

Appraising Qualitative Research Reports: A Developmental Approach

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In this paper, the author discusses the development of an appraisal instrument designed for evaluating submissions to The Qualitative Report—the TQR Rubric. Following a description of the context of TQR, she explains what led to the development of the TQR Rubric and describes its components. She concludes by presenting the plan of implementation of the rubric and a discussion of how the TQR Rubric's elements relate to notions of quality presented in the literature. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Appraising, Quality, Peer Review Process, Social Constructionism.

There is a rich and helpful body of academic literature related to writing and appraising qualitative research. This literature includes a discussion of what constitutes quality in qualitative research, as well as what contributes to a quality research report. In addition, there are several appraisal tools available to help those seeking to assess the quality of qualitative research reports. All of the Editors of *The Qualitative Report* think about how to evaluate qualitative research reports on a regular basis. We consider this issue both from a process perspective and a quality control perspective. In this paper, I describe how we as Editors of TQR came to the decision to develop our own appraisal tool for papers submitted to the journal and describe the tool that we developed—the TQR Rubric (Chenail, Cooper, Patron, & TQR Associates, 2011), as well as the developmental approach that guides our editorial processes and products.

Quality in Qualitative Research

Flick (2007) points out that the question of quality in qualitative research can be addressed on four different levels: the researcher interested in learning how well they have conducted their research, funding bodies seeking to determine what studies should be funded or evaluating funded research, journal editors deciding which research reports to publish, and readers hoping to learn what research they can rely on in their own work. In this paper we address quality in qualitative research from the perspective of journal editors. As Flick notes, “Here, the quality issue is in some way doubled. Consideration of rigour and criteria in the research is seen as essential if the research is to be published. The research in its presentation has to be linked back to existing literature, for example—which is a criterion at the level of presentation” (p. 5).

In the peer review process of reviewing manuscripts for journals, “a growing number of guidelines for assessing research papers (articles, proposals) are developed, used and published in different fields of application” (Flick, 2007, p. 22). For example, Kitto, Chesters, and Grbich (2008) describe how they assess the quality of submissions to the *Medical Journal of Australia* where their focus is on rigour of research and

transferability of findings. In addition to journals having their own preferences for manuscript quality, other groups have developed their own tools to appraise completed articles as part of systematic reviews of previously published work. The recent work by Hannes, Lockwood, and Pearson (2010) is one attempt to provide a comparison of three such appraisal instruments available online free of charge: the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) tool, the critical appraisal skills program (CASP) tool, and the evaluation tool for qualitative studies (ETQS). In addition to these qualitative research specific instruments, many journal editors use the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010) as a guide to the quality of a manuscript. However, as Polkinghorne (2010) observes, the APA author guidelines were originally developed based on quantitative research reports, which can sometimes present a challenge to authors of qualitative research reports.

In this environment of transparency regarding the articulation of what constitutes quality in qualitative research reporting, it is apparent that the context of the appraising body is an important factor in what the reviewer demarcates as quality and how these preferences are communicated to the general public as well as to potential and actual authors. In this spirit of localization and transparency, the Editors of *The Qualitative Report* embarked on a process of self-reflection of what constitutes quality in qualitative research writing from our local perspective and history. The goal of such an endeavor was first to make the *TQR* preferences overt to the journal's internal community and second to produce a communication device through which these practices could be made more transparent.

TQR Context

Each academic journal has its own review process, editorial policies, and guiding philosophy. At *The Qualitative Report*, there are a few characteristics that we feel are central to our "brand": a developmental approach, transparency, fostering a qualitative research community, and a focus on methodology.

