2

Why, What, and How We Write

A WORD is dead

When it is said,

Some say.

I say it just

Begins to live

That day.

—Emily Dickinson

If a word when it is *said* begins to live, as Dickinson proclaimed, then when a word is *written*—read, read aloud, quoted, and discussed—it is living its life, just as we are. The point of this book is to assist qualitative researchers in helping the words of research participants and their own words to live full, impactful lives. Researchers want to improve the world for all, and words are researchers' partners in this endeavor.

In this chapter, I

- consider *why* qualitative researchers represent data—including to publish or perish, believing research can cause change for good, and

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the expectation that representations may allow the reader and writer to grow;

- provide an overview of *what* qualitative researchers write historically and contemporarily; and

- detail *how* successful writers ensure they are productive, including *drifting*, blocking out writing time as sacred, participating in a writers' group, and writing every day (e.g., snack writing), even when there is no time to write.

Why Do We Write?

Professors, if they did not understand this initially, quickly find out that their primary activity is writing—prospectuses, teaching materials, feedback, grants, conference presentations, reports, evaluations, research plans, research results, articles, book chapters, books, poetry, vitae, dossiers, emails, blogs, posts, tweets, and more. Karen Golden-Biddle and Karen Locke (2007) succinctly state, "We are at the core a profession of text writers" (p. 9). What we are writing varies from being high stakes to low stakes, professional to casual, but it is an always present and ongoing aspect of who we are and how we are perceived as professionals.

Scholars have argued throughout the history of higher education over what constitutes research scholarship. The answer changes over time and depends both on the larger field of which we are a part and on what the local everyday judges of our writing believe scholarship is—or are willing to "allow" as scholarly writing. Unfortunately, this discussion is contentious and littered with racial, class, gender, orientation, and other issues of power, with the outcome often limiting access to resources for certain types of researchers—with potentially devastating results. I want to acknowledge this possibility and will weave in suggestions on how to negotiate the process of deciding what constitutes research throughout this text.

When I was an assistant professor, I attended a well-known qualitative researcher's training session. I asked how they helped colleagues understand and value their research representations. I was told that the researcher never bothered with this issue because it was their colleagues' problem, not theirs— such a disappointing answer for someone who felt as out of their depth as I did. The ability to not bother with the important issue of what constitutes scholarship signals the power and privilege of some full professors, but most of us do need to consider what our colleagues or, in the case of students, professors' value, or risk leaving academia.

The question of what constitutes research and scholarship, along with the daunting and unpredictable nature of the writing and publishing process, is

reflected in the professional admonishment "publish or perish." This phrase, while true, has become overused, and its threatening tone is unhelpful. I advocate for rephrasing it as "publish and persevere"! I address this area first to get it over with since, while there is truth in the adage, degree attainment or job security should not be the only reason a researcher writes. If as researchers we are to find amity in and lifelong dedication to research, it will be through a belief that research can bring about change and cause understanding for the good. How we represent research may allow for broader and deeper understandings.

The major point of this book is to move readers towards a clear understanding of the writing and publication process. Of this, Jessica Smartt Gullion (2016) writes, "Many graduate programs make the assumption . . . that students already know how to write. . . . Graduate programs are more likely to train students to be researchers, not to be writers" (p. xi). Smartt Gullion goes on to point out that this is an issue not just for students but also for early-career professionals. "I've met many new faculty who have minimal experience writing for publication . . . who spend the first year or two on their tenure track floundering" (p. xii). I agree and feel that struggling with writing as a professor is kept hidden since public knowledge of this struggle would be seen as exposing oneself as a potential failure. Instead, increased transparency would allow for more support and success. With increased success, writers may develop a deeper appreciation for qualitative writing and the possibilities it holds for enhancing research and providing a satisfying and meaningful career, rather than feeling lost and at odds with the writing and publication process.

Having addressed perishing or persevering, another primary reason why qualitative researchers conduct research and publish is that we believe our work can have an impact for the betterment of humanity and the world. Postmodernism and critical studies have allowed us a glimpse of how idealistic and naive this statement is, but even the most critical perspectives would seem to be striving toward some type of hope for humanity's ability to change for the better.

However, having advocated for qualitative research and transformation, I want to emphasize that on any given day the only good thing I am sure of in research is that the writing I have engaged in and the representations of life I have crafted allow me personally to grow. As I engage with the craft of other qualitative researchers, research participants' experiences, and my personal struggle to write and represent, I am always becoming.

What Do We Write?

What do we, as qualitative researchers, write? The contemporary short answer is anything and everything. It is an exciting time to be a qualitative researcher, thanks to the hard work of those who have come before us, such as Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, Egon Guba, Laurel Richardson, Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, and more. However, this freedom has not always existed, and it is still not the case in many fields or at certain universities.

