

## 12 Writing the Report, Disseminating the Findings

In the mind, as well as in the body, there is the necessity of getting rid of waste, and a man of literary habits will write for the fire as well as for the press. (Jerome Cardan, 1501–1576)

The main theme of this chapter is that writing is a process of drafting, throwing the draft on the fire, redrafting, feeding the fire, and . . . Most chapters of this book have been redrafted four times, some more. All have been regularly polished, tuned and tweaked. On this view, writing is a continuous process that runs in parallel with other research activities. It is not an end-of-research event.

The experience of writing many essays, term papers and reports is some preparation for writing a research report, dissertation or thesis, but it is seldom sufficient. A report certainly requires all the skills that essay writing develops, notably reviewing and criticizing other people's ideas and evidence, while developing an argument in response to a question or problem. However, it also requires the ability to describe clearly and convincingly the choice of methods and to handle a substantial body of evidence in a way that is fair, persuasive and uncluttered. Because the research report will often be longer than a term paper or essay, it can be daunting, which can lead some people to make the serious mistake of putting off the writing for as long as possible. In addition, the length itself poses problems of organization, structure and coherence that are more acute than in essays.

Although a conventional academic report is the most common product of research, there is growing interest in creative expressions of research findings in the form of broadcasts, narrative, story and film. It is worth recalling that Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, Dickens' *Hard Times* and Zola's the *Rougon-Macquart* are works of social analysis that could, especially in Zola's case, be located within critical theory. In Britain today, writers such as Peter Ackroyd and Pat Barker show the power that fiction has authentically to represent a past, and to do more besides. These are interesting, exciting developments, but we will not explore them here, concentrating instead on mainstream report writing.

### Starting Writing

This section is influenced by two books. The first, Boice's report (1992) of a well-thought-out programme to support new members of academic staff, may seem to be an odd inspiration. Undergraduate and postgraduate students writing reports

are not in the same business as full-time academic staff: students are novices, staff are experts; students strain to write, but lecturers' fingers fly across the keyboard, with neat phrases smoothly appearing and complex concepts rolling across the pages. Or so those who are not members of academic staff might think.

One of the striking things about Boice's research is that he showed how difficult people find writing, even when they have already produced their PhD theses. Investigating further, he found that the academics who were the most productive writers were not those who waited until they had clear days when they could 'binge' on writing. Those days disappear under tides of other tasks. The productive writers were those who tried to write a little regularly, or even daily.

That is our first message: write regularly and throughout the project. Do not try to write the report in one go. It is better to draft an introduction (which will certainly be rewritten later) very early in the research. There was advice on doing the literature review in Chapter 4, which should be referred to as the writing continues. The suggestion here is that the review is best written up while the research and thinking are in progress, again in the knowledge that it will be reshaped when the research is done. Likewise, it is a good idea to write the section on the research methods when decisions are made about the research design and while piloting takes place. Field notes and memos you wrote to yourself will often provide draft material for incorporation in the report.

That is one of the strongest themes in Becker's book (1986), which is the second that influences this section. Keep drafting, editing, shaping, changing. That is the best way of beating writer's block. The trick is to write *something*, if only as a way of helping you to get to something better. Remember that not everything that is written is 'good' writing (whatever that is). This chapter bears few traces of draft 1, although it is recognizably close to drafts 2 and 3. Without the experimentation of draft 1, drafts 2 and 3 would not have been possible. Key meanings emerged in the course of doing that first draft, and if many of its devices and phrases have gone, the ideas remain.

However, it is important to be able to look later at this quick-writing with a fresh, appraising eye so as to be able to edit and revise it. Three ways of bringing a fresh eye to your draft are:

- Re-read what you have written with a style book beside you.
- Put the draft away for a couple of weeks or so, and come back to it as an unfamiliar piece of writing.
- Get friends to look at it.

The first strategy is good for improving style, but it is not much help with evaluating the ideas, evidence and structure. The second is a good strategy if the time is available. For example, the first draft of this section was laid aside for five weeks, which meant that it could be re-read with more detachment and with a sharper critical intent. The third strategy is the best, although you need to be prepared for criticism and suggestions that may not be entirely welcome.

Most of us have feelings of unease, unworthiness and risk when we show others our drafts. These feelings are well described by Pamela Richards in Becker's

book. Many people try to minimize these feelings by spending ages on the first, 'quick' drafts, wrestling with getting their prose 'in a fit state to be seen' – putting it in its academic 'Sunday best'. Yet, friends' comments on these early dabbings could show us what we do not see, highlight the strengths and provide pointers about where ideas should be developed, where reconsideration is necessary, and where serious repair work must be done.