Developmental Approach

All of the Editors of *The Qualitative Report* are committed to bringing a developmental approach to our work with both authors and editorial board members. Several years ago, this commitment led to the creation of the Manuscript Development Program (MDP), a review process that involves direction communication between authors and reviewers, and a team approach to supporting authors in developing their qualitative research reports until they are ready for publication. (For more information on the MDP, please see our editorial statement at <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/Editorial/editstm.html> as well as *A Guide for TQR Authors* (Chenail, Wulff, & St. George, n.d.). In 2010, we introduced the Reviewer Development Program (RDP) to similarly support the professional development of our editorial board members. In this program, reviewers have the opportunity to advance within the editorial board based on quality and timeliness of reviews and become Assistant Editors and then Associate Editors.

In addition to the MDP and RDP, our developmental approach contributes to the training we provide our editorial board members. This includes providing new reviewers with appraisal tools and an annual in-person training session held at the annual *TQR* conference, conducting one-on-one training with new Assistant Editors regarding their role in our review process and how they can interface with the online manuscript tracking system we use, msTracker. We also send a quarterly editorial board newsletter to all members of the editorial board with tips for reviewing, policy updates, and other information to help them in their editorial work. In addition, we solicit information from our editorial board members regarding their accomplishments, publications, and promotions, and feature these achievements in the *TQR* News section of our website, as well as publishing them in our weekly newsletter, *The Weekly Qualitative Report*.

Transparency

Our commitment to transparency is evident in several key features and practices of *The Qualitative Report*. Perhaps most obvious is the fact that we are an open-access journal. Complete journal contents are available online free of charge. Besides our journal contents, our review process is a transparent review process, in which authors, reviewers, and editors communicate openly with one another, rather than employing a blind review process. This review process has been recognized by the Soros Foundation, which provided a grant to help us develop this open editorial process. In addition, all of our communications as an editorial board are available online for anyone interested in reading the editorial board quarterly newsletters and the minutes of the annual *TQR* editorial board meeting. We feel that authors and readers deserve to know the thinking guiding the editorial processes and decisions of the journal.

Community-Building

A third characteristic of the *TQR* “brand” is a focus on fostering a sense of community among the qualitative research community. The developmental approach and transparency described above contribute to building a sense of trust and openness among our community of authors, reviewers, editors, and readers. In the past few years, we have taken additional steps to develop the sense of a qualitative research community. In 2009, we started *The Weekly Qualitative Report*, a weekly newsletter available online and sent as an email to subscribers. *The Weekly* demonstrates that our commitment to qualitative researchers goes far beyond the bounds of *The Qualitative Report*. It includes listings of conferences and calls for papers associated with many other organizations. We feature current publications from many different journals that would report on qualitative studies. *The Weekly* also announces new issues of other qualitative research journals. We don’t see ourselves as in competition with these other journals, but as peers within a larger qualitative research community. The year after the launch of *The Weekly*, in January 2010, we held the first *TQR* Conference, to provide a forum for qualitative research practitioners, teachers, and students to come together to share their discoveries and experiences related to practicing qualitative inquiry. The *TQR* 3rd Annual Conference will take place in January 2012. All of these activities and products reflect our commitment to community-building.

Focus on Methodology

A final feature of the TQR brand is a focus on methodology. Some academic journals that publish research reports prefer brief methods sections, as they wish to emphasize other aspects of the report, such as the theories informing the study and the study findings. At *The Qualitative Report*, we highlight the methodological details, asking authors to explain the reasoning behind design choices and to discuss the literature that guided those choices. We don't publish papers that present theoretical arguments alone; articles published in TQR need to either be reporting on a particular qualitative research study or offering commentary and recommendations on a specific aspect of the practice of qualitative research.

Theoretical Perspective

As may be seen from the priorities and perspective shared above, we approach our work with *The Qualitative Report* from a philosophical and epistemological orientation rooted in the theory of social constructionism, focused on collaboration and a developmental emphasis. Perhaps it is no surprise that all of the TQR Editors are also Associates of the Taos Institute, "a community of scholars and practitioners concerned with the social processes essential for the construction of reason, knowledge, and human value" (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/>).

