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# Facilitating Coherence across Qualitative Research Papers

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## Facilitating Coherence across Qualitative Research Papers

### Abstract

Bringing the various elements of qualitative research papers into coherent textual patterns presents challenges for authors and editors alike. Although individual sections such as presentation of the problem, review of the literature, methodology, results, and discussion may each be constructed in a sound logical and structural sense, the alignment of these parts into a coherent mosaic may be lacking in many qualitative research manuscripts. In this paper, four editors of *The Qualitative Report* present how they collaborate with authors to facilitate improvement papers' coherence in such areas as co-relating title, abstract, and the paper proper; coordinating the method presented with method employed; and calibrating the exuberance of implications with the essence of the findings. The editors share exercises, templates, and exemplary articles they use to help mentor authors to create coherent texts.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Writing, and Coherence

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## **Facilitating Coherence across Qualitative Research Papers**

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*Bringing the various elements of qualitative research papers into coherent textual patterns presents challenges for authors and editors alike. Although individual sections such as presentation of the problem, review of the literature, methodology, results, and discussion may each be constructed in a sound logical and structural sense, the alignment of these parts into a coherent mosaic may be lacking in many qualitative research manuscripts. In this paper, four editors of *The Qualitative Report* present how they collaborate with authors to facilitate improvement papers' coherence in such areas as co-relating title, abstract, and the paper proper; coordinating the method presented with method employed; and calibrating the exuberance of implications with the essence of the findings. The editors share exercises, templates, and exemplary articles they use to help mentor authors to create coherent texts. Key Words: *Qualitative Research, Writing, and Coherence**

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When reading, reviewing, and editing qualitative research papers, we take great care to attend to the paper's coherence (n.d.). From such a perspective we focus on the logical interconnection, consistency, or unity of the various parts of the paper and work with our authors to facilitate greater alignment of these elements to create a cohesive and logically constructed account (Chenail, 1997).

Bringing these various parts of qualitative research papers into a coherent textual pattern presents challenges for the authors and us. Although we may find individual sections such as presentation of the problem, review of the literature, methodology, results, and discussion to be constructed in a sound logical and structural sense, the alignment of these parts into a coherent mosaic across the span of the paper is lacking in many qualitative research manuscripts we receive.

Some of these coherency problems seem to come from very natural and common practices in writing. As authors we generally compose papers section by section and, when we are satisfied with the text of that particular section, we move on the next one and the next one until the paper is completed. Even when we review and revise our papers we may continue to reflect upon the paper from a section-focused perspective only. This style of reflection has its strengths, but it can also keep us as authors from grasping the big picture of the paper so as to judge whether or not the whole manuscript holds together or if the ideas of one section do not seem to agree or align with information conveyed in another section.

Another challenge in maintaining cohesion throughout one of these papers is the complexity of re-presenting the results of a qualitative research project in a paper-length form. There are many anticipated elements which must be covered in a scholarly qualitative research

paper and each of these elements has its own prescriptions for quality (e.g., Ballinger, 2004; Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2002; Drisko, 1997; Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Russell & Gregory, 2003). Attention to the details within each of these sections may keep an author from examining the relationships between each section so as to manage the alignment and logical unity across the manuscript as whole.

The flexible nature of qualitative research design with its emphasis on emergent, interactive, or systemic approaches (Maxwell, 2005) can also contribute to problems of coherence when it comes time to re-present the focus/problem, literature, research questions, methodology, procedures, findings, and discussion in a paper or dissertation. Although the researcher may make macro or micro changes to the procedures as proposed and may even change the form and substance of the research questions themselves as new and interesting things are learned about the phenomenon, participants, or settings, these iterative acts to align these elements may lead to other parts of the overall study (e.g., review of the literature or statement of the problem) to come out of alignment. Failure to re-calibrate all aspects of the study as these adjustments are made in the field can lead to a disjointed and possibly contradictory narrative when it comes time to tell the story of the research in a paper or other reporting forms (Merz, 2002).

### **Types of Coherence Problems**

From our experience of reading and editing qualitative research papers as editors and reviewers with *The Qualitative Report* and other scholarly journals as well as from our work as faculty members within our respective academic units, we have identified a number of common incongruities that can occur between and within major portions of qualitative research papers. The following are just a few of these textual inconsistencies.

