


Slide 1



**Reviewing Qualitative
Papers and Research
Grants**

Workshop Number 8
ESRC Workshops for
Qualitative Research in
Management

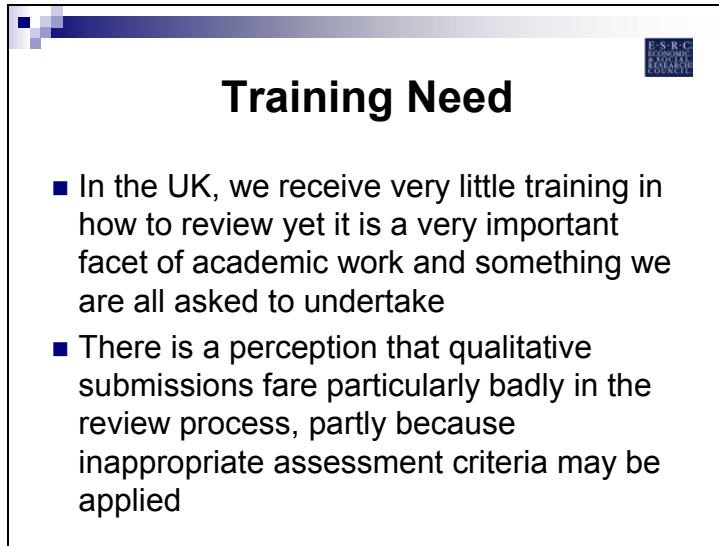
Reviewing Qualitative Papers and Research Grants: The Facilitator's Guide

Pre-reading: Workshop 7: Assessment Criteria >>. Additionally, before coming to the, participants should have attempted a review of the paper [facilitator to provide appropriate paper] or should bring some reviews either written or received by them (good or bad)

Handouts: N/A

Target audience: Journal Editors, journal review boards, funding bodies inc ESRC, rapporteurs for ESRC etc

Any thing else to note? It may also be helpful to provide papers to review for practice either pre- or post-workshop. If appropriate, participants may wish to bring research proposal on which they are working, and include a final exercise evaluating this.




Training Need

- In the UK, we receive very little training in how to review yet it is a very important facet of academic work and something we are all asked to undertake
- There is a perception that qualitative submissions fare particularly badly in the review process, partly because inappropriate assessment criteria may be applied


Additional Comments:

This training need was identified in the accompanying study carried out by Cassell et al 2005 entitled 'Benchmarking Good Practice in Qualitative Research'


>>



Aims



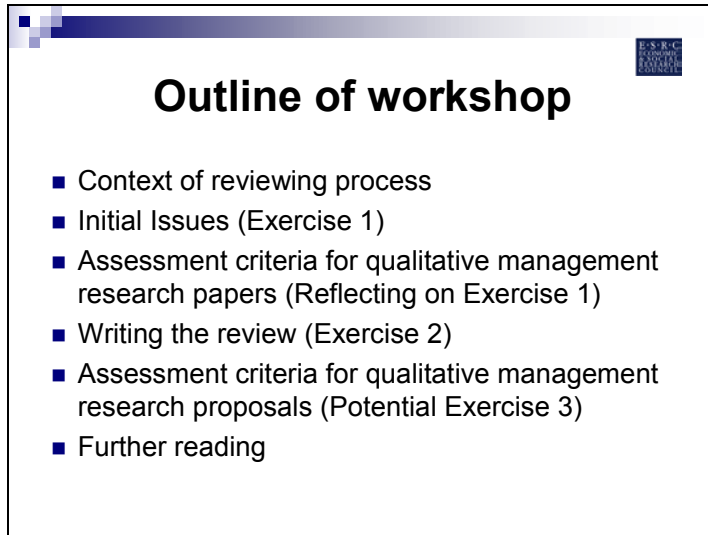
- Provide some background to the reviewing process for those unfamiliar with this context
- Give some guidance as to how to be a responsible reviewer
- Assessing (qualitative) research papers
- Assessing (qualitative) research proposals
- Outline some general elements of good and bad practice in writing the review
- Provide further reading



Objectives

By end of the session you should be able to:

- outline the role of the reviewer;
- conduct a review which focuses on appropriate elements of evaluation for qualitative research;
- recognise and be able to structure an appropriate written review;
- source further reading in the area.



