

Slide 1



Writing Skills and Publishing

Workshop Number 6
ESRC Workshops for
Qualitative Research in
Management

Writing Skills and Publishing

Pre-reading: N/A

Handouts: Editing list.

Target audience: PhD Students

Any thing else to note? Participants need to bring a piece of their own writing with them, which includes a literature review. The piece of writing should be no more than 2 sides of A4. This can be part of a larger piece (eg a paper).

It would be a good idea for the facilitator to have a few pieces of suitable writing from other authors available- in case participants in the workshop feel embarrassment about using their own work in exercises with other people.

This workshop is not supposed to represent a shining example of a fantastic piece of writing, rather it discusses the writing processes and skills used in qualitative research.



Identification of training need

The need for training in writing skills in order to produce and publish high quality qualitative management research (Cassell et al 2005).

Issues perceived as especially important:

- Presenting a logical argument
- Reflexivity in writing
- Integration of literature and empirical data
- Demonstrating how work makes a contribution. (Cassell et al 2005).

Additional Comments

Due to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the current emphasis on producing papers, this workshop will largely focus on writing skills for journal articles. However, many of the skills will also be relevant for theses and books.

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



Workshop aim

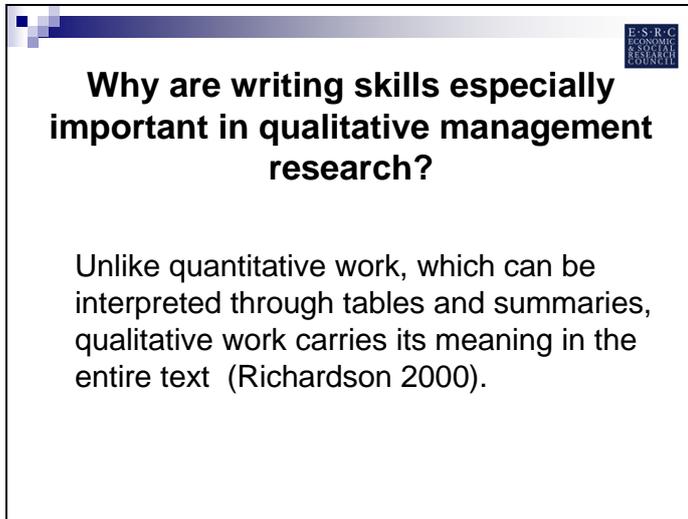
To encourage the publication of high quality qualitative research through understanding and enhancing qualitative writing skills.



Objectives

To improve participants writing skills in qualitative research through enabling them to :

- Construct a clear and logical argument
- Successfully integrate literature and empirical data
- Reflect on the use of writing style
- Source further reading

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Why are writing skills especially important in qualitative management research?

Unlike quantitative work, which can be interpreted through tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meaning in the entire text (Richardson 2000).

Additional Comments

Richardson (2000) states that, 'qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading' (Richardson 2000). Therefore writing is an important part of the general research process. Crafting a strong argument is important to the process of getting published.

Loseke and Cahill (2004) point out that potentially insightful and important manuscripts may be rejected because editors and reviewers find their prose too incomprehensible or just too painful to read.

Skilful writing is also critical to qualitative research because only carefully crafted writing can do justice to the complexities of qualitative data. There is no set rhetorical form – such as in more 'scientific' objective writing (which uses aspects of style such as impersonal pronouns, passive voice) but writers tend to rely on a range of creative stylistic devices such as vivid description and poetic language to hold readers attention- this goes back to the above point that the meaning is expressed in the text and so writing is very important.



Outline of the workshop

1. Constructing a clear and logical argument.
2. Reflexivity in writing.
3. Publication considerations

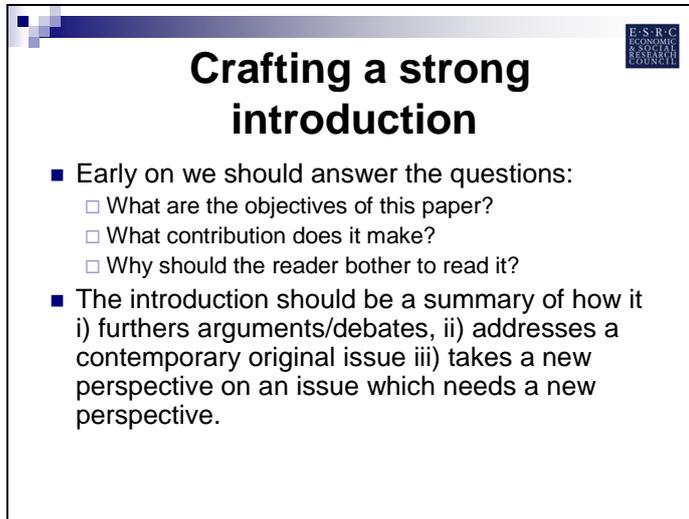


1. Crafting a strong theoretical argument

- This can be achieved through:
 - Crafting a strong introduction.
 - Situating the argument within the literature.
 - Integrating theoretical argument with data/text taken from empirical fieldwork.
 - Editing

Additional Comments

The major task of writing up involves working out how to make contextually grounded theoretical points that are viewed as a contribution by the relevant community of readers (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1997). This is generally done through the three points listed above. This is not an exhaustive list of the way that an argument is crafted, but highlights some of the most important aspects.