#### ***Title-Abstract***

The lack of correlation between the words in the title and the abstract can be confusing for a reader of a manuscript. Such a situation raises the question if a word or phrase was so important to merit inclusion in the title, why is it not used in the abstract also? In qualitative research this incongruity is most often seen in the depiction of the methodology. For example the author may state in the title that the study was phenomenological in nature and then refers to the methodology as grounded theory in the abstract. As a reader of this paper we are left confused regarding the study's methodology and even more important we have to guess from which methodological perspective (i.e., phenomenology or grounded theory) we should judge the quality of the paper.

#### ***Abstract-Body***

The same kind of incongruity described in the Title-Abstract relationship above can also occur between the abstract and the body of the paper wherein words and distinctions drawn in the abstract do not seem to appear in the body of the paper. Another lack of unity that can also exist between the abstract and the paper is the order of ideas presented in the abstract does not correspond with the order in the paper. To us as reviewers such inconsistencies raise questions as

to the “real” structure of the paper and leave us without a clear map to guide us through the rest of the paper’s territory.

### ***Focus of Study and Literature Review***

Although a qualitative research paper may not have a review of the literature section, for those papers that do, we look for authors to use the literature review to create a coherent context for the study. In qualitative research such contexts usually revolve around an apparent gap in the body of knowledge on the topic in question to which the author designed the study and intended the results to address. In many papers we encounter extensive reviews of the literature which seem to have general connections to the study conducted, but the overt message of how the literature actually guided the author to choose the study that was conducted remains elusive. Ironically, the gap to which the study was being directed becomes a gap in the review of the literature itself! For example, in a paper about research on pre-service teachers’ experiences working with urban school district students, the review of literature may contain a synthesis of what research has been already been conducted on this population, but the author never makes it clear what the gap is in the literature on pre-service teachers and how such a gap helped to organize the study that was conducted.

### ***Literature Review and Research Questions***

Just as a lack of cohesion may exist between the focus of the study and literature review, a similar lack in interconnectedness can exist between the literature reviewed and the research questions posed. For example, in the pre-service teacher study described above, if the author never explores the confluence of pre-service teaching literature with urban school district student literature we would wonder how a research question such as “What challenges do pre-service teachers experience when working with urban school district students?” logically emerged from the literature.

### ***Research Questions and Methodology***

Qualitative research questions and qualitative research methodologies can usually be organized in terms of those which emphasize description, or analysis, or interpretation (Wolcott, 1994). For example, ethnographic approaches are well-suited to provide thick descriptions of social settings and participants; conversation analysis as its name would imply is geared to provide analytical accounts of everyday talk; and phenomenology helps researchers to focus on people’s interpretations of their lived experiences. If an author’s research question seems to ask for a descriptive answer, then we as reviewers would expect the author to utilize a methodology with a similar descriptive emphasis. When such a correlation does not appear in the text, we are left to wonder why such an apparent contradiction seems to exist in the paper.

### ***Methodology and Methods***

Qualitative researchers may employ “designer” brand methodologies such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography to guide their studies or they may choose a more “generic” brand to conducting qualitative research (i.e., qualitative data analysis; Caelli, Ray, &

Mill, 2003). The designer name methodologies come with well-recognized procedures or methods of their own (e.g., grounded theory and its trademark constant comparative method) to help a researcher guide the study; however in the generic approaches the researcher may take a more eclectic approach to making decisions regarding data collection or analysis. Questions of coherence can arise when a researcher declares the use of a designer name methodology and then presents a design which suggests a more generic or eclectic pattern of choices. In such a case we are left to ponder if the methodology was misnamed or the methods employed are mischaracterized.

### ***Methodology and Findings***

In describing their challenges in conducting meta-syntheses of published qualitative research papers, Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) commented on how difficult it was to classify the methodologies used in these papers simply based upon the authors' self-declarations. For example, an author may say the study was guided by grounded theory, but no apparent theory can be found in the findings section, or the methodology is presented as a phenomenology, but no essence of the participants' lived experience appears in the results. In cases such as these we wonder if the authors underutilized the transformative strengths of these methodologies or if they are not quite sure what a grounded theory is or what constitutes an essence. Another possible source for a lack of coherence in the relationship between the methodology and the findings can arise when the design as proposed begins to change as the researcher enters the field and makes adjustments in sampling and data collection procedures based upon emergent discoveries taking place at the research site.