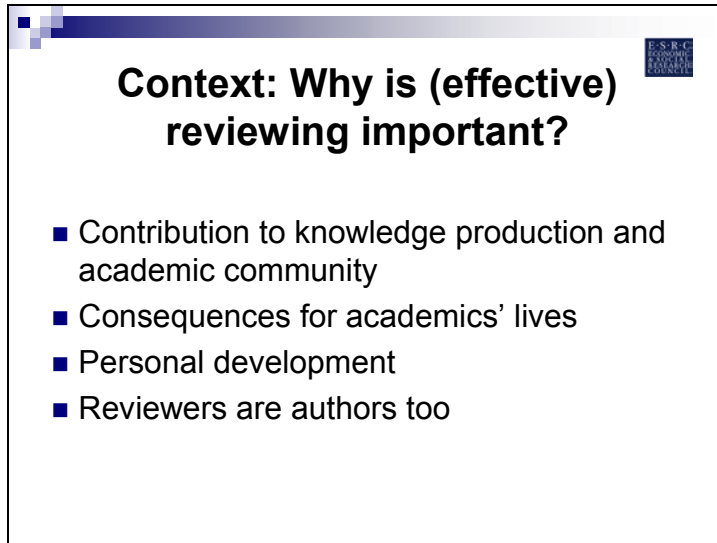
Outline of workshop

- Context of reviewing process
- Initial Issues (Exercise 1)
- Assessment criteria for qualitative management research papers (Reflecting on Exercise 1)
- Writing the review (Exercise 2)
- Assessment criteria for qualitative management research proposals (Potential Exercise 3)
- Further reading

Additional Comments:

Not all the issues covered in this workshop are specific to qualitative research or confined to empirical studies.

The facilitator may choose to omit or include exercises depending on the time and materials available, type of participant etc.



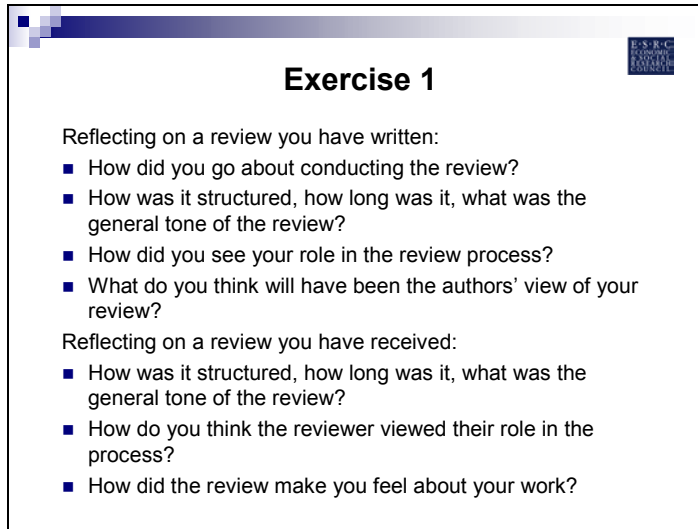
Context: Why is (effective) reviewing important?

- Contribution to knowledge production and academic community
- Consequences for academics' lives
- Personal development
- Reviewers are authors too

Additional Comments:

With respect to academics' lives, this is in relation to career needs in terms of attracting research funding and getting work published.

With respect to the last point, remember; treat authors as you would want to be treated yourself! For example, we know it is frustrating to wait for feedback so why delay your own? We know it is upsetting to receive pages and pages of damning criticism, so why provide it?

The slide is titled "Exercise 1" and features a blue header bar with a small logo on the right. The content is organized into two sections: "Reflecting on a review you have written:" and "Reflecting on a review you have received:". Each section contains a bulleted list of four questions. The slide is enclosed in a black border.

Exercise 1

Reflecting on a review you have written:

- How did you go about conducting the review?
- How was it structured, how long was it, what was the general tone of the review?
- How did you see your role in the review process?
- What do you think will have been the authors' view of your review?

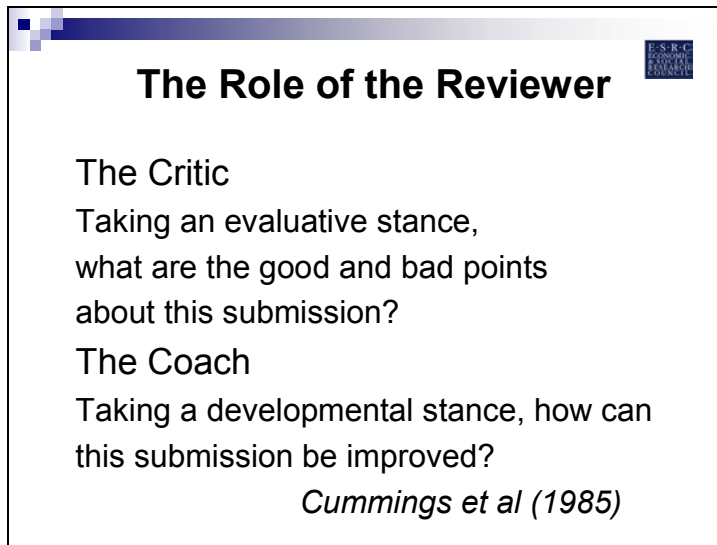
Reflecting on a review you have received:

- How was it structured, how long was it, what was the general tone of the review?
- How do you think the reviewer viewed their role in the process?
- How did the review make you feel about your work?

Additional Comments:

Participants should be divided in small groups of only 3 or 4 for this exercise and encouraged to each describe their answers to the first set of questions initially, then the second set of questions, then to reflect on any differences or similarities. The objective of the exercise is for the participants to reflect on potential differences in viewpoint between reviewers and authors and the issue raised earlier of 'reviewers are authors too'. General observations from each small group should be fed back to the larger group by a spokesperson and summarised by the facilitator. Some participants may have received 'harsh' rejections and there is the potential that this exercise raises some issues for them - sensitivity and a focus on general points rather than specific individuals in the larger group is called for. However, the point can also be made that everyone has received harsh reviews at some point in their career! Indeed, this exercise could enable some helpful sharing of experiences.

