A front-to-back guide to writing a qualitative research article

Ahir Gopaldas
Fordham University, New York, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to offer junior scholars a front-to-back guide to writing an academic, theoretically positioned, qualitative research article in the social sciences.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on formal (published) advice from books and articles as well as informal (word-of-mouth) advice from senior scholars.

Findings – Most qualitative research articles can be divided into four major parts: the frontend, the methods, the findings, and the backend. This paper offers step-by-step instructions for writing each of these four parts.

Originality/value – Much of the advice in this paper is taken-for-granted wisdom among senior scholars. This paper makes such wisdom available to junior scholars in a concise guide.

Keywords Qualitative research, Theoretical contribution, Writing an article

Paper type Technical paper

As a doctoral student, I turned to several senior scholars for advice on writing my first qualitative research article. Some scholars advised me to "imitate other articles". That advice makes sense because imitation is a natural way of learning new skills. Yet, as a novice reader, I found it difficult to distinguish between an article's generic and specific content, making imitation more challenging than I imagined. Other scholars said that "there is no formula; each article is unique". That perspective also has some merit because writing qualitative research articles is a creative endeavor with unlimited possibilities. However, for better or worse, most academic journals seem to have rather standardized expectations, from research motivations in the introduction section to theoretical contributions in the discussion section. A few scholars also referred me to their favorite resources on writing, a few of which are noted in the references. In the following author's guide, I draw on formal (published) advice from books and articles as well as informal (word-of-mouth) advice from senior scholars into a front-to-back guide to writing a qualitative research article.

Allow me first to issue a few disclaimers. This author's guide is composed for a very particular audience: junior scholars who are just beginning to write their very first academic, theoretically positioned, qualitative research article in the social sciences. Junior scholars value clear, step-by-step guidance, and that is what I aim to provide. The psychological goal of this how-to manual is to ease the process of writing a qualitative research article, which can be daunting at first try. Please note that this guide does not address qualitative research methodology (Belk *et al.*, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2010). Rather, this guide elaborates what to write, in what sequence and to what

end. Like any advice, the advice presented here is subjective opinion, not hard truth. The proposed template is just one of many possible templates for writing qualitative research articles. Authors are strongly encouraged to adapt the template to their own discipline, research project and target journal. To animate a few key points in the guide, I use a fictitious example of a qualitative study on the community factors that promote drunk-driving. The sample sentences are expressly crafted for this author's guide. A final disclaimer is that scholars unfortunately use various terms to refer to the same aspect of an article. I try to acknowledge the variety of terms in this guide, but to reduce confusion, I establish one preferred term and then use it consistently throughout the guide. Nonetheless, junior scholars will need to familiarize themselves with the variety of terms because different reviewers use different terms when evaluating manuscripts.

A qualitative research article typically consists of four parts: the frontend, the methods, the findings, and the backend. All four parts are important, but the frontend is paramount because it not only establishes the phenomenon, relevant literature, theoretical problem, research question, research motivation and theoretical perspective, but also sets expectations for the empirical findings, theoretical contributions and practical implications to come. In other words, the frontend serves as a summary of the critical aspects of an article. As the first thing one reads, the frontend also contributes disproportionately to a reviewer's impressions of an article. Accordingly, I recommend writing a rough draft of the frontend at the outset, then refining it periodically as you advance other sections of the article.

The frontend

- *Organization*: The frontend is sometimes written as one long section entitled "Introduction" and sometimes as a series of shorter sections with generic titles such as "Theoretical Background" or domain-specific titles such as "Prior Research on Drunk-Driving". Regardless of how it is organized, the frontend answers several critical questions, roughly in the following order.

- *Phenomenon*: What is the domain, field or phenomenon that you are investigating? Why is it important to study it? Many qualitative research articles begin with a provocative data vignette or news story to pull readers in and indicate the importance of the phenomenon. For example, "After a brief decline in the last decade, fatal accidents caused by drunk-driving are again increasing at an alarming rate of x per cent per year". Another approach is to begin an article with a brief description of the focal phenomenon in plain (non-specialist) language. Common reasons given for studying a phenomenon are that it is historically new, growing in size, changing in nature, critical to a profession or critical to a social cause such as environmental sustainability or public welfare.

- *Literature review*: What does the literature say about the phenomenon? Or what do we know? A literature review introduces the reader to the theoretical conversation about the phenomenon thus far. If there is considerable literature on the phenomenon, cite the landmark articles that started the theoretical conversation and those that changed the conversation significantly, especially those that were published in the journal you are targeting. Common ways of organizing literature are by chronology, discipline, level of analysis, methodology or theoretical perspective. For example, "Many studies address the national and

individual factors that promote drunk-driving. At a national level, studies show that […]" How one reviews literature must be directly related to the theoretical problem, which is discussed next.