TQR Rubric

Development of the TQR Rubric

As noted above, the Editors of *The Qualitative Report* have made it a priority to provide constructive, developmental support and mentoring to both authors and reviewers of qualitative research reports. There have been a variety of steps and tools that have been employed in this effort over the years. The Manuscript Development Program resulted in marginal comments providing targeted constructive feedback directly on the submitted manuscript. As the TQR Editors discovered that the same comments were proving to be helpful on paper after paper, the editors developed a document called *TQR Ready Review Comments*, so that editors could copy and paste (and modify as needed) these comments for authors, rather than composing them anew for each manuscript review. Initially this document was available only to the TQR Editors; however, in the spirit of both development and transparency, a revised and updated version of the *TQR Ready Review Comments* was made available to the entire editorial board in the Spring of 2011 (see Spring 2011 TQR Editorial Board Newsletter at <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/BoardNews/index.html>).

While the Ready Review comments have been very useful for the TQR editorial board, authors have not had access to these comments in advance of submission, unless they took it upon themselves to research the TQR editorial board newsletter archives, which is highly unlikely! Thus, authors have not been able to take these constructive suggestions into account as they develop their papers. We came to feel that it was more supportive of authors' development to provide this type of information up front, so to

speak. In addition, the scale of submissions to the journal has been growing significantly as a result of the community-building initiatives such as the *TQR* Annual Conference and the development of *The Weekly Qualitative Report*. While we celebrate this increase in submissions, it has led to our editorial board, especially our Editors, being rather overwhelmed by the quantity of manuscripts for which they are responsible. To aid authors and reduce the burden on reviewers and editors, we wanted to communicate as much helpful information to authors as possible prior to submission. In the past, we had made use of the CASP appraisal tool (see Chenail, 2011), but we had come to feel that it did not address all of the priorities encompassed by the *TQR* brand. All of these factors contributed to the decision to develop our own appraisal tool, designed to address the components of the *TQR* brand.

To format our appraisal tool we selected a rubric which is “an instrument based on a set of criteria for evaluating student work” (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2007, p. 42). In our work as faculty members (e.g., Chenail, 2009), we use rubrics

to make explicit, objective, and consistent the criteria for performance that otherwise would be implicit, subjective, and inconsistent if a single letter grade were used as an indicator of performance. Rubrics delineate what knowledge, content, skills, and behaviors are indicative of various levels of learning or mastery. Ideally, “grading” rubrics are shared with students before an exam, presentation, writing project, or other assessment activity. Conscious awareness of what he or she is expected to learn helps the student organize his or her work, encourages self-reflection about what is being learned and how it is being learned, and allows opportunities for self-assessment during the learning process. (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2007, p. 42)

We have found the structure of the rubric to be one that allows us to present the key elements of an assignment in a simple and clear manner. The tool also helps us to communicate progress as students revise and resubmit their work. Lastly, rubrics, when shared with students at the beginning of a course, provide a self-assessment tool through which students can create, access, and revise their works before submitting them for formal review. For all of the reasons we decided to create our appraising tool in the form of a criterion-based rubric consisting of multiple sections enabling us to provide assessment and feedback in both quantitative and qualitative forms.

Elements of the TQR Rubric

The rubric that we have developed is divided into ten sections, which we refer to as “performance areas” (please see Appendix to review entire TQR Rubric, Chenail, Cooper, Patron, & TQR Associates, 2011). Several of these performance areas are typical for checklists or appraisal tools for research reports, such as “Introductory Section,” “Literature Review,” “Methods Section,” and “Results Section,” while other performance areas would appear to be unique to the TQR Rubric, such as a performance area for “Coherence” (see Appendix). Yet even in the “typical” performance areas, there

may be some atypical items, reflecting the unique priorities and brand of TQR. We highlight a few examples of this below and encourage you to refer to the complete TQR Rubric in the Appendix for more information.