This exercise draws out some general assumptions at this stage before the issues are explored in more detail. Participants will be encouraged to reflect back on their responses for this exercise later in the workshop.



The Role of the Reviewer

The Critic
Taking an evaluative stance,
what are the good and bad points
about this submission?


The Coach
Taking a developmental stance, how can
this submission be improved?

Cummings et al (1985)

Additional Comments:

The reviewer has to adopt both these roles. Often, however, the emphasis is on the former. Although the specific goal is to evaluate the piece, the general goal is to facilitate the sharing of knowledge within the discipline. If the piece has some good elements to it which should be shared within the research community, work with the author to improve it. The relationship between the author and the reviewer does not have to be adversarial (Bergh, 2002).

At all times, bear in mind that the author(s) has put much effort into the piece and deserves considered attention.



Questions to ask yourself before conducting a review

- Have you got the resources to do it?
 - Time? Don't take on a review if you cannot devote sufficient time to it
 - Expertise? Be honest about what you can comment on and what you cannot
- Have you got a conflict of interest?
 - Do you know the authors?
 - Are you in a competitive relationship with the authors?

When in doubt, ask the editor.

- Be prepared to say no (but recommend someone else!)

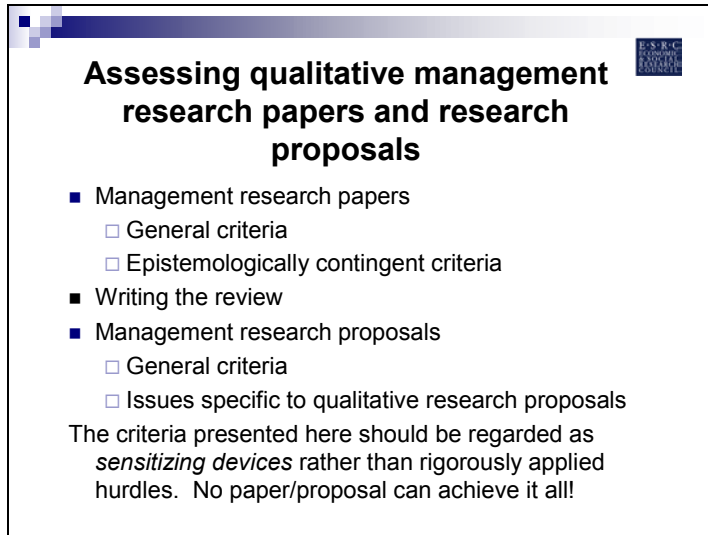
Additional Comments:

Why does an editor or funding body approach a particular reviewer?

Usually because they have some expertise in the area. However, 'expertise' may be fairly loosely defined and may pertain to just substantive area or just the approach/method.

Bear in mind that editors and funding bodies have to find many reviewers. They may approach you when the area is only tangentially related to your own. It doesn't have to be directly in your area (e.g. I'm only interested in reviewing papers/proposals that use qualitative diaries to investigate personal development within manufacturing). However, you need to need to reflect on your own biases (e.g. against survey work) and whether you can either bracket them or acknowledge them. Sometimes, editors/funders specifically choose reviewers they know are antagonistic to a piece to get an alternative view. This is okay as long as that alternative view is acknowledged and the piece is reviewed on its merits and not dismissed simply because this isn't your preferred approach. You can be explicit about your own biases and what you feel competent to comment on.

The editor/funder may not know about any personal relationship you have with the authors (even though anonymous, you may know the authors). It is up to you to acknowledge this.



Assessing qualitative management research papers and research proposals

- Management research papers
 - General criteria
 - Epistemologically contingent criteria
- Writing the review
- Management research proposals
 - General criteria
 - Issues specific to qualitative research proposals

The criteria presented here should be regarded as *sensitizing devices* rather than rigorously applied hurdles. No paper/proposal can achieve it all!

Additional Comments:

We are now going to move on to discuss the assessment of qualitative research papers and research proposals. With respect to research papers, we first discuss general assessment criteria, which while of particular relevance to qualitative research may also be relevant to other kinds of research papers. We will then re-visit the contingent criteriology outlined in Workshop >> and apply the assessment criteria outlined there to reviewing research papers based on different epistemologies. Then, we will examine good and bad practice with respect to writing up the review.

With respect to research proposals, we will again first look at general criteria for assessment and then criteria which might be specific to qualitative research proposals. It is important to bear in mind that the criteria presented are sensitizing devices.

