

Unit 28

Writing Up Qualitative Data

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Learning Objectives

It is expected that after reading Unit 28, you will be able to grasp the following crucial inputs for the purpose of writing your own research findings.

- ❖ An understanding of the kinds of problems you are likely to face at the time of starting to write up your research results.
- ❖ It is always better to first understand what you have in mind and then try to express the same in writing.
- ❖ Do not delay the task of writing.
- ❖ Appreciate the different styles of writing.
- ❖ What you write the first time is always a draft only.

28.1 Introduction

Unit 28 is principally written for research students and the neophytes in sociological and social anthropological research. Such research writing happens to be largely qualitative in nature. With skilled, well-known writers and authors, it shares the issues of writing up qualitative research, handling the world of words, an area of apprenticeship on which not many people have written. This unit reflects upon the *modus operandi*[®] of creating a text, a piece of writing which is a product of field research.

28.2 Problems of Writing Up

How important is the issue of “writing up qualitative research” in a text of or a seminar on research methods? Perhaps not much, as can be gathered from a cursory glance at the contents of most books in research methods or from courses prescribed for pre- and post-fieldwork levels. These books and articles intuitively believe that writing is not a problematic area. One knowledgeable about language in which the text is to be written, with a good control over the technical vocabulary, can write

provided he has the relevant facts at his disposal and a satisfactory understanding of the theoretical apparatus. In this line of thinking, writing is not a problem; what is of concern is how to collect and analyse data. This is indeed a subject of serious study. Now we know why the overall emphasis of books on research methods is on techniques and tools of data collection, the procedures of analysis, and the presentation of data.

But have a look at the “quieter” side - I call it “quieter” because researchers, writers, and authors generally do not speak about it, at least in public. If writing were such an easy endeavour, then why is it that the open-ended questions in a questionnaire are left unanswered by literate respondents, or are often answered in two words, often written obliquely, “not applicable”? Survey researchers are frustrated on seeing this response to their questions. To combat the low response rate, they either often plan to increase the size of their sample assuming that some respondents would definitely answer all questions, or replace open-ended questions with close-ended thinking that the latter are answered with greater facility. Or else, as happens invariably, the questionnaire is administered as a schedule, in which the investigator reads the questions before the respondent and notes down his replies verbatim. Researchers who have worked with questionnaires and schedules have pointed out time and again that respondents find writing difficult, as some kind of an onerous burden. However, they take delight in talking about the topics on which the researcher needs information provided those areas are not considered taboo in their cultures. The observation that open-ended questions remain unanswered, or are callously answered, does not imply that the respondent does not want to answer them, or is less serious about answering them, but that s/he finds writing stressful, burdensome, difficult, or one which exposes her/ his level of education. Or, s/he may be afraid of writing the facts, because against the background of the legal value of “written records”, writing is proof whilst speech may not be. But this is a separate issue, not to be broached here.

Writing can equally be a phase of trial and tribulation for researchers (see Box 28.1).

Box 28.1 Writing, a Phase of Trial and Tribulation

Srivastava describes the process in the following words.

“Although aware of it from the time (1977) I read for an M.Phil. Degree in Chinese studies, I became acutely aware of the problems of writing up qualitative research and the pangs through which the researchers pass while working on a doctoral dissertation (in 1988) in social anthropology at Cambridge. For those who had returned from fieldwork, the Cambridge social anthropology department those days had a seminar titled “Writing-up Seminar”, in which the doctoral students presented their fieldwork experiences and the chapters of their dissertations they had written. As members of the teaching faculty often attended these seminars, the presenters of these papers were exceptionally nervous, but knew full well that academic interventions of senior scholars would profit them greatly. The informal conversation between the students this seminar group used to pivot on “how the writing was coming up”. I avidly listened to their experiences

of writing up, and like fieldworkers, queried them on the “writing difficulties” they were facing. Was it vocabulary, the battery of technical terms? Or, the correct grammar? Or, the theory? Or, some other inhibition? In so far as the ethnographic facts were concerned, the researchers seemed to me confident, having stayed with people long enough to know them reasonably well. In fact, the Cambridge supervisors insisted on a long field stay, not less than one year, and the examples of students who stayed with the communities they had studied for longer duration - two years or more - were always given in pre-fieldwork seminars.”