Crafting a strong introduction

- Early on we should answer the questions:
 - What are the objectives of this paper?
 - What contribution does it make?
 - Why should the reader bother to read it?
- The introduction should be a summary of how it
 - i) furthers arguments/debates, ii) addresses a contemporary original issue iii) takes a new perspective on an issue which needs a new perspective.

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Additional Comments

The introduction is a very important part of a research paper because it is a chance to both gain the readers interest and sell the paper. Thus early on one should answer the questions:

What are the objectives of this paper? Wolcott (2001) advocates using the sentence 'The purpose of this study is ...' at some point in the introduction, at least in the first draft before making it sound more elegant. He argues that this gives the intro focus and purpose.

What contribution does it make ? i.e. include explicit consideration of why this paper is important and why should anyone bother to read it?

The introduction should be a summary of how it i) furthers arguments/debates, ii) addresses a contemporary original issue iii) takes a new perspective on an issue which needs a new perspective.



Situating argument within the Literature

- Usually the literature is summarised at the beginning of our papers and in such a way that highlights our papers contribution.
- We re-write existing work to illustrate the gap that our study aims to fill.
- Some writers argue that this organisation of literature in our writing is unhelpful to qualitative writers.
- Relevant literature often emerges in response to the research process and not as a separate stage before.

Additional Comments

When we construct the literature review we are doing much more than generating a summary of previous studies and theorizing on a topic. We are shaping and constructing the relevant body of literature in such a way so as to highlight the relevant gap that our study strives to help resolve. We rewrite existing work to illuminate the contribution made by our theoretical points. This is not to say that authors misrepresent the literature for their own individual ends, but that there is enough fluidity and ambiguity in the literature to allow it to be interpreted in a number of ways.

Writers such as Wolcott (2001) argue that this organisation of the literature in our writing is unhelpful to qualitative researchers. He argues that we should draw on the literature as and when we need it and not consider it a hoop that we have to jump through to get to our main argument. Due to the exploratory nature of qualitative research, the literature often emerges as relevant in response to the analysis as opposed to being identified before the analysis. Equally writing 'up' and analysis often happens at the same time in qualitative research and so actually it is no longer 'writing up findings' but part of the

research (for more on this see our Workshop No 5: Qualitative Analysis >> or Richardson (2000) referenced at the end of this workshop).

The choice between sticking to the traditional structure or using an alternative which fits in with individual research processes depends on personal preference/views and also the target audience – whether they are likely to be receptive or hostile to a change in traditional structure. Whichever people choose it is still important for them to reflect on their writing structure in light of their research process.



Constructing the gap

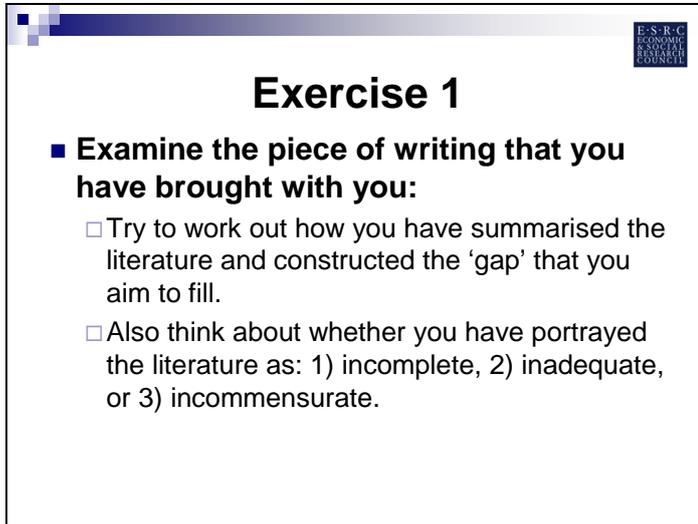
Literature is portrayed as :

- **Incomplete** – Identification of a gap in the literature and where further specification is needed.
- **Inadequate** – Identification of oversights and failure to incorporate different perspectives which would help better understand the phenomena under investigation. Alternative perspectives are then introduced in a bid to increase understanding.
- **Incommensurate**. –Assertion of an alternative superior argument. In contrast to refining or augmenting the literature, seeks to reformulate or redirect the literature.

(taken from Golden-Biddle and Locke 1994)

Additional Comments

Again this is a heuristic device and in practice it is not as clear cut as this but much more messy, overlapping and fluid.



