METHODOLOGY: ANALYSING QUALITATIVE DATA AND WRITING UP YOUR FINDINGS

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Introduction

You have collected data or sourced it in documents. Now that you have it, you need to analyse it in order to produce findings. Much of what we offer in the way of practicalities in this chapter could be characterised as strategies for analysis, rather than *shoulds* (cf Richardson, 1990: 32). There are, however, some *shoulds,* such as the need to be systematic and organised, and to present evidence to back up your findings. We make this clear when we discuss these processes.

This chapter addresses:

- Why one should analyse data and not just assume that it can 'speak for itself';
- What analysis entails;
- Getting started: preliminary analysis and coding;
- The nature of evidence;
- Doing more advanced analysis;
- Writing up your findings;
- Discussion-oriented writing.

Why analyse data?

Why not just present, verbatim, the data that you collect or source? Why not let the data 'speak for themselves'? The simple answer is that it won't speak for itself if left in the form in which you collect it – recordings, or pages of transcripts, or documents of one kind or another. These raw data do not constitute the findings of the research. When we talk about findings, we refer to what has emerged from the data, after the process of analysis. Consider the example of a finding emerging from interview data from research on battered

women (Hydén, 2005). Note how the researcher handles the text or transcript in order to reveal the meanings embedded within it.

Christine is a 42-year old woman, no longer living with her husband, and doing her sixth interview with the author.

The 'dialogical' and 'resistant self' in the position of the wounded

68 I have never been allowed to decide for myself what I wanted.

69 He almost always decided how I should dress.

70 He decided, and when we went out together …

71 I'm not used to saying hello to anyone or looking at anyone,

72 you have to walk with your head down,

73 like, you can never be yourself.

74 You weren't allowed to look at anyone.

75 He decided everything at home.

76 Everything.

77 Absolutely everything.

In this narration, 'he' denotes Christine's former husband. She positions him as the powerful acting agent, issuing orders and demanding obedience, in line 69 ('He almost always decided …') in line 70 ('He decided…') and in line 75 ('He decided everything…'). In autobiographical narratives the teller usually denoted the self by using the pronoun I. In this excerpt, I note the tension and dialogical interplay in the use and switching between the pronouns 'I' and 'you'. Christine denotes herself as 'I' in line 68 but switches to 'you' in lines 72-4, still denoting herself. By using the 'you', she distances herself – not from the 'I' but from the 'he'. The interplay between these pronouns creates a narrative space for what I call 'the resistant self'. The man is her dominant force, but he only rules the 'you', not the 'I'. Such variations in pronouns use contribute to her positioning of herself less as a wounded person than as a person resisting domination, although she conceals her oppositional stance. (Hydén, 2005: 177)

Analysis takes us beyond raw data

Post-positivist research typically yields a large amount of qualitative data. In its raw state, it is suitable for an archive, but not for presentation in a thesis of a limited number of words. You may not always do an analysis as close as the one above by Hydén, but at the very least, you need to arrange your data under different themes or headings, and you need to select and present certain pieces to your readers.

This process is often daunting, especially if you have pages of interview or focus-group transcripts or other documents to work with. A great deal of the process of analysis remains invisible in the final thesis document, although all of the process informs the final product. Although Hydén did many analytic exercises like the one in the foregoing box, they do not all appear in the final article. But what does appear (such as the example given) offers readers insights into how she approached analysis.

Analysis provides evidence

Analysis is necessary because findings require evidence. Evidence is something that is able to convince us of the existence of a certain kind of knowledge, or a certain phenomenon. You need to be clear about what constitutes evidence within your epistemological framework. Broadly speaking, within positivist research frameworks, only quantifiable data count as evidence. But within various post-positivist frameworks people's words or texts can provide evidence. 'Text is the actual empirical material and the ultimate basis for developing the theory' (Flick, 1998: 248).

The evidence that you are putting forward for certain claims should be clear. It should let your readers see how you have fitted your explanation together. The quotes bring you back to the individual or collective and real experiences of the research participants or document writers. Their words provide the evidence and the analysis frames their experience (cf Richardson, 1990: 39) and sets it in context.