Surely, the students from China, Japan, Korea, Bangladesh, Spain, Russia, some African countries, and Iran lacked good command over English, thus failing to express their arguments well. Sometimes, they also registered their incompetence in handling and writing abstract pieces in English. They were also known for writing up their dissertations slowly. Because they could easily afford expensive education, quite a few of them went for private tuitions in English and engaged the services of professional editors. Thus, apparently, the problem of non-English speaking students lay in their inadequate command over English, the language in which they were expected to write their dissertations. In order to explore if the problem rested in their lack of ability over a foreign language or in some other factor, I often asked them how they would fare if they were to write their research works in their native languages. Most of them said that they could write letters in their mother tongues but not dissertations. One might think here that the native speakers of English would not suffer from “writing blocks”, but that was not true. Like the others, I learnt from my interviews with them, they also described writing as a difficult process, be in their own language or foreign languages.

A conclusion one may draw from this is that although command over language in which the text would be written plays a significant role, its lack is not the only impediment to writing up qualitative research. Because people face genuine problems in writing, that could be one of the reasons why many of them resort to plagiarism. Perhaps, the researchers dealing with quantitative facts do not encounter the same problems of writing up as do qualitative researchers, a point to which I shall return later. It has been observed that certain set formats - thumbnail designs - are available for quantitative researches, which guide each piece of research. This is, however, not the case with qualitative research because the format, the chapters, and sections and subsections will emerge from the type of data the investigator has at his command. As each fieldwork is unique, so is each piece of ethnography.

Complete Reflection and Action 28.1 and discover the kind of problems you as a researcher are likely to face.

Reflection and Action 28.1

Write four pages on Field Research. After finishing the text, recount the problems you faced. Explain briefly the nature of each problem you encountered.

28.3 Grasp and Then Render

Clifford Geertz, in his famous article that advocated the idea of “thick description” (1973), says that the fieldworker first of all grasps, and then renders. Grasping is done using a set of techniques and methods, the tool-kit of anthropologists. In his standard textbook on anthropological methods, Pelto (1970) writes that the fieldworker does not have at his disposal a fixed assemblage of techniques, arrayed in a particular manner. What he knows are the generic types of fieldwork techniques and methods that he has acquired as a part of his theoretical training. But he also knows, as we have said earlier, that each fieldwork is not only unique; it is also an experiment with the basic fieldwork techniques and methods. Whether a specific technique or method is useful in a particular fieldwork situation will depend upon the conditions prevailing in the community under study at that point of time. Depending upon the context of study, the fieldworker will combine various techniques and methods. He may also improvise new techniques and methods or make a significant contribution to the already existing tool-kit. An important part of sociological writings is an account of one’s experiences of handling the repertoire of techniques and methods in a fieldwork (see B eteille and Madan, ed., 1975; Srivastava, 1991; Thapan, ed., 1998; Srinivas *et al.*, ed., 2002).

“Rendering” is what we give to the world of academics, to the public, and to all those concerned. We can render through a broad range of activities, such as, we may write academic reports, articles, monographs; we may deliver lectures and make seminar presentations on our studies; we may show slides, pictures, films, videos that we have prepared on the people of our study; we may narrate stories about the people or recite poems we wrote on them or during the fieldwork; we may exhibit local material cultural artifacts and give their descriptions; we may appear on a T.V. talk show and talk about our field studies; we may write for newspapers and popular journals, or write a script for an ethnographic play or fiction; or just chat about our studies and the people of those studies in pubs. In other words, all these options are viable and fieldworkers often resort to them.

But of these, the most important, and also academically uplifting, is the realm of publications, which includes books, articles and monographs, the pieces of serious research. In the world of academics, no substitute exists for publications. There was a time when writing was the only thinkable way to present the results of one’s fieldwork. Now, other ways have come into existence, and in recent years we also write for certain web sites, write e-books. Earlier, we wrote long hand or on the typewriter. Now, the technology of writing has changed - we write on the computer or use a Dictaphone, the taped text being transcribed later. We also tape our lectures, then transcribe, edit, and publish them. We create our “renderings of fieldwork” in classes and lecture theatres, and let

others jot them down for our benefit.