In the history of research, while "empirical" means raw observations—which clearly includes qualitative research—qualitative research, if it was even considered at all, was "preresearch"—a footnote or window dressing employed to underscore quantitative results with colorful quotes or engaging scenarios. More recently, qualitative methodology courses, texts, and dissertations may be seen in a wide and diverse array of fields from nursing to counseling to business. Qualitative dissertations with traditional formatting are burgeoning (e.g., Rennie et al., 2002), and alternative formats are seen more frequently. Journals dedicated solely to qualitative research, such as *The Qualitative Report*, *The Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, *International Journal of Qualitative Research Methods*, *Qualitative Health*, and *Journal of Autoethnography*, to name a few, are thriving. Journals dedicated to academic disciplines accept qualitative research at increasing rates (see a partial list of qualitative journals and journals that accept qualitative accounts in the resources section at the end of Chapter 4). Qualitative researchers have taken to the internet and may be read in blogs (e.g., Lim, 2016), tweets (e.g., @antonioabush, @WriteNThrive, @lahman_maria), Facebook posts (e.g., https://www.facebook.com/DQRDW, YouTube videos (e.g., Weaver-Hightower, 2014; see https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJlmnEV4K0nOZ72XT2s6JcrGImJnJmqSh), and other online platforms.

What Do Novices Write?

A novice is a new writer who is just beginning to engage in their field and develop a sense of what type of qualitative writing they are expected to publish or a published research writer new to qualitative forms. According to Richard Bach, "a professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit." I think Bach's quotable quote gets at the importance of persistence and being able to change and adapt along with our fields of study. Some early writing will include research proposals and papers for courses, conference papers, and conference talks to practitioners about research. Setting up a clear expectation from the start that presentation and publication should be a goal for all novice researchers allows students to hone their abilities as researchers who publish as they move through the graduate school process. Learning the publication process should not be saved for after the dissertation has been completed—under the intense pressure of an academic job. All prospective professors have a dissertation publication; it is the other publications that help set researchers apart.

A primary way novices represent data is through the dissertation. The dissertation is a form that can help a field to grow or become stultifying. To encourage growth, see if your advisor and dissertation committee would be supportive of adding qualitative elements to your dissertation. Or if the dissertation is a traditional qualitative report such as grounded theory or phenomenology, would the committee support the addition of aesthetic elements such as visuals or research poetry? The dissertation is such a lengthy document that there is often room to try different types of representations. (See an extended discussion of this in Chapter 4, in the section "Innovative Dissertations.")

While a student researcher may be new to what academia traditionally sees as "scholarship," this does not mean they arrive without highly specialized skill sets. Part of advising is getting to know students' areas of expertise and helping them reflect on what they might bring to research data representation. For instance, I am currently teaching two writing teachers, a graphic designer, a zine (magazine) developer, a mindfulness expert, a podcaster, a videographer, a historian, and a disc jockey. What might their interests, experiences, and skills bring to research representation?

Increasingly, graduate students are coming to academia with advanced skills in social media, which can easily be applied to educational social media (ESM)—websites and apps (applications) that allow scholars, researchers, and educators to create and share content in a similar manner to how social networking on the internet occurs. These media skills often outshine any that the faculty graduate students work with may have. We need to advocate for an increase in the validation of ESM as a reputable and necessary outlet for research. The primary way this occurs is by citing ESM, as I have throughout this book. A central argument for representing research through ESM is open access to knowledge, which is framed by a critical equity perspective. Clearly, the answer to what novices are writing is a blooming, full-flowered reply.

How Do We Write?

In composing, as a general rule, run a pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigor it will give your style.

—Sydney Smith

2.1   HOW DO WE WRITE?

MARGARET SEBASTIAN

I woke up this morning from a dream about writing. I hadn't written anything in seven days and I felt like I had something to say. But instead of writing, I started laundry, made breakfast, took a shower, did my hair, picked out clothes for the week, listened to an interview with my favorite comedian, and then read a book on my phone. Three hours have passed, and I'm still thinking I may write something today. Finally, I pick up a sweater, my coat, and my pre-packed book bag with all my articles, and I leave my apartment for the library.

It's terribly quiet in the library. I sit near a window to take in the sun and the fun everyone else is having outside—still haven't written one word. I laugh at myself because I hid my cell phone in my car so I wouldn't text anyone, yet I am searching for it to see what time it is. I finally open up my computer to an

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empty page. I write one sentence, and I feel inadequate—like I have no idea what I'm talking about and if I did, someone already wrote it better than me—so I start reading articles about my topic. After about seven or so articles, I realize I could indeed write about the same topic with my own words and from my perspective. Instead of writing, I then look over all the references, find the ones that fit with my research, and look them up.

After another hour, I still have only one sentence.