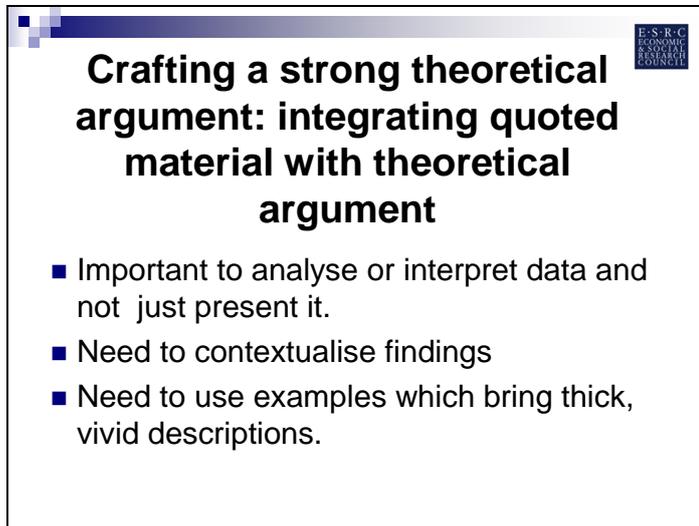
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Exercise 1

- **Examine the piece of writing that you have brought with you:**
 - Try to work out how you have summarised the literature and constructed the 'gap' that you aim to fill.
 - Also think about whether you have portrayed the literature as: 1) incomplete, 2) inadequate, or 3) incommensurate.

Additional Comments

It would be beneficial if participants reflect on this on their own for five minutes before getting into pairs and discussing it for a further 5 minutes. It would be a good idea to stress that discussing it in pairs afterwards is optional, in case some participants feel too uncomfortable about this. Due to the potential for embarrassment, this exercise should not be discussed by the group as a whole afterwards.

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Crafting a strong theoretical argument: integrating quoted material with theoretical argument

- Important to analyse or interpret data and not just present it.
- Need to contextualise findings
- Need to use examples which bring thick, vivid descriptions.

Additional Comments

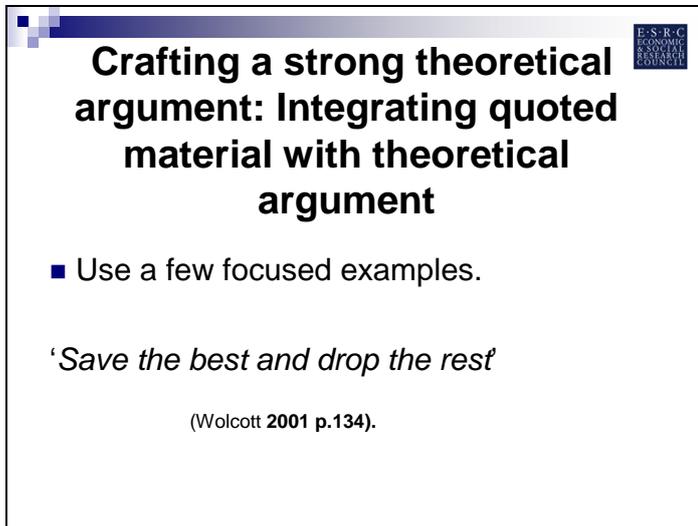
Gephart (2004) points out that it is important to analyse or interpret data and not just present it. This involves comparing and contrasting different examples to reveal conceptual similarities and differences in the data. Gephart points to the need for these examples to represent key concepts and to be selected on conceptual and methodological grounds, with discussion provided as to how the examples relate to the broader corpus of data used in the study. Drawing these links avoids what he terms 'examplimg' which is when the researcher addresses a few examples but fails to explain how these examples represent a broader data set or to explain why they were chosen.

This again links to what was said earlier about analysis and writing being intertwined in qualitative research. For more on this see our analysis Workshop Number 5: Qualitative Analysis. >>

Writers need to contextualise their findings in order to show how findings were surfaced from data or otherwise disclosed through analysis. Gephart (2004) argues that a common criticism of reviewers is that findings often

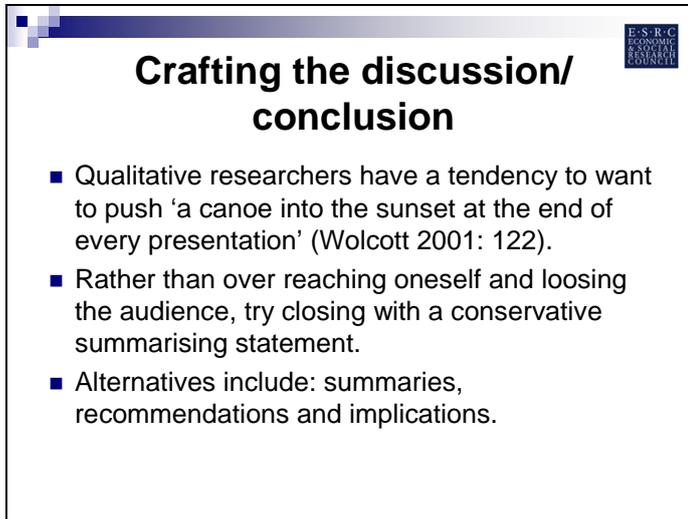
appear to lack grounding in data. Reviewers often can't see how the writer got from the data to their analysis partly perhaps because this process is only done in the analysts' mind, not a computer program, as is sometimes the case in quantitative research.

Edmonson (1984) points to the need for selectivity in the choice of exemplars of organisational life. He maintains that they should not only illustrate our theory, but that they should bring the study alive in a way that evokes human interest and engages the reader. Some writers label this thick description. It is often argued that examples should also be picked on the basis of their representation of the broader corpus of data.