In some cases, researchers are not allowed to use quotes as part of the finished thesis. This may be because the respondents asked for their actual words to be kept confidential. If this happens to you, this does not mean that you are excused the task of analysis. You keep the evidence in a separate file of your own. For instance, in a study of couples in the first year of marriage, one of us, (Anne B. Ryan) was asked by all the respondents not to quote them in the published document.

Anne writes:

I carried out an extensive analysis of the interview and focus-group transcripts. The respondents gave me permission to show these to a small group from the commissioning organisation, ACCORD Dublin, but I was not allowed to use direct quotes in the finished report. Nevertheless, I and ACCORD were happy with the finished report, and that the findings presented in it were directly related to the data (Ryan, 2002).

Analysis makes the familiar strange

One of the key purposes of analysis is to make the familiar strange, as Hydén does with the quotes foregoing. It is about looking at what might on the face of it be described as mundane or obvious, or taken for granted, or even nonsensical or not related to the research topic. You, the analyst, have the task of using a variety of ways of seeing and thus revealing a certain essence of the data, one that helps you to address your research questions. Your reader needs some path through all of this data, which will provide, for example, a psychological, sociological, pedagogical, social change or cultural interpretation.

Analysis sheds light on the research questions

The research questions are paramount, and the insights should relate to them. 'Keep in mind what you have set out to do' (Wolcott, 1990: 30). This is good advice, because it draws us back constantly to the purpose of the research, and thereby gives a focus to the analysis. The analysis has to make links between what you have found in your data and the questions that led you to undertake the research in the first place. The insights or understanding that you present should throw some light on your thesis question. Remember, as discussed in Chapter One, you won't always come up with hard and fast answers.

Analysis may even reveal that you asked the wrong questions to begin with. Don't let this put you off. There is no reason why you should not continue to develop and refine, even change, your research questions, as the analysis proceeds. You must allow your data to take you wherever it needs to go. Be sure, however, to make clear what is happening and why. This can be confusing for new researchers. Make sure you stay in close contact and discussion with your supervisor.

What does analysis entail?

Analysis is the process of coming up with findings from your data. The complete process of analysis requires that the data be organised, scrutinised, selected, described, theorised, interpreted, discussed and presented to a readership.

All of the data is filtered through you. You have to decide what to use and how to use it. Drawing on your theoretical sensitivity (that is, the combination of your personal and professional experience, your reading of the literature and your knowledge of theoretical issues), you decipher the complexity of the experiences represented in the texts you are working with. You look for evidence of how people make sense of their experiences. In this way, you make the familiar strange. In other words, you provide new and insightful lenses for viewing what your respondents tell you, or what is written in documents.

Analysis involves examining the meaning of people's words or actions and trying to make explicit the knowledge that is in them. Sometimes this knowledge is clear and overt, but sometimes it is tacit, and you have to reveal it to your readers. First, of course, you have to identify it yourself.

Your procedures for analysis and thus your findings from a particular set of data could be different from those of another researcher, depending on the theoretical sensitivity and the particular interests of that researcher. This is why it is necessary to lay bare the processes by which one analyses one's data – so that readers and other researchers can see how you did it, agree or disagree on your findings, and possibly suggest other ways the data might be analysed.

Start early

Analysis is a very exciting part of the research process, because it gives you the opportunity to pick out the gems that your data undoubtedly contain. But a word of caution too: it would be unfair to pretend that it is always easy. It is rarely quick, and in fact is usually the most difficult, time-consuming and anxiety-provoking part of any research project, whether professional, commissioned research, or student research. It is essential to devote sufficient time to it.

Very often, student researchers devote a great deal of time to collecting data, and not enough to analysing it, and this leaves a weakness in the thesis. These two processes – collecting and analysing data - need to be in balance. There is no point in collecting data if you do not allow sufficient time to make good use of them, in order to produce findings. As we already recommended in Chapter Five, you need to allow at least three times as much time for analysis as you do for data collection.

