't any rules!), is where I review how to form the traditional five chapters of the qualitative dissertation while detailing other dissertation forms that may be available to the student, such as article manuscripts, plays, research poetry, and visuals. I also feature a discussion on the politics and process of the dissertation since this context must be negotiated for a successful outcome. Finally, I review the changes some are advocating for in the area of dissertations. Chapter 5, "Writing the Qualitative Journal Article: Of Rice Cakes, Tortillas, Bread, and Butter," opens with a review of the basic form of qualitative writing, the thematic article. I review the sections in this type of article, with suggestions on how to write them. I explain what a qualitative methodological article is and encourage more qualitative researchers to make contributions in this area. In Chapter 6, "Publish and Persevere: The Publication Process," I fill a gap that occurs for some after course work or when a dissertation has been completed. In this chapter, the publication process for an article and a book are described step-by-step, with examples of ups and downs presented throughout. Providing transparency regarding the publication process is my goal in this chapter.

Samuel Johnson reminded us that "the only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it." As researchers, we should extend these words to research writing, which is no small thing; and in addition, if we could learn to love research writing—the turn of a phrase, a powerful allusion, the moment when your breath catches at a participant's words—what a difference this would make in a profession comprising readers and writers.



Introduction

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

—Muriel Rukeyser (n.d.)

Has research occurred if it hasn't been written (represented) and disseminated? Some have argued that it has not (e.g., Wolcott, 1994). This perspective is based on the point of view that research is conducted to create impact, facilitate change, and add to knowledge, so a portrayal of research that is disseminated is necessary. Therefore, my primary purpose in this book is to consider *why* and *how* qualitative researchers portray research and how these portrayals may best be disseminated.

In this chapter, I

- discuss why I wrote this book,
- describe my attempt to ground the book in literary and artistic perspectives,
- lay out the path of the book,
- highlight each chapter, and
- detail key features of the book.

I tell my family I have signed a contract for a book with SAGE. I am elated but also full of trepidation. Both of my children respond, "Oh, no!"

“What?” I tease them, exaggerating my outrage. “Oh, no! What does that mean?” But I knew what they meant. The first and only book I have written so far was a daunting experience in many ways—the newness and the time constraints, as well as the shifts in my eyesight and overall health that came from sitting and looking at a screen too long.

Later, at a celebratory dinner—for me at least—while eating Japanese noodles and dumplings, it occurs to my daughter Kate, 8 years old, to ask, “What is this book about?”

“How to write,” I reply.

“What? [again] You are writing a book about writing?” We all laugh at Kate’s genuine incredulity. My children thought it was odd enough to write a book about how to be ethical, but now Kate’s astonished tone wipes out an entire genre of writing, the how-to-write books—how to write murder mysteries, poems, theses, dissertations, children’s storybooks, and so on.

In what follows, I lay out my reasons for writing this book, both as a defense and as an offense of sorts. I write this book first and foremost for the graduate student and assistant professor I once was and in memory of how profoundly lonely and out of step I felt when it came to writing research. Coming from a literary home with a father who was an English, literature, and journalism professor at a liberal arts college, I had the naïve notion that I would just combine what I knew from the humanities with what I wanted to accomplish in higher education as an educator and social science researcher. My belief that I could write in the manner of educational nonfiction writers such as Kidder (e.g., 1989) and Paley (e.g., 2009) for my dissertation seemed to draw blank looks or, more disappointingly, lectures on how we cannot learn from an “*n* of 1” or from a research participant who is a remarkably positive figure. I was told, “Dissertations aren’t about the Mother Teresas of the world, because who could be like them?” These assertions came from people I respected, so I began to feel unsure of myself and of a knowledge source I had always learned through—stories.