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Additional Comments

Wolcott (2001) argues that using many examples can destroy the focus of an argument and lose the audience. He explains that subtle differences clear to the author may be lost on the reader. Unless there is compelling reason for presenting long interview extracts in the respondents words (for example theoretical principals often found in discourse analysis – for more on this see Workshop Number 5: Qualitative Analysis >>) it is a good idea to paraphrase and/or edit to lend emphasis to the material quoted. Wolcott advises to 'save the best and drop the rest' (p.134).

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**Crafting the discussion/
conclusion**

- Qualitative researchers have a tendency to want to push 'a canoe into the sunset at the end of every presentation' (Wolcott 2001: 122).
- Rather than over reaching oneself and losing the audience, try closing with a conservative summarising statement.
- Alternatives include: summaries, recommendations and implications.

Additional Comments

Wolcott suggests a conservative closing statement that reviews succinctly what has been attempted rather than always ready to push 'a canoe into the sunset at the end of every presentation' (Wolcott: 122). Rather than striving for closure, you can leave yourself and your readers pondering essential issues that perplex you. Alternatives such as summaries, recommendations and implications may satisfy your need for closure without tempting you to go too far, losing your audience at the last minute.



Editing Qualitative Writing - Checklist

When editing look out for:

- Unnecessary and redundant words
- Passive voice
- Overused phrases
- Excessive anythings

(taken from Wolcott 2001).

Additional Comments

Unnecessary and redundant words- e.g. qualifiers such as very, rather, quite etc

Passive Voice- Every sentence containing any form of the verb 'to be' is a candidate for rewriting in the active voice if you can see a way to do it.

Overused phrases – However, thus. Ask colleagues to spot these in your work.

Excessive anythings – italics, exclamation marks.



Editing – Checklist (continued)

- Poor expression
- Lucidity
- Slang
- Consistency
- Poorly conceived, long complex sentences.
- Misuse of references

Additional Comments

Poor expression – this can come from clichés, truisms, old or inappropriate metaphors, over elaborate writing. Woods (2001) points out that often what seems like a good first attempt makes you cringe when re-read. Consulting others can help here.

Lucidity - Drafts need to be read carefully to make sure that everything is crystal clear. Put yourself in position of the reader – do phrases make sense?

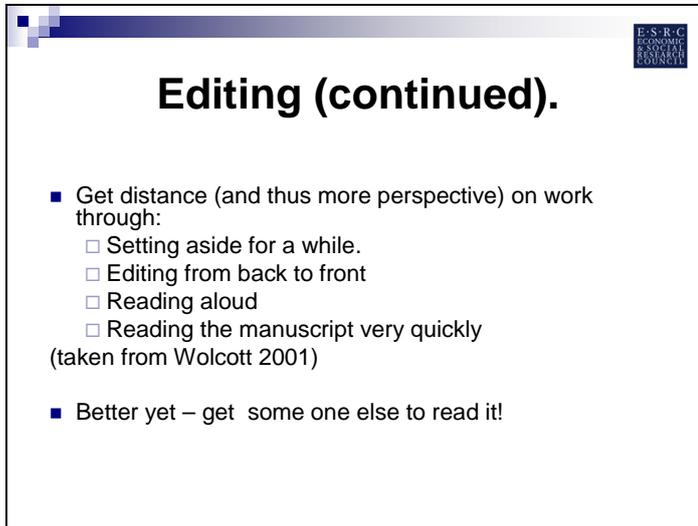
Slang should not be used unless in quoted material (Woods 1999).

Consistency – ensure that terms, numbering and references are used in the same way.

Citations can give an article a ring of academic credibility, however, when not consistent they can make work look sloppy (Woods 1999).

Look for long complex and poorly formed sentences. And check that there is not poorly formed ideas behind them (Wolcott 2001)

Slide 17

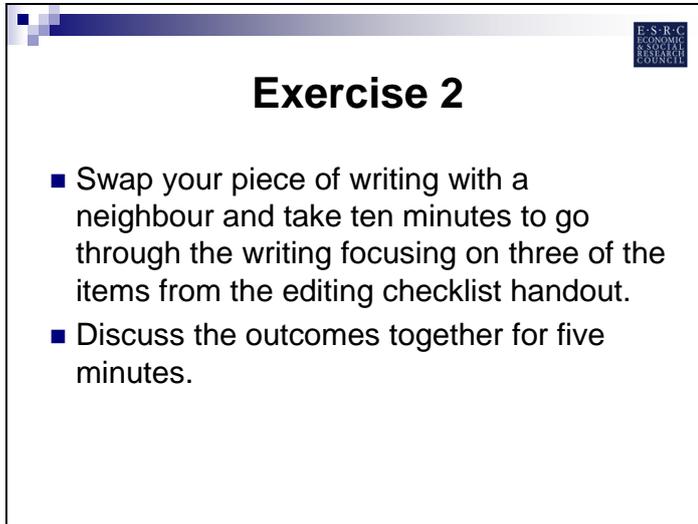


Editing (continued).

- Get distance (and thus more perspective) on work through:
 - Setting aside for a while.
 - Editing from back to front
 - Reading aloud
 - Reading the manuscript very quickly(taken from Wolcott 2001)
- Better yet – get some one else to read it!

Additional Comments

Getting distance and perspective will enable the researcher to do a better job of spotting discrepancies, strengthening interpretations locating irregularities and discovering overworked phrases and patterns. Setting aside is particularly good but getting someone else to read it even better! We will explore this in the next exercise.