### A language for the report

People often find academic writing difficult. One reason is that the common style of academic writing is virtually a new language to novices, who struggle and falter, as do people learning any new language. For example, we may casually use sexist and discriminatory language in daily speech with friends. Undesirable in itself, it is quite unacceptable in print. The British Sociological Association is just one of the professional bodies that publishes helpful guides to writing in non-discriminatory language (see p. 94).

There is also an assumption that academic writing has to be ghastly, and there certainly is a lot of ghastly academic writing – bloodless prose that has no hint that the subject of study is people. Long sentences. Long words and technical terms (jargon, if you prefer). The passive voice. Otiosity, meretriciousness and a predilection for impressive Latinate words.

It does not have to be like that. The best academic writing is direct, simple and clear, as in Becker's book. Plain and direct writing is easier on the reader and encourages precision and clarity of thought. Here it would be worth reading the classic essay on this point, George Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* (1954).

Why is so much academic writing so bad? One reason is that there is a belief that the passive voice is better, since it appears so much more scientific to say 'subjects were asked' rather than 'we asked them', and that goes with the assumption that long words are a sign of learning. Unfortunately, academics often perpetuate these peculiar notions, leaving students little choice but to ape this bad writing if they want to get good grades. Students also often act on the basis of subliminal beliefs about good writing, even though these are often, in effect, beliefs that describe bad writing. It sometimes makes no difference when a tutor makes it clear that long words are not better than short ones and that making the meaning clear is the first task of the writer. Other advice that frequently gets ignored is that writing needs to be 'reader-friendly', so that the reader knows why something is being covered in a certain way and where the argument is going.

If the report is for practitioners and other interested people, bear in mind that they will not usually like a dull academic style and will complain that academics' technical terms baffle them: that the report is littered with jargon. One way of checking whether your writing is suitable for a lay audience is to give it to friends who do not know your subject, let alone your research. Listen very carefully to their comments. If they have difficulty with any part, the best advice is to assume that you have not written clearly enough for that audience. Change it.

It is common, when writing for practitioners and others who are not in mainstream academic life, to begin with an executive summary. This should set out the main findings and any recommendations. It should convey the essence of the research and say why it is significant so that the busy person who reads nothing more than the summary has a full understanding of what the report is saying. The summary is often put in bullet point form with cross-references between each point and the body of the report.

The difference between writing for academic and other audiences can be highlighted by looking at the way references are given. Academic writing is full – usually far too full – of references, even to the extent of giving references to material that no one is going to be able to locate, let alone wish to read. We all often fall short of the ideal of giving references only when:

- We are summarizing distinctive views or findings.
- We are quoting directly.
- We wish to indicate where differing views may be found.
- They direct readers to useful sources of further information.

When writing a report for a non-academic audience, it is advisable to keep references to a minimum. In this situation, it may be helpful to provide an annotated bibliography at the end of the report. Since there will be few references, it takes little space to write a short (up to 50 words) commentary on each one, summarizing what it says and indicating its significance in the context of the report.

### Criteria for judging research reports

Near the beginning of good programmes of study academic staff will set out the criteria by which research reports are to be judged. Better still, they may spend time working through the criteria, perhaps by having students grade one or two anonymous reports, so that the criteria are not just available but are also understood. While criteria will vary by institution, subject and level of study, there are some things that are generally valued and others that signify an inferior report. Box 12.1 offers a view of these characteristics.

### Organizing the report

It is easiest to organize the report around one of the conventions. Scientific reports, such as those found in most psychology journals, tend to have a very formal structure, which may be quite suitable for the presentation of survey findings to audiences who expect reports to follow that form. Conventions are less binding when writing in other disciplines and for other audiences.

The difference between a good and an acceptable report does not usually depend on how good the research was. The coherence of the report and the

### Box 12.1 General criteria for judging a research report

#### Outstanding report

- Problem or issue is clearly stated.
- The findings or argument are stated early in the report and it is easy to see in the body of the report that they are the best conclusions from the investigation.
- Links are made to other work in the field and the issue of significance ('who cares?') is addressed.
- The research methods are explained and justified and are appropriate to the issues raised in the literature review.
- The design can be justified as an appropriate way of investigating the problem and, within the limits of time and resources, promises a plausible answer to the questions raised in the literature review. The findings are readily understood.
- In reports of survey research, graphs and tables summarize the data and statistical tests are used. In qualitative research, relevant quotations are used to illustrate the general points being made.
- The conclusions are related to the findings and to the literature review.
- Unresolved issues are explored and directions for further research are indicated.
- Realistic suggestions for action are made where this is appropriate.
- There are signs of originality or of intellectual excitement.
- The report makes a useful and secure contribution to understanding of the field.