My mother, a white woman born to Mennonite missionaries in colonized East Africa, was a storyteller. When asked a yes or no question, Mom would settle into long narratives from which the asker would need to make sense of what the point was. These narratives were enchanting to people unless you were an impatient daughter who wanted a quick yes. Yet I am thankful that as I grew older I was able to appreciate the stories and yearn to have had more opportunities to record them prior to her death. I know I am also a storyteller and find myself ending the ones I tell when I teach, which I sense may have been too long, with a crisp “So the point is . . .”—summarizing for non-“storied” students the main nugget I want them to extract. Indeed, while most reviewers of my texts appreciate my storytelling, there are reviewers, including of this text, who want me to get to the point quicker—charts, tables, the gist, have been provided in this book for these readers since I know time is valuable. Yet, paradoxically, in a book that includes organization and time management strategies, I call for times when qualitative researchers can drift, slow down,

take a break from listening and writing up others' stories to tell their own stories. What it would have meant to me as an unsure Mennonite at a state university if someone had slowed down and really listened to the story that I, as a fledgling researcher, was trying to tell.

My father, an author and English professor, was a storyteller and writer. When he told stories, Mom would shush any of our comments, and he was allowed to hold court like traditional professors did as though on a dais behind a podium. No one interrupted—not when he wrote stories either; and he was a great storyteller. Toward the end of his life, dementia took from him the one thing these great professors held in common, the ability to hold a vast group of listeners' and readers' attention without the use of whiteboards, PowerPoint, SMART boards, or Zoom. So we told his stories back to him, and at times, he knew when it was the right point to cry, chuckle, or boom with laughter.

My initial writing experiences are what led me to create a course focused on writing and representing qualitative research when I received a position as an assistant professor in qualitative methodology. I wanted students to avoid the isolation I felt and the consistent message that my way of thinking about and representing the world was inferior. I wanted to create a sense of community for students where they could try new writing ideas in a safe environment and grow and thrive as a result. This book emerges from that story. Twenty years later, I like to think the writing experience I had in graduate school is no longer as common for today's students. Yet for those who are in the midst of anything reminiscent of my early experience, this text can be a resource, a comfort, and, perhaps, an inspiration, reminding them that they are not alone. We must continue to ask ourselves as academics, researchers, teachers, and mentors what we risk, as "primary arbiters of knowledge," when we cut off or relegate certain ways of seeing and knowing to a lower-level status or completely exclude them from the academy.

Second, I write this book to emphasize the connection between qualitative portrayals of research and the need to disseminate research, thereby making it transparent and accessible. As instructors, we make a mistake when we concentrate solely on writing research proposals, course research papers, or dissertations while excluding assignments and discussions of manuscripts for the purpose of publication. Students who go on to be professors will no longer be writing course papers or dissertations; they will maintain their place in higher education through the writing and publication of research articles. The lack of concentration on research manuscripts can have profound repercussions for the type of academic position a new professor may receive and ultimately for their chances at tenure. There need to be ample opportunities for students to learn how to craft and refine course work and dissertations into journal articles—no easy feat. The primary graduate qualitative research writing focus needs to be on (a) a publishable manuscript; (b) the thesis and dissertation form, including conversion to a journal manuscript; (c) understanding and participating in the publication process, and building on this foundation; and (d) other ways to represent and disseminate research. Given the lack of emphasis in some students'

degrees on publication, I write this book for graduate students, untenured professors, and professors venturing into qualitative research for the first time.

Readers who are in the position, as I am now, to represent qualitative research aesthetically, may wonder at my emphasis on the traditional qualitative journal manuscript. From my experience, as someone who teaches and consults across all areas of the social, psychological, educational, and even some business sciences, I have found that most students and untenured professors will need to concentrate on the traditional qualitative manuscript form. Once the traditional form is mastered, they are well positioned to critique, expand, and break the form.

Third, I write this book in celebration! Over my career, the variety of ways qualitative data are represented has burgeoned. There is much to celebrate and discuss. In this book, I have the privilege to feature the research of my current and former students portrayed through literary, performative, and artistic accounts, such as poetry, visuals, personal accounts, plays, song, sand trays, music, art, videos, collage, quilts, websites, posters, charts, infographics, rants, and more. I am confident, even as I write, that someone is considering representing research in a new way to help us engage with and understand our world.

