

Qualitative Research in Health: Challenges in Writing and Publication

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ABSTRACT

In health, the scientific communication process for qualitative research involves multiple obstacles: (A) financial barriers due to high article processing costs that are not covered by institutions, forcing researchers to rely on personal funds or grants; (B) some journals may prefer quantitative studies and not accept qualitative ones, limiting options; (C) peer review may be more rigorous, involving experts in social sciences, which adds another layer of complexity.

The authors summarize the main challenges and provide recommendations that can guide us toward successful writing and publication. It is necessary to adapt technical language for an audience accustomed to quantitative approaches, synthesize information to meet word count restrictions (a long and challenging process), and carefully select the data and quotes to include. The appropriate balance between theory and findings ensures that the depth and richness characteristic of the qualitative approach do not get sacrificed.

Keywords: Qualitative Research; Academic Communication; Publication Bias; Peer Review of Research; Support Policies and Funding for Scientific Publishing.

Investigación cualitativa en salud: desafíos en la redacción y publicación

RESUMEN

En salud, el proceso de comunicación científica para investigaciones cualitativas conlleva múltiples obstáculos: a) barreras financieras por altos costos de procesamiento de artículos que no son cubiertos por las instituciones, obligando a investigadores a recurrir a fondos personales o subvenciones; b) algunas revistas pueden preferir estudios cuantitativos y/o no aceptar cualitativos, lo que limita las opciones; c) la revisión por pares puede ser más rigurosa, involucrando expertos en ciencias sociales, que añade otra capa de complejidad.

Las autoras resumen los principales desafíos y brindan algunas recomendaciones que guían hacia una redacción y publicación exitosa. Se requiere: adaptar el lenguaje técnico a una audiencia acostumbrada a enfoques cuantitativos; sintetizar para cumplir con restricciones del recuento de palabras (proceso largo y dificultoso), seleccionar cuidadosamente los datos y las citas que se van a incluir. El equilibrio adecuado entre teoría y hallazgos garantiza no sacrificar la profundidad y riqueza que caracterizan el abordaje cualitativo.

Palabras clave: Investigación cualitativa, Comunicación académica, Sesgo de publicación, Revisión de la investigación por pares, Políticas de apoyo y financiación de la edición de publicaciones científicas.

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CHALLENGES IN PUBLISHING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN HEALTH

A research project is only complete once the results have been published, as this is an ethical responsibility of researchers¹. However, scientific communication involves multiple challenges inherent to the publication process itself, including economic barriers due to the article processing charges (APCs) of scientific journals. Unfortunately, many institutions do not cover the publishing costs in open-access formats; therefore, authors must rely on personal funds or grants².

In health, the writing of a qualitative research manuscript presents additional limitations: (a) some journals may prefer quantitative studies and/or may not accept qualitative studies, (b) the peer-review process may be more rigorous or conducted by experts in social sciences (e.g., anthropology, sociology, communication), (c) a labor-intensive effort is required to adapt technical and specialized language for readers (accustomed to quantitative studies), and (d) the requirements of an academic publication format usually impose a maximum word count, posing a significant challenge in writing.

CHALLENGES IN WRITING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN HEALTH

Meeting the expectations of journals

Each journal has strict guidelines on format, length, and style, which can restrict the structure of the writing.

Typically, the target section is usually “original article,” defined as a manuscript that presents research results not previously published. Depending on the areas of focus and editorial policies, the most common types of research include quantitative (experimental, observational, intervention), qualitative, and mixed-method studies.

Manuscript Structure

The structure for qualitative studies still follows the IMRaD format (an acronym for the sections Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion)³. However, there are certain particularities and differences compared to quantitative research, which we outline below.

Introduction. The “theoretical framework” is a fundamental section that provides the conceptual foundation underlying the research, establishing the academic and conceptual context of the study, justifying the study, and guiding the analysis and interpretation of the data⁴. This section is structured to follow a logical flow, leading the reader seamlessly through the concepts and theories (e.g., it may include sections on historical background and key theoretical perspectives).

Methods. This section should provide a detailed description of the design (e.g., grounded theory, ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological, or action research), the sampling process and participant recruitment details, data collection (instruments, timeframe, and study setting), and the analysis.

Clear and concise writing ensures that readers have information about the decisions made by the researchers, justifying each choice⁴. Data may include audio recordings,

videos, images, texts, or field observations⁵. Information on data management and ethical considerations should be provided (e.g., the timeline for deleting interviews and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality)⁶. Sample sizes are usually small and determined by data saturation^{6,7}.

This section is essential to demonstrate the rigor and validity of the study. It should describe the treatment given to the constructed “empirical corpus” and implement “triangulation” whenever possible (e.g., using multiple data sources, methods, and theories) to enhance credibility.

Results. This section may be titled “Findings” or divided into subtitles (subthemes) based on topics, codes, or categories⁸, and it must directly address the research question⁵.

Textual fragments (verbatim) are often included to clarify the relationship between the data and its interpretation⁹, which requires contextualization⁴.

This section should not include bibliographic references but restrict itself to the accounts of the subjects/participants.

Discussion. This section should connect and link the findings to the existing literature (it may be necessary to revisit theories and conceptual definitions), emphasizing the transferability of the results (scope and limitations)⁴. Qualitative research focuses on understanding specific phenomena within particular contexts, which may not be replicable in other situations or with different groups of people⁵.