#### Acceptable report

An acceptable report will have many of the characteristics of an outstanding report but not all of them. The last criterion is unlikely to have been met. Rewriting each criterion at the acceptable level produces the following profile.

- The problem or issue is stated.
- The findings or argument may or may not be stated early in the report.
- Where they are, it is not easy to see in the body of the report that they are the best conclusions from the investigation.
- Links are made to other work in the field but they are not sufficiently full.
- The issue of significance ('who cares?') gets passing attention.
- The research methods are described.
- It is often not shown that they are the best ways of investigating the issues raised in the literature review.
- Within the limits of time and resources, the research design promises to shed some light on the questions raised in the literature review.

*continued*

- The findings are comprehensible with some effort by the reader.
- The conclusions are not strongly related to the findings and to the literature review.
- Unresolved issues may not be explored and directions for further research may not be indicated.
- There may not be any realistic suggestions for action, even where that would have been appropriate.

#### Unacceptable report

The acceptable/unacceptable borderline is very much one of local custom and practice. In some cases, falling short on one of the criteria of acceptability is enough to ensure failure. In others, there may need to be weakness on several counts before a report is regarded as unacceptable. There is little point, then, in repeating the criteria of acceptability, but casting them in the language of failure. What follows is a list of some distinctive features of poor reports. However, some of these features are to be found in work that is otherwise acceptable:

- The prose hurts. This may involve poor spelling; the grocer's apostrophe ('the informant's said that . . .'); highfalutin writing that fails ('the problematic in this issue is comprised of . . .'); long and pompous sentences; difficulty in understanding what the writer is getting at.
- The literature review is too short. That does not mean that there are insufficient references; it means that the writer has not really got the essence of the sources that have been used. In these cases, the review is often organized as first a summary of *this* book and then of *that* article. It is like reading a shopping list. Good reviews are organized around issues and themes.
- It is hard to understand what the findings are. This section is often confused and frequently is organized as a question-by-question report of the findings: far better to present the findings in terms of the questions posed at the beginning of the report and developed in the literature review.
- Poor reports often seem to produce conclusions like a conjurer pulling rabbits from a hat, avowing that what has gone before self-evidently leads to those conclusions. The conclusions are disconnected from the rest of the report and no amount of insistence that 'it has been shown that . . .' can hide it. In short, there may be some information in the report but it is not organized so as to help the reader know what it is supposed to signify.
- References are a mess. Few people are failed on the basis of bogus, incomplete, or poorly presented references. However, these faults can make readers suspicious of the rest of the report.

evidence in it of critical, analytical and evaluative thinking are as important, or more important.

#### *A framework for the report*

Undergraduate reports are likely to be 5,000–10,000 words long, and dissertations will tend to be 10,000–20,000 words long. PhD theses usually fall in the range of 80,000–100,000 words. First drafts are usually too long (ours are). Edit by cutting out material that neither develops the argument nor advances the conclusions. That may mean departing from the balance between the sections of the report that we suggest below. That is perfectly reasonable, particularly as our suggestions are precisely that – suggestions, not prescriptions.

In all cases, you should make clear and strong connections between each section and chapter and summarize what has been shown or argued in each section or chapter. Do plenty of signposting, summarizing what you've argued and explaining why the next batch of information is significant, and letting the reader know where your argument is going.

The following elements generally need to be present in a report, although in longer reports any of them may be divided into several chapters.

*Introduction* This should say what the problem is, why it is of any interest or importance and set out the main conclusions of the research. It may include or take the form of an executive summary. Avoid an introduction that says that certain methods were used to investigate the problem, which led to unspecified conclusions. That is weak and makes it seem as if you do not know what you are trying to say. Keep this section short, allowing perhaps 5 per cent of the overall word count for it.

*Background* This section may not be needed, since the literature review may effectively provide the background. Where it is necessary to supply some background that cannot be presented elsewhere, keep it brief and to the point. Historical backgrounds often contain a lot of information that is not needed in order to understand what is being investigated or claimed. Remove it.

*Literature review* Discussed in Chapter 4, this is one of the most important parts of the report. It should set out the state of thinking about the problem or issue that you have investigated; identify gaps in existing knowledge, or flaws and problems with it; note methods of enquiry that have been used in this area; and conclude by identifying the key questions that will be studied and the methods of enquiry that are likely to be productive. This can take 20–25 per cent of the report, where it is a report for an academic readership. It can also be a lot shorter.