### ***Findings and Phenomenon***

Creating a coherent relationship between the findings and the phenomenon analyzed in the reporting of the study's results presents a major challenge for authors. Adding to this difficult task is the additional task of creating a cohesive relationship between the finding themselves. Mismanaging these dual planes of focus in reporting the results--horizontality (i.e., category-to-category relationships) and verticality (i.e., category-to-phenomena relationships; Chenail, 2008) can lead to situations where the findings discussed do not seem to connect with the supposedly exemplary data presented as evidence, categories and their sub-categories do not appear to align, and the general pattern of the findings to not seem to reflect the expected output from the methodology as identified in the paper (e.g., grounded theory is the announced methodology yet the findings consist of a list of individual categories with no accompanying narrative on their interconnectedness; Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). Instances such as these usually require significant revising and may entail a return to the data for further analysis.

### ***Findings and Research Questions***

Sometimes a strange and wonderful thing happens in the field or the lab while conducting a research study. A sort of drift can occur as the data and its analysis seem to take on a life of its own and begin to take control of the study's direction. Although qualitative research's discovery-oriented and iterative qualities of qualitative research are strengths, these characteristics can also raise problems if the researcher does not properly document these emerging developments (e.g.,

proposed research questions become revised in the field leading to a change in the data collected). In some papers we have read, this shift seems to have occurred without the researcher taking notice or the author may have neglected to revise the research question and methodology section accordingly. In any event, the resulting relationship between these two sections would appear to us as being out of alignment.

### ***Findings and Implications***

The translation of a qualitative research paper's findings into its implications can present some very special challenges for authors. In some cases what is reported as implications is plagued by errors of exuberance in that the author appears to say *more* than what was found in the study and in other cases the errors are of deficiency in that author seems to say *less* than what was discovered in the research (Becker, 1995). In still other cases, the implications do not seem to be related at all to what was reported as findings. In all of the instances, the interconnections between the findings and their implications seem strained at best.

### ***Findings and Limitations***

In research studies it is quite common and usually expected for authors to place the results and findings of the study within some limiting context or perspective. In these limitations passages, the author might comment that the particular site or the sample might have been problematic for some unforeseen reasons and that this set of circumstances should be taken into consideration when judging the merits of the study and its results. In some qualitative research papers we have encountered a different kind of limitations section which we call the "qualitative researcher's lament" where the author laments that the study's limitations can be summed up in one sad observation: The study was not a quantitative one. In these instances the author's self-described limitations are centered on what was not done (e.g., random sampling) rather on limitations of what was done. To us, this sort of lament does not align very well with the study as a whole or cohere with what a limitation section for a qualitative research study should be.

### ***Posture and Language***

Posture according to Harry Wolcott (1992) asks qualitative researchers to assume a particular position which is held by the investigator throughout the study including when the study's findings are reported. In qualitative research this position or posture is informed by the researcher's choices of epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods (Crotty, 1998) and general intent of the inquiry (e.g., curiosity, confirmation, comparison, changing, collaborating, critiquing, or combining methodologies; Chenail, 2000). As noted above the relationship between these various elements can fall out of alignment in a qualitative research paper; nonetheless when it comes to an author's choice of wordings, especially in the Results and Discussion sections, these incongruities can become glaringly apparent. For example, in a paper where an author has declared the work to be organized from an interpretive posture, we as reviewers find it incongruent to read the author stating results in overly declarative language (e.g., There were five distinctive themes present in the pre-service teachers' experiences.) rather than utilizing more hedging or contextualized discourse (e.g., As a result of

the analysis, the researchers organized the pre-service teacher's experiences into five distinctive themes.) that would be more consistent with an interpretive posture.