- *Theoretical problem*: What aspect of the phenomenon does the literature overlook? Or what do we *not* know? This aspect of an article is variously called a "gap", "oversight", "problem" or "problematization" because problems are rarely self-evident; authors must actively problematize the literature for a problem to become apparent. For example, one could say that the literature is incomplete, inadequate or incommensurable (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997). Claiming that the literature is incomplete ("nothing is known about […]") is much too risky, as there may be studies using different keywords than those you searched. The inadequacy problematization is a safer framing: "Although many studies address the national and individual factors that promote drunk-driving, less is known about the community factors that promote drunk-driving". Claiming that the literature is incommensurable ("there is debate about […]") only makes sense if you can advance or resolve the debate in a significant way. Taking a side is rarely considered a theoretical contribution.

- *Research question*: To leave no room for doubt about the research focus, I recommend restating the theoretical problems as research questions. While "who", "what", "when", "where", "why" and "how" questions are all essential building blocks of any theoretical puzzle (Whetten, 1989), top academic journals really value answers to "why" and "how" questions. Fortunately, qualitative research is especially well-suited for developing explanatory ("why") and processual ("how") models. This does not necessarily mean that your question needs to contain the word "why" or "how". For example, the following is a "why" question, implied by the verb "promote": "What are the community factors that promote drunk-driving?"

- *Research motivation*: Why is it important to solve the theoretical problem? The answer to this question is called the "research motivation", "potential contribution" or "so what"? Here is an opportunity to foreshadow the core theoretical contributions and practical implications. For example:

  Understanding the community factors that promote drunk-driving is important for theoretical and practical reasons. First, this knowledge can help researchers bridge disconnected insights at the national and individual levels. Second, this knowledge can also help policymakers develop much-needed interventions at the community level.

- *Theoretical perspective*: What interpretive lens are you using to examine the theoretical problem, and why? Some popular lenses or perspectives in contemporary qualitative research include actor-network theory, institutional theory and social practice theory. Theoretical perspectives are necessary in qualitative research to help focus your data analysis. Without them, analyzing rich qualitative data can be overwhelming. Theoretical perspectives also provide you with a vocabulary for conceptualizing your emergent findings. To justify your selected perspective, emphasize similarities between the perspective and research question. For example, "Actor-network theory is well-suited for our

study because we are interested in the heterogeneous material and semiotic elements in a community that interactively produce drunk-driving".

- *Roadmap*: How is the paper organized? So-called "roadmaps" describe the contents of the rest of the paper. Roadmaps are usually placed at the end of a short introduction, just before the literature review, or at the end of a long multi-component introduction, just before the methods. For example: "The next section describes the empirical study. The section thereafter presents the emergent findings. The final section discusses the theoretical contributions and practical implications".

The methods

- *Organization*: The "method(s)" section is often the shortest section of an article, unless the methods are unusual for the field, in which case they require more elaboration. Three critical elements of the methods section are the research context, data collection and data analysis. Each element should be theoretically justified.

- *Research context*: What is the context, or real-world setting, of your research, and why? By the time you start writing your article, your research context may seem ordinary to you, but it will almost certainly be unfamiliar to most readers. Accordingly, when describing the context, it may be useful to pretend that you are writing to someone very far away in a very different context. To justify your selected context, explain how the context embodies the theoretical problem. For example, if you are studying the community factors that promote drunk-driving, you could select a region in which otherwise similar communities have a broad range of drunk-driving rates.

- *Data collection*: How were the data collected, and why? A strength of qualitative research is that it can include various forms of data, including primary and secondary data; textual and visual data; and interviews, observations and surveys, but it is advisable to only mention those data that are actually used to answer your research question. Most qualitative research uses theoretical sampling, that is, data collection based on theoretical goals. For example, within the communities, you could interview bartenders, drunk drivers and traffic police to understand drunk-driving from multiple perspectives.

- *Data analysis*: How were the data analyzed, interpreted or developed into theory, and why? Some articles choose to discuss their theoretical perspective here rather than in the frontend. However, if your theoretical perspective has already been discussed in the frontend, you can discuss the more procedural aspects of data analysis here, procedures such as "categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration, and refutation" (Spiggle, 1994). Focus your discussion on the unusual, interesting or creative steps that you have taken rather than describing standard protocols for qualitative data analysis. Some examples of unusual steps could be coding the data using a radically new software application or presenting initial findings to a focus group of community members for feedback.

The findings

- *Organization*: The findings are the answers to your research question. They can be organized into any number of subsections, but it is typical to have three to five subsections. If you have multiple research questions, then each subsection could answer one research question. If you have a single research question with multiple answers, then each subsection could offer one answer.

- *Figures*: Qualitative research articles often use a figure to illustrate the emergent framework, model or theory. A good figure includes a visual representation of all the key concepts as well as all the key relationships among these concepts. Unlike standard box and arrow drawings of causal models in quantitative research, figures in qualitative research evince greater diversity. Common visual tropes include core-periphery relationships via inside-outside placements, macro-micro relationships via up-down placements and antecedent-consequence relationships via left-right placements.