The criteria presented here are derived from:

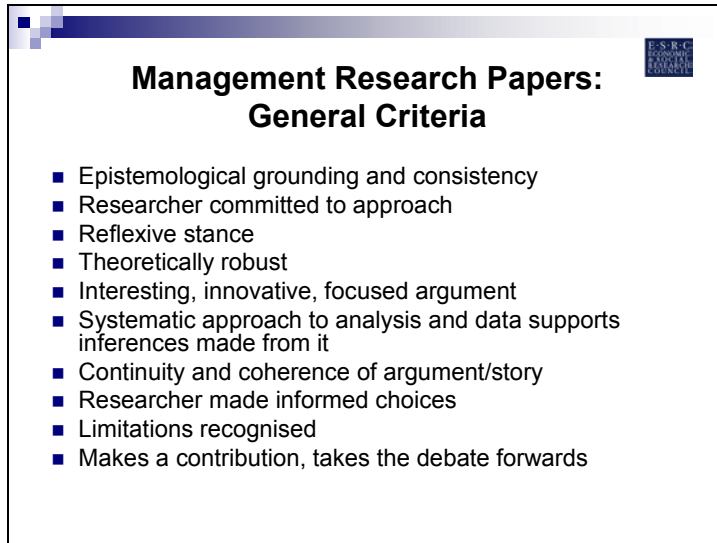
- 1 Interviews with representatives from UK grant awarding bodies and various editors of management journal.

2 A logical analysis of epistemological assumptions of different perspectives (i.e. the contingent criteriology presented in Workshop 7 >>). Although these criteria are more appropriate for judging the outputs of research, not proposals, they could still be loosely applied.

Before going on to the assessment criteria themselves, it is also important to note that all journals and funding bodies have their own specific criteria as a basis for evaluation. While these also influence the review, we are offering here additional criteria which (a) may provide more detailed advice and (b) seek to balance any potential undue emphasis on criteria suitable for assessing quantitative work.

The criteria presented here concern the work itself and not external factors such as alignment with aims of the journal in the case of research papers or accurate budgeting/access/policy implications in the case of grant proposals. These obviously need to be taken into account too but are outside the objectives of this workshop.

There is a split between papers and proposals because the former is research already completed while the latter only planned so there are important differences (e.g. the presence of actual data and conclusions in the former), however, there is also considerable overlap of course.



**Management Research Papers:
General Criteria**

- Epistemological grounding and consistency
- Researcher committed to approach
- Reflexive stance
- Theoretically robust
- Interesting, innovative, focused argument
- Systematic approach to analysis and data supports inferences made from it
- Continuity and coherence of argument/story
- Researcher made informed choices
- Limitations recognised
- Makes a contribution, takes the debate forwards

Additional Comments:

The paper is well grounded epistemologically and demonstrates epistemological consistency from conceptualisation to conclusions (e.g. a postmodern piece would make no claims to generalisation, see later).

Researcher thoroughly understands their approach and considers it important
Balance between 'self indulgent' reflexivity (over emphasis on self) and explanatory reflexivity (how researcher is positioned with respect to the analysis).
See also Workshop 3: Reflexivity >> This positioning right from the start to help reader interpret data.

There is a guiding theoretical framework which informs the analysis and allows piece to make a theoretical contribution i.e. it is theoretically contextualised.
There is congruence between the theoretical problem and method/data analysis
Paper is generally interesting, but remains focused on issue at hand. Reader knows the point of it from the start. Engages the reader.


Some sort of guiding framework for analysis (whether meta-theoretical, theoretical or methodological/technical e.g. coding). 'Coherence out of messiness'. Rich description and sophisticated analysis/interpretation, rather than (for example) descriptive lists of quotes. Can see how/why the author made the interpretation they did (even if you don't agree). Author contextualises analysis, reflects on the significance of their interpretation.

The paper tells a coherent logical story where the beginning and the end of the paper 'match'. The argument is internally consistent. Tells a compelling story.

It is clear that the researcher knows why they made the design decisions they did and these are reasonable. Rationale provided for why particular texts selected for discussion in the paper. The piece is transparent in this sense. Reader is not presumed to have access to the author's tacit knowledge.

Recognises problems of account (within a particular epistemological position, see later).

Provides insight, re-conceptualisation, suggests new problems. Has resonance for the reader.



**Management research papers:
epistemologically contingent criteria**

Different criteria for different kinds of qualitative research based on different epistemological commitments:

- Positivist
- Neo-empiricist
- Critical
- Postmodern

Additional Comments:



This re-visits the contingent criteriology from Workshop 7 >>

Assessing Positivist Research

- Are the results internally valid? (is the data collection and analysis sufficiently rigorous?)
- Is construct validity demonstrated? (are the phenomena of interest adequately operationalised? i.e. are the researchers measuring what they say they are measuring?)
- Are the results reliable? (Is the process described in sufficient detail to be replicable? Has there been a reliability check computed such as inter-rater reliability coefficients?)
- Are the results generalisable? (Is the sampling sufficiently random/extensive and the analysis sufficiently rigorous for results to also pertain to other samples?)



Additional Comments:

Some qualitative research is conducted within a positivist epistemology (e.g. using large samples and very structured analysis methods) and therefore should conform to the same sort of criteria as many quantitative studies.