The slide features a blue gradient header bar at the top. On the right side of the header, there is a small logo for the Economic Research Council (E.R.C.). The main content of the slide is centered and includes the title 'Exercise 2' and two bullet points. The first bullet point describes swapping writing with a neighbour and reviewing it against an editing checklist. The second bullet point describes a five-minute discussion of the results.

Exercise 2

- Swap your piece of writing with a neighbour and take ten minutes to go through the writing focusing on three of the items from the editing checklist handout.
- Discuss the outcomes together for five minutes.

Additional Comments

This editing checklist is printed out on accompanying handouts. Refer participants to this when discussing exercise.

It would be beneficial if groups contain no more than 2/3 people. Point out that if people feel too uncomfortable they can use one of the pieces of writing that you (the facilitator) have bought along.

Emphasise the importance of **constructive** criticism. Also explain that although the author should try and consider the advice they are free to disregard it after the workshop. Due to the potential for embarrassment this exercise should not be discussed by the group as a whole afterwards.



2. Reflexivity in writing

- Credibility often achieved through 'scientific' language (objective, passive).
- Scientific language is reflective of the dominant positivist paradigm.
- Recent querying of scientific stance and greater acknowledgment of the presence of the researcher reflected in subjective writing style.
- Conveying independence from data creates a special issue for qualitative researchers.

Additional Comments

When seeking to be published we need to establish the author as 'credible' to the readers (including reviewers, editors and other colleagues in the discipline). This has traditionally been done through the use of the 'objective', passive scientific style. This is reflective of the dominant positivist quantitative paradigm of research.

This has led to a greater acknowledgment of the presence of the researcher in qualitative research which has been reflected in a more subjective writing style. (This involves a whole range of complex issues. For more on these see Workshop Number 3: Reflexivity >>).

Therefore more qualitative writers are allowing themselves to be present when writing up – for example using pronouns such as 'I' and 'we' Writers such as Golden-Biddle and Locke argue that the choice is not whether the researcher is part of the research and writing process, but how much of this role is allowed to be portrayed in the writing style.

However, some writers argue that conveying independence from the data creates a special issue for qualitative researchers because we have entered the field and relied on ourselves as the major data collection instruments, intentionally using a methodology that enhances involvement with the phenomena studied (Golden-Biddle Locke 1997).

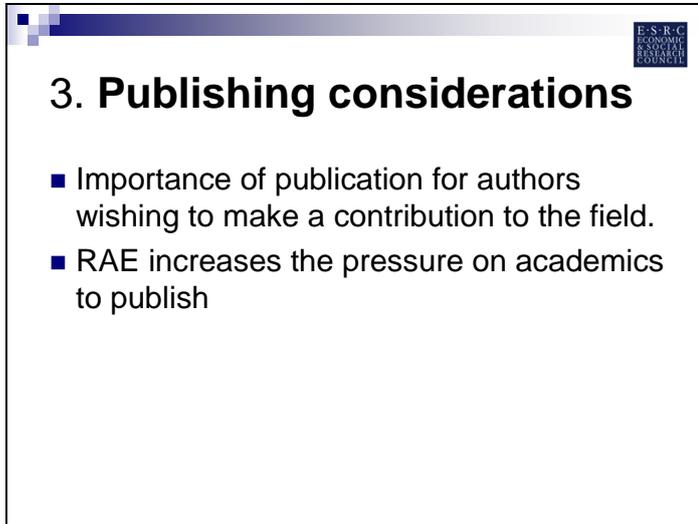
Writers who take a more interpretive stance based on more subjectivist assumptions argue that we are unable to see the phenomena studied objectively and so to convey this through 'objective' style language is false.

Slide 20



An example of writing which uses personal pronouns:
*This chapter presumes to help you begin writing. 'Getting going' by the way is a terrible title. It offends **my** ear, and **I** hope it offends yours. If it does then there is hope for **you** as an editor of **your** own work...*
(Wolcott, H. 2000 *Writing Up Qualitative Research*, California, Sage p.12).

An example of writing which uses a more impersonal style:
It goes without saying that scientists need to be skilful readers. Extensive reading is the principal key to expanding one's knowledge and keeping up with one's development in a discipline. This often ignored corollary to this assertion, however is that scientist are also obliged to be skilful writers. Only the researcher who is competent in the art of written communication can play an active role in contributing to science.
Ebel et al (1987).