### ***Facilitating Coherence and Creating Coherent Texts***

When we encounter papers with one of more of these problems, we work with the authors to facilitate a greater degree of coherence in their manuscripts by encouraging them to take a more interactional view of their texts and to look across the parts of their papers. We suggest ways these authors can coordinate the choices they make within the sections of their papers and to appreciate the affect choices made in one section can have on the other sections. We also share simple ways to check for alignment and to keep the key points of the paper in line.

Much of this mentoring and guidance takes place in the pages of the manuscript itself. We employ many of the editing features of Microsoft Word such as "track changes," "insert comments," and "highlighting" to identify specific problematic passages and to suggest remedies to improve the coherence of the text. We have found this intra-textual process of juxtaposing our prescriptions with the passages in question to be more helpful for authors instead of producing a separate review about the problems of the paper and then expecting the authors to make the inter-textual jump from one document containing the solutions and another paper containing the problems (Chenail, St. George, Wulff, Duffy, Laughlin, Warner, & Sahni, 2007).

As we have worked with authors to assist them in improving the textual coherence of their papers, we have also created some exercises and templates and have identified some exemplary articles that our authors have found to be helpful in learning how to improve their papers' coherence. We have also developed some techniques which help us to identify coherence issues better and to articulate these concerns to our authors.

### ***Creating a Bird's Eye View***

Writing and reviewing a paper one section at a time can make it difficult to gain a big picture of a paper and to identify where sections of the paper may be falling out of alignment. Scrolling through a paper on the computer screen or pursuing a printed version of the paper page by page still cannot quite facilitate grasping the flow of a paper. In these instances we sometimes create a "bird's eye view" of a paper by printing off a paper and laying out the pages on a large table, countertop, or floor so we can soar over the paper and quickly swoop from section to section to compare and contrast the various segments and to judge the coherence between sections and across the span of the entire paper. We especially find this technique to be valuable when reading and reviewing results sections in order to gain a good sense of the flow of the findings and to assess if there are inconsistencies with the presentation of the categories or themes and the coherence between the findings and the exemplars being re-presented. Perched high above the paper in this fashion also helps us to scan the headings being used in the paper which can also give us an indication of the paper's internal organization and help us to identify possible inconsistencies with the paper's unity.

### ***Title-Abstract Concordance***

When working on the title of the paper we ask the authors to make sure the major elements of their qualitative research study (e.g., phenomenon, perspective, and methodology)



appear in the title and then we ask the authors to repeat these words and expand their meaning in the abstract itself. We underline this suggestion by saying if a word is important enough to appear in the title, it should also be important enough to re-appear in the abstract. By creating a concordance between the wording of the title and the abstract, we suggest the paper starts with a greater degree of harmony and the repetition is also a good engagement technique to keep the reader aligned with the central focus of the paper.

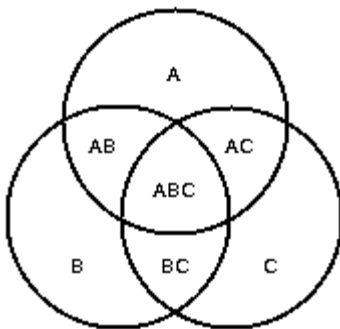
### ***The Five Sentence Abstract***

For papers which present the findings of a qualitative research study, we believe that the abstract should not be “abstract,” but rather “concrete” in its form and substance. To this end we suggest to authors that this concrete abstract should ideally consist of five sentences which could ultimately be re-presented in body of the paper itself or could be taken from the paper and placed in the abstract. In this scheme, sentence one would present the problem or focus of the study. The second sentence would present the study’s research question or hypothesis. Sentence three would present the study’s participants and methodology. The fourth sentence would present the study’s findings. Sentence five would present the author’s discussion of the findings. Although some may find this process to be unduly prescriptive, as editors we have found that the formulation of an abstract in this concise manner presents an instructive map to the paper and helps authors to organize and guide the rest of their manuscript development process.

### ***Venn Way of Knowing***

The key concepts identified in the title of the paper and expanded in the abstract become the parameters of the paper and can provide a context in which the author can situate each subsequent element of the paper and help to keep these sections in a logical or narrative alignment. We often ask authors to create a Venn diagram (see Figure 1) to help them map out the major distinctions and to locate the focus of the paper.