Don't get caught out. You need to think about analysis before you even start collecting the data. Questions and issues to do with analysis should be occupying your mind from the time you begin formulating your research questions. Some categories for analysis will be

in your head, based on your questions, others will emerge from the literature, and others will be surprises contained in your data.

Reading and evaluating literature, collecting data, analysing data and writing up findings are activities that exist in a dynamic relationship with each other. The whole process (like the thesis process) is cyclical, not linear. All should proceed in a 'complementary fashion' (Wolcott, 1990: 25). From the moment you begin thinking about the research questions and reading literature, you are generating categories that may be useful when you come to analyse your data. As you collect data, other categories will suggest themselves, arising from what your respondents say, or material you find in documents you are examining. When you write these up in draft you will find that other sub-questions, which are relevant to your main question, suggest themselves to you. Some researchers, especially at PhD level, may try to explore these new questions in a further round of data collection, but students undertaking a smaller thesis will not have the time to do this. (See Chapter Five for more on when to stop collecting data).

See how other researchers do it

There are no prescribed post-positivist ways to analyse qualitative data. You can help yourself enormously by reading articles, books and other theses, so that you can gain some insights into the ways other researchers go about it. Fortunately, in good qualitative research, the analysis process is laid bare for readers to follow. So as well as considering the strategies we offer here, you can see at first hand what other strategies are available.

Do not confine yourself to reading research directly concerned with your topic. An analytic strategy that works for a different topic could work equally well for yours, or could be adapted to suit your topic. Scan research journals and reports with analysis in mind, rather than topic, and you may find some useful examples of how others go about analysis and the means by which they write up their findings. Be alert to processes and procedures that might be useful for your own work. Ideas about what to aim for, along with templates and exemplars, serve a useful purpose – they don't have to be slavishly adhered to, but can be useful, not to mention comforting, when starting out.

You should begin searching for this kind of work as early as possible in your thesis process. Do not wait until you have mountains of data sitting on your desk in the form of transcripts or other documents.

Getting started: preliminary analysis

Analysis of some kind should start as soon as data is collected. Don't allow data to

accumulate without preliminary analysis. As you are collecting the data, you are beginning to analyse it in your mind. While you are doing this, ask yourself what is in the data that confirms what you already knew and/or suspected, what is surprising, what is puzzling. Make written notes on this.

You should:

- Index and organise your data from the start;
- Generate categories as you go along. Start by including rather than excluding – you can combine and modify categories as you proceed;
- Think, reflect and immerse yourself in your data; dealing with it should not be a routine or mechanical task. You need fairly long periods of time for this. But you also need to stay in touch with it, by returning to it often;
- Be systematic, organised and persevering, and keep a record of your procedures, so that you can write a short description of them in your methodology chapter or in one of your methodology sections.

As we have pointed out, while post-positivist researchers are agreed on the need to analyse data and to theorise from the findings that result, there is no prescribed analytic method in most post-positivist approaches. However, you do need to be systematic and thorough.

Organise your data according to themes

The first step in analysis is called coding, that is, reading your data and developing a set of categories, themes or basic organising ideas (see Buzan, 1995). Give names to these categories and use them to label sections of data. Some categories are in your mind before research begins, drawn from your theoretical orientation and the kinds of questions the research is addressing. Sometimes these categories simply relate to the questions asked. Other categories develop or reflect the understanding of the research participants or document-writers, and they emerge as you examine the data.

Begin by identifying the broadest categories you can. Read for *broad themes:* several may arise from one piece of text, either anticipated, or unanticipated. The categories can be understood as low-level theoretical concepts for thinking about the data (Davies, 1999: 196). It is essential that you undertake this initial coding, which is really just sorting your findings into themes. Keep it as simple as possible. List topics and sub-topics and divide your transcripts or documents into sections based on these topical headings.

If you find you are having ideas about theory at this stage (see Chapter Two), record them in writing, but keep them separate for now. Make a note of the sources (you, the literature or the data itself) of the different categories, so that you can draw attention to this in the write-up.