Films and photographs are valued, for they augment a standard ethnography, but they are not supposed to replace the latter. A picture may be highly expressive, worth a million words; but words come first and pictures are optional (Wolcott 1995). A coffee-table book, with dozens of pictures and their captions, is not counted as ethnography or a monograph on the people of one's study (see Box 28.2 on the place of pictures in the written up text for publication).

Box 28.2 Words come first and Pictures are Optional

Srivastava says that,

One of the differences I have noted between anthropology textbooks done by British and American scholars is that the former are virtually without pictures whereas the latter carry a number of them. One may refer, for example, to the standard British texts such as John Beattie's (1964) *Other Cultures* or Lucy Mair's (1965) *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*. Pictures constitute the appendix, so do the material objects, which go to the museum. Doing visual anthropology is not taken seriously. I remember if a speaker in a Cambridge seminar relied greatly on showing slides, or films, or playing an audio, the audience thought that he had not "written up", or was shy of sharing his words with them. I am told in many universities there exists a word limit on the number of pictures one may include in one's dissertation. In some others, each picture is supposed to be equivalent to a certain number of words (say, three hundred). If the dissertation is not to exceed the word limit, then its author has to be really judicious about the selection of pictures, for they eat away the words. Moreover, the writer does not get any credit for the pictures, howsoever evocative they may be. The student gets a degree for words and not pictures. One may remember here an oft-quoted statement from Clifford (1990: 2): "No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter."

It is abundantly clear from the above that the issues of writing up are as important and significant as are the issues of fieldwork, of rapport establishment and handling the methods and techniques of data collection. While a lot exists on how fieldwork was carried out, there is hardly anything available on one's experiences of writing up, on one's problems and crises pertaining to what has come to be known as "deskwork". Becker (1986) notes that teachers do not tell the students how the textbooks and monographs they read are actually written. Most students, he says, never have an opportunity to actually see their teachers, or professional writers and authors, or researchers at deskwork, and also, the authors and writers do not write on their "writing experiences" of producing a text.

However, in the last two decades, some authors have seriously attended to this topic. They clearly state that the aspects of writing up need to be discussed as explicitly as possible. Undoubtedly, some researchers are far more creative than others and have a flair for writing, but one can examine the matter of writing up objectively, suggesting useful points that one must bear in mind, notwithstanding one's level of creativity in

writing. That writing regularly can increase one's creative potential has time and again been emphasized in many of these works. In this connection, one is advised to consult the following two texts: Howard Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish your Thesis, Book, or Article* (1986) and Harry Wolcott's *Writing up Qualitative Research* (1990). Wolcott's *The Art of Fieldwork* (1995) also has a chapter on writing up, which is highly recommended, and so is Laurel Richardson's paper (1994) titled "Writing: A Method of Inquiry".

Let us complete Reflection and Action 28.2 for discovering the actual process of transforming knowledge into communication.

Reflection and Action 28.2

You write or communicate what you know. The two are related in the sense that you can write only what you know. You would like to organize your material in order to transform knowledge into communication. As you are registered at a study center of IGNOU, you are likely to know about the IGNOU system of open and distance learning. In order to communicate to your family about your knowledge of the IGNOU system you need to organize what you know about it. Just carry out this exercise of organizing your knowledge and then transform it into communication. Describe the process in five hundred words.

28.4 "Writing Down" and "Writing Up"

Writing up is the *process* whereby the *world is transformed into words*. By the "world" is understood the ethnographic landscape where the investigator spends a lengthy period of time, generally not less than an annual cycle, observing and interviewing people in their natural habitat. During this period of fieldwork, the investigator sees, feels, hears, smells, and tastes the "other", the object of study. S/he also "imagines" many things about the "other", chances upon the tentative explanations of various phenomena, tests certain well-known theories on the facts at her/ his disposal, and records in the mind as well as on the paper her/ his experiences of collecting data. S/he also sends out from the field letters, and now e-mails, to supervisors, project directors, kinspersons, and friends. They all constitute a part of the data, a first-hand account of experiences of knowing the "other" (see Box 28.3 for the meaning of the term the "other"). Murray Wax (1980) says that writing is not simply an "adjunct" to fieldwork but is its "critical component".