**Figure 1. Three set Venn diagram**



If we return to the pre-service teacher example we discussed throughout the earlier sections of this paper, we can now place pre-service teachers in Set A, urban school districts in Set B, and students in Set C. This organizational schema now can help the author coordinate the various sections that will be covered in the review of literature (e.g., Intersection BC: Literature on urban school district students) and remember that the gap for the study is situated at the convergence of all three sets (i.e., Intersection ABC). These various sets and their intersections can now become the major headings throughout the Review of Literature section and can easily be seen from the

Bird's Eye View of the manuscript. The Venn diagram can also be used to assess the citations listed in the Reference section. A simple coding exercise consisting of noting each citation's Venn set or intersection of Venn sets can help an author to see if there is a balance in the pattern of citations or if one intersection or more are under-represented in the Reference section. Such a situation could suggest that a part of the literature review is under-developed and in need of further attention.

### ***Report and Command in the Reviewing of Literature***

Gregory Bateson (1972) suggested that all messages contain a report aspect (i.e., the content of the message) and a command aspect (i.e., the relationship suggested by the message). We ask authors to make both aspects clear and consistent throughout the paper and especially in the literature review section. In making this suggestion we encourage authors to make overt and transparent why they are reporting a particular observation from the literature and how this point relates to other points they are making in the review as well as to how the particular point relates to the focus of the paper and the research questions. We hold that the most important command message to deliver in the entire literature review section is to summarize the review of the literature, identify the gap, and clearly articulate how the research questions logically flowed from that gap which in turn flowed from the literature. This step-wise prose of one "so therefore" after another can help the author show the coherent unity of the thinking that organizes the flow of the paper's narrative from the literature review to the research questions.

### ***Crotty's Figures***

Michael Crotty (1998) identified four interactional elements of social science research: Epistemology (i.e., the theory of knowledge serving as a foundation of the theoretical perspective), Theoretical Perspective (i.e., the philosophical perspective underlying the methodology), Methodology (i.e., the organizing strategy or design governing the study), and Methods (i.e., the techniques and procedures involved in the design of the study and situated within the methodology) and presented them in easy to follow figures and tables on pages 4 and 5 of his 1998 book. We often direct authors to Crotty's book and ask them to articulate their specific choices in each of these four categories and to judge how their choices cohere with each other and if they are consistently articulating these stances or postures throughout the paper. We especially find this tool effective when the author appears to be unclear whether phenomenology is the theoretical perspective and/or the methodology in the study. In these types of instances we will direct the authors to identify their choices for the four social science research elements as represented in Crotty's Figure 1 (p. 4):

1. Please identify your epistemology.
2. Please identify your theoretical perspective.
3. Please identify your research methodology.
4. Please identify your methods.

By making these selections overt, we can then begin to help the authors assess the coherence across these different choices and to make adjustments if necessary.

### ***Designer, Generic and Knock-Off Brand Methodologies***

In qualitative research some critics argue that, in the spirit of being flexible with methodological choices, authors can blur methodologies' differences and that these inconsistencies can lead to some incongruities between designer brand methodologies like grounded theory and how a particular author presents the approach and its associated methods (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Such a blurring can lead to confusing reading on the part of the reviewer due to the way the author operationalized the methodology. In some other cases, the confusion can arise if authors state they are using a designer brand methodology like grounded theory, but they really mean that they employed constant comparison, a method usually associated with grounded theory. In such instances calling a method a methodology could be seen as offering a "knock-off" brand (i.e., a methodology seemingly represented as a designer brand, but in reality some methodology different than advertised).

With our authors we ask that they stay loyal to their brand be it designer or generic and to use citations to help readers know what specific brand of methodology is being used. This pattern of utilizing citations can also help authors keep their methodological choices aligned both internally to their study and externally to best practices for that particular designer brand qualitative research methodology or for a generic brand of qualitative research methodology. We also suggest a number of papers for authors to read in which the transparency of presenting methodological choices is especially well articulated. Papers like those by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002), Conostas (1992), and Harry, Sturges, and Klingner (2005) allow authors to see some best practices in re-presenting methodologies and help them to produce methodology sections that are not only transparent, but coherently organized.