Literary Framing

Throughout this book, I draw on literary worlds when possible. Researchers can learn from professional artists who spend all of their time writing and representing. Researchers with positions such as mine only spend part of their time on scholarship, and much of this time is not engaged in direct writing experiences. Given the demands to teach, assess, advise, consult, serve internally and externally, and secure funds, in reality, many academics likely feel they are not able to spend significant amounts of time on the actual writing of research. Therefore, we have much we could learn from those who spend most of their time writing. Challenging the conventions of academia to revitalize our writing by engaging with literary and artistic works and wisdom will only improve our ability to represent and disseminate qualitative research.

The heavy and diverse workload in academia and the simultaneous demand for scholarly publication are the primary reason the traditional writing form has served the academy so well. After it is learned, this form can be efficiently pounded out over and over with new literature, variables, and results inserted. However, the form has become deified as a way to distinguish academics as elite knowledge brokers. Aspects of writing such as adherence to American Psychological Association (APA) style are dogmatically applied, to the point that it seems the application of an academic style guide is mistaken for or privileged over the ability to have research ideas, conduct research, and write it up in an accessible and impactful way. Adherence to academic style guides is seen as a mark of quality and excellence when by nonfiction writing standards it is not (e.g., Zinsser, 2006). This is the tyranny of the scientific paper form and style guides. (Note my rebellious use of exclamation marks in this text!)

Researchers need to consider and draw on other forms of writing. Literary authors, for example, have a deep desire to be published so others can engage with their writing. Readers may know some famous stories of writing persistence, such as the example of the woman who wanted to write but was so busy rearing her children that she did not submit her first novel manuscript to a publisher until she was in her 40s. Twenty-six rejections later, her book was published, changing the face of science fiction forever and creating a literary icon—a female child protagonist, awkward with braces and thick glasses, who draws on themes of redemption, quantum physics, and love—to defend the universe from our deepest fears. The woman was Madeline L’Engle; the book, *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962). Tony Hillerman’s book agent is infamously reported to have told him to “get rid of the Indian stuff” (Spizer, 2003). Hillerman persisted and published more than 18 mysteries with Native American protagonists, which were made into several movies. I believe we, as qualitative researchers, can learn from the persistence of literary and journalist writers who have dedicated their lives to writing. As Faulkner said, “Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it is good, you’ll find out” (Stein, 1956).

Path of the Book

Beginning writers must appreciate the prerequisites if they hope to become writers. You pay your dues—which takes years.

—Alex Haley

Part I: Writing Qualitative Research Essentials consists of six chapters, including a syllabus for a qualitative research writing course (Appendix A) in which the foundational and traditional aspects of writing qualitative research is covered. In Chapter 1, “Introduction,” the daunting and hidden nature of writing is explored. I also describe the goal of this book, which is to make the qualitative research writing¹ and publication process more transparent and accessible. The idea that one must understand the traditional writing form—for qualitative researchers, this is the thematic article—in order to break it or build on it is proposed. In Chapter 2, “Why, What, and How We Write,” I remind writers of the various reasons *why* we represent data, including (a) the imperative to publish (or perish), (b) the belief that research can cause change for good, and

¹A word about the words “write,” “writers,” and “writing.” At all times when I use the word “write,” I also mean “represent” and “representing,” as in “How do qualitative researchers represent research findings?” I use the word “writers” and “researchers” interchangeably since in this text I am focusing solely on qualitative research writing. I believe the word “write” reads smoothly and have chosen to use this word in all the chapters except Chapter 9, which is about visuals and visual research.

(c) the idea that varied representations may allow the reader and writer to grow. I give an overview of *what* qualitative researchers have historically and contemporarily written. Finally, I detail *how* successful writers ensure productivity. I advocate for reading multiple examples of the research writing style writers are working with as foundational to writing.