I look at the screensaver quote my mentor told me to focus on: "What is the easiest thing you can write about right now as if you were talking to your daddy? How would he understand your topic? Would your argument make sense to him? Write it cohesively."

I look outside and see children playing on the playground swings, laughing and smiling.

I write 500 words without looking up again.

Source: Reproduced with permission from Margaret L. Sebastian.

Where would a writer never want to live?

A writer's block. (Vick, 2018)

Read, Read, Read

The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading, in order to write.

—Samuel Johnson

How do we learn to write? When I teach qualitative writing, I tell students, "I am asking you a trick question: How do we learn to write?" Invariably, the answer I am given is "by writing." This is certainly partly true, but the answer I want to emphasize first is that writing is learned by reading. Read, read, and *read*—read anything and everything. Dick Meyer (2008) says if you live in the United States, "Statistically, if you're reading this sentence, you're an oddball. The average American spends three minutes a day reading a book. At this moment, you and I are engaged in an essentially antiquated interaction. Welcome, fellow Neanderthal" (p. 87)! I assume academics read more, but if

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we take a candid moment to self-assess what type of media we read and how much we read, the answer for many busy scholars is "not much"—unless we are giving evaluative feedback (e.g., the weekend I wrote this, I was reading and evaluating 450 pages for three students). Given the predictable format of much of research writing, we often do not read a research article in its entirety—let alone a journal issue—but reach into it for specific aspects we can use, such as the literature review, research design, or findings.

William Faulkner (n.d.) pointed out to writers that reading all sorts of material is important: "Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it. Then write." This is certainly also true for qualitative writers. While qualitative researchers, especially novices, should read traditional qualitative accounts to get a sense of the genre, reading anything and everything is also important. For instance, reading James McBride's memoir of his mother and himself, *The Color of Water* (1996), helped me to begin thinking about powerful ways to use italics in qualitative writing. Reading a journalist, memoirist, and Pulitzer Prize winner, Rick Bragg, helped me begin to think of speaking directly to the reader, as well as to consider the use of imperatives and admonishments. Bragg (1997) tells readers directly, "Listen to her" (p. 29) and then, with the readers' attention riveted, quotes from his mother in a compelling way.

Write, Write, Write

Linked closely to reading is a need to practice writing in order to be a successful writer. As Faulkner pointed out in the earlier quote, it is helpful for a writer to think of themselves as an apprentice, at first imitating the masters and then perhaps moving on to breaking existing forms and creating new forms. For qualitative research writers, much of this traditional writing will involve exploring how writers have found ways to convey copious amounts of data through journal articles limited to a word count of 6,000 to 8,000 words or a page count of 30 pages including references.

Opportunities should be provided for research writing in graduate course work, but if you find yourself in the unenviable position of being a student who receives little to no feedback, seek out writing mentorship wherever you can find it. Graduate schools and conferences will often have workshops, mentors, or weekend writing intensives. The university may have a writing center, with documents that guide novices through all aspects of research writing. The drawback is these resources are often formed around traditional ideas of scientific writing. Finding a successful student to engage with who is more advanced in course work than you can also be of help.

Revise, Revise, Revise

Writing and revision should be addressed together because the work of writing for some is really in the revisions. Some writers (myself included) find

that ideas come easily and the real problem is having too many ideas. However, rewriting these many ideas may be a difficult task. For some other writers, coming up with the ideas is the harder part and rewriting not as irksome. Either way it helps to reflect on your preference and find ways to improve on weaknesses. For example, early on I realized I had too many ideas and could distract myself with the latest one. I also had figured out how to write conference proposals that would be accepted and found oral talks and conference papers stimulating and successful experiences. However, conference talks were not translating into publications in journals. I made two rules for myself. First, if I had a new research or writing idea, I would put it in a file of ideas, which helped me to set it aside mentally. Second, if the conference paper I had written did not move into a journal article, I did not attend the next conference. This combination of acknowledging my ideas yet setting them aside for later and rewarding myself with a conference experience was quite successful for me.

The central focus of revision for most qualitative research forms[1] is coherence, cohesion, and conciseness. William Zinsser (2006) believed that organization of a lengthy article is an "untaught and underestimated skill," comparing it to the way one might "put the jigsaw puzzle together" (p. 254). He went on to say, "Ask them to try something more extensive—an article or a book—and their sentences leach out all over the floor like marbles" (p. 254).

