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Communicating Your Qualitative Research Design



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1.0

Overview

In preparing a proposal for one of Spencer’s grant programs, it may be helpful to learn more about what makes an application successful. In this essay, noted scholar **Frederick Erickson** elaborates on how to best articulate research design for proposal reviewers. This essay is a companion piece to [“A Guide to Writing Successful Field-Initiated Research Grant Proposals,”](#) which provides general information about elements of compelling field-initiated research proposals.



It is important to note from the outset that these essays are not meant to be stand-alone guides for writing proposals, being awarded a Spencer grant, or conducting research. There are numerous valuable approaches to conducting research, and we urge you to consider the specific concerns in your disciplinary and methodological fields.

This essay focuses on effective communication of qualitative research design. Compelling proposals provide a convincing rationale for the study design and a clear description of the design. Yet, problems with the discussion of research design are common in proposals. It is important in planning and writing qualitative research proposals to have a clarity about the primary purpose of the inquiry, and that the research questions, plans for collection of data and evidence, and analysis are aligned to that purpose. Different investigators may approach studies with differing, equally valid designs, but whatever the design is, it should be described and explained clearly.

Remember that a research proposal is fundamentally an exercise in persuasion—to show the reviewers that the topic is significant, the proposed methods are thorough and systematic, and that the proposed team’s skills are appropriate for the task at hand. Don’t leave any of that overall argument unstated or taken for granted. Explain it all to the reviewers as clearly and concretely as possible.

The following discussion highlights common problem areas in qualitative research proposals. The main topics to be addressed include: clarity of focus on basic purposes of qualitative inquiry, significance of the research topic, appropriateness of the research site and participation selection, matters concerning generalization, and procedures for the collection and analysis of evidence.

1.1 Basic Purposes of Qualitative Research

Including research questions in a grant proposal is common practice; however, the explicit connections between what is asked and how it is answered are sometimes vague or disjointed, resulting in a lack of clarity around the alignment of research design components. While proposal readers have a broad understanding of qualitative research, effective communication of the underlying purpose of qualitative inquiry sets the stage for the significance of the proposed study.

The popular understanding of qualitative research is that it produces narrative reports on people's everyday experience and sense-making, based on the researcher's firsthand acquaintance with the lives of the people who are studied. The firsthand observational fieldwork is guided by a generic pair of research questions: "What is happening here?" and "What do the happenings mean to the people who are engaged in them?" But the narrative reports that result are not just loose storytelling; rather, they are analytically shaped accounts. Their primary substantive focus is on identifying certain distinctions among kinds of things—"qualities"—that have relevance for people's understanding and conduct of their everyday lives. Discovering those locally relevant distinctions involves identifying the full range of variation in the kinds of settings in which people participate, the types of actors present, the various actions taken, and the meanings, perspectives, and evaluative opinions concerning the actions that occur. This likely includes understanding the relations shaping actors' interactions and the formations of the settings.

Applied qualitative research in education is topic-focused, with explicitly stated guiding research questions (sometimes even with hypotheses, which can be thought of as research questions stated in the form of declarative sentences). This is unlike some old-fashioned "general ethnography" in which the researcher went someplace to see what was going on there without any predetermined focus of interest. The proposal should make clear what the guiding questions are and why those particular ones are being asked rather than others. The guiding questions point to settings, people, actions, and opinions that will be of primary interest in the study. In other words, they point to certain ways in which the collection and analysis of evidence will need to be done in order to answer the research questions.

In thinking about research design for a grant proposal, consider site selection, collection of evidence, and data analysis. Have a clear sense of the connection between what the study is asking, where the study is being situated, in what format(s) evidence will be collected, and how analysis of data will be completed. The following sections will address each of these areas in turn. An example of these proposal components appears in the final section of this guide to contextualize the disparate elements.