In Chapter 3, “Start Writing!” I assume that readers have analyzed qualitative data and have access to an analyzed data set. Then I challenge researchers to represent the same data set or parts of the same data set in different ways. Having done so, they should step away from the representations and then reengage, considering what each rendition has to offer. Ideally, if the researcher had access to other researchers to help with this process, the reflexivity could be even more powerful. To illustrate representing data in multiple ways, I draw on the three data representations in *A Thrice-Told Tale* (Wolf, 1992), my own publications with coauthors (Ku et al., 2008; Lahman et al., 2011), and Erin Patchett’s research conducted during her doctoral course work represented in three pieces (see Appendix B). I cover ways to hone the craft of writing—drawing on examples from top nonfiction writing experts—in areas such as first sentences, style, diction, tone, and structure.

In Chapter 4, “Qualitative Dissertations: The Three Rules,” I review how to form the traditional five chapters of the qualitative dissertation while giving tips and pointers on the politics and process of writing a dissertation. I detail other dissertation forms that may be available to the student and then highlight examples of qualitative dissertations that illustrate the breadth of possible aesthetic representations, including plays, research poetry, and visuals.

Chapter 5, “Writing the Qualitative Journal Article: Of Rice Cakes, Tortillas, Bread and Butter,” opens with a review of the primary form of qualitative research writing, the thematic article. I explain what a qualitative methodological article is and challenge qualitative researchers to engage in this type of representation, since it allows readers a glimpse of what occurs in the background of research and thus enhances others’ research abilities and methodological understandings.

In Chapter 6, “Publish and Persevere: The Publication Process,” I fill a gap that occurs for some after course work or the dissertation has been completed. Novices are often guided through the research and writing process for a course paper, but publishing may remain a mystery. Through this chapter, I offer a step-by-step overview of the publication process for an article and a book, with examples of the ups and downs prospective authors experience presented throughout. Making the publication process transparent is my goal in this chapter. Text boxes from student authors are included.

Part 2: Aesthetic Representations of Qualitative Research consists of four chapters, in which aesthetic forms of qualitative writing and reflexivity are proposed and advocated for. In Chapter 7, “Autoethnography: A Kaleidoscope of Knowing,” I discuss a hallmark of alternative and aesthetic representations, autoethnography, and detail it as a methodology. Some ways in which autoethnography may be positioned, including *heartfelt*, *critical*, and *multivoiced*, are detailed, with examples provided. The process I followed to

write autoethnographies on loss is described in an effort to make this form transparent and accessible to more writers.

Chapter 8, “Poemish Research Representations” is where I describe the primary form I use to explore participants’ and my own experiences. I cover what research poetry is, research poets’ potential contributions to the field, and how to write research poetry. Examples of research poetry—transcription, autoethnographic, literature review, archival, formed, collage, and more—are presented, along with text boxes from students engaging with research poetry.

I explore the idea of what an image is in Chapter 9, “Visuals in Qualitative Research Representation: In the Blink of an Eye.” Research representations that use visual data within a traditional qualitative article and representations that rely primarily on visuals are explored. Representations discussed include collage, photography, video, and art. Considerations in visual representation including quality of images for reproduction purposes, copyright, dissemination, and image as sacred are forwarded. Throughout the chapter, visuals created by qualitative researchers are featured.

In Chapter 10, “Reflecting Reflexivity in Research Representations,” I consider the role of reflexivity in research representations, reviewing the scant and superficial nature of reflexivity accounts in our final research products. Considering the reflexive experiences of a student researching people who are homeless, I advocate for *raw reflexivity* with deeper, more vulnerable representations.

I close the book with an epilogue, where I revisit the idea that research and researchers’ *becoming* is supported by the concepts of *ish* and *good enough* from children’s literature (Reynolds, 2004) and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), respectively. These ideas are further developed as I attempt to advocate for a space where researchers feel safe to attempt new forms of representation without yet being experts.

Features of the Book

In this text, I address the primary qualitative writing challenges for novices and provide resources for sage writers through engaging materials created for lifelong learners. Many successful research scholars received their primary training in quantitative research, and their experience is in writing quantitative research results. The curious mind of the academic, a desire to assist students in expanding research areas, and a wish to portray data in engaging ways cause some of these scholars to seek new, qualitative understandings. This desire to extend research and representation understandings may be seen in the colleagues who audit my courses, attend workshops on qualitative research, and consult on qualitative research issues. This book is for all researchers who desire to engage deeply with writing qualitative research.