As you revise carefully, check to see that all the pieces of your work are coherent—meaning consistent and well reasoned. Consider the cohesion of your writing as the backbone of the work. Are the title, abstract, purpose, research questions, literature, theory, methodology, and findings working together? Are there tangents of thought, rabbit holes in the literature, jumps and breaks that seem to belong to a different manuscript? Finally, cut out unnecessary words, pare back superfluous paragraphs, and edit yourself before others do it for you or, worse yet, throw up their hands in disgust at your rambling rhetoric. Zinsser (2006), calling this type of revision "fighting clutter" or "the weeds of writing," advises writers to

> look for clutter in . . . writing and prune it ruthlessly. Be grateful for everything you can throw away. Reexamine every sentence . . . put on paper. . . . Can any thought be expressed with more economy? Is anything pompous . . . pretentious or faddish? . . . Simplify, simplify. (p. 16)

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[1]Qualitative writers working in innovative forms will at times push back against coherence and a sense of a unified whole with the argument that smoothing out the research creates a false sense of an objective research experience. Innovative writing in and of itself does not mean, however, that the writer will not work to have coherence and cohesiveness; unfortunately, all of us, due to space constraints, need to be concise.

This is hard work—this level of revision is like scrubbing the grout between shower tiles until it shines—which I seldom fully achieve.

Make Writing Time Sacred (and What to Do When You Don't)

I only write when I am inspired. Fortunately, I am inspired at 9 o'clock every morning.

—William Faulkner

This quote by Faulkner illuminates a truth the literature makes clear—engaging with writing consistently is a fruitful way to write. In the text *How to Write a Lot*, the idea of writing time as sacred underscores the need to keep the time protected in an honored way (Silvia, 2007). This makes sense to me since when I step away from writing for too long I start to lose the thread of what I was doing and may not even recall a section of what I had written. This, of course, is where the use of abstracts, headings, tables of contents, and outlines allows writers to pick up where they left off. These are the signposts of our work for future readers that also allow us to check for organization and clarity of thought. Nonetheless, I have never been able to write on a daily basis. I have a deep sympathy for graduate students, so I do not hold research/writing days as sacred when it comes to scheduling a defense. I also continue to look at dissertation drafts when I am off contract from the university. However, I have become increasingly adept at saying no to unproductive work invitations (always presented as opportunities) that eat into my writing time.

I do get up and write when I have insomnia. This usually means I will write for one or two hours before I start to feel tired again. Ideally, I wake up early before my family begins to stir and then set my laptop aside for important family morning routines, knowing I have already accomplished several hours of writing. Also, when I have an intense writing project, such as an upcoming conference paper or book deadline, I lug my laptop with me *everywhere* and write as I wait to pick up kids for carpool or for sporting events to end. I have even written an entire research manuscript backstage during a children's theater production and made final revisions of this chapter hunkered down in my car keeping an eye on the nearby sledding hill to monitor my children for social distancing COVID safety and sledding safety. While this is not sacred writing time, it is writing as an ever-present activity and is only sustainable for several months at a time. It is dissertation deadline–type writing.

Drifting

The afternoon sun was getting low as the Rat rowed gently homeward in a dreamy mood, murmuring poetry to himself.

—Kenneth Grahame (1908, p. 15)

In a chapter where I am advocating for ways to stay engaged with writing, *drifting* may seem a strange interlude. Yet I find drifting to be a vital companion state to writing. For me, drifting usually occurs when I have set aside all devices and am absorbed in some wholly different task, such as gardening, chauffeuring or waiting for children, or simply watching birds congregate at the feeder. Jasmine Ulmer (2018), in an article on how to develop qualitative writing, writes of the importance of disengaging from writing, using the enticing phrase "not writing." "A . . . literal approach to not writing involves moving away from writing altogether. Given . . . demands . . . of productivity, not writing can appear to be a professional liability. . . . Viable options do not include writing all of the time or writing none of the time" (p. 730).

Thinking about drifting brought to my mind the book by Grahame (1908), *The Wind in the Willows*, in which the industrious Mole, always tunneling below ground, encounters the outdoor world of the water Rat and relaxation in nature for the first time: "The Mole never heard a word. . . . Absorbed in the new life he was entering upon, he trailed a paw in the water and dreamed long waking dreams" (pp. 7–8). Ulmer (2018) writes of not writing, saying she does not make a deliberate plan not to write in order to become inspired: "Inevitably, though, it is the escape from writing and the attempt to *not* write that somehow lead to more writing" (p. 730). Describing this as a possible aspect of a "Slow Ontology," Ulmer (2017) goes on to say, "In writing a Slow Ontology, researchers might create writing that is not unproductive, but is differently productive" (p. 201).

I imagine psychologists, activity, and mindfulness experts would tell us it is the time we have taken for self-care, refilling our reservoir, that allows for this to occur. Yet writers would know that this is not the full picture because when we are at our lowest, depleted, even in the deepest despair, ideas for writing arrive inexplicably, with a hint, a nudge, or a bolt—hackneyed but true. While not an ideal setting for drifting, I find a somewhat related form may occur at a laptop when we stop writing to stare off into the distance for some time. If possible, position yourself so when you do move into the writer's daze your gaze is not on stacks of dirty dishes, piles of laundry, or the concrete blocks of a university wall but instead on photos of those you love, a window with a view, or an arrangement of meaningful mementos. It's healthy disengagement—drifting—that leads to more writing.