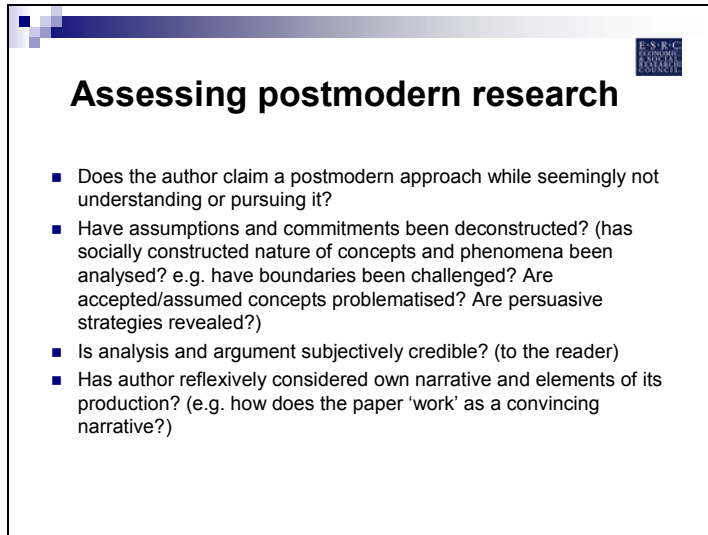
Assessing neo-empiricist/ interpretivist research

- Are the findings synthesised? (patterns in the data identified)
- Are the findings dependable? (free from researcher bias, effects of bias minimised or otherwise accounted for)
- Are the findings credible? (was the research process appropriate? Is evidence provided that this is an authentic representation of what happened e.g. audit trail?)
- Are the findings confirmable? (alternative explanations considered and negative cases analysed)
- Are the findings ecologically valid? (do they speak to real life events and contexts?)
- Are the findings transferable? (has extent of their applicability elsewhere been considered and is this feasible? Have the findings been related to established theory?)



Assessing critical theory research

- Has the researcher engaged in reflexive consideration of own position? (are their beliefs and commitments clear?)
- Have hegemonic regimes of truth been identified? (have established truth claims been unsettled and challenged?)
- Are the readers and the participants encouraged to see the world in new ways?
- Does the research lead to possibilities for change? (are there actions identified to bring about valued change?)
- Have participants in the research confirmed the credibility of the analysis?
- Has researcher considered how this context may speak to other contexts? (are similarities and differences between this context and others considered?)





Assessing postmodern research

- Does the author claim a postmodern approach while seemingly not understanding or pursuing it?
- Have assumptions and commitments been deconstructed? (has socially constructed nature of concepts and phenomena been analysed? e.g. have boundaries been challenged? Are accepted/assumed concepts problematised? Are persuasive strategies revealed?)
- Is analysis and argument subjectively credible? (to the reader)
- Has author reflexively considered own narrative and elements of its production? (e.g. how does the paper 'work' as a convincing narrative?)

Additional Comments:

As postmodernist approaches tend towards relativism, evaluation criteria are not generally supported from within the underlying epistemology. Hence criteria here fewer in number. However, lack of criteria is a logical conclusion from the assumptions of the epistemology, rather than a pragmatic conclusion from the work of postmodern researchers (who probably still distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' examples).



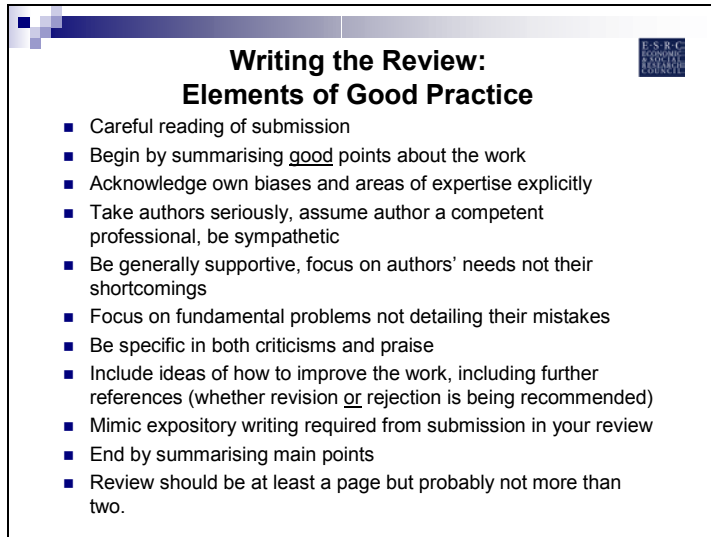
Applying contingent criteriology to the review process: A pragmatic approach

- These evaluation criteria are logically derived from underlying epistemological commitments
- However few papers or proposals would have all the elements from a particular position
- Therefore reviewers should adopt a relatively pragmatic position
- Criteriology should not be applied rigidly but flexibly and with regard to the overall impression of the piece and other elements already outlined

Reflecting on Exercise 1



- To what extent have you found reviews helpfully 'developmental'? Do you see yourself as a critic or a coach?
- What kinds of papers do you feel competent to review? i.e. what are your areas of expertise?
- To what extent do you take into account the criteria outlined? Is this practical?