*Research design* Show that the methods used were the best of all those that might have been used (see Chapter 6 for an example). Details of the development and piloting of interview schedules should be included, ideally showing how each question or planned prompt was designed to explore an aspect of a research

question listed in the previous chapter. In the best reports, there is a clear and strong link between the design and the literature review. Include details of sampling and discussions of credibility and generalizability. This is also the place to give serious attention to something that is frequently side-lined, namely the analysis of the data. Methods of data analysis should be discussed and there should be some evaluation of the confidence that can be placed in the outcomes of this analysis. Finally, consider the strength of the design overall, if need be, indicating how more time or resources would have allowed for improvements. Allow up to 20 per cent of the report for this important section.

*Results* Say what you found. Some writers like to interweave reporting the results and commenting upon them, in which case this section will be combined with the next, and probably be organized into several shorter chapters. Each one will address a key theme in the data, describing what was found and commenting upon it. Other writers like simply to present the data, perhaps using the end-of-chapter summary to indicate the themes that will be pursued in the discussion. Where the results are presented without commentary, give no more than 30 per cent of the report over to them.

*Discussion* This section is one of the most important in a report and the one that often does more than any other to determine how well it is received. It needs to appraise the results and their meaning mainly in terms of the themes raised in the literature review, making it quite clear how these results confirm or change thinking about the problem or issue. It is here that the argument is most developed and it is here that the claim to having found something of interest is laid. It can take about 20 per cent of the report.

*Conclusion (and recommendations)* The conclusions should already be clear. They can be restated, but doing only that makes a dull ending. This is a good place to speculate on the significance of these conclusions – what are their implications, whether for views of the field, for research methods, or for policy and practice? The conclusion is a good place to connect your research, which will usually be small in scale, with far larger issues. Yet the conclusion does not need to be much longer than 5 per cent of the whole.

*References* Find out if there is a style that you are expected to use, or choose a referencing style, and then stick rigorously to it.

*Appendices* Appendices are not always counted within the length limit. They are an ideal place to put research instruments, some of the data and a limited number of other documents of importance. Number them as Appendix 3.1, 4.2 etc. (the first appendix for Chapter 3, which might be an interview schedule, and the second appendix for Chapter 4, which might be a particularly interesting transcript). That said, keep appendices to the minimum. Too many appendices can be taken as a sign that the writer lacks the power to select what is really important.

## Dissemination

Many students, particularly undergraduates, do not see disseminating research findings as a priority, so this section is brief.

Undergraduate reports are not usually disseminated beyond the tutor and examiners. One exception is when the report comes from an action research project, where the whole point is to try to affect practice and where collaboration is the norm. In such circumstances, the report may be written primarily for practitioners and the style should reflect that. In rare cases, undergraduates are encouraged to summarize their report for publication, often in practitioner-focused journals, where readability, concision and practicability are, again, at a premium. Reports of postgraduate research tend to be more widely disseminated, and may be published in academic journals, in which case the rules for writing are more formal.

### *Report to participants*

Where participants are literate, there is almost an ethical, as well as a practical, case for disseminating findings to them. This can be a two-stage process. Findings are disseminated when transcripts are sent to informants for checking and again when a report to participants is circulated. In this report cover what will be of interest and significance to them in comprehensible language. Normally, you will omit references.

In response, you may be told about factual errors. Also, this report gives participants the opportunity to confirm that the findings are, at face value, a valid representation of what they believe and understand, which is a helpful confirmation of the study's validity. Alternatively, where participants have reservations, these should cause re-thinking (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). However, this is not saying that participants should have the last word on what your results mean. The point is that their interpretations should lead you to consider your interpretation. Once your study is completed, you might wish to distribute a final report to participants.

### *Practitioner journals*

These are good channels of dissemination. They tend to appear frequently, to have a need for interesting copy, and to prefer short, clear, practice-focused pieces. If an article can be linked with a forthcoming anniversary of interest (50 years of the NHS, for example), it has greater appeal on the grounds of topicality. The cardinal rule for getting published in these journals is to find out what the journal looks for in terms of style, typical length and referencing conventions. The second rule is to write with the journal's readership in mind. This is not only a matter of style, but one of messages too: readers are likely to be preoccupied with the 'so what?' question, and this must not only be answered (preferably in the first paragraph) but also answered in terms of the practical implications of your research. Editors of these journals can be swayed where there are good, human-interest pictures accompanying the text.