Many researchers find the easiest way to do the sorting is to make hard copies of the transcripts or documents and to use different coloured highlighters to mark material that fits in different categories, making sure that each section can be identified according to its source (that is, the place in the original transcripts or documents where you can go back and find it in context). Then you literally cut the different chunks and put them in piles under the different category headings.

You can get computer packages to do this kind of sorting for you, but we advise against them, especially for student researchers. It helps to be able to see and touch the processes and outcomes of sorting, and these are hidden from you when you use a computer to identify themes. Your senses are blunted by the technology, and you often miss out on making links between categories. With the more hands-on paper approach, it is more likely that you will see commonalities.

Ask questions about the themes

Having sorted your data into manageable units, and identified themes, you then start to ask some basic questions about those themes, such as:

1. What can you tell about the people/person/objects in your data?
2. What is going on and why?
3. What can you read between the lines and what is the basis for your reading?
4. What tentative conclusions are you coming to?
5. What categories are coming from you (that is, what categories are arising out of your reading and earlier theorising)?
6. What categories are new, in the sense that they are emerging from the 'facts' of the data?
7. What tentative conclusions are influenced by the values, attitudes or meaning repertoires of the person/people who produced the data?
8. What makes you focus on some particulars of the data and not on others?

Keeping a thesis at the thematic level of analysis

Many student theses do not go beyond coding, or the preliminary analysis of data into themes. Data which have simply been coded often appears as lots of fairly short chunks taken from different data sources (transcripts or other documents), in order to illustrate themes or categories. In these cases, what a respondent says is usually taken as an accurate reflection of what her experience is really like. The meaning of the data extract is taken to be self-evident and to refer unproblematically to what 'really happened'. In other words, data is considered 'transparent' and the write-up stays close to the original data, although organising them in a different format.

This level of analysis is sometimes dismissed as 'merely descriptive' but the act of organising the data into themes is itself a form of analysis, because you are selecting things that you consider important and leaving out others. Wolcott (1990: 29) suggests thinking of description as subtle analysis and the more overtly analytical/interpretive sections as heavy-handed, even 'intrusive' analysis. Done thoroughly, accompanied by a good write-up and discussion, thematic analysis can produce a very satisfactory thesis. Evaluation reports usually confine themselves to this level of analysis of the primary or raw data, should you want to find some examples. If possible, however, you should try to move beyond thematic analysis. Indeed, it is essential to do so at MLitt and PhD levels. The rest of this chapter offers strategies for doing so.

Doing more detailed analysis

Description is the foundation on which analysis, interpretation and discussion are based. Once a category is described, more detailed analysis usually tries to identify and reflect on concepts that underpin the categories. This level of analysis takes it for granted that 'there is no unmediated version of the event' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 151). In other words, all of the ways that people understand the world are filtered through systems of meaning-making, so the researcher scrutinises the data for evidence of discourses, paradigms, meaning repertoires, values and attitudes, which construct knowledge, talk and practices. This facilitates a degree of abstract thinking (theorising) about the concepts underpinning the data and allows you to draw some general inferences.

Writing up

'Writing up' is the term used most often for presenting the analysis of data in the form of findings. Do not leave it to the very last stage. Writing in the form of notes, memos or mind-maps is part of the early stages of analysis, but writing also takes on a significance of its own in the later phases, where you show similarities or differences between findings, and ponder on their theoretical significance.

During the early stages of the writing-up process, you can flag or highlight issues, ideas, or findings that you want to discuss later. You can put these ideas in parentheses, highlight them, type them in a different font, or confine them to footnotes for the moment. Later, you can consider whether to interweave them with the findings, all in one chapter, or whether to give them a discussion chapter or section of their own. Once again, look for how other authors do this, and model your approach to discussion on successful strategies.

Taking analysis further by means of writing up involves 'giving meaning and intent to action, and … reading meaning and intent in the actions of others' (Schratz and Walker, 1995: 125). It is essentially theorising about the data, which involves 'the taxing business of trying to grasp what is actually going on' (Eagleton, 2003: 223)[4]. This is sometimes a daunting process. You often need moments of optimism in order to keep going with this kind of work. The minute you find something surprising in your data, note it in writing and try to develop it. Optimism is born the moment we are surprised by what we hear or read.