In keeping with our focus on methodology, we include criteria that both the title and key words for the paper should include a term indicating the qualitative research method used in the study. In addition, in the “Methods Section” performance area, we ask authors not only to provide a step-by-step description of the procedures used in the study, but also to include their rationale for each design choice, as well as an indication of the methodological literature they referred to in making those design choices. The “Methods Section” criteria also indicate that we would like authors to tell readers what constitutes data in their study, and to provide examples to illustrate each step of data analysis.

In keeping with our emphasis on transparency, the TQR Rubric (Chenail, Cooper, Patron, & TQR Associates, 2011) includes an entire performance area on the “Role of Researcher.” The papers that we publish in the journal include an explicit description of the researcher’s context, interest in the topic under study, investment in the study, and intentions related to the study findings. Another way in which we encourage authors to be transparent is to include criteria such as “Makes clear who did what throughout study procedures” and “Active voice.” Anyone who has received a review in the Manuscript Development Program has likely received a request to shift from passive to active voice; we feel this is essential in being transparent about the role of the researcher(s). Another example of criteria to support transparency is a requirement that authors include within their paper a statement of the approval they received from an Institutional Review Board or other third party to assure that the safety and well-being of participants was addressed prior to the study being conducted.

Discussion

Multiple tools are available for authors and reviewers to assist in the evaluation of qualitative research reports. As Kitto, Chesters, & Grbich (2008) note, “In themselves, these criteria do not ensure rigour. However, they can strengthen rigour if they are used in concordance with a broader understanding of qualitative research design, data collection and analysis” (p. 243). The usefulness of any given appraisal tool is determined in large part by the objectives of the user. In our case, our objective for the TQR Rubric (Chenail, Cooper, Patron, & TQR Associates, 2011) is not just to assess the validity of a study’s findings, but to evaluate the quality of the report, where our criteria for quality reflect the TQR brand; and, to communicate our sense of rigor to authors and the larger qualitative research community.

One of the priorities of TQR is transparency, and we recognize that we are not alone in valuing transparency. Flick (2007) observes that “transparency becomes relevant in several ways for enhancing the quality of qualitative research. Transparency means in general to make the research process, in its steps and in the decisions that influenced how data and results were produced, understandable to readers in the broadest sense” (p. 137). For us, transparency is not only important as a means of clear communication, and thus a measure of the trustworthiness of the findings, but transparency is also a reflection of the social constructionist perspective we bring to

reviewing qualitative research reports—a perspective which acknowledges that the results and the research report are constructions of the researcher.

Regarding the use of checklists and rubrics, some people raise concerns about taking a one-size-fits-all approach to evaluating qualitative research (Barbour, 2001 cited in Flick, 2007). “The core of this problem is that the term ‘qualitative research’ is kind of an umbrella term. Under this umbrella, approaches assemble or are packed that have very different theoretical backgrounds, methodological principles, research issues and aims” (Flick, 2007, p. 6). Referring to the differences between grounded theory and conversation analysis, he then asks, “Is it possible then to evaluate these two examples with the same criteria once it comes to funding or publication, or do we need different criteria for each, taking the special features of both into account—without becoming completely relativistic in our judgments about good and bad research?” (Flick, 2007, p. 7). We feel we address this concern in our emphasis on coherence; we are not asking that all research reports be written in the same manner, but that the results be reported in a way that aligns with the methodology indicated. Through our transparency and coherence in the *TQR* Rubric (Chenail, Cooper, Patron, & TQR Associates, 2011), we are asking authors do the same: Be transparent in communicating the choices you made to conceive, implement, and report qualitative research and show how these individual choices cohere with each other across the researching endeavor.

Another concern raised regarding the use of appraisal instruments is that the instrument will end up determining, and thus limiting, how research is reported (Barbour, 2001, cited in Flick, 2007). As journal editors, we must confess we find this “limitation” less problematic. After all, we are indicating by means of the *TQR* Rubric (Chenail, Cooper, Patron, & TQR Associates, 2011) what we value and wish to publish in our journal; thus, we encourage authors to use the *TQR* Rubric as a developmental checklist to provide useful feedback throughout the writing process. While recognizing that this appraisal tool may reduce the creativity and range of reporting styles that end up being published in our journal, a focus on detailed explanations of methodological choices and rationales is part of the “TQR brand” and therefore, we see the rubric as a developmental tool to help authors be more transparent about their research rather than a limitation.