Box 28.3 Meaning of the Word "Other"

A brief clarification is required here about the meaning of the word "other": the "other" refers to the object, externally situated, which is the focus of study. It could be one's own people, rather than those belonging to a different culture. The idea here is that one's own community can be studied with the same spirit of detachment that is employed in the study of, what anthropologists call, the "other cultures". The point to be made here is that writing begins the moment the fieldworker (or, the ethnographer) plunges into the study of the "other". It commences with the preparation of the research design or proposal.

But this writing is “writing down the notes, the observations, excerpts from interviews”; it is the pre-text stage. It is like collecting, gathering, and accumulating the ingredients, and transforming them into a “cuisine”, if one takes an analogy from the culinary art. Researchers know that the “collection of data” and the “ethnographic writings” are not only analytically separable but also, can be distinguished into a number of ways. However, it is on the first (i.e., data) that the second (i.e., ethnography) is built up. We “write down” - the common expression is “note down” - the facts in our notebooks and field diaries, which constitute our data. In addition to the factual details that we have written down, a lot exists in our minds, in our memories, for which Simon Ottenberg (quoted by Sanjek, 1996) has used the term “head notes”. The pieces of information embedded in our heads surface when we are in the process of writing. Our “head notes” help us in interpreting and understanding the facts that we have collected. That is why, when a sociologist “reads other ethnographers” notes he finds it difficult to understand them because he lacks the head notes that facilitate understanding” (Srivastava 2004: 34). When we are in the process of writing up a text, we realize that what we have collected in our notes and diaries is not really complete, for much exists in our memories and can always be called for at relevant places and times.

We “write down” field notes but we “write up” the ethnographic texts. Let us have a look at the distinction between “write down” and “write up”. According to the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1986), “write down” is “to set down in writing, record, note”. Its other meaning is “to direct one’s efforts in writings to a lower level, as to a less intelligent reader or audience”; the example given here is: “He writes down to the public”. “Write up” is “to put into writing, especially in full detail”; the example appended is, “to write up a report” (p. 1520). Thinking in terms of these meanings, we can say that the facts are recorded; they are written down, scribbled, and scratched. In her writings, Margaret Mead discusses the pressure on the fieldworkers to prepare field notes from “scratch notes”, and also the danger of the scratch notes turning “cold” and “uninteresting” when the process of writing them down is delayed, even by a day. She also notices the satisfaction that a fieldworker gets on catching up with the writing down of scratch and head notes (Sanjek, 1996; Srivastava, 2001; Srivastava 2004: 33-5). From the written down notes and the unwritten memories from the field, the investigator writes up the qualitative account, the piece of ethnography.

This distinction between “write down” and “write up” is clear from what Geertz has to say in one of his interviews (see Olson 1991):

I’ve spent a lot of time in the field - almost a dozen years in Southeast Asia and North Africa - where I don’t do any writing at all. I can’t write in the field. I write a lot of field notes, but I can’t compose anything...You do two or two and a half years” fieldwork in Java in which all you do is live with the people, write down

everything, and try to figure out what the hell is going on; then you come back and write-out of the notes, out of our memories, and out of whatever is going on the field. So, for me at least, it's a fairly divided life. I don't write in the field; I write after I return. Mostly, *here* I write and *there* research.

“Write down” to “write up” is also a transition from fieldwork to deskwork, from the hurly-burly field to a quiet workroom (Geertz 1988). Through writing up, the first-hand field experiences are transformed into a text, a report, a monograph, or an article. At this juncture, we may ask a question: Is the transition from “write down” to “write up” as smooth as it appears? Furthermore, pursuing the analogy of a kitchen, as different cooks prepare different cuisines from the same raw ingredients, in the same way, different fieldworkers produce different ethnographies from the same reservoir of facts. It should also be remembered here that the social facts collected by two different fieldworkers from the same ethnographic situation are never the same, for different theoretical perspectives colour each one's vision (find out the same by completing Reflection and Action 28.3).

Reflection and Action 28.3

Form a team of four members from among the learners of MSO 002 at your study center. Each member of the team is to collect data about “learner participation in activities of your study centre” and write only a one-page note on the topic on the basis of the data collected. Compare the notes for similarities and differences and prepare a short note of two hundred words to list the same.