Motivation and Distraction

As you hone your ability to be a productive writer, it is important to consider what motivates you and what distracts you. The answers may be light irritants (e.g., noises on your street) or the deeply emotional problem of feeling incapable. Make a list of all the ways you are distracted. Then mark which distractions you can control and how to go about addressing them.

Distraction	How to Address
Device notifications	Turn off when writing
Neighbor's barking dog	Wear headphones
Messy house	Move to a different location, tidy for 10 minutes a day
Worrying about outcome of writing	Talk to advisor, deep breathing, make list of worries, then set aside

Similarly, make a list of all the healthy ways you motivate yourself. After you have achieved a small to large accomplishment, what could you do as a "reward"?

Accomplishment	Motivations
After a 20-minute writing period	- Five-minute walk - Fresh tea - Check social media for 5 minutes - Five-minute phone call
After a lengthy, productive writing period	- Go to a movie - Get take-out - Zoom call - Take a run
After a major draft is completed	- Take a day off - Attend a campus sport or theater event - Share with your writers' group

A colleague and I who started working at our university at the same time had both decided as graduate students that we would work on writing our dissertations over a weekend and then go to the last movie matinee on Sunday as a reward. We went to the movie by ourselves, in our own university town, and later laughed imagining how much more fun the reward would have been if we'd known each other and been friends at the time! (It might be hard now to imagine what a big reward going to the movies was in our current era of binge movie streaming!)

Timing and Organization

Ideas for using time wisely and for organization can be a huge help, but they also have the potential for distraction. I find that when I try a new timing idea

it works to move me into sustained writing—the sort of writing where I emerge befuddled since I have been working for such a long period of time. This is the most productive writing for me. Some possible strategies for achieving this follow.

Time of Day. *Determine what time of day you are most productive, and if at all possible, shift fresh, first-draft writing to that time of day. If you have a deadline looming or a lengthy writing project, you will have to write at other times of the day also. Writing a dissertation taught me that all my ideas about writing only when I was "fresh" and "focused" are totally false. We can write whenever we need to, but there is no doubt that we write much better at certain times of the day than at others.*

Twenty Minutes. *When you are unable to find larger blocks of time for writing, as is frequently the case for me, consider using the "writing 20 minutes a day" strategy. This is an idea that has support from writers who discuss how to sustain writing (e.g., Cordell, 2014). There is some disagreement as to whether you should keep going once you get going if you have the momentum and time; however, I would say use your best judgment in that area.*

Pomodoro Technique. *In the advanced qualitative writing course I teach, I invite students to share ideas for making the most of their time or organization techniques they are trying or have had success with. Several years ago, a student shared the idea of the Pomodoro technique—which calls for us to work smarter, not harder (Cirillo, n.d.). Since then, Pomodoro has had a huge surge in popularity, with websites, apps, and imitators using terms such as "marinara time." The Pomodoro technique involves working in 25-minute stints, with a 5-minute break in between and then a longer break after four Pomodoro work periods. In theory, this works for writing also. Other time utilization ideas include The Power Hour (DiCarlo, n.d.), the 33.33 minutes rule coined by Eugene Schwartz, and the 5-minute rule devised by Kevin Systrom, the CEO of Instagram. All of these time ideas have in common (a) no interruptions, (b) intense focus, and (c) a brief break under the premise that people will work better when more focused. I also think that part of the Pomodoro technique's success is tying the idea into the striking visual of a tomato cooking timer, which for me evokes food and savory smells—of course, any timer could be used. (For more information about the technique, see Cirillo, n.d.)*

Snack Writing. *Snack writing is an idea promoted by Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns (2011). For more writing ideas, you can follow Gardiner @ithinkwell and Kearns @ithinkwellHugh on Twitter. Snack writing lies somewhere between shorter, 20-minute writing ideas and what Kearns refers to as "binge writing"—long blocks of writing that are infrequent. To take advantage of snack writing, identify one- to two-hour blocks of time that occur in your week. These may be at unconventional times—I snack write in the car and have the added benefit of being first in line for school pickup by arriving early after my last appointment. Ideally, snack writing would occur three*

to five times a week. As I move toward a deadline, this is the primary technique I have tended to use daily—even before I found a name for it. I also take snack writing a step further by turning off the internet and all alerts on my laptop.

One Sentence. *A final type of writing was shared with me by a student with regard to a well-thought-of colleague's advising strategy. I asked about a student and was told, "Oh, they are groaning in the lab over their computer." Startled, I wanted to know what was going on.*

"They have to write one sentence for their advisor."

