

Top Ten Musings about Publishing Qualitative Manuscripts:

Managing the Devil in the Details

John M. Palladino

A Presentation Handout

Panel of Journal Editors on Ins-and-Outs of Publishing

Qualitative Research Conference

St. Louis, MO

March 4, 2011

John M. Palladino, Ph.D. (john.palladino@emich.edu)

Eastern Michigan University

Managing Editor, *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research* (JEQR)

Abstract

The purpose of this presentation was to engage in dialogue with editors of other qualitative journals and conference participants about the common roadblocks that hinder the publication possibilities for qualitative research studies. All audience participants were conference presenters and/or qualitative researchers, novice level and above. The format was designed to address the often dismissed minute details about publication that limit qualitative researchers' chances of publishing their manuscripts. Thus, the presentation focused more on a manuscript's format than content. The list that follows includes ten such details, each with examples and recommendations of how to address it. The intent was for conference participants to use the list as a quick checklist throughout their writing process and as a self-editing tool once finished writing a manuscript. The ten recommendations were all subjective and based on the author's experience of communicating blind-review feedback to authors who submit manuscripts to the *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research* (JEQR).

The Writing Process: Tips for Avoiding Potential Problems

1. **Remember the three “tell” rule: (1) Tell us what you will share throughout the manuscript, (2) tell us, and (3) tell us what you just told us.** This standard rule of junior high writing is paramount for qualitative writers. You have passion for your topic and the study you conducted. Your prolonged engagement with participants may hinder your ability to “step back” and understand how the nuances of your study might confuse a reader. Therefore, make sure to provide a blunt thesis statement at the onset of your manuscript, one that you revisit several times throughout. This process is especially important for doctoral students who cut and paste certain sections of their dissertation into a manuscript; such a procedure can oftentimes result in a lack of cohesion.
2. **Highlight the first and last sentences of each paragraph.** Doing so will force you to determine if a link between the last sentence of one paragraph connects with the first sentence of the next paragraph. A “flow” throughout the manuscript should exist.
3. **Discuss citations versus simply inserting them in your narrative.** Inserting a citation in your narrative is awkward unless you discuss it. Examples:
 - a. Awkward wording: Teachers often ignore the stress they endure (Smith 2010).
 - b. Better wording: Smith (2010) surveyed 1,000 Detroit teachers about their responses to their stress. The author concluded that a significant number of respondents reported that they ignore their stress and its impact on their well-being.

In the first example, the reader does not know the context of Smith’s work. The second example contextualizes Smith’s scholarship for the reader.

4. Do not use qualitative “buzz” words without discussing them. Although the qualitative research community recognizes terms such as “member checks,” “triangulation,” and “open coding,” it is imperative to describe how the terms relate to your manuscript. Examples:

- a. Awkward wording: We used member checks to verify our data.
- b. Better wording: We employed member checks to verify our data and began by contacting our first two participants because....based on this information, we then...

If you cite specific qualitative authors (e.g., Creswell, Seidman), make sure to explain *what* the author stated about the qualitative concept and *how* it relates to your research.

Example: We employed Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series method. The author explained that this process involves.....We identified a connection between the process and the study we designed..... Furthermore, use an author’s most recent publication/edition.

5. Write a purposeful literature review. A literature review should not read as a “she said/he said” laundry list. Select the most relevant citations for your topic and synthesize them into an organized, thematic narrative. Conclude with a clear connection between the review and the study you conducted, thereby creating a natural link from the Literature Review to the Method section. Make sure to revisit and incorporate the literature review in your discussion section. The reader should not have to guess how your study relates to the literature. Remember, editors will often select reviewers who likewise conduct research about your topic. The literature review will be the first thing they read and might evaluate the worthiness of your research on your ability to synthesize literature.

6. Quote your participants according to the journal's specific guidelines: Quoting

participants is standard writing in qualitative journals. However, each journal has specific formats for doing so. Make sure to review published manuscripts in a specific journal and determine the standard format. In addition, print a copy of your manuscript without any participant quotes and ask yourself, "Does my manuscript make sense?" If it does not, chances are you have strung quotes together and/or haphazardly placed them throughout the manuscript. Much like a story on NPR, your manuscript should include quotes that *enhance* a narrative that could stand alone without the quotes.

7. Scan your manuscript for common grammar mistakes that may result in unfavorable views of your writing and overall manuscript submission. Common errors include the following:

- a. "ly" adverbs. Overuse of adverbs results in awkward reading (e.g., joyfully, hopefully)
- b. Authors often misuse the word "which." Rewrite sentences without this word.
- c. Scan your paper and make sure that you use "who" when referencing a person/people instead of "that."
- d. Remove all forms of "belief" and "feel" unless a participant used the actual word.

You cannot assume one's beliefs and feelings:

- i. Misuse: The participants all felt upset about their employer's use of differential pay.
- ii. Revision: The participants raised their voices and stated their resentment when I questioned them about their employer's use of differential pay.
- e. Avoid the overuse of prepositional phrases within sentences. Examples:

- i. Overuse: The families told stories about the loss of fertility of their ancestors.
 - ii. Revised: The families told stories about their ancestors' loss of fertility.
- f. Rewrite all passive language into active voice:
 - i. Passive language: The participants were given the interview protocol ahead of the scheduled interview.
 - ii. Active language: I gave the participants the interview protocol ahead of the scheduled interview.

Consider using a writing text as a reference when conducting a self-edit of your written work. Strunk and White's (2008) *Elements of Style* and Henson's (2005) *Writing for Publication* are two good reference books that provide bullet lists of writing mistakes. Use your software's "search" function and locate and edit any of these mistakes.

- 8. Double check all references.** Authors sometimes include references that do not appear in the manuscript and vice versa. Print your reference list and double check it against all in-text citations. Furthermore, make sure that all references are in APA format, a necessity before a manuscript can appear in print. Most common mistakes include citing an edited book without naming the specific author of a chapter within the book, including issue numbers for journals with continuous paging throughout a volume, and providing non-working URLs for web-based citations.

Submission Process and Communication with an Editor

- 9. Editors publish. Reviewers rank.** Blind reviews are necessary for a journal's overall integrity within the academy. Editors must account for feedback from their reviewers. At

the same time, editors must also consider the “big picture” about a submitted manuscript and determine if the content *and* writing quality are sufficient for publication. For example, reviewers may praise the merits of an author’s research and subsequent manuscript. The editor, however, may cringe about improper APA formatting, missing citations, inconsistent dates throughout the manuscript for a particular source, and other glitches that must be addressed. Likewise, an editor may receive mediocre reviews and determine the manuscript worthy of publication because of the “low maintenance” editing it requires. Present your editor with a crisp, nearly flawless manuscript to enhance your success with publication.

10. Resubmission invites are golden opportunities. Accept them as such. An invitation to revise and resubmit a manuscript is an editor’s quest to help you succeed. Always welcome the feedback you receive, even if harsh. Blunt feedback is necessary and increases the likelihood of a successful resubmission. Responding with a defensive standpoint conveys your unwillingness to assist the editor with his/her responsibility of appeasing reviewers and publishing a flawless manuscript. Consider revising your manuscript with your software’s “tracking” program. Submit this tracked version along with a “clean” copy for your editor, thereby presenting a visual of the changes you made in response to the feedback you received.