28.5 Write Early

Words come first. And, linking them up to form a cogent and a meaningful whole is a demanding task, often frustrating. I remember myself sitting at the desk placed in a corner of my room, with field notes, diaries, photocopies of relevant articles, books with markers on important pages, spread all around me, with a pencil in my hand, often striking it at the paper, waiting for the formation of proper sentences, cutting and erasing them, moving to the kitchen to prepare a cup of tea, or going out for a smoke, all to focus my concentration on my work. Some days, the scenario remained unchanged for hours, as I struggled with writing, a proper and correct expression of my ideas. At this point of time, many of us rush to the library to read more, or rush to the field area, if it happens to be situated nearby, thinking that we have not read enough or we do not have enough information to write up our accounts. Thus, we keep on postponing writing; we keep on accumulating readings, more and more references. Like the snowball process, one book or article leads to another, and so on; it is a ceaseless process.

Because we do not start writing up, besides suffering from tremendous stress, we are unable to discipline our thoughts. Lots and lots of readings, polemical viewpoints, confound us. The writing problems are so real and genuine that a cross-section of researchers in my sample, both young

and experienced, admitted to having passed through the crippling effects of not writing or “not writing well”. I remember my own days as a research student: for hours together, I would not be able to write, or what I was able to write was of so poor quality that I would not like to share it with others. These failings would make me depressed and low, forcing me to look for more reading or discussion with fellow researchers, but I was able to cut the “glacier”[®] of not writing by remaining glued to my chair, attempting to write again, attempting to express the same idea again, and then, gradually, sentences would begin forming, ideas would begin flowing, and some kind of a first-draft of my work would start emerging. And, once I have a draft of my work before me, not only do I feel confident of my abilities (“I can do it”), but also, I think through my first draft, give it to the others to read and comment, edit it, make additions and deletions, sharpen the arguments, refer to other works, and add what is known as the “scholarly apparatus” (epigrams, quotations, footnotes, bibliography). In this context, one is reminded of Wolcott (1995: 216), who writes:

Simply stated, the only antidote for not writing is to write. You can always improve what you have written, editing the good stuff and tossing the rest. Until you have words in front of you to edit, thoughts can jump around forever in your head in so abstract a form that they can neither be communicated to others nor sharpened to your satisfaction.

The period of trial, tribulation, and ennui prevails when nothing significant seems to be coming out of our pen (or the keyboard), and this period is to be sustained, with a positive and optimistic outlook, for this is the transitional stage.

Further, writing is like any other workmanship or art that we must practice regularly in case we wish to excel in it in course of time. You may try to follow the general principles of preferring to write in the active to the passive voice and write as “I” and “you” in place of “we” and “one”. Similarly, try and vary the length of your sentences. Connect sentences with “for”, “since”, and “nevertheless”. Avoid the use of “It is” or “There is” to begin a sentence.

In the context of qualitative research, the sooner we begin with writing the better it is. It was said earlier that the writing of a “text” begins the moment we begin to write the research proposal. Throughout our fieldwork, we write notes and diaries; we transcribe audiotapes in case tape recorders are used. Research students are advised not to treat writing as the last phase of their research, an activity that comes after data have been collected. Richardson (1994) writes that writing should not be understood as a “mopping-up activity” at the end of a research project. Rather, it should be seen as a “way of knowing” - a “method of discovery and analysis”. Similarly, Wolcott notes that writing should be “joined to research”; it is wrong to consider it as the “final step after everything is finished” (see Box 28.4 for writing early).

Box 28.4 Advantages of Writing Early

There are distinct advantages of writing “early”. We write to discover what we have to say about what we are experiencing and how we are going to say it. We should consider writing before beginning with a field study and after the research proposal has been finalized. It is well known that we are advised to start our study without any preconceptions, prejudices, or stereotypes, but we do carry with us several theoretical ideas to the field. If we write about these ideas, we will be able to ferret out our biases.