Some more guiding questions for writing up your data

You can develop the earlier questions in this chapter by asking the following and similar questions:

- What is going on behind the scenes/between the lines here?
- Why is this happening?
- What assumptions are directing the way people (including oneself) are acting?
- What positions do people take up in the accounts they give or write? How do they position others?
- What kinds of knowledge or concepts are the people who produced the data (either interviewees, focus-group participants or document-writers) drawing on?
- How are these kinds of knowledge (skills, attitudes, reflections, assumptions, etc) transmitted, either intentionally or unintentionally?
- How do some kinds of knowledge come to dominate, and others to be muted?

[4] Within a post-positivist epistemological stance, it is, of course, accepted that it is impossible to fully know what is going on. One can illuminate what is happening, but always bear in mind that if you think you understand perfectly you probably misunderstand completely.

Your ultimate aim is to take the kinds of knowledge that are implicit in the data, and to translate them into readable prose (cf Agar, 1986: 66).

You do this by asking questions such as:

1. What is the central premise of the discourse, meaning framework or construct?
2. With what themes is it associated?
3. How does it operate?
4. What conditions facilitate its operation?
5. What discourse/s[5] does it complement, and what discourse/s does it oppose?

(cf Ryan, 2003: 159)

Two examples from recent theses

As a first example, consider how Kay Lynch (2004) analyses the theme of usefulness. 'Useful' and derivatives of the word arose in many conversations that Kay had with women graduates employed in administrative positions in third-level educational institutions, who had studied part-time for their degrees as mature students. Kay also interviewed their line managers.

All of the research participants used the term 'useful' in relation to third-level education, but drawing on different discourses. The two dominant (and clashing) discourses were that of economic usefulness and usefulness for citizenship and contribution to community.

Kay could have simply reported that her respondents used the term and provided some quotes to that effect. But her theoretical sensitivity gave her the tools to go beyond the surface use of the word, in order to investigate what the interviewees were taking for granted, or what assumptions they were making, each time they employed the concept of usefulness.

Similarly, Mary Scully (2002) examined the unspoken discourses that influence the document *Ireland Aid Review* (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2002). She took her analysis beyond a thematic one, by examining the systems of making sense of foreign aid that were available to the writers of the documents, and therefore affecting aid policies. She used the text of the document as the basis for her analysis and her evidence.

[5] For the rest of this chapter, we use *discourse* and derivative terms as a shorthand for the range of terms that includes beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, interpretation of experience, mental frameworks or models, meaning repertoires, etc.

Make your processes of analysis clear for the reader

Evidence gives validity to your analysis. 'A judgement about whether data analysis is valid is a judgement about whether or not it measures, explicates or illuminates whatever it claims to measure, explicate or illuminate' (Mason, 1997: 89). The goal is to present analysis, discussion and conclusions in such a way that the reader is able to assess the researcher's interpretations. Each stage of treatment of the data is laid bare, and the reader can agree or disagree.

Think about the writing-up process as the telling of a story. Take up the role of story-teller – the story-teller selects the aspects s/he wants to present to the audience, knowing that s/he cannot tell absolutely everything that happened. In the same way, you cannot present every single finding that has resulted from your analysis. You have to select the salient parts, in the interests of a coherent story. You can, of course, let the participants' words or sections of a document illustrate the story. But how you link them and how you make them speak to your audience is a key task for you as analyst and writer, learner, observer and translator. This approach should include an examination of the stances taken by different people in the research (including your own). Draw on your experience to make interpretations. Examine the experience of others.

Getting rid of data

You undoubtedly have more data than you can use in your thesis write-up (there may be exceptions to this, if you are working with a very small number of texts). Counter-intuitive as it may seem, you need to get rid of a lot of it, in order to proceed to writing up findings. You need to progressively home in on certain key ideas in certain categories, and leave aside others, however much you may regret this. This is especially true when you want to proceed to more detailed analysis. You need to be *selective* rather than *exhaustive*, and selection depends on the original research questions and your theoretical interests. You want quality and key insights rather than quantity and easy generalisations. To do this, you may need to select a limited number of key pieces from your data, and subject them to detailed scrutiny. In the thesis, always justify your selection of a particular section of data to analyse, by means of the question: 'how is this helping me to get closer to responding to my research questions?'