### *Academic journals*

The cynic might wonder whether this counts as dissemination, since the number of people getting beyond the abstract of most articles is surprisingly low (and estimates of fewer than ten people have been made for some fields and journals). However, publication in these journals is a prerequisite for consideration for an academic post and can be helpful in applying to do research or when going for other sorts of employment. Most journals contain guidelines on what they publish and the preferred style.

Editors of academic journals will send your article out to experts in the field for refereeing. Ideally, the referees will not know who wrote the article, so they should judge it on its merits alone. Good referees provide helpful suggestions for improving your article and do so quickly. Others take months and provide vague, unhelpful and sometimes hurtful comments. Whether the process is fast or slow, helpful or hurtful, it is something that happens to all of us in academic life. The points to heed here are that it may take a long time to get your paper accepted; acceptance may only happen after one, two, or even three revisions; and so your paper may not be published until two years after you first submitted it.

If your paper is rejected, take account of the reasons, revise with the help of friends, colleagues and supervisors, and try another journal.

Do not make the mistake of assuming that readers will instantly see the significance of your work. Unless that is clear, from the beginning and in the abstract, it is unlikely that most readers of the journal will read your article. For that reason, editors may be reluctant to consider it for publication. This is especially true of case studies. If, for example, you have done research on midwifery in Hong Kong, editors of an international journal will want you to be clear about the implications of the study *for an international readership*. If no implications are drawn out, or if they relate to Hong Kong alone, then publication is unlikely.

### *Conference presentation*

It is usually easy to get a proposal accepted to present your work, usually orally or in a poster presentation. With oral presentations, performance skills are very important. The main advice is never read a paper, although it is good practice to give participants a paper to take away, or to direct them to the web site where it may be found. Instead, make up six or so overhead projector slides, each containing about six points. Talk to those points, using presentational skills to best effect (Gelb, 1988, is excellent on doing presentations). As always, make sure that the main implications of the research that are relevant to this audience stand out: in the old adage, tell them what those points will be, tell them the points, and then tell them that you've told them. Allow time for questions, always in the knowledge that you will invariably *ad lib* to your slides for longer than you had expected. If, as happens in the best presentations, there are activities that involve the audience, recognize that these also take longer than is usually assumed.

*Bulletin boards*

Sharing your findings electronically is a good way of getting quick reactions from international audiences. It is important to keep electronic postings short. One strategy is to post the main points electronically and direct interested recipients to a web site containing the complete article (or invite them to e-mail you for a copy of it). Publishing in this way does not yet receive much credit in academic circles.

*A book*

Print runs for academic books are normally in the hundreds, which means that books will not reach large audiences, seldom make your reputation, and certainly will not make you rich. They are, though, a good way for would-be academics to start building a reputation.

There is an art to identifying publishers who will be interested in your work and in convincing them of the value of your book proposal (and it is far better to get a proposal accepted and then write than to send a completed typescript to a publisher). Most publishers will supply guidelines on making a proposal. They will be looking for an idea that has the edge over other books in the field and that will have reasonable sales. Many academic book proposals have very poor sales prospects and will be rejected on that ground alone. Poor sales prospects mean that publishers are seldom interested in publishing theses. One of us has written a book based on a PhD thesis, but substantial presentational changes were made to the thesis to produce a marketable book.

**Conclusion**

It would be nice to think that this book is completed as these words are written. Nice, and unrealistic. Before this draft makes it to print, there will be revisions, and revisions of revisions, and the references will need to be got into order, which is always a long and tiresome task. That work will continue alongside our ongoing work on our own interview-based research projects. For Peter, that means coding up interview data. In some ways a tedious activity, in this case there is added spice to it, since the two researchers involved are quite independently devising indexing systems and coding up the data in order to explore the multiple ways in which the same archive can be read. For Hilary, it means setting up interviews for the Carers' Act project, refining the research design as the first couple are done, and beginning to see themes in the data and lines of analysis. These fluid, overlapping processes neatly illustrate the nature of interview-based research in the qualitative tradition.

## Appendix

### An Interview Research Checklist

This checklist summarizes key issues discussed in the text which you may need to think about in your research. However, we have consistently emphasized that the research design has to be fit for the purpose, and that research practice is about making the best choices in situations that are not ideal. The implication of this insistence is that it will be quite reasonable to give a 'No' answer to some of the questions we have raised.

However, since a research report to academic audiences will need to give an account of your choice of methods and the way you carried them out, you might wish to say something in your report about the questions to which you have answered 'No'.

Some questions you will repeatedly revisit, for we have argued that research 'stages' overlap and that certain issues have to be repeatedly addressed during the work. We saw no better way of asking these questions than in this form, but the form itself does tend to suggest that research is a 'when you've done that, do this' process, which is not what we have been trying to say.