Conclusions

This section is not always present. Some journals request it as a subtitle under the Discussion toward the end of the report. Writing the conclusions of a qualitative study requires a reflective and structured approach, as they should summarize the key points of the study (without introducing new information), linking them to the theoretical framework, the research question(s), the objective(s), and the practical implications.

REAL WRITING EXAMPLE⁹:

- Objective: to explore the perceptions, concerns, and needs of healthcare staff in an Adult Emergency Department (AED) in Argentina
- Conclusions: the identification of issues by the AED staff themselves proved to be a relevant method to foster a process of collective management change, promote reflection and raise awareness, allow for identifying areas for improvement, and design concrete strategies and proposals.

Balancing theory and findings

It is essential to properly integrate the theoretical framework with the findings. A precise presentation of the theory that guided the research is required, but there should be enough space to present the results and their interpretation. It is easy to fall into the trap of being too descriptive or, on the contrary, not providing enough

context for the explanation to be clear, concise, and convincing.

Synthesizing the richness of the data

The goal is to be concise without sacrificing the meaning or nuance of the results in terms of the volume and selection of the most pertinent quotes. Keep in mind that qualitative studies often generate rich and detailed data, such as interview transcripts, field notes, and thematic analysis. However, the limited space requires careful selection of the portion that best represents the findings.

Clear and precise language

It is crucial to maintain clarity and consistency in scientific writing (with a guiding thread and context for readers), especially when summarizing complex concepts in so few words.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPORTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Title

The title should effectively and engagingly convey the core of the study, highlighting both the main topic and the qualitative approach to enhance its visibility in search engine results. It is also common to provide additional context regarding the setting of the study, including details such as the location and time frame.

Question(s)

An alternative search strategy tool to the PICO format (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) for qualitative and mixed methods research is described, known as SPIDER, which includes Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research Type^{10,11}.

Objective(s)

Qualitative research allows us to understand phenomena, experiences, feelings, emotions, or processes from a deep, contextual perspective. Therefore, the objectives should align with the exploratory and descriptive nature of the qualitative approach⁵. It is advisable to use verbs that suggest depth and nuance in exploring the phenomenon (Table 1) and to consider feasibility (i.e., being realistic given the time, resources, and methods to use). Furthermore, it is recommended to phrase them in a manner that permits flexibility and the potential to uncover unexpected aspects throughout the study.

Tables

A qualitative article is usually longer (5000-7000 words) than quantitative ones (3000-5000 words)¹², although this may vary depending on the guidelines in each journal.

Due to the maximum length of the main text (which typically excludes abstract, acknowledgments,

Table 1. Guide for writing qualitative research objectives*

Qualitative research activities	Quantitative research
Explore	Estimate
Describe	Quantify
Understand	Report
Interpret	Measure
Investigate	Analyze
Analyze	Compare
Examine	Relate
Comprehend	
Identify	

*Own work

references, tables, and figures), qualitative reports often present many narrative results in tables, as they are not counted in the word count. For instance, a broad overview of the key findings can be displayed, broken into categories, subcategories, and thematic dimensions (e.g., Table 2).

Tables may also be used to present the interview guide or the roadmap of prompting questions, as well as to show the quantified characteristics of the participants (using descriptive statistics) (e.g., Table 3)¹².

Figures

Although qualitative studies primarily rely on textual data and narrative accounts, figures can complement the analysis and help readers better understand certain aspects of the paper or visualize complex data, such as theoretical models (e.g., "Concept Maps" that visually represent the relationships between key concepts).

References

By convention, bibliographic references are typically presented using the correlational numbering system and Vancouver format, based on the NLM (National Library of Medicine) style.

Reporting Guidelines

It is good practice to anticipate common questions and criticisms from reviewers. Just as quantitative studies follow the STROBE guidelines for reporting observational studies¹⁴, qualitative studies can use well-known standards such as SRQR (Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research, published in 2014) and COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research, published in 2007). These are checklists containing 21 and 32 items, respectively, aimed at improving transparency through standardization in reporting¹⁵.

Table 2. Guide for Reporting Results in Tables from a Qualitative Study

	Topic	Description	Textual excerpts
Theoretical concepts	Key word related to the topic	Definition or explanation to provide content for the reader	Explicit verbatims: "....." (interviewee's description)
Real-world example*	Privacy issues	Understood as the right of individuals/patients	"They are constantly knocking or opening the door," (says an Internal Medicine resident about care in the Emergency

Own work.

Table 3. Guide for Reporting Participant Characteristics

n: 25		
Age in years		14,96 (DE 1,5)
Génder, n (%)	Female	11 (44%)
	Male	14 (56%)
Parental marital status, n (%)	Married	20 (80%)
	Divorced	4 (16%)
	Never married	1 (4%)

SD: standard deviation.

Own work, adapted from Johnson A. C., et al. *A qualitative study of adolescent perceptions of electronic cigarettes and their marketing: Implications for prevention and policy*. Children's Health Care. 2017; 46(4): 379-92¹³.

Lessons Learned

- Understand the elements that make up a qualitative research article.
- Familiarize yourself with and read other qualitative studies published in academic journals.
- Work through multiple stages of writing and rewriting to achieve internal consistency.
- Practice reflexivity and remain aware of biases as a researcher throughout the process.
- Overcome fear and take the leap: publishing may be laborious, but it is a feasible and achievable goal.

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