Early writing should not be seen as influencing (or biasing) our train of thoughts, but as one that brings us face to face with our preferences and preconceived ideas. As a result, we are able to deal with them far more effectively than is the case otherwise. In disciplines like sociology and social anthropology, one has to deal with higher levels of empathy, which materialize principally because of a long-term stay (often, not less than one year or so) of the ethnographer with the people of his study. We treat our “subjects of study” as “fellow beings” in comparison to the other social sciences for which the subjects of study are the “objects” with whom any sort of a passionate relationship, a relationship of comradeship, is largely ruled out. Because of the special conditions obtaining in sociological and social anthropological work, the likelihood of our getting biased is far more than what may be the situation in other social sciences. Against this background, writing helps in a big way to make oneself aware of one’s likes and dislikes, one’s subjectivity, involvement with people, and the paradoxes of participant observation.

28.6 Writing Styles

One of the principal expectations from the fieldworker is not only that he would write up the ethnographic account, but would also write it well. Wolcott (1995: 209) writes that readers are “twice-blessed”[®] when an ethnography is not only insightful and of substance, but is also well written. Needless to say, well written and well composed works are read, and the more they are read, the more popular they become. Our biggest defeat is when our fieldwork accounts remain unread, notwithstanding our erudition, because they fail to captivate the attention of readers. My M.Phil. dissertation supervisor, Professor Krishna Prakash Gupta, taught me that a writer must not forget the reader, and while in the process of producing the text, the writer should critically read whichever chunks he has written by taking up the role of the reader. Whatever an idiosyncratic poet may say about his compositions (sometimes patchy, incomprehensible, and obscure), which he thinks he has written for himself, for his own aesthetic fulfillment, cannot be said about fieldwork accounts. The latter are meant for others, to be read, understood, and appreciated. We may say that the first draft we write may be for ourselves, but all the subsequent drafts are for our readers.

It has been observed that several young students try to emulate the style

of writing of some well-known authors. Being an admirer of the writings of a scholar and imitating his or her style of writing are two different things. I have come across many admirers of anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Margaret Mead, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Clifford Geertz, and among sociologists, Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton, M.N. Srinivas, André Bêteille, and Anthony Giddens. Of these admirers, several have tried to emulate the styles of their favourite scholars, but in the end, they have not succeeded. As each actor's role performance is different from the others occupying the same position (or "status" as it is technically called), in the same way, each author or writer develops his or her own style, which is a product of hard work of several decades and also of several other highly individualistic factors, such as the type and quality of schooling, hobbies, flair for reading and writing, etc. Therefore, my submission is that we should try to develop our own style, keeping in mind that we would be known not for being a "copycat"® but for our own manner and style of handling the world of words. All the same you can study the writings of other sociologists/ anthropologists to find out about main characteristics of their writing styles. You can critically examine them for their capacity to communicate (see Reflection and Action 28.4).

Once I was sharing my ideas on writing skills with a group of students, when one of them asked me: "But, what to write?" Yes, for this we need to have a writing task at hand: a dissertation, book, article, comment, project report, review, field notes and diaries, etc. Before we begin with writing, we need to develop a proposed outline or table of contents. We should also have in mind the basic story we are going to tell. Also, we should keep in mind the number of pages in which we will be able to tell the story.

Fieldworkers know that in a fieldwork carried out for one year, a lot of data is collected, including on those areas that were not originally chosen for investigation. This is one of the main differences between survey research and intensive fieldwork. In the former, data come only on those topics that are part of the survey, but the latter yields so much of data that the investigator may bring out of that not one but several texts over a period of time. In the context of a book, or article, which in any case will have a focus, the most important thing is to get rid of as much of extraneous data as possible so that the corpus of data with which we actually deal is manageable, to the point, and illustrates an argument satisfactorily. Whichever data have been kept out of one text can be used in another. That is why we need to keep in mind the approximate length of each chapter, section, or subsection. We should also remember that the space available in a text for the description of ethnographic details is necessarily limited, because we have also to include in it sections on methods, theory, the review of literature, analysis, interpretation, recommendations and implications, references cited, and bibliography (or sometimes, annotated bibliography).