### ***Managing Errors of Deficiency and Exuberance in the Findings and Discussion***

Presenting findings and reflecting upon these results in the discussion section of a qualitative research paper are two of the most difficult acts qualitative researchers must accomplish in order to produce a quality qualitative research account. In the results or data analysis section we encourage authors to balance two lines of focus: One focal point concerns the poetics or rules of the author's selected methodology's data analysis and presentation procedures; and the other focal point emphasizes making data the center of attention and star of the overall analytical proceedings (Chenail, 1995; Sandelowski, 1998). With the first point of concentration we will ask authors to consult a number of "how to" papers in which the writers present clear and concise directions of how to re-present analytical steps and data analysis presentations. Two of our favorites in this area are Anfara, Brown, and Mangione's 2002 paper for those authors struggling with how to present a generic qualitative research methodology's analytical processes and outcomes and Harry, Sturges, and Klingner's 2005 depiction of the steps for re-presenting the steps and results of a grounded theory study. With the second focal point, we direct the authors back to their data and try to "stay as close as they can" with their words when it comes time to describe, analyze, and/or interpret the words, actions, or documents of the others in the study. Although this process can be difficult, by keeping data as the star attraction, the authors can help to minimize their errors of deficiencies and exuberances when it comes to reporting results and reflecting upon their findings (Becker, 1995).

### ***Wolcott's Posture and the Utility of Hedging***

Wolcott's emphasis on maintaining a posture is more than a mental framework for qualitative researchers; it is also a useful guide for authors and their choice of words in their papers. In the case of writing qualitative research accounts many factors and traditions suggest that authors take a hedging or hesitant posture in discussing findings, implications, and limitations (Holliday, 2007; Myers, 1989). We find this reporting style to be a logical and fitting choice for qualitative research discourse because it helps researchers to express observations in a cautious and restrained voice (Holliday, 2007) which coheres well with the interpretive and descriptive nature of qualitative research approaches. The style also allows the researcher to present findings within contextual frames (Mishler, 1979) which helps to remind readers that qualitative research is focused on exploring and reporting the particularities of locally defined knowledge. By hedging, qualitative researchers can acknowledge observations as their own and as existing within particular constraints. When encouraging authors to find their hedging voices, we often suggest exemplary articles for them to read in order to see how results can be expressed in this clear, but restrained, style. The following passage from Sandelowski and Jones' 1996 paper, "Healing Fictions': Stories of Choosing in the Aftermath of the Detection of Fetal Anomalies," is one we have used to illustrate how to hedge well in qualitative research papers:

Although the findings of this study are compromised by the small sample size and its variability, they suggest in a very tentative way that there may be subtle differences in the way choice is perceived, "exercised and burdened" [50] (p. 237) in the aftermath of the detection of fetal impairment. (p. 359)

By hedging in this fashion (i.e., they *suggest* in a *very tentative way* that *there may be subtle differences...*) qualitative researchers can accomplish what their quantitative research colleagues do with their use of probability or *p* scores when reporting statistical results—the act always reminds the reader that the findings are always to be understood within a certain degree of confidence. Whereas quantitative researchers use statistics, qualitative researchers employ words to achieve the same effect.

### ***Improving the Coherence of Qualitative Research***

Although we think we have developed some effective means for helping authors to address problems of coherence in their qualitative research manuscripts, we have also realized that the best way to improve the coherence of qualitative research is for researchers to focus on that ingredient from the very start of the conception and development of their research studies. By engineering coherence into the process from the inception of the study, many of the challenges we find in the "final drafts" submitted to scholarly journals and to academic programs could be avoided. One way to accomplish this goal is to begin writing the paper right away in the research endeavor. Qualitative research writing experts like Wolcott (2001) have longed encouraged researchers that it is never too early to start writing and that advice is quite fitting to the issue of coherence. By writing the paper as early as possible in the research process, the author can notice quite early if the parts of the story are not cohering well. For example, can relics from the research proposal still be found in the narrative even though the study as proposed is no longer the study as implemented due to adjustments made at the research site? By

juxtaposing the work in the field with the work at the word processor from the advent of the project to its completion, authors can improve both the process and the product of their qualitative inquiries and increase the chances that the final draft submitted for publication will indeed be the ultimate version they had envisioned.

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