**Writing the Review:
Elements of Good Practice**


- Careful reading of submission
- Begin by summarising good points about the work
- Acknowledge own biases and areas of expertise explicitly
- Take authors seriously, assume author a competent professional, be sympathetic
- Be generally supportive, focus on authors' needs not their shortcomings
- Focus on fundamental problems not detailing their mistakes
- Be specific in both criticisms and praise
- Include ideas of how to improve the work, including further references (whether revision or rejection is being recommended)
- Mimic expository writing required from submission in your review
- End by summarising main points
- Review should be at least a page but probably not more than two.

Additional Comments:


Meyer (1996): Review is a balance between enforcing high standards and screening out innovation. Objectives are to flesh out insights, remediate flaws and exploit findings.

The length of reviews is a tricky issue and a balance has to be found. While a piece may be so good it does not require much comment, a short review is more commonly an indication that the reviewer has not spent much time on the piece. The author (and the research community) deserve some attention from the reviewer. Where you want the author to improve the piece, you may need a lengthy review to cover developmental issues however, a lengthy critical review may be completely annihilating to the author(s).

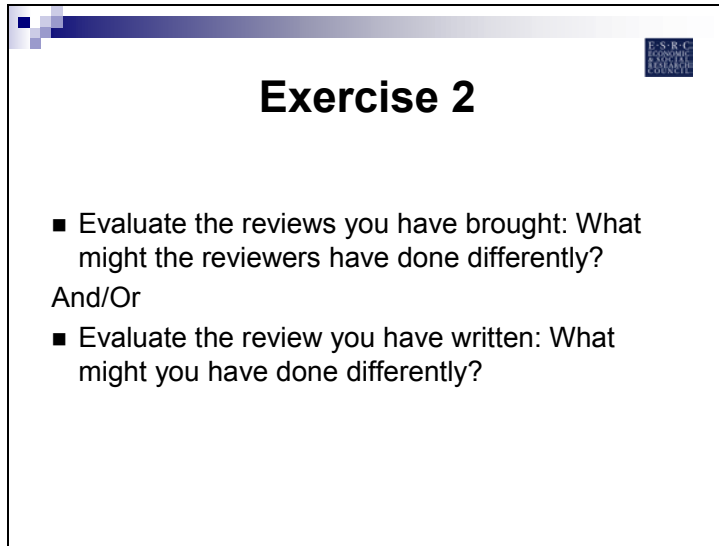
Bergh (2002): If a review is too broad, the author cannot see how to change/improve it. If it is too detailed, the overall contribution of the piece is difficult to ascertain.



**Writing the review:
things to avoid**



- Beginning with negative criticism and then focusing on deconstructive rather than constructive criticism
- Commenting on personal characteristics of the author(s) and (explicitly) presuming personal inadequacy
- Flippancy, belittling authors' efforts
- Several pages of dense criticism which picks up on every negative element of the piece
- Hurried and/or late review
- Showing no reflexive consideration of own biases
- Forcing author to write a different paper, rather than write the same paper differently (reviewing vs ghostwriting, Schminke, 2002)



Exercise 2

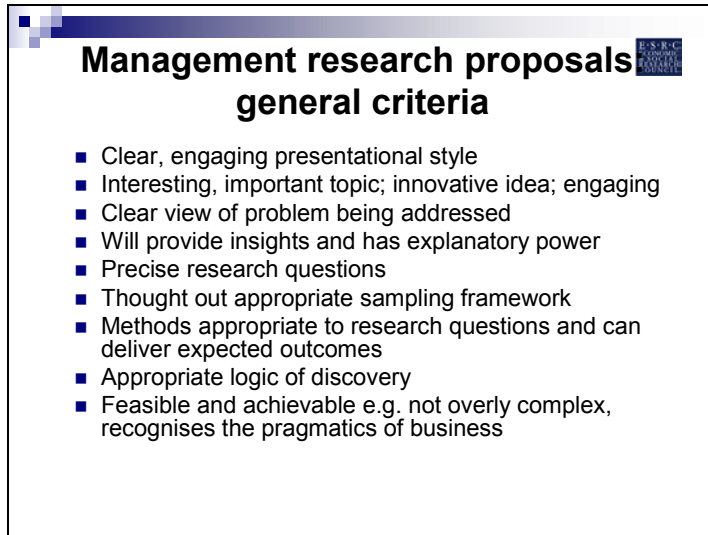
- Evaluate the reviews you have brought: What might the reviewers have done differently?

And/Or

- Evaluate the review you have written: What might you have done differently?

Additional Comments:

Again this should involve small group work, with general feedback to the larger group which might summarise common issues to watch out for in reviewing alongside potential solutions. Participants should also be encouraged to critically reflect on the criteria and their usefulness.



The slide features a title 'Management research proposals' in a large, bold, black font, with a small blue square logo to its right. Below the title, the subtitle 'general criteria' is centered in a bold, black font. A list of nine bullet points follows, each preceded by a small blue square. The slide has a white background with a thin black border and a decorative blue and white pattern in the top-left corner.

Management research proposals

general criteria

- Clear, engaging presentational style
- Interesting, important topic; innovative idea; engaging
- Clear view of problem being addressed
- Will provide insights and has explanatory power
- Precise research questions
- Thought out appropriate sampling framework
- Methods appropriate to research questions and can deliver expected outcomes
- Appropriate logic of discovery
- Feasible and achievable e.g. not overly complex, recognises the pragmatics of business

Additional Comments:

While these are probably general issues, many were raised by interviewees (as identified earlier) with respect to specific problems perceived with qualitative research.

