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Forty Years in the Making: Harry Wolcott Shares his Expertise in Writing Up Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Harry Wolcott's major focus in the third edition of *Writing Up Qualitative Research* is on writing what has come to be known as qualitative or descriptive or naturalistic research. To this end Wolcott draws upon the experiences from his life in the field of qualitative inquiry from over the past 40 years to offer suggestions on every aspect of the writing process from the beginning to end of a qualitative research project. Wolcott discusses how to jump start the writing process by providing guidance ranging from when and how to begin, how to keep the writing process going, what to do by way of tightening up a manuscript, and how to prepare an article or book for publication.

Keywords

Writing, Qualitative Research, Technical Writing

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Forty Years in the Making: Harry Wolcott Shares his Expertise in *Writing Up Qualitative Research*

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*Harry Wolcott's major focus in the third edition of *Writing Up Qualitative Research* is on writing what has come to be known as qualitative or descriptive or naturalistic research. To this end Wolcott draws upon the experiences from his life in the field of qualitative inquiry from over the past 40 years to offer suggestions on every aspect of the writing process from the beginning to end of a qualitative research project. Wolcott discusses how to jump start the writing process by providing guidance ranging from when and how to begin, how to keep the writing process going, what to do by way of tightening up a manuscript, and how to prepare an article or book for publication. Key Words: Writing, Qualitative Research, and Technical Writing*

In the third edition of his *Writing up Qualitative Research*, Harry Wolcott (2008) major focus is on writing what has come to be known as qualitative or descriptive or naturalistic research. To this end Wolcott draws upon the experiences from his life in the field of qualitative inquiry from over the past 40 years to offer suggestions on every aspect of the writing process from the beginning to end of a qualitative research project. Wolcott discusses how to jump start the writing process by providing guidance ranging from when and how to begin, how to keep the writing process going, what to do by way of tightening up a manuscript, and how to prepare an article or book for publication.

Wolcott (2008) discusses how to kick off the writing process by offering suggestions ranging from when and how to begin (in Chapter 2), or how to keep going (Chapters 3 and 4), to what to do by way of tightening (Chapter 5) and what needs to be included in the front and back matter of a book (Chapter 6). In Chapters 1 through 4, he discusses how to initiate the writing process by offering suggestions ranging from when and how to begin (in Chapter 2), or how to keep going (Chapters 3 and 4). He uses honesty and humor as he focuses on the immediate task: "helping you get your thoughts and observations in presentable written form" (p. 5). He also uses honesty when he states,

I am not going to try to convince you that writing is fun. Writing is always challenging and sometimes satisfying; that is as far as I will try to go in singing its praises. You might think of it as comparable to getting up and going to work each day: Some days are more pleasant than others, but regardless of how you feel, you are expected to be "on the job," whether in an inspired state or not. (p. 5)

Wolcott (2008) suggests establishing the discipline of writing on a continuous and regular basis. Beyond the more general format, he suggests to write down ideas rather

than talk about them. Wolcott emphasizes the need to get the words out of your heads and onto paper. When the researcher renders ideas on paper, the reader can visualize the final product, actually “see” how it looks and begin to edit and revise ideas. Wolcott stresses that working ideas out on paper has served many experienced writers well. Wolcott further suggests selecting a time of day to work that is best for you, and then using discipline to write at this time each day. Wolcott also recommends that you should go through the iterative process of writing, reviewing and rewriting.

Wolcott (2008) suggests following what he refers to as “A Workable Writing Plan: Your Statement of Purpose.” He refers to the statement of purpose as the “First Commandment” or to commit to paper your statement of purpose. This is a major theme that emerges consistently throughout Wolcott’s book. The purpose statement serves as the central intent and questions for a study. Wolcott offers that this purpose statement is structurally the most uninteresting beginning however, he can think of no better way to help academic writers find, declare and maintain a focus than to have this sentence up front, not only in their thoughts but in their manuscript. Further, as part of the “Workable Writing Plan,” he suggests (a) Devising a Table of Contents, word outline or a visual map of ideas; (b) Writing out a draft and then shift and sort ideas, moving around entire paragraphs in the manuscript and finally, (c) Editing and polishing each sentence.

From these general orientation and preparation chapters Wolcott then walks his readers through the basics entailed in each major section of a qualitative report be it a paper or book manuscript. I especially liked Wolcott’s presentations the literature review and method in Chapter 4 and the results of the data analysis in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 4, Wolcott (2008) proposes an alternative to devoting an entire chapter to the literature review. Wolcott suggests that the “Literature Review” other than presenting a brief justification for a study, draws on the relevant work of others on a “when-and-as-needed” basis. He shares that sometimes the literature review is incorporated into the introduction section and at other times some professors require the literature review be a separate section. In any format, Wolcott recommends in review of the literature you

- Ensure you are not "reinventing the wheel."
- Give credit to those who have laid the groundwork for your research.
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the research problem.
- Demonstrate your understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to your research question(s).
- Show your ability to critically evaluate relevant literature information.
- Indicate your ability to integrate and synthesize the existing literature.
- Provide new theoretical insights or develop a new model as the conceptual framework for your research.
- Convince your reader that your proposed research will make a significant and substantial contribution to the literature.