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Appendix

The Qualitative Report (TQR) Rubric

Minimum 13 points required to enter TQR Manuscript Development Program (MDP)

Total points out of 20:

Author:	Title:			Points:
Performance Area and Criteria	Non-Performance: includes none or minimal important elements of performance area (0 points)	Partial: includes some but not all important elements of performance area (1 point)	Complete: includes all (or almost all) important elements of performance area (2 points)	
1. <u>Opening Elements:</u> A. Title is 12 words or less B. Title indicates most important elements of report, i.e., population, focus, methodology, and findings C. Abstract is 200 words or less D. Abstract reflects organizational structure of paper (i.e., presents problem/focus of study, research questions, participants, methodology, findings, key points from discussion of findings) E. Paper includes Key Words F. Key Words include term for research method	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
2. <u>Introductory Section:</u> A. Statement of research problem B. Statement of research objectives C. Indication of why local study has global importance D. Statement of rationale for study E. Naming of intended audience F. Indication of benefit of research (answers the "so what?" question)	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
3. <u>Literature Review:</u> A. Offers synopsis of current literature on topic in terms of content and research processes used B. Demonstrates gap in literature re: content and/or research methods C. Explains how study will fill gap D. Provides reflections on literature vs. series of reports on sources E. Includes literature that helps define phenomenon shows what is known and not known about phenomenon F. Explains how literature led to research questions	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
4. <u>Role of Researcher:</u> A. Describes researcher's context, interest in topic and investment in study/intentions B. Makes clear who did what throughout study procedures C. Provides statement of IRB or other third-party approval secured to conduct study D. Describes how ethical issues were considered and addressed E. Describes how researcher bias was addressed F. Discusses steps taken to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of findings	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
5. <u>Methods Section:</u> A. Explains how research design fits with research objectives B. Explains what type of qualitative inquiry was used C. Provides step by step description of procedures, with corresponding headings D. Describes sampling strategy and participant recruitment E. Explains steps of data generation, collection, and data analysis, as well as rationale for each design choice	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	

F. Cites literature used to guide procedures G. Tells reader what constitutes data H. Provides examples to illustrate steps of data analysis				
6. <u>Results Section:</u> A. Tells reader how results will be organized B. Tells reader how results are derived from analysis C. Findings produced consistent with methodology indicated D. Presents exemplary evidence to support findings E. Explains how each excerpt supports assertions/findings F. Each excerpt illustrates unique qualitative distinction (rather than including multiple quotes to illustrate one finding) G. Presents demographic information of participants in composite form	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
7. <u>Discussion Section:</u> A. Does not include discussion in results section B. Does not include findings in discussion section C. Does not repeat information already presented in paper D. Discusses how findings compare/contrast with what was known and/or not known in the literature E. Discusses limitations of study F. Discusses position on generalizability of results G. Discusses implications of findings H. Indicates area of future research I. Ends paper with discussion section	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
8. <u>References:</u> A. Citations in text correspond to sources in reference list B. References are in APA style	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
9. <u>Writing:</u> A. Effective use of headings B. Fluent English language C. Clear, precise writing D. Correct grammar and usage E. Avoids bias in language F. Strong mechanics of style G. Active voice H. Contextualized language reflects interpretive stance	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	
10. <u>Coherence:</u> A. Between title and abstract B. Between abstract and body of paper C. Between focus of study and literature reviewed D. Between research questions and methodology E. Between methodology presented and methods employed F. Between methodology and findings G. Between findings and research questions H. Between findings and stated implications	Elements needing attention:	Elements needing attention:	All important elements included. -or- Only the following element is missing:	

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