Indicates commitment, clear thinking, ability to communicate/disseminate
Importance demonstrated within proposal e.g. 'it is currently important to study project managers because globalisation has led to work being organised within diverse project teams but we don't currently know much about how project managers' conceptualise effectiveness'.

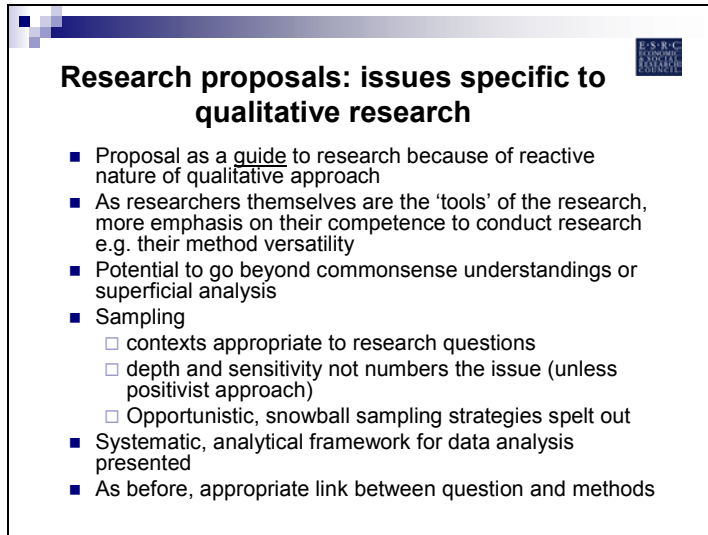
Researchers have a clear idea of the problem and what they want to achieve
Research questions informed by theory (as much as practical issues) are more likely to have explanatory power.

For example, 'we're going to study a sample of project managers and find out what their views are on project management' vs 'do project managers share a conception of good project management across diverse application areas?'

Following this example, the question implies a heterogeneous sample, not project managers all from the same business area. Sampling should relate to the question at hand. The previous globalisation issue may also imply an international sample.

And again, an interest in project managers' subjective experience implies an interpretivist position. This could be examined through questionnaires but interviews may deliver more sense-making aspects and allow interrogation of project managers' assumptions.

Thus overall the theory justifies research questions, research questions imply design/methods and overall, therefore, the project will deliver expected outcomes. One of the many criticisms raised of research proposals received was that the research design could not answer the research questions.



Research proposals: issues specific to qualitative research

- Proposal as a guide to research because of reactive nature of qualitative approach
- As researchers themselves are the 'tools' of the research, more emphasis on their competence to conduct research e.g. their method versatility
- Potential to go beyond commonsense understandings or superficial analysis
- Sampling
 - contexts appropriate to research questions
 - depth and sensitivity not numbers the issue (unless positivist approach)
 - Opportunistic, snowball sampling strategies spelt out
- Systematic, analytical framework for data analysis presented
- As before, appropriate link between question and methods

Additional Comments:

Within qualitative research, it is possible to raise new research questions as product of research process and change direction. Allowance should be made for this.

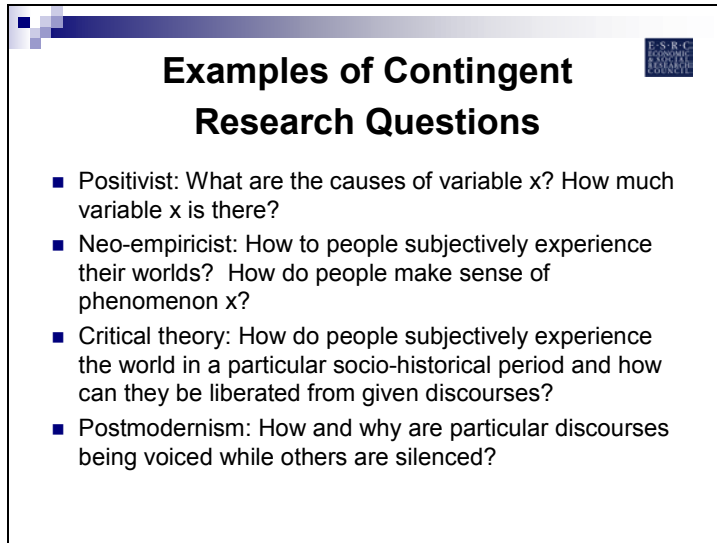
Have researchers demonstrated their competence? Do they know the area well and have appropriate skills? Is there an appropriate mix of skills within the research team?

Does the design or set-up imply we will be left with trivial findings or what is already known? Some proposals may of course specifically want to explore common sense beliefs. Will it make a contribution, provide insights?

Morse (2004). 'concepts should be studied at the place where they are maximised' (p.495) in qualitative research i.e. where is globalisation most likely to have implications for project management? In what cases are organizations most likely to have concerns about effectiveness? (international organizations in teams dealing with non-trivial issues?)