Wolcott (2008) further reviews how most students’ literature reviews suffer from the following problems: lacking organization and structure, lacking focus, unity and coherence, being repetitive and verbose, failing to cite influential papers, failing to keep up with recent developments, failing to critically evaluate cited papers, citing irrelevant

or trivial references and depending too much on secondary sources. Wolcott warns that your scholarship and research competence will be questioned if any of the above applies. Lastly Wolcott suggests it is also helpful to keep in mind that you are telling a story to an audience so try to tell it in a stimulating and engaging manner without boring your reader, because such an outcome may lead to rejection of your worthy research (Wolcott).

In Chapter 4, Wolcott (2008) provides guidance in writing up your method. He suggests that after having explained and justified your choices, you can now give a report of what you actually, did. He emphasizes to make sure that you:

- Explain how you developed any pre-collection materials (e.g., interview schedule)
- Explain how you chose and contacted your participants.
- Explain who your participants were.
- Explain what instructions and information they were given.
- Give some indication of your participants' responses to the collection process.
- Give details of any processes of data treatment (note-taking, transcription, etc.)
- Explain how you analyzed your data - give enough detail for the reader to understand how you developed your codes, themes or interpretations.

In Chapter 5 Wolcott (2008) explores how you can tighten up your results so you can give an account of your data (to communicate a sense of “what it is like”) and to offer an interpretation of (to make a case for “what it means”). This reporting should be based upon your codes and/or themes, but there is plenty of scope for you to be imaginative in both the way that you choose to structure your analysis section, and in the way that you choose to lay out your evidence. Many of your decisions will depend on your chosen approach, but Wolcott offers the following general tips:

- Write your analysis section in a way that allows you to move gradually from the descriptive to the interpretative.
- Tell a “story” about your data - make sure that you link and develop your points as you go along.
- In terms of tightening, support your account of the data with plenty of excerpts, quotes and phrases from the data source.
- Always give some indication of the location of your chosen excerpts (e.g. a transcript and line number).
- It is important that your argument is persuasive, and that means, firstly, that there is plenty of evidence to back it up.
- Try to make your case *transparent* - this means try to make it so that the reader can see how the data has been coded, how codes have led to themes, and how themes have been incorporated into your interpretative account.
- Provide a “key” for your codes and themes if you choose to number or abbreviate them.
- The use of quotes also has the advantages of giving the participant a “voice” in your research (often an aim of qualitative approaches), and of offering your

reader the chance to make some “validity checks” of your interpretation of the data against the data itself (Wolcott).

Lastly, Wolcott (2008) talks about discussing your findings-what do they mean? He suggests you relate them back to the problems that you identified in your introduction. Now that you know what you know, can you add something to your original argument? Contextualize your analysis-what are the implications of your findings for the world ‘out there?’ It is possible to say plenty of interesting things about your work, even if your study is a single-participant case study-just remember that there is a difference between generalizing from your data to the wider world (which you should not do), and relating your data to the wider world (which you should do). At the very least, you will have identified something about the cultural understanding of particular phenomena, and this understanding will have come from “out there.”

After thoroughly covering the details of developing your manuscript, Wolcott (2008) discusses issues about academic publishing in Chapter 7. He indicates that major publishers have an agenda to meet when looking for manuscripts to publish. Whereas once they were simply looking for well-written manuscripts, today they are also looking for marketable authors with ideas for future titles. Rejections are not uncommon for aspiring authors who now need to become savvier and more pro-active to ensure that their manuscript is noticed amongst the hundreds of manuscripts left waiting on an editors' desk. Although all publishers may appear to be similar; however, they do in reality differ quite substantially, so Wolcott emphasizes that you need to tailor your proposal to a particular publisher. He advises that you craft a proposal that says why you're approaching this particular publisher and why you believe your book will be a great fit with them (Wolcott).

Wolcott (2008) manages to clearly provide suggestions on every aspect of the writing research process from the beginning to end. He uses humor, compassion, intelligence, vocabulary, examples and illustrations to make the book inviting to read and accessible. It is excellent as a review for someone who is writing their thesis, or for a new graduate student to grasp an understanding of writing up qualitative research. This is a "how to" and "what to do" book. It does not go into the philosophy behind each of the qualitative methods or the history of their development. When you are clearly writing up a research project, it isn't philosophy that helps you! This book is a definite must for anyone interested in understanding or writing up qualitative research, or writing a qualitative proposal. Highly recommended!!

Reference

Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Writing up qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Author Note

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