1.2 Significance of Research Site(s) and Participants

Qualitative research has multiple purposes that can further develop an idea or examine a particular problem or question; it may also explore a new context, concept, or relationship important to the field of education. Successful proposals clearly describe the sites and participants around which the project is centered. Selecting the right research site(s) and participants for the study is crucial for the proposal. Moreover, it is important to provide a clear and compelling justification for the choice to engage with those sites and participants to answer the research questions.

Qualitative studies are often proposed for an issue or site that is understudied or has not been studied at all. For example, one might propose an exploratory study of the subjective experience of underpaid early childhood teachers who are married with children and who work an extra job in order to make ends meet. What is going on in everyday life for those teachers, inside and outside school, and how do they experience it? How do they handle conflicting demands on their time and energy? Are there differences in this by gender, race, or between less experienced and more experienced teachers? Alternatively, a qualitative study might address an issue that has been studied a great deal quantitatively (for example, by causal analysis methods using inferential statistics) in prior research efforts that have yielded findings that are inconclusive, contradictory, counterintuitive, or which in other ways might benefit from follow-up qualitative studies.

Whatever the focus of the proposed study, it is crucial to explain why the particular site or sites chosen for close monitoring is especially appropriate for inquiry. Also, the proposal should demonstrate that the PI or researchers have established—or can establish—relationships of trust and candor with those whose everyday life takes place there. The proposal should show why the site is one in which can be found phenomena of crucial research interest, given the primary topic and research questions of the study. Don't take it for granted that readers of the proposal will understand why the site is especially appropriate for the conduct of the proposed inquiry and its central focus.

It is important to keep in mind that in qualitative inquiry a site that is chosen for study is not a sample of a larger population—it is a particular place in which certain things of research interest are happening. It is an instance of something—a case, hopefully, a “telling case”—that helps the research audience understand what is happening in that instance and why it is happening.

1.3 A Note on Generalizability in Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers assume that it is necessary to begin with a detailed descriptive report, usually of a single case. Therefore, the qualitative researcher need not (and should not) claim that what is found in a particular site that is studied will “generalize” directly to other sites that might appear to be similar. This is because qualitative inquiry proceeds from an assumption that social life is dynamic and labile and that history does not repeat itself, although it may sometimes rhyme. In other words, local sites each have their distinct local ecologies, and so what happens in a particular way in Site A cannot be presumed to happen in the same particular way in Site B. Specific behaviors (and specific causal relationships) do not generalize. They do not repeat exactly across settings that carry the same name.

What may generalize are processes, but that cannot be presumed and claimed by the qualitative researcher or demonstrated by a procedural logic of sampling. Rather, generalization beyond the single site reported on in a case study is an empirical matter. To see if certain processes will generalize to other seemingly similar settings, further research is necessary. It calls for going someplace else and looking, perhaps using less labor-intensive ways of collecting evidence.

In sum, generalization in qualitative inquiry is a judgment usually made by the reader audience, not something demonstrated by the researcher. A proposal for qualitative research should not claim generalization, in the sense of that term as used in quantitative causal analysis. But the case study can still inform practice and further research more broadly, by suggesting processes to look for in settings that appear to be similar to the one originally studied. Also, what is found in an initial single case study can inform the design of follow-up studies to examine phenomena taking place in larger numbers of cases.

1.4 Clear Alignment: Research Questions, Methods, and Analysis

In writing a proposal, describe in as much detail as possible the specific strategies for evidence collection and for subsequent data discovery and analysis grounded in your selected methodological tradition. Participant observational fieldwork involves a wide-ranging collection of potential evidence, stored in evidence sources—typically field notes, interview records, collections of site documents, and pertinent historical or demographic information, and possibly videotaping or audio recording of events of research interest.

A proposal should provide an overview of anticipated evidence collection activities. What particular events do you plan to participate in and observe repeatedly? Who will the primary participants in those events be? And if you plan to interview them, what kinds of information will you seek from interviewing? If you plan to collect information from other sources (e.g., site documents or audio-visual recording), these should also be mentioned. It is useful to summarize all of these with a calendar of anticipated evidence collection activities.