Researchers have outlined how they will deal with the data in a systematic way and how the results of this will answer their research questions. Systematic does not have to mean a rigorous coding scheme but may be a theoretical or epistemological framework (e.g. in rhetorical analysis isolating persuasive strategies in talk). Is it clear how the researchers will effectively deal with the likely substantial amount of data that will be generated? Is sufficient time allowed for this?

Particularly with respect to suggesting qualitative methods to answer questions which imply some assessment of prevalence/incidence (i.e. questions that imply a quantitative method). See next slide.





Examples of Contingent Research Questions

- Positivist: What are the causes of variable x? How much variable x is there?
- Neo-empiricist: How to people subjectively experience their worlds? How do people make sense of phenomenon x?
- Critical theory: How do people subjectively experience the world in a particular socio-historical period and how can they be liberated from given discourses?
- Postmodernism: How and why are particular discourses being voiced while others are silenced?

Additional Comments:

These questions are taken from Johnson et al (2005) 'Evaluating Qualitative Management Research: Towards a Contingent Criteriology'.

These are only examples and not exhaustive. They are meant to give a flavour of potential differences.

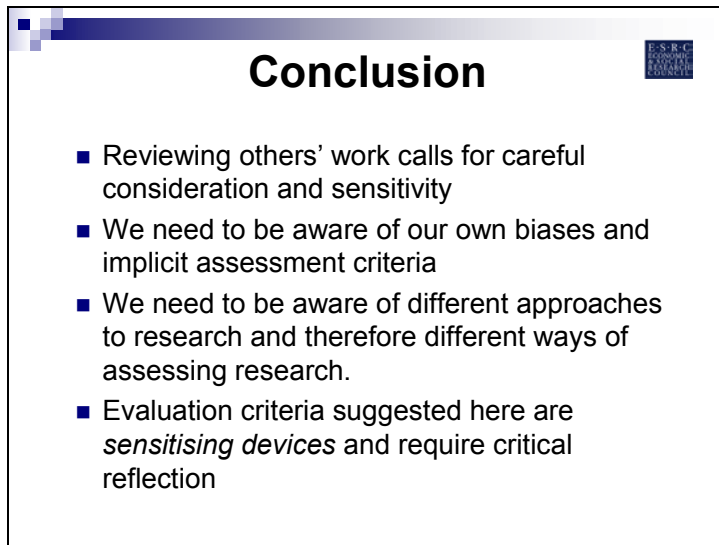


Potential Exercise 3

- Assess current draft of proposal in terms of the evaluation criteria outlined on previous slides. Are there changes you could make?
- Reviewing your own unsuccessful proposal, could these criteria explain any problems with the proposal?
- Reviewing someone else's proposal, are these criteria helpful in identifying costs and benefits?

Additional Comments:

By this time in the workshop, participants may not have the energy for further work. However, they could be encouraged to try some of these exercises individually after the workshop (refer to notes to slide 1). Participants should also be encouraged to critically reflect on the criteria and their usefulness.





The slide features a blue gradient header bar with a small graphic on the left and the text 'E.S.P.C. CONSENSUS' on the right. The main content is a list of four bullet points under the heading 'Conclusion'.

Conclusion

- Reviewing others' work calls for careful consideration and sensitivity
- We need to be aware of our own biases and implicit assessment criteria
- We need to be aware of different approaches to research and therefore different ways of assessing research.
- Evaluation criteria suggested here are *sensitising devices* and require critical reflection


Additional Comments:

Having attempted to apply these criteria to actual reviews, participants may want to modify and suggest changes to what is presented here. Feedback and suggested changes are welcome on the project website >>




Further Sources

- Bedeian, A. (2004) Peer review and the social construction of knowledge in the management discipline. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 3, 198-216.
- Harrison, D. (2002) Obligations and obfuscations in the review process. *Academy of Management Journal*, 46, 1079-1084.
- Meyer, A. (1996) Balls, strikes and collisions on the base path: Ruminations of a veteran reviewer. In P. Frost & M. S. Taylor (eds). *Rhythms of Academic Life*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Morse, J. (2004) Preparing and evaluating qualitative research proposals. In Seale et al (eds). *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage.
- Spencer, L. et al (2003) *Quality in qualitative evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence*. Report from the UK National Centre for Social Research, prepared for the UK Government Cabinet Office.



- For further information on similar workshops in qualitative management research please see our web site:
 - www.shef.ac.uk/bgpingmr/



References

(Not included in Additional Reading List)

- Bergh, D. (2002) Deriving greater benefit from the reviewing process. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45, 633-636.
- Cummings, L. et al (1985) The manuscript review process. In L.L. Cummings & P. Frost (eds). *Publishing in the Organizational Sciences*. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
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- Schminke, M. (2002) Tensions. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45, 487-490.

Contents

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Workshop 1: Skills of the qualitative researcher

Workshop 2: Philosophies that inform qualitative research

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Workshop 6: Qualitative writing and publishing skills

Workshop 7: Assessment criteria

Workshop 8: Reviewing qualitative papers and research grants

Workshop 9: Supervision for qualitative research