"One sentence?"

"Yeah, when they start working on the dissertation, they have to meet with their advisor once a week and have at least one sentence written."

Intrigued, I tried to look this idea up and grilled my colleague about it. It is of note that I did not find any information on this style of writing, but I think it is related to the writing advice that suggests you stare at the computer screen until something starts to happen. If all else is failing, this is worth a shot.

Writers' Retreat

When you are having a hard time starting a writing project or have a deadline looming, a writers' retreat may be a partial answer. This could include grant-funded writing opportunities, professional retreats where writers are offered either seclusion or some engagement with other writers, online retreats (e.g., Virtual Writing Retreat @vwr_pgr), and university graduate school writers' camps, or perhaps you could do a retreat on your own or with a friend who is also writing. Go to the mountains or to the beach for a weekend of writing. For me, writing works best when my family goes somewhere and I am able to be in my own home with a minimum of travel or fuss. However, these opportunities are few and far between and may backfire at times, with the writer ending up feeling even more pressure to produce or a sense of isolation, so consider carefully what works best for you.

Writing Courses and Conferences

Courses and conferences for writers abound in the area of literary writing. For qualitative research writers, these are less frequent, but they do exist. I have had the opportunity to attend a writers' conference and found that the other writers' work stimulated multiple ideas for qualitative research writing, from autoethnographic and poetic representation ideas to research ideas. The autoethnography I excerpted in Chapter 7 of this book, "Lemon Tree," was an idea I acquired at a writer's conference. Due to the associated costs, try to take advantage of any opportunity to attend a writers' conference offered by your graduate school or university. Don't set your hopes for the course too high, but

taking the opportunity to see that you are not alone and to create a network of fellow writers can be invaluable.

Reading About Writing

There are many books on how to write and even a few on how to write qualitative research (e.g., Anzul et al., 2003; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007; Holliday, 2007). If you are not receiving much feedback on your writing or feel you are well into the graduate degree process and still not sure what you are doing, you might consider investing in a few of these books. I suggest finding a nonfiction writing book and a qualitative research writing book (e.g., this volume; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014) or a book chapter that works for you. For nonfiction, I still prefer Zinsser (2006) but am sure this text would not work for all students. Check out the writing books at a library first, or look them over at a bookstore so you do not spend money on a text that doesn't work for you. See the resources at the end of this chapter for book ideas.

Writers' Groups

Writers' groups in higher education usually consist of informal groups of students who may band together for an assignment or formalize their group as they work toward longer pieces of writing, such as a thesis or dissertation. I have heard these groups can be a source of support, not only in dealing with the writing process but also in facing the daunting challenge of degree attainment. Some students have continued to write with group members as they moved into their first professor position.

Student writing groups can also waste time through too much socializing, complaining, undermining others, and providing a false sense of productivity. When I was a doctoral student, I was invited to join a writing group with other students who were dynamic and engaging. However, I had to curtail the amount of time we spent together since the group did little writing and mostly socialized and complained. While I completely understand the need for venting, I already had venues for that in my life and really needed a writing group. My support system finally crystalized into a group of just three fellow students who supported one another in the areas of transitioning to more sophisticated technology, getting through statistics classes, writing, and editing. One member of the group is the person who tipped me off about the amazing job I now have as a qualitative research professor.

There are various types of writers' groups in academia. What may be harder to find is a group that is healthy and produces consistent results. To help graduate students start to consider how a writing group might be a supportive part of their writing experience, I form writers' groups in the qualitative research writing course I teach. Each group consists of three to four students depending on the size of the course. Students may privately indicate course members they wish to be in a group with and anyone they do not want to be in a group with. However, I encourage working in an interdisciplinary group since many students have only had the opportunity to receive feedback on their writing

from people who are aligned with them in beliefs and training. Most students tell me I can group them with any other student in the class.

Feedback to a Writers' Group. At the outset, I require that the groups create a calendar of who will submit what and when. Students must use the internet for communicating feedback and editing—Google Docs, email, or the course platform— and provide feedback using technology (e.g., the Comment function and Track Changes). These requirements are intended to get students up to speed with writing with remote others. Each group creates guidelines for how feedback will be given. For example, a group indicated they would give feedback with the sandwich method. The bread is the positive components of the feedback, and the filling is feedback regarding areas to consider and changes needed—positive feedback first, then constructive criticism, then positive feedback. Other groups have created specific criteria. At the start of each meeting, update other members regarding what you have written since the last meeting. End each group by taking a few minutes to write down and then share with other members writing objectives or goals for the next meeting.