Features of the book include first-person *narrative interludes* (Lather, 2012)—integrated into the chapters and indicated by italics—about the reflexive personal writing experiences I have had. The purpose of these writings is not explicated for the reader, with the intention that both the writer (myself) and the reader continue to mull over the interlude. (I present these when I teach as

a way of demonstrating the learning and strength that can occur when we, as teachers and scholars, are willing to be vulnerable. Writing and publishing can be a confusing and lonely endeavor.)

Qualitative research writing vignettes from other writers are offset in *text boxes*. These narratives are first-person accounts written by researchers—many of whom were graduate students at the time of the writings—regarding real-life writing challenges they have encountered and how these were negotiated. I am thankful to these generous and candid writers for the learning they provide here.



I have developed a second set of text boxes, denoted with a writing quill, dedicated to honing writing. These contain practical writing information (e.g., how to write an abstract), ideas for improving writing, or ways to challenge ingrained scholarly writing conventions that may no longer be useful. The writing text boxes are in response to a qualitative reviewer of a manuscript of mine who wrote, “You cannot even write well enough to be published in *The New Yorker*.” I gasped while laughing aloud when reading this review. If I could write well enough to be featured in *The New Yorker* magazine, along with the top U.S. writers of our time, I might have a different career. It is this type of academic arrogance around what constitutes scholarship that I wish to counteract through the writing suggestions in this book.

Each chapter has a joke bubble signified by a laughing emoji. I find humor, even the unsophisticated humor in these bubbles, to be such an important part of successful scholarly writing. I’ll also point out academic humorists who can give a writer in a hard spot a moment of levity. We have to know how to gently laugh with others, at ourselves, at the field—not mocking or with derision but with genuine pleasure in our foibles as a way of strengthening ourselves to go back into the solitary fray that always must occur at some point in writing. The first joke follows.



Why did the writer get so cold?

They were always around multiple drafts.

Each chapter ends with *The Gist*, which includes a summary of takeaway points and next action steps. There is a list of *reflexive questions* researchers should ask themselves before, during, and after writing, along with suggestions for ways to engage with the questions in a reflexive manner. *Resources* for further reading and *reflexive activities* that could occur on your own, in a writers’ group, or during a course and face-to-face or virtually are shared.

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The *appendices* have been developed to provide rich extensions to the text. An *example of a student's work* in representing qualitative data in several ways is included. *Reflexive activities* for group or personal use are detailed. A template of the *syllabus* for the writing qualitative research course I teach and suggestions for a *qualitative research poster* presentation layout are shared.

The Gist

With the invaluable help of graduate students and colleagues who are willing to be transparent about hidden areas of qualitative writing, I have crafted a book that will be a resource and perhaps an inspiration for qualitative researchers at many and varied points in their writing careers. Let us now stop reading about the goals of the book and get on with the goal at hand—writing and publishing—for as Eva Young said, “To think too long about doing a thing often becomes its undoing” (cited in Colegrove, 2004).

Reflexive Questions

1. Who are the literary authors whose work you have enjoyed?
 - a. Go back and review these authors' work, and try to identify what it is you appreciate about them.
 - b. Create a list of what you could draw on from their work in your research writing.
 - c. For published authors, revisit a traditional qualitative research article and/or data set. How might you use this work to explore literary possibilities for a different type of representation?
2. Who are literary authors who have been recommended to you as someone you should read?
 - a. Create a list of these authors, and start to read one of their works today or in the near future.
3. What present writing goals would you like to accomplish?
 - a. What are possible impediments to your goals?
 - b. How can you reduce or remove these impediments?
4. What future writing goals would you like to accomplish?
 - a. What are the smaller goals within the future goals that must be accomplished first? Consider creating a list of the smaller goals that will lead toward this larger one.
 - b. What are possible impediments to your goals?
 - c. How can you reduce or remove these impediments?

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