'Make a lot out of a little' (Silverman, 2000: 102). It is better to work very well with a limited number of extracts from your data, and to present a limited number of themes, than to do a poor job with too much data. When it comes to presenting the findings too, you will have space to present only samples from your material, so you must decide what are the

most important elements that you want your readers to know about. Nevertheless, all of your analytic work is informing what you present.

Focus on accounts rather than individuals

When people give an account, write a document or construct a narrative, one of the things they are doing is conducting their own analyses of a situation or event. It is a mistake to assume that any account is 'simple description', or 'just the facts'. At all times, the person producing the account is selecting and drawing on assumptions and discourses.

Post-positivist epistemologies focus more on the range of explanatory devices that people use to understand a situation or event, and less on 'goals, choices, behaviour, attitudes and personality' (Rosenau, 1992: 8, cited in Flannelly, 1999: 32).

> A person can produce a potentially limitless number of accounts, depending on the situation and relations in which an interview or discussion takes place. The focus in the analysis as a whole is thus on how the specific *accounts* of the different themes are constructed and what social forces are shaping them, rather than on the psychology of individual participants. This kind of analysis … allows us to draw generalised conclusions, rather than conclusions pertaining to individuals. (Ryan, 2002: 3, original emphasis)

This allows the researcher to give attention to the issues, but without passing judgement on the individual who offers the account.

As an analyst then, you are trying to expose the rules that shape any particular document or account.

> Not only what we do but also what we *can* do is restricted by the rights, duties and obligations we acquire, assume or which are imposed upon us in the concrete social contexts of everyday life (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999: 4).

These rules are often hidden, unspoken, or taken for granted (this does not rule out the fact that overt rules may also exist). As Anne Lamott (1994: 199) puts it, 'we write to expose the underexposed'. Detailed analysis has this effect.

At this level of analysis, the researcher reads for detail, looking for nuance, contradictions, vagueness, absences and assumptions. As you develop your research questions and theoretical sensitivity, you should also develop a list, specifically geared towards your own analysis, of things to look for in accounts.

Remember the emphasis in post-positivist research is on the broad theoretical framework for analysis, which includes:

- attention to how discourses construct knowledge and practices;
- different discourses operating in various situations;
- how people vary their narratives or accounts depending on the situation or event or experience they are referring to;
- identifying significant patterns of *consistency* (shared features) and *difference/ variation,* both within accounts, and across accounts.

Consistency in the text of interviews or documents indicates that speakers or writers are drawing on a limited number of compatible discourses or interpretative repertoires when giving their accounts. Analyses that identify only the consistencies are uninformative, because they tell us little about the full range of accounting resources people use when constructing the meaning of their social world. The researcher should also attend to what is *not* mentioned, in a subsequent discussion.[6]

More examples of the kinds of questions to explore for detailed analysis

Detailed analysis merges into discussion and interpretation. You can explore questions such as:

- Whose interests are served (for example, interests of sex, race, class, institution, etc)?
- Who is being privileged?
- What is the practical field in which a discourse operates?
- What conditions facilitate a particular discourse?
- What is left out: what is ignored by the discourses drawn on, what is unspoken?

Look for contradictions, points of conflict, inconsistencies, places where dominant explanations run out of explanatory power, or reach their explanatory limits. There must be a tolerance for ambiguity, and a way of explaining it. One way to do this is to use the concept of multiplicity: multiple discourses, positionings, subjectivities, knowledges

[6] If you notice during the data collection phase that certain concepts or themes that you expected are not arising, you should try to explore them in subsequent data collection. Given the time constraints under which many theses are written, however, this is often not an option. See Chapter Five on methodology.