Forming a Writers' Group. Writing groups vary in terms of frequency from meeting once a week to twice a month for two to three hours. While a writers' group needs only two members, three to four works well in case someone cannot keep up with commitments for a while and to add a diverse perspective. Each member needs to be comfortable taking their turn to contribute a piece of writing and committing to provide feedback to everything that is submitted. (To read more about writers' groups, see Durst, 1992; Elbow, 1973; Grant et al., 2010.)

2.2 SCHRODINGER'S RULES OF CRITIQUING

Maria Lahman, with thanks to Holly Lisle (n.d.) for condensing this advice

1. Critique the *writing*, not the writer. Avoid phrasing critiques by starting with the word "you," as in, "You are . . . "; reworded, this would be "The dissertation is . . . " or "The manuscript should. . . ."

2. Share what works along with what seems not to work.

3. Understand that feedback is not about how *you* would write. It is about how *they* could write.

4. Be aware that writing is personal.

5. Be conscious of your writing biases. If you plan to share a bias in a critique, be sure to say it is a bias; otherwise, avoid bias in critiques.

_____
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Possible Types of Writers' Groups

Lisle (n.d.) identified the possible types of writers' groups. I have rewritten this slightly to fit academia.

Colleagues or Friends. *This is a group of writers all working at about the same level. It may literally be formed from friendships that already existed or developed from a collegial writers' group into friendships.*

Instructor and Students. *This group is put together by a professional writer and is open to beginners. This is designed as a teaching group, with the pro as the teacher. As you can imagine, this group can be terrible or effective depending on the instructor. In an academic context, this type of group often occurs when an experienced professor as part of their university "service" requirement mentors new professors in publication or when a graduate school sponsors student writing groups. If you have someone who loves to teach, who is genuinely interested in seeing the members of the group get published, and whose work appeals to you enough that you think you could learn from them, then an instructor and students group will be effective. If, however, your existence in the group is solely to provide an ego boost for the instructor, then you end up with an unhealthy situation. Lisle cautions that an unhealthy master and serf dynamic occurs when the group is more about boosting the instructor's ego, which can result in group members just listening to stories or excerpts from the instructor's current writing rather than getting help to achieve success. I would add that this can also occur when the instructor forces people into a narrow mold.*

Sharks and Fish. *Any writers' group can turn into sharks and fish if it becomes a "clique" that tears newcomers' and those not in the popular groups' writing apart. Avoid this group at all costs even if they seem to welcome you. If you are being invited to speak poorly of others' work when they are not present, this is a sure sign the same is happening to you when you are not present.*

2.3 CREATING WRITERS' GROUP GUIDELINES

MARIA LAHMAN

The following is the guidance I give writers' groups in my writing course to assist in the creation of the group "rules." I ask the groups to create a set of criteria. Midway through the semester, after we have read scholars' suggestions for qualitative criteria, we revisit the criteria and see if there is anything they would change. I find the criteria are consistently too detailed for creative pieces or too general for traditional thematic qualitative journal articles. I ask that the following occur or be addressed:

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- The author should provide the target journal's writing guide with the manuscript being reviewed when possible.

- When submitting a piece of writing to be critiqued, the author should provide a paragraph explaining the purpose of the manuscript, who the audience will be, and areas they have questions about.

- When does writing need to be submitted to the group to have time for all to provide a thorough critique by the next meeting?

- How will the writing be shared with the group (email, Google Docs, etc.)?

- What criteria should be used?

- What format should the oral critique take?

The Gist: Get on With It

I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set,

I go into the other room and read a book.

—Groucho Marx

Marx underscores the need to always be reading as we are writing; as writers, we should dwell in the land of words. In this chapter. I presented *why*, *what*, and *how* qualitative researchers write and included ideas to enhance motivation and reduce distractions. We need to get on with the important task of writing. "We need to stop waiting and get writing," writes Nicolas Cole (n.d.), who describes himself as a digital writer. He goes on to say,

> All through college, I watched the majority of my peers wait to write. They were waiting to feel inspired, waiting to see what the teacher thought of their last piece, waiting for some outside nod of approval instead of just getting on with it and putting pencil to paper (or fingers to keys).

Good writing occurs from persistent work.

Reflexive Questions

1. What are some early writing experiences you had?
   a. Which, if any, experiences were positive or negative?
   b. How does this recollection of early writing affect your writing today?

2. What are more recent writing experiences you have had?

   a. Which, if any, experiences were positive or negative?

   b. How does this recollection of writing affect your writing today?

3. What negative writing experience(s) have you had?

   a. How do these experiences affect your writing today?

4. What positive writing experience(s) have you had?

   a. How do these experiences affect your writing today?

5. How, where, and when do you tend to write? Make a list of the best conditions. Now look at the list critically (a partner or group helps a lot with this). What changes should you consider making?