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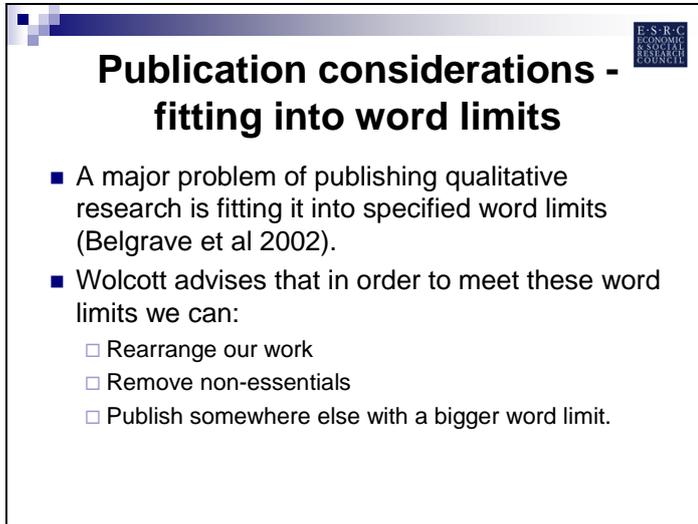
3. Publishing considerations

- Importance of publication for authors wishing to make a contribution to the field.
- RAE increases the pressure on academics to publish

Additional Comments

Even when research articles provide coherent stories that point to particular theoretical contributions, they are not automatically construed as 'knowledge'. Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997) argue that they have to be accorded the status of knowledge, for example they must be seen as true and significant, first by a small group of reviewers who represent the disciplinary community and then by the wider community itself. They maintain that whether the research will count as knowledge or not depends on whether it is subsequently cited and written into other research reports as part of the literature. Only when its findings are used in future published articles will a piece of research have achieved the status of contributing to knowledge of the field. Therefore getting published is of paramount importance and a major step in making a contribution.

Currently, there is also pressure on academics to publish because of the Research Assessment Exercise which determines research funding for institutions and therefore jobs, status and research careers (for more on this see the report on Benchmarking Good Practice for Qualitative Research >>).

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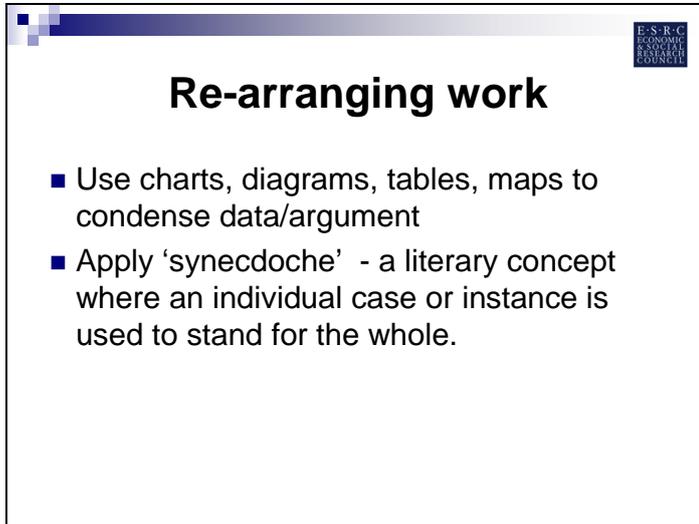
Publication considerations - fitting into word limits

- A major problem of publishing qualitative research is fitting it into specified word limits (Belgrave et al 2002).
- Wolcott advises that in order to meet these word limits we can:
 - Rearrange our work
 - Remove non-essentials
 - Publish somewhere else with a bigger word limit.

Additional Comments

A frequent problem when publishing qualitative research specifically (especially in paper form) is meeting the word limit. Wolcott points out that researchers have similar options to the traveller of having the dilemma of wanting to pack more than the suitcase may hold. The traveller can rearrange to get more in, remove non-essentials or find a larger suitcase.

The 3 mechanisms mentioned above will now be discussed. These are not the only ways of cutting word limits, but are just some chosen examples.

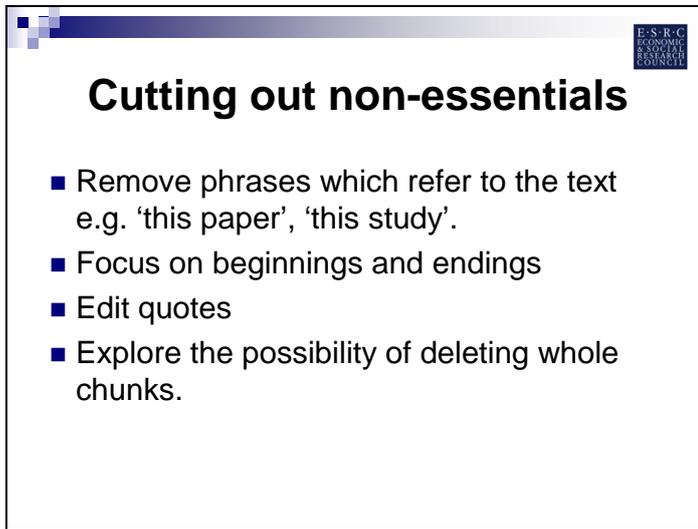
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Re-arranging work

- Use charts, diagrams, tables, maps to condense data/argument
- Apply 'synecdoche' - a literary concept where an individual case or instance is used to stand for the whole.

Additional Comments

Make sure that the charts are relevant and not trying to replace a strong argument.

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Cutting out non-essentials

- Remove phrases which refer to the text e.g. 'this paper', 'this study'.
- Focus on beginnings and endings
- Edit quotes
- Explore the possibility of deleting whole chunks.