In addition, the proposal should show how these proposed plans align with the research questions. It should explain the choices in evidence collection—why certain events and certain participants will be foregrounded in research attention while others will receive less central attention. The discussion should also explain how these evidence collection plans would change if (as is often the case) circumstances with the research site don't exactly match the expectations at the time of proposal writing. In other words, the proposal should demonstrate deliberative engagement in making choices of research problem formulation and evidence collection approaches, and that there will be intentional deliberation in changing those plans if necessary.

Make room for evolving new questions and collection strategies during the course of fieldwork, should that be warranted by circumstances encountered as the inquiry develops and progresses from initial discovery to more complete understanding. The proposal is presenting a discovery process in which change along the way is appropriate, and should show that the proposed discovery process is disciplined and strategic rather than haphazard.

Just as evidence collection strategies need to be specified in the proposal to show how they align with the research questions, it is important to specify evidence analysis strategies and their alignment with both the research questions and methodological approach. Lack of clarity in alignment between these elements can be a major problem in proposals for qualitative research. In some proposals, the discussion of how evidence will be handled once it has been collected is the least well-communicated aspect of the proposal.

A common practice in writing qualitative research proposals is to skim lightly over description of anticipated procedures for analysis of evidence. Some proposals offer few details for systematic analysis procedures. Titles of analytic approaches are sometimes presented as a placeholder for a concrete and thorough discussion of the planned analysis. These proposals often sketch a general analysis approach, cite a few foundational texts, and possibly mention some computer software analysis program (e.g. Nvivo, Dedoose). While this is helpful and important information, the proposal should offer more specificity, making clear what the anticipated evidence would look like, and plans to deal with it analytically so as to rule out competing interpretations.

1.5 Describe the Analytic Process

It is important to realize that sources of evidence—field notes, interview transcripts, or anything else—are not “data.” Once information documents of various kinds are prepared during fieldwork, it is appropriate to consider and discuss them as sources of potential data, not as “data” in themselves. They contain information bits in large amounts, which must be systematically reviewed—mined through selective attention—to produce smaller amounts of data points in collected sets.

For example, a data point appears when an information bit from an information source is linked to a research question, or to a partial answer to a research question, in the form of an assertion. Sometimes this is called “coding.” However labeled, it fundamentally involves sifting through information sources to find relevant data points. Identify the full range of variation in phenomena—differences in kind—that pertain to all relevant individuals—all sets of actions and all opinions. And identify the full range of frequency of their occurrence—not just focusing on the frequent (typical) but including attention to what is infrequent (atypical, discrepant instances.) This is to prevent cherry-picking—basing an asserted conclusion on narrowly or prematurely selected evidence—or considering only confirming evidence rather than also considering disconfirming evidence. Once exhaustive analysis is done, select especially illustrative narrative vignettes and interview quotes, identifying them as typical or as illuminating discrepant cases that occur infrequently, for the research report.

In writing about proposed strategies for data analysis, anticipate and defend criticism that the evidence collection and analysis procedures are unsystematic. This can be done by showing hypothetically but in concrete detail the approach to constructing and following evidence trails according to the relevant methodological scholarship. These details may include a few possible codes and their definitions, or a description of preliminary themes, or the application of matrices, simple frequency displays, and other data visualizations or charts to support analytic procedures. A discussion of strategies such as these, as well as the iterative cycles of analysis, and the expansion and collapsing of categories and concepts linked to the particular evidentiary base serve both to clarify the substance of the research and to justify the study's importance.

Sometimes in qualitative research proposal authors will say “after initial review and coding, themes will emerge.” As is apparent from the previous discussion, themes and findings do not simply “emerge”—as a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat. Since the proposed research process is not magic but rather is deliberative inquiry, the proposal's audience of reviewers should be shown how the evidentiary rabbit would get into the hat, and out of it. In other words, how assertions about what is happening and what those happenings mean to the social actors engaged in them (and narrative portrayal in reporting) would be warranted by careful discovery and analysis of data.

