Tips on writing a qualitative dissertation or thesis, from Braun & Clarke – Part 1

Our advice here relates to many forms of qualitative research, and particularly to research involving the use of thematic analysis (TA).

Based on our experience of supervising students over two decades, as well as our writing on qualitative methodologies, we discuss what we think constitutes good practice – and note some common problems to avoid.

Our first tip is *always to check local requirements*! Check what is required in your university context with regard to the format and presentation of your dissertation/thesis; if our advice clashes with this, discuss it with your supervisor. Sometimes requirements are "rules", and sometimes they're more norms and conventions, and there's room to do things differently.

Qualitative centric research writing

Why might our advice here clash with what your local context expects or requires? The simple answer is that there isn't a widely agreed on *single* standard for reporting qualitative research. Broadly speaking, there are two styles of qualitative research reporting – let's call these "add qualitative research and stir" and "qualitative centric". The "add qualitative and stir" style reflects the default conventions for reporting *quantitative* research slightly tweaked for qualitative research. Some characteristics of this style of reporting include:

- third-person/passive voice
- searching out and identifying a "gap" in the literature in the introduction
- methodological critique of existing research;
- and, when it comes to reporting the analysis, separate "results" and "discussion" sections.

This style of reporting is far more widely understood and accepted than the other.

What we advocate for is a "qualitative centric" style of reporting – one that is more in line with the ethos and values of qualitative research. This style departs from quantitative norms of empirical research reporting, and is consequently less widely recognised and understood.

This is why you might experience a clash between what we recommend as good practice and what is required in your local context. We experience this clash of reporting values all the time – we have been required by reviewers and editors on numerous occasions to turn our qualitative centric research papers into something more conventional, and our students have sometimes been required by examiners to turn their qualitative centric theses into something more conventional (e.g., by separating out an integrated "results and discussion" and including methodological critique in the introduction).

We want to be open about the fact that there *can be* risks in a qualitative centric style of reporting! One of the aims of this blog post, and the Twitter thread on which it is based, is to increase understanding of qualitative centric reporting styles so that fewer qualitative researchers are required to rework their research report into something less reflective of the ethos of qualitative research.

So, what are some of the features of a qualitative centric reporting style? Let's work through a report section by section.

Introduction

Think of the opening section of your report not as a literature *review* but as an *introduction* – the introduction is highly likely to include discussion of relevant literature, but the goal of the introduction is not to review the literature and find a "gap". Instead, your goal in this section is to provide a context and rationale for your research.

If you do discuss bodies of literature, try to avoid summarising study after study after study… instead overview and synthesise a body of literature (What questions have been asked? What, if any, assumptions have been made? What are some of the common themes across the literature?). Have the confidence to tell the reader something about the state of the literature from your perspective.

Theoretical consistency in your introduction

If you embrace fully the ethos and values of qualitative research, you don't just understand qualitative research as providing you with tools and techniques to generate and analyse data; you're unlikely to be a committed positivist or (simple/pure) realist. So if you're not a positivist or realist when conducting and reporting *your* own research, how should you handle reporting research in your introduction that *is* positivist/realist? We think it's important to be theoretically consistent across *your* report!

That means not being a positivist/realist in your introduction when discussing quantitative research, then shifting to being something else when reporting your research. It means you need to think carefully about how you present and frame the findings of quantitative research. As an example, don't present results from other projects as statements of fact (e.g. by stating "gay men are more likely than straight men to experience poor body image"), but rather as what other research has reported e.g. by saying "several quantitative studies suggest that gay men are more likely than straight men to experience poor body image". It's a subtle but important difference. It shows the reader that you understand your theoretical approach, and that it doesn't (necessarily) align with the philosophical assumptions underpinning the quantitative research.

We would also advise against engaging in methodological critique based on the values and assumptions of quantitative research in an introduction (methodological critique consistent with the philosophical assumptions of your research may be appropriate).

Framing your research: inverted triangles or stacked boxes?

Ideally, your introduction will make an *argument for your research* and *frame it within relevant wider contexts*. It will flow beautifully – the reader will always know why they are being told something and where they are being taken next. There will be no jumping around from one to another seemingly unrelated topic.

To help with flow and structure, work out if your introduction is the classic "inverted triangle" (starts broad and gets increasingly more specific) or what we call the "stacking boxes" structure. With the latter, you have several different topics to discuss but they aren't easily classifiable as broader or more specific, they are all roughly at the same level. Your task is to decide how to order or stack the boxes! This is a judgement call and you will often need to figure out what works best *as you write*. We regularly advise our students to reorder their stack of boxes; we do the same with our own work. You can't always know ahead of writing how things will flow.

With a “stacking boxes” introduction, we strongly recommend having some signposting or an overview at the start of the introduction to help the reader understand what you will cover and where things are going. Try to have linking sentences between different topics or sections to signal transitions to the reader (we’ve been here, now we are going there…).

Research questions/aims

Typically, we’d advise you to end the introduction with your research questions/aims*. Any question (or questions) and aims should make sense to the reader – they definitely should not come as a surprise! – in light of the context you have presented. You want the reader to almost expect and anticipate your research question; you want your research question to *make sense*.

*Though, in some instances, this *might* work best at the start, ahead of your box stack! In such cases, you should come back to it at the end or before the start of the methodology. This works within a qualitative-centric introduction because you are not building towards a great “reveal” of the “gap” you have identified.

Make sure you formulate your research question in a way that is consistent with the ethos and values of qualitative research. Don’t frame your research question(s) as hypotheses or, indeed, discuss what you expect to find. A common error is to formulate a research question in terms of the impact or effect of X on Y – which is essentially a poorly-disguised quantitative hypothesis! Our book *Successful Qualitative Research* provides a detailed discussion of formulating research questions for qualitative research. If you’re using TA, we have recently published a paper *Conceptual and Design Thinking for Thematic Analysis t*hat includes guidance on appropriate research questions for reflective TA – the approach to TA that we developed and first wrote about in 2006.

Circling back to the title

Let us circle around to thesis/dissertation *titles* here too – qualitative research is nothing if not recursive! Double check your title to make sure it isn’t implicitly quantitatively framed either. You really don’t want the reader to read your title and the introduction and be expecting a quantitative study when they get to your research questions! Ideally a good title tells the reader something about the topic, the methodological approach and perhaps also a key message from the analysis. Short, evocative quotations from participants can make great titles. Here’s an example from a project on gay fathers.