An important piece of advice that the texts mentioned earlier on writing up qualitative research give is: “one should try to write everyday”. On this suggestion, in one of the lectures that I delivered on writing up in a psychology seminar, the comment of a female participant was that it would be difficult for many married women with children, and several household chores demanding their urgent attention, to keep a particular time reserved for writing everyday; also, in many cases, they may not be able to write everyday. In this context, Wolcott’s suggestion (1990) may be considered: we should try to “sandwich” writing in our busy work schedules or earmark “writing days”. The point is that we should try to maintain some kind of regularity with respect to writing. In one of the issues of the *Reader’s Digest* (1998: 16), a contributor with the name Jeremy Daniel had the following to say:

Writing a 300-page book is a formidable task; spinning out two pages daily is easy enough. Repeat this process 150 times and you have a book. This principle can be applied to any task.

If I write five hundred words everyday, by the end of the year I shall have a book to my credit. In one of his interviews mentioned earlier, Geertz said that he usually wrote a paragraph a day, but he never left a sentence or paragraph until he was satisfied with it (see Olson 1991). I was told that Edmund Leach used to come to his department in the late morning hours after having finished his quota of writing of that day. Wolcott (1990) writes that when he busied himself writing, his answering machine had the following taped message: “Sorry, Harry is writing; he can’t speak to you now.” An asceticism of this type is essential for maintaining writing schedules. If we do not spread out our writing over several days or weeks, then the pressure of finishing it would start mounting up when the deadlines draw closer. To my mind, this is the most critical time, for we may be tempted to plagiarize in order to meet the deadline, or produce a work of abysmally inferior quality.

Reflection and Action 28.4

Read the following excerpts from the writings of expert fieldworkers and show the advantages and disadvantages of each type of giving a description of a particular event. This exercise will give you an idea of how to present your descriptive data.

The first act is ... the driving into the ground of a tethering peg and the tethering of the animal to it. ... Sometimes, after the victim has been staked, a libation of milk, beer or water is poured over, or at the foot of, the peg (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 208).

In the late afternoon another ceremony was performed - the *kava* of the canoe. Food from a large oven was brought into the chief’s house, a series of libations poured, and offerings made to the gods of the vessel and of the chief. About a dozen men were present inside, but the expert and some of the workers refused an invitation to come in (Firth 1939: 123).

One of the excerpts has the indirect style of writing while the other one has the direct style. First examine which of the two excerpts you followed better and then work out why you grasped one better than the other one. After doing this preliminary work, write down advantages and disadvantages of writing in direct and indirect styles.

28.7 First Draft

So, the initial hurdle is to overcome the state of inertia, when nothing is being written down, and get something written without being discouraged by the quality of writing. Here, we should always remember that the quality of our writing would improve, as we shall work over the draft against the background of our own comments and the observations of others whom we have requested to read our works. Here, I remember the words of one of my teachers: "You should not be shy of showing your rough work to others, because what we produce in the beginning and what is published in the end are two qualitatively different drafts and each draft improves with one's own reading of it and the others' comments" (see Box 28.5 on different patterns of writing).

Box 28.5 Should you always Write First Draft?

However, we should not assume that all writers and authors follow this pattern, producing several drafts of the same text. Geertz, for example, says that he does not write drafts (see Olson 1991):

Sivastava says, "I write from the beginning to the end, and when it's finished, it's done. And I write very slowly...and except for a few touch-ups at the end, I write essentially one draft...Once in a while people ask me for early drafts, but these drafts just don't exist...I have an outline, especially if it's a book, but I hardly pay attention to it. I just build it up in a sort of craft-like way of going through it carefully, and when it is done it's done. The process is very slow.

I also know about Professor André Béteille whose first draft is his final draft, and invariably, he does not change a word, because he writes very carefully, stretching the writing of a text over several days and weeks. But these are individual styles that take a long time with sustained effort to develop. But the point here is that one should exercise great care in writing and handling "words like precious stones" (Srinivas 1973: ix)".

Once I have a completed draft in hand, I know where it is going. From then on, I start "playing with the text", which means, I start editing and revising it. The comments of fellow-scholars and supervisors, if any, start pouring in. I examine all these comments with unexceptional judiciousness and make changes in my draft. My language also improves; common mistakes are corrected. Remember, from the state of "not a single word written down", I have a manuscript, ready for submission. I discovered it during the course of writing up my doctoral work, and later I read about it in Wolcott's book (1995), that one is able to discover ambiguities in one's work when one reads one's sentences loudly, to hear what they are. I was able to eliminate several sentences that appeared to me superfluous and replace many words with more suitable ones.