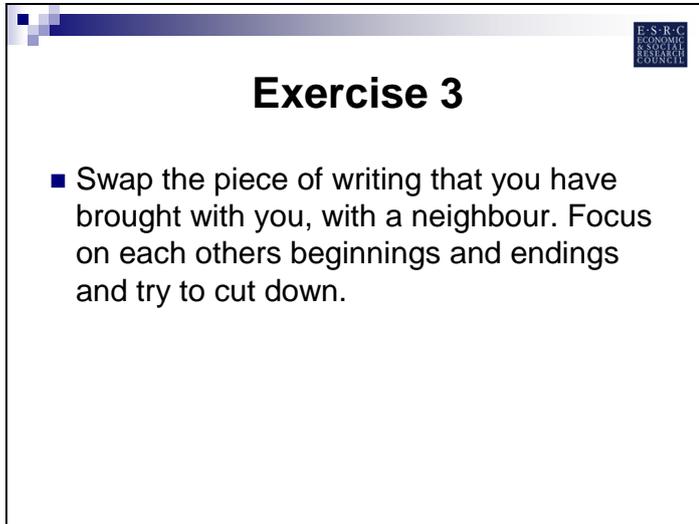
Additional Comments

Remove phrases that refer to the text- give the reader credit for remembering what they are reading.

Focus on beginnings and endings – these are often just used as writing 'warm ups' for the writer and can be trimmed without damaging the argument (Wolcott 2001).

Edit quotes so that they provide just what is relevant to the argument (Belgrave et al 2002). Again think of the idea discussed earlier 'save the best and drop the rest' (Wolcott 2001). The temptation for qualitative researchers is to try to include too much, whereas usually there is only space for a small amount of the data.

Look for the possible deletion of whole chunks. It may be that deleting big chunks may lead to glaring omissions of topics which you can point to as topics purposely passed over to be dealt with another time. This may be better than minor cuts which spoil the style and integrity of the piece (Wolcott 2001).

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Exercise 3

- Swap the piece of writing that you have brought with you, with a neighbour. Focus on each others beginnings and endings and try to cut down.

Additional Comments

Again stress the importance of being constructive.

This exercise is best done in pairs. As with other examples, due to the potential for embarrassment this exercise should not be discussed as a group afterwards.



**Publication considerations –
targeting journals**

1. Know your Product

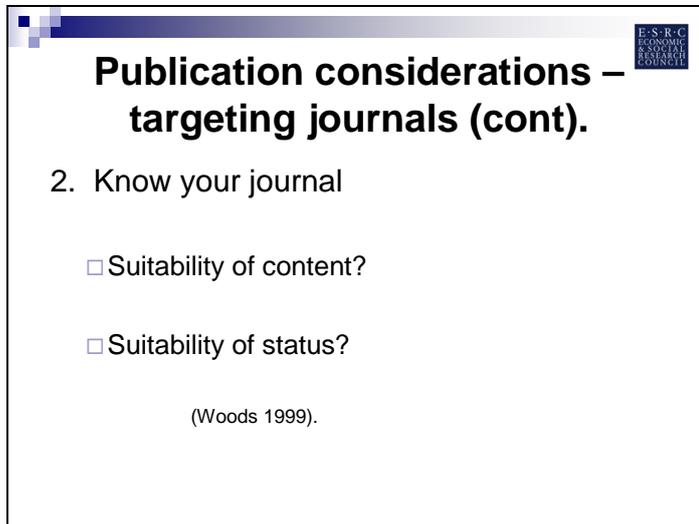
- Suitability of the project for publication –
academic content, contribution to knowledge.

(Woods 1999)

Additional Comments

Firstly the suitability of the article should be checked. Criteria would include high academic content, for example involving a contribution to knowledge in research findings, research methods or an original review of the literature. It might show a theoretical advance, an unusual approach, cast new light on a field of research, or make a distinctive contribution to a current debate.

It is good preparation to study the journals to which your research is relevant to get the feel of what is appropriate/acceptable to the journal.



Publication considerations – targeting journals (cont).

2. Know your journal

- Suitability of content?
- Suitability of status?

(Woods 1999).

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Additional Comments

Suitability of content? Has the journal published before in the general area of your research and method? It can be useful to refer to articles or to discussions or debates that have appeared in a particular journal (empirical research, theoretical discussion, methodological debate, disciplinary approach – in what areas, in what format do they invite submissions).

Is it suitable in terms of status? Journals vary considerably in this respect. As a general guideline, those with higher status are obviously harder to be published in. However the extra status means more kudos. Refereed journals are considered more highly than non-referred ones, but even among those there are big differences. The highest status journals are the leaders in the particular field. For more reflections on reviewing procedures see Workshop 8: Reviewing Qualitative Papers and Research Grants. >>

Respondents in a study by Cassell et al (2005) often voiced the opinion that it was harder for qualitative management research to get into many of the American journals, which were often of a high status. Respondents highlighted the cultural and paradigmatic differences between the US and

European approaches to research. These were perceived as acute and as acting to delineate a possible barrier to qualitative research of a non-positivist perspective. Therefore for academics to 'compete' or participate in this environment they need to be aware of the cultural differences and act tactically to avoid them. For more information on how to do this see Gepart (2004)



Guidelines

- Journal Guidelines advise on issues such as:
 - Subject area
 - Format
 - Length of paper and abstract
- Information is usually inside the front and back cover or on the journals website.