(some of them acknowledged and some tacit or subjugated). If you are working with data generated in an interview situation, it is essential to present your questions and contributions to the interview and to include them in the analysis, since they are seen as active and constructive and not passive and neutral.

Discourse analysis and attention to narrative accounts can create awareness of the constructive nature of, for example, the media, and of state and social apparatuses, institutions and practices. They can also draw attention to the importance of who gets to tell what stories about different groups.

To develop your discussion-oriented write-up, you can include sections that:

- ponder the significance of the findings – implications, relations to social life and practice, with particular reference to your research questions;
- interweave the findings with discussion on theoretical issues. In this process, you can give yourself space to say why the world is as it is, but also and equally important, to think about how it could be different (cf Schratz and Walker, 1995: 125);
- discuss implications for policy, research and practice, where relevant. Remember that implications are not simply reiterations (Day, 1996:29).

Purpose

Give every section or sub-section some kind of introduction. Be clear about why you are writing it. Each chapter, section, or sub-section needs to have a clear purpose. In your drafts, begin each one with the phrase 'the purpose of this chapter, section, sub-section is …' It may sound very uninspiring, but it will help you to keep focussed. You can always edit out those introductory sentences later if you like (although it may not be necessary to do so). While you are working on the writing they will help keep you on track.

Avoid over-abstract writing

Don't be too abstract. If a critical friend/reader or supervisor comments to this effect, it may be that you do not fully understand what you are writing about, or have not followed it through, or are relying too much on literature that you do not fully understand or have not fully engaged with, in order to guide your analysis. Try to give concrete or specific examples to illuminate your theoretical discussion. If you can't come up with an example, something is wrong and you should try again.

Generalisations and conclusions

Generalisations should be framed in such a way that they feed into wider sets of issues or questions, or help to initiate debate about issues and questions which you see as legitimate public concerns. You can take these up more fully in the final chapter (see Chapter Seven of this book).

Make connections. This can mean drawing attention to similarities, but equally important, it can mean examining where findings and theories differ, contrast, contradict each other or complement each other even if not entirely similar. When we write about our research, we are using our authority and privileges to tell about the people we study. As writers of research, we are narrators, with our own points of view, and our own situated knowledges.

Do not reach conclusions too early in the writing-up process. Keep the tone speculative, open, discursive, and reflexive. Do not come to conclusions too soon, but don't avoid conclusions either.

Remember too that, as the reader and analyst of the data and as a writer and presenter of the findings, you are a product of your society and culture. That is, you need to be aware of what ideas (implicit and/or explicit) you draw on for your analysis. Nevertheless, you must retain responsibility for what you write and draw attention to the evidence for your conclusions. Be authoritative without being dogmatic. The difference is that a dogmatic writer will be keen to present 'just the facts'. When we are authoritative, we do not shirk conclusions, opinions and suggestions, but we offer them in a reflexive way.

More thoughts on writing

Writing is an essential and integral part of the thesis process. There are no clearly marked stages, one after the other, so writing is not what you do when all the other stages have been completed. Writing develops your ideas and your ability to theorise about what is going on. You can always edit later, but if you don't start writing about your findings early on, then you will find it difficult to do it all in one go at a later stage. If you want your thesis to be more than adequate, you need to work with the ideas in writing from an early stage.

Writing and revising are forms of thinking. This assertion is made by countless authors who advise on the process of writing for any purpose – whether for social research, fiction, poetry, philosophy or any other discipline. Some students will not begin writing because they think they don't know enough. They keep looking for the perfect book or article, or that one gem of a finding, which will provide the key they need to get started.

If you write something early on, it is not set in stone – you can change it later, when you have a better grasp of what you want to say. If you find something you want to say at a stage late in the thesis process, you can insert it in the thesis where it fits best. That might be in the introduction, or in the literature review, or anywhere else that would benefit from an addition or from editing.

Writing is an amazing process – it provides a record of what you know already; it shows up the gaps in what you know; it provides signposts to what you need to do and it develops your ideas in ways you never thought possible. You can talk and read all you like, but writing is the process that records and develops your ideas. It makes the work *yours.*