Thus, unless we have a draft before us, our thoughts may jump around in abstract forms. Neither can they be communicated to others convincingly nor their relationship with other thoughts explored. Wolcott (1995: 216) writes:

I mull things over before I write, and I constantly jot down ideas, phrases, and questions as they pop into my head. But my best “mullings”, like my best scanning for related ideas and relevant citations in the literature, seem to come after I start to capture my thoughts on paper, not before.

During the process of writing, we chance upon many new ideas about which we had not thought of earlier. I remember in 1992 as a doctoral candidate, about to submit my dissertation, the pre-fieldwork seminar group asked me to speak on an aspect of ethics in fieldwork. The moment this offer came, I told the organizer of the seminar group that I would speak on the role of payments to respondents in fieldwork. That time, I really did not know what I would say, what would be the line of my argument, except that I would introspect my fieldwork experiences. It was in the course of writing up this paper (1992) that I chanced upon many new ideas that I developed in detail. I am here reminded of Howard Becker (1986) who says: Writing is thinking.

It was observed earlier that quantitative researchers do not face the problems of writing up that qualitative researchers face, because for them, some kind of, relatively speaking, fixed designs of writing are available. For instance, a typical article in physical anthropology will have the following sections: introduction, the review of literature, materials and methods, results and discussion, and summary and recommendations. This may also be the list of contents of a dissertation. Although it may be true to some extent, it should not be forgotten that numbers and the correlations obtaining between them by themselves mean nothing. They need to be interpreted, for which imagination is required. The interpretations are expressed in qualitative terms, for which the same sort of writing that is central to typical qualitative research is expected. The difference between qualitative and quantitative research with respect to writing is one of degree, and not of kind.

However, an important difference between the texts that are overwhelmingly quantitative and those that are overwhelmingly qualitative may be noted here. In the former, the findings (the “conclusions”) are of crucial significance and what is unimportant in these texts is the way in which they have been written down and the style they have adopted. They are largely “author-nascent” texts, by comparison to the ethnographies and pieces of qualitative research that sociologists and social anthropologists produce, which are “author-saturated”. One cannot fully understand these texts until the reader knows who the fieldworker was; what were his or her prominent social characteristics; and how did he or she carry out his or her fieldwork. The diaries of the fieldworker are extremely important for having an idea about why the ethnography is of a particular tenor and type. At the end of our discussion it is a good idea to complete just one more Reflection and Action exercise.

Reflection and Action 28.5

Write four pages on Comparative Method and next day read what you have written. Do you feel the need to change the text? Do you feel that shifting around words and sentences the text may read better? Do you find that adding a bit more or deleting a word here and there or modifying certain expressions would communicate better what you intend to express? You may go ahead and make changes and give the draft to you friends/ fellow learners of MSO 002 at your study center. After getting the feedback from them, you may want to make further changes in your text. Oh, you are writing up!

28.8 Conclusion

Finally, let me submit that in this chapter I have not discussed the role of theory in writing up dissertations, because that can be fruitfully discussed in the section on the analysis of data. But, it may be noted that the technical terms an author would use more frequently in his text flow from the theory to which he subscribes. My main submission here is that writing is central to the art of fieldwork. Our field notes are the “bricks” of our ethnographic texts; the leaves from our diaries are reproduced in our monographs. One of our main obligations to the people whom we study and the scientific community of which we are a part is to write up the fieldwork accounts as early as possible and as meticulously as possible. This needs to be emphasised because a common observation is that many field studies remain unwritten and unreported (Wolcott 1995:226; Srinivas 1996:194).

Further Reading

Galtung, J. 1967. *Theory and Methods of Social Research*. George Allen and Unwin: London (deals with all aspects of analyzing data for writing up)

Mills, C. Wright 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press: Oxford (for its classic statement on social inquiries and the presentation of results)

Sellitz, C., M. Jahoda, and S. W. Cook 1966. *Research Methods in Social Relations*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York (especially the section on the writing of research reports)