Additional Comments

For more information on reviewing guidelines see Workshop Number 8, Reviewing Qualitative Papers and Research Grants. >>



Collaborative writing

- Advantages of collaborative writing:
 - Enable material to be seen in a new, fresh way.
 - Maximise opportunities for dissemination of research.
 - Teamwork can help refine arguments
 - Offer emotional support.

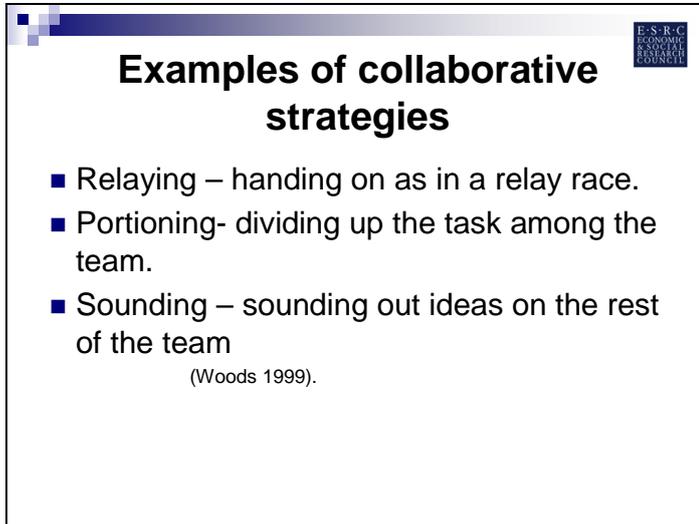
Additional Comments

Collaborative writing encourages material to be seen in a new, fresh way - Another's perspective can set off new chains of thought, or enable material to be seen in a new light. They may be comparatively small points, a contrary point of view or a different interpretation, the suggested relevance of a theoretical concept or piece of literature or a new theoretical slant.

Collaborative writing may maximise opportunities for dissemination of research - Members have their own contacts and their own favourite venues or journals for which joint presentations will be made. Since there are a number of people to help with these, a higher number of possibilities and invitations can be taken up than if operating alone.

Team work can help refine arguments - Others can spot weaknesses in cases or see alternative explanations. These debates take place in face to face meetings, but are reinforced, by email. The exchange of views among the team allows debate to continue outside meetings.

Offer emotional support – This can help keep the impetus going, help lessen the stress and allows individuals to discuss problems/ worries.



Examples of collaborative strategies

- Relaying – handing on as in a relay race.
- Portioning- dividing up the task among the team.
- Sounding – sounding out ideas on the rest of the team

(Woods 1999).

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Additional Comments

Relaying - handing on as in a relay race, with the person handing on the baton to the person doing the next stage. This conveys the sense of sustained development of the project as a whole, but with points of individual relief following a burst of effort.

Portioning – That is dividing up the task among the team.

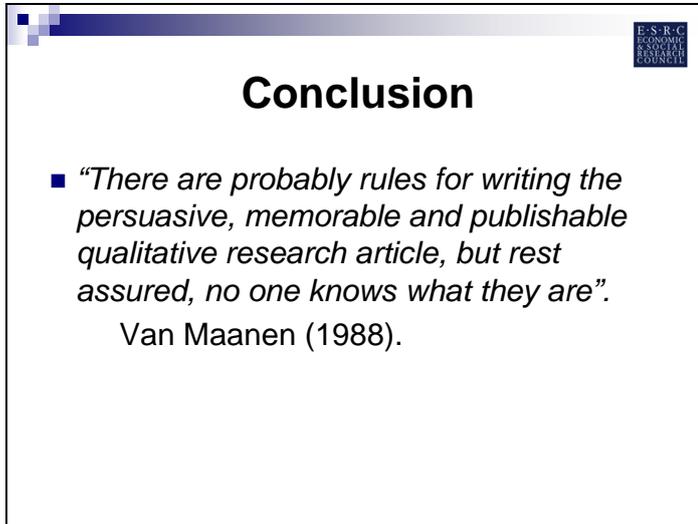
Sounding – An individual puts some suggestions to the team, perhaps an outline of how some task is to be approached and invites responses before making a full commitment. The task can then be approached with more security.

This list is not exhaustive but just provides a general idea of the collaborative process.



Issues for collaborative writing

- Be aware of team composition.
 - Personality clashes may lead to counter productive struggles
 - Different status may constrain/enable members
 - Different status may lead to exploitation of certain members. It is important to discuss and agree on the order of names in publication.

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Conclusion

- *“There are probably rules for writing the persuasive, memorable and publishable qualitative research article, but rest assured, no one knows what they are”.*
Van Maanen (1988).

Additional Comments

Although there may be no pre-set recipes for writing qualitative research and getting published it is hoped that this workshop has helped encourage the publication of qualitative research through understanding and enhancing of qualitative writing skills.



Further sources

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Further sources

- Richardson, L. (2000) Writing a Method of Inquiry, in Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y., *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, California: Sage
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Slide 35

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

There is a space on our website for feedback on the training workshops. Please use it to record any feedback including modifications/ adaptations made to the original workshops. >>



References

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- Ebel, H., Bliefert, C., Russey, W., (1987), *The Art of Scientific Writing Weinheim, Kart, p.4.*
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