- *Quotes*: One type of in-line quote is an informant's word or phrase placed within an author's sentence. A second type of in-line quote is an informant's sentence placed among the author's sentences. A third type of quote, called a block quote, is anywhere from a paragraph to a long interview excerpt. This type of quote is indented from the margins. Some journals have word count guidelines for in-line quotes versus block quotes (e.g. under vs over 100 words). When deciding how much of a text or transcript to quote, err on the side of including more text because it is easier to trim unnecessary clauses later on when it is clearer which aspects of the excerpt are most relevant to your theoretical claims.

- *Tables*: Qualitative research articles sometimes present additional data in tables. The most effective tables are self-explanatory with meaningful column and row headers. Use consistent terms across the tables, figures and text.

- *Theorizing*: I am using the term "theorizing" here to denote the writing up of qualitative findings, which involves rhetorically combining extant and emergent observations along with figures, quotes and tables to make your theoretical arguments. There are innumerable ways to discuss qualitative findings, but my favorite approach combines a three-part sequence of first stating your theoretical claim, then offering data to support your claim and, finally, elaborating on how your assumptions, data and interpretations collectively justify your claim. I refer to this approach as the "Claim, Data, Elaboration" sequence. Note that the punch line is at the beginning. Another approach is first elaborating on your initial expectations based on conventional wisdom or prior research, then offering data that address those expectations and, finally, concluding with (dis)confirmations of those expectations. I refer to this approach as the "Expectation, Data, (Dis)Confirmation" sequence. Note that the punch line is at the end. Whichever approach is taken, a slice of data is usually sandwiched between two slices of the author's comments. Some scholars refer to this data sandwich as the "Telling, Showing, Telling" sequence (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007). How to make your arguments more persuasive is beyond the scope of this guide, but excellent advice on enhancing authenticity, plausibility and criticality is published elsewhere (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993).

The backend

- *Organization*: The backend is sometimes written as one long section entitled "Discussion" and sometimes organized as a series of sections with titles such as "Interpretive Summary", "Theoretical Contributions", "Practical Implications", "Limitations and Opportunities" and "Conclusion".

- *Primary theoretical contributions*: While your findings include several pages of theoretical insights and empirical evidence, the "core contribution" or "interpretive summary" is an abbreviated version of your key insights. This section typically restates the research question and your study's answer in theoretical language, with little or no reference to the empirical context. "Drawing on a multimodal study of demographically similar communities with high and low drunk-driving rates, this study reveals four community-level factors that promote drunk-driving".

- *Secondary theoretical contributions*: My notion of primary and secondary theoretical contributions could also be referred to as theoretical "contributions" and "implications". Primary theoretical contributions tend to be strongly evidenced theoretical insights directly related to the literature in the frontend. By contrast, secondary theoretical contributions, or implications, tend to be more speculative theoretical insights that are applicable to other related literature. Accordingly, secondary theoretical contributions often begin with a brief literature review, in a paragraph or a few sentences, to clarify the status quo before declaring the novel insights. A classic phrasing of a theoretical implication is as follows: "This study also [challenges, extends, or revises] existing theory on [another related phenomenon]".

- *Practical implications*: Practical implications are actionable recommendations that result from your research findings. Write your practical implications with specific stakeholders in mind. For example, if your research is about drunk-driving, write your practical implications for policymakers, counselors or alcoholics in your community. Be sure to review what actions your stakeholders currently take and how your recommendations will improve upon their current actions.

- *Limitations and opportunities*: Limitations and opportunities can be separated, but they go well together because opportunities often arise from limitations. Many limitations stem from the chosen research context, data collection or theoretical perspective. Once you have stated the limitations of your study, specify how future research could explore alternative research contexts, informant samples and theoretical perspectives to improve upon your current research. Avenues for future research can also be inspired by the theoretical contributions of the study.

- *Conclusion*: This ultimate section is not always necessary, but it gives you an opportunity to leave your readers with what you believe are the key takeaways from your research.

Finishing touches

- *Front-to-back integration*: Revise your article multiple times to check that all of the pieces fit together. Do the methods, findings and contributions flow from the

research question? Do the findings actually incorporate all the types of data you have noted in the methods? Are the research motivations in the introduction actually realized as theoretical contributions or practical implications in the discussion?

- *Editing*: Format your article, including the tables, figures and references, to the journal's style sheet. This may take several days the first time you do it. If you can afford it, hire a professional to edit your manuscript. Professional editors offer a range of services from relatively major "developmental" or "substantive" editing to relatively minor "copy editing" and "proofreading". All of these services are much faster and more affordable than you might imagine. Search online for "editing services".
- *Friendly reviews*: Send your manuscript to at least three to five friendly reviewers for feedback, not all at once, but in stages, as you keep refining your manuscript. Contrary to popular belief, friendly reviewers need not be senior scholars in your field. In fact, PhD classmates, junior scholars in your field and non-academic friends can all be excellent friendly reviewers. Wherever you turn, seek diverse, tough and nit-picky readers as reviewers. You can certainly disregard idiosyncratic feedback that does not ring true for you, but if two or more friendly reviewers indicate a similar concern, then do take their concern seriously.

You are ready to submit your manuscript. Good luck!

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Corresponding author
Ahir Gopaldas can be contacted at: agopaldas@fordham.edu