6. Why do you need to write?

7. What do you need to write?

8. What have you written?

9. Have you ever tried a time or motivation technique to encourage your writing?

   a. How did it work for you?

   b. Which motivation technique could you try from the list in this chapter?

Reflexive Activities

1. *How do we write?* Take a moment and consider what the writing process resembles for you. Look at the reflexive questions above to help with this process. For example, do you feel you write best when up against a deadline? A strength of this type of writing is the ability to keep writing under pressure. While this writing style works for course deadlines and some areas of academic writing in general, initial submission of journal manuscripts does not have a deadline—an exception to this is the call for special journal issues. The thought that writing under pressure brings about great results may be a habit that has been formed in deadline-intense contexts or by people who tend to procrastinate. It is hard to believe that extra time to read over a piece of writing multiple times for polishing it is not beneficial. Once you have identified the different ways you write, question these ways and look for areas that are strengths and areas that are potential weaknesses.

2. *Experienced writers:* Review the writing you have published, considering what aspects of it might work well in qualitative writing and what aspects won't transfer.

Review any of your publications that have qualitative data as part of the study—perhaps a survey with open-ended questions at the end. How might the qualitative data have been represented in a stand-alone article?

Review any qualitative data you have, even if they are partially published in a thematic article. How might the data be represented in different forms? Choose a few forms to experiment with. Read a chapter from the second half of this book in the areas you decide to try. Show the outcome to a colleague or friend. What works for you? What doesn't? What works for the field you publish in? What doesn't?

3. *Positive/negative writing experiences:* Choose a positive and a negative writing experience to write up into a short anecdote or story. Put the writings away for a while—perhaps two weeks. When you read them again, ask what resonates with you. Consider doing this writing activity with a few other writers. What resonates for you about the others' writings? What might you tell the "you" who existed at the time of the story? How might the story be different if it occurred now?

Resources

Articles About Writing

Wolcott, H. F. (2002). Writing up qualitative research . . . better. *Qualitative Health Research*, *12*(1), 91–103. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732302012001007

Books Qualitative Writers Have Written About Writing

Allen, M. (2016). *Essentials of publishing qualitative research*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315429298

Anzul, M., Downing, M., Ely, M., & Vinz, R. (2003). *On writing qualitative research: Living by words*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203451427

Durst, R. K. (1992). A writer's community: How teachers can form writing groups. In K. L. Dahl (Ed.), *Teacher as writer: Entering the professional conversation*, (pp. 261–271). National Council of Teachers of English.

Golden-Biddle, K., & Locke, K. (2007). *Composing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Holliday, A. (2016). *Doing and writing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446287958

Smartt Gullion, J. (2016). *Writing ethnography*. Sense.

Wa-Mbaleka, S. (2014). *Publish or perish: Fear no more*. CentralBooks.

Wolcott, H. F. (2009). *Writing up qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452234878

Writers' Groups Resources

Durst, R. K. (1992). A writer's community: How teachers can form writing groups. In K. L. Dahl (Ed.), *Teacher as writer: Entering the professional conversation* (pp. 261–271). National Council of Teachers of English.

Lisle, H. (n.d.). *The good, the bad, and the ugly or how to choose a writers group.* https://hollylisle.com/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-or-how-to-choose-a-writers-group/

Writers' Group on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/members writersgroup/

"This group is for those interested in the craft of writing. All are encouraged to help one another through problem spots in their writing, bounce ideas off other members, and talk about the latest news affecting the industry/craft."

Writer's Relief, Inc.—List of Writing Groups by State or Region: writersrelief .com/writing-groups-for-writers/

Writing Conferences and Courses

Top Ten Writing Conferences in North America: https://www.writermag .com/improve-your-writing/conferences-residencies-retreats/top-10-writing-conferences-north-america/

Pennsylvania Writers Conference: https://www.wilkes.edu/academics/ graduate-programs/masters-programs/creative-writing-ma-mfa/pennsylvania-writers-conference/index.aspx

South Hampton Writers Conference: https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/ writers/about.php

Southern Writers/Southern Writing Graduate Conference: https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2018/01/28/southern-writerssouthern-writing-graduate-conference-2018

Writing Internet Resources

Cox, J. (2018, November 12). *What is the writing cooperative?* https:// writingcooperative.com/what-is-the-writing-cooperative-do-not-publish-54901adf5325

Handley, A. (n.d.). *9 Qualities of good writing.* http://annhandley.com/ 9-qualities-of-good-writing/#.WsqE5dPwbVo

William, D. K. (2020, August 7). *8 Brainstorming strategies for generating new writing ideas*. The Web Writer Spotlight. http://webwriterspotlight .com/8-brainstorming-strategies-for-generating-new-writing-ideas

Write to Done—Unmissable Articles on Writing: https://writetodone.com/