

The practice of writing

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Good writing leaps off the page. However, it takes time and effort and a goodly amount of blood, sweat and tears. Many of us engaged in scholarly writing perversely enjoy the tussle of wills between the beautifully crafted paper we want to write and the somewhat shoddy first draft that crawls out of our fountain pens, pencils, tablets and keyboards. The gap between the first and the last draft requires reflection as we shape and craft the messages to be communicated. Writing is an act of crystallization of ideas. It is also an act of acknowledging that what you want from your paper is probably less important than what your paper needs to be. A cleverly written paper is not a vehicle for demonstrating your command of concepts and intellectual dexterity; a clever paper engages with the reader, absorbs their attention and – we hope – leaves them wiser or better informed than they were before.

If writing is a crystallization of ideas, it is also an act of self-editing. Good writing is neither pretentious nor superficial. It requires judgement and careful consideration of the language used, the phrasing of sentences and the building of arguments. This is true of all academic writing, regardless of whether the author is writing a paper reporting a randomized controlled trial or presenting the findings of a narrative study. Although the forms of writing are different, the fundamentals are the same; they both need to communicate messages clearly. However, it is surprising how many papers submitted to journals fail to communicate as effectively as they could do. Abstracts are often vague, presenting generic ideas that could relate to many papers; ‘participants were recruited’, ‘themes were identified’, ‘recommendations are made’, with no indication of what these were. Within the main body of the paper, precise, decisive and economic writing is needed to be able to present your work clearly and within the word limit, regardless of the methodological approach used. Although challenging, writing within a word limit is a key requirement for authors submitting to most journals and rather than bemoaning your fate and desire for more words, be economic in your writing; as a writer who has a tendency to wax lyrical in early drafts, I know my writing is improved by editing out unnecessary phrases and sentences and removing overly complex explanations. Every word in a paper needs to earn its place.

Thinking specifically about writing qualitative papers encourages us to consider some of the particular issues that are raised by scholars such as Sandelowski (1998) and Jonsen et al. (2018) who are concerned with raising the bar in relation to this distinctive writing practice. Sandelowski (1998: 375) describes what she calls the offences to good writing that some qualitative researchers make, including the use of:

turgid prose, seemingly endless lists of unlinked codes and categories, dangling participles, and dizzying arrays of multiply hyphenated and, sometimes, nonexistent words that convey nothing more than the writer’s willingness (albeit unintended) to destroy the English language.

So how can writers avoid some of the errors that Sandelowski identifies? Experienced writers offer suggestions for thinking about and improving writing. Creswell and Poth (2018), in their focus on qualitative writing, argue that writers need to consider the architecture of the paper. They note two specific structures: the overall structure in terms of the organization of the paper or report and the embedded structure that relates to the techniques and narrative devices a writer may use. They propose an awareness of four writing strategies: reflexivity and representation, audience, encoding and quotes. These strategies, alongside a consideration of the two structures, can guide a writer to narrate their ideas effectively. Their writing about writing is well worth reading.

Jonsen et al. (2018) make an eloquent plea for the writing in qualitative research to be appealing and convincing. Their detailed consideration of qualitative writing practices identifies five categories of practice that writers should consider in relation to 'convincing writing'. These are 'a confident, clear and candid rhetoric; solid and transparent methodological craftsmanship; a compelling, lively authenticity and energy; a strong reflexivity; and a touch of imagination, some brave abductive leaps' (Jonsen et al., 2018: 33). Each of these elements interplays with the others to create convincing writing in terms of substantive contribution (relevance), appeal and stimulus (actionability) and scientificity (rigour) (Jonsen et al., 2018: 43). Their paper is a masterclass in how to think about writing. While one reading of their paper might result in the reader feeling overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the endeavour of writing in a convincing manner and considering never writing again, other readers would be inspired to learn from the paper. I have read and reread the paper and keep finding new elements and ideas to inspire me. It is a paper I wish I had written and I enjoy rereading. This in itself suggests that they have written convincingly – which is as well, as this is what their paper is about.

Writing is a skill set that we develop and refine with practice and by reading other people's work. Even with the proliferation of different non-text-based methods of dissemination of our research such as film, performance and animation, our ability to craft words into papers is sure to be one of our most fundamental means of communicating for the foreseeable future.

Do not expect the practice of writing a paper to be easy or something you can easily fit in around other commitments. Expect it to be hard, even slightly soul-destroying at times. Sometimes a sentence or a paragraph will feel beyond you, but the moments of clarity when you resolve the problem, when your ideas and writing flow, will be rewards in themselves. Writing is challenging, but it is incredibly rewarding too. It is worth doing well for its own sake as well as for the impact it has and the legacy it can create.

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