Put another way, the handling of evidence would support assertions about generalization within the case at hand. Even with small numbers of subjects in a single case study, patterned differences can be discovered in the way they act, and how they conceive of their actions. Such display of regularity in patterning is informative in its own right, and offers insights into the workings of the social ecology of the local setting studied while providing a basis for further inquiry into generalization beyond the case, as discussed earlier. Presenting evidence for patterns of generalization within the case demonstrates to readers that the text items of rich description presented—narrative vignettes, interview quotes, transcriptions of video—are not haphazardly selected but are representative of regularities that are apparent from careful review of the evidence collected. In sum, the proposal should demonstrate clear and concrete capacity to complete analytically guided selection of narrative detail in reporting, which is a final aspect of alignment between research questions and procedures. Demonstration of such alignment throughout all the study components warrants, in qualitative inquiry, the equivalent of what in quantitatively oriented research is called “internal validity.”

1.6 Final Comments

To conclude, this statement on writing compelling qualitative research proposals has surveyed all aspects of the qualitative research process, from initial purposes and framing of research questions through matters of evidence analysis and reporting. Special emphasis has been placed on proposal components that have been found in past proposals to be least well thought-out and explained by writers. These include: justification of the research site(s), issues of generalization, and detailed explanation of proposed strategies for evidence analysis. What is recommended here is clarity and specificity in describing research procedures and in discussing rationales for choices among possible alternatives for procedures. A convincing proposal shows alignment of all aspects of the research process, demonstrating coherence among its various components from start to finish.

Finally, keep in mind that a grant proposal is an exercise in persuasion. Writing a proposal along the lines discussed in this statement does not guarantee approval, but it does make a direct argument that the study proposed has significance and that it will be conducted with deliberation. To engage further in the ideas presented, consider the list of additional resources listed in the Appendix.



2.0

Appendix: Further Resources

Qualitative Inquiry (General/Overview)

Bhattacharya, K. (2017). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide*. New York: Routledge.

- Presents an engaging and comprehensive overview of epistemological perspectives, and summarizes narrative inquiry, grounded theory, and ethnographic methodologies. Provides several activities and exercises to help readers understand various concepts.

Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (5th ed.). New York: Pearson.

- Balanced and readable discussion of all aspects of the qualitative research process.

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

- This text presents fundamentals of qualitative research design applied to higher education.

Maxwell, J. (2012). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Cogent and comprehensive presentation of fundamental components of research design and their alignment across all stages in the research process.

Qualitative Methods and Methodologies

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Classic statement of the grounded theory approach in qualitative inquiry.

Delamont, S. (Ed.) (2012). *Handbook of qualitative research in education*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

- A magisterial international set of authors, presenting basic and advanced discussion of current methods.

Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In Wittrock, M. (Ed.) *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed.) (pp. 119-161). New York: Macmillan.

- Widely read essay on purposes and methods of interpretive qualitative inquiry in education.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.

- Repeatedly republished, this is still the most lucid and evenhanded discussion of ethnography as a qualitative research approach.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE.

- Thorough and well-reasoned introduction to qualitative research methods.
- Ravitch, S.M., & Carl, N.M. (2020). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Surveys a wide range of current methods and their theoretical groundings. Presents extensive examples of work to clarify and specify the research procedures and rationales that are described.

Yin, R. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Comprehensive and authoritative discussion of case study as a research method.

Qualitative Analysis

Miles, M.B., Huberman, M., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- A compendium of diverse approaches in data analysis and reporting, with clear examples of procedures for information display.

Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Surveys a variety of coding approaches, providing extensive examples.

Sipe, L., & Ghiso, M. (2004). Developing conceptual categories in classroom research: Some problems and possibilities. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 35(4), 472-485.

Erickson, F. (2004). Demystifying data construction and analysis. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 35(4), 486-493.

- Parallel articles published together, presenting alternative approaches to evidence discovery and coding.

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