Eight Text Devices Useful in Writing Qualitative Research
Sam Intrator, Smith College

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Eight text devices for qualitative research

S. Intrator

If you wrote a dissertation that relied on qualitative methods, perhaps you remember this stage of the process. Proposal: Approved. Data collection: done. Transcribing: finished. All that’s merely left: writing the dissertation.

I don’t know about you, but before I could write I became the embodiment of Felix from the “Odd Couple.” I bought a ream of manila folders and filed every scrap of datum. My desk looked eminently corporate by the time I had finished: an expanse of barren Formica and a keyboard. Since I’m notorious for living amidst blizzards of paper, my sudden impulse of fastidiousness was really a transparent case of writer’s paralysis. A paralysis whose genesis can’t be attributed to a lack of material to write: I had wads of conceptual memos. Instead, I believe I can trace my inertia to an uncertainty about how to wield language and structure text in this genre: the qualitative dissertation or monograph.

So rather than write, I trudged to the library and pulled some qualitative studies that I had read during my coursework. I began to study how they were put together. In retrospect, my efforts could be described in two ways: First, like any novice looking to learn fast, I was hunting for the secret handshake. Second, like any novice, I was looking to work from models.

Prior to graduate school, I was an English teacher, so I was experienced with using texts as models to learn how to write. I also could ask some substantive questions of these texts: What style devices did these writers use to describe and interpret their data? What are the tropes of this genre? I respect artful writing enough to appreciate how absurd it would be think that I could dissect Sara Lawrence Lightfoot’s portraits and generate a prescriptive set of rules; however, I also believe that there’s much to be learned from trying to pin down the characteristics of writing that delighted and informed me as a reader.

The rest of this paper presents eight specific text devices that I discovered in the qualitative studies that I used as models. By text device I mean a literary contrivance or technique, utilized by the writer in the text, to achieve a particular effect. The first four text devices address the question: How do I get my reader to trust me and my text? The last four devices address a question, I find particularly gnarly, how can description and interpretation work together?

I. Text Devices Useful for Cultivating Verisimilitude

Perhaps the only imperative stretching across all forms, genres, epistemologies, and paradigms of research is that the reader of the research must trust the research, and by proxy, the researcher. In a qualitative project, the researcher must convince the reader of their capacity to be a deeply observant and sensible guide by cultivating what Jerome Bruner and others have called, verisimilitude, which is the quality of being real and credible. What text devices do these writers
Eight text devices for qualitative research

S. Intrator

use to cultivate the quality of verisimilitude in their texts?

Rapport trope
The first text device that I noticed as I read through my models is what I call the rapport trope. Early-on-in-the text writers showcase their rapport with the subjects of their site. How do they do this?

Mark Twain offered this adage to young writers: “Don’t tell me the old lady screamed. Haul her out and let her scream.” My translation: these gifted qualitative researchers don’t tell us they have great rapport with their respondents, they haul out the rapport and let us read it. What I mean by this is that even before the writer launches the story, they, in essence, role a short clip that allows us to see them—the researcher—in action—doing fieldwork with informants. With a little inspiring music, the clip could be a commercial. Let me offer you some examples, In God’s choice, Buddy Peshkin (1986) begins the text by with this select quote by Pastor Muller, the head of the church school Peshkin studied. “Bless this interview, Lord. Let it be helpful for Christian education, but as well, Lord, for the community at large, and, Lord, for the testimony of Jesus Christ, our Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen” (p. 1). A few paragraphs later, Peshkin describes himself sitting with Pastor Muller in his office. The text then continues with a lengthy, and highly personal narrative told by the Pastor. Immediately afterward, Peshkin writes, “Pastor Muller and I spoke of these and many other things” (p. 10).

Jonathan Kozol offers an even more compelling example. After a brief overview of the South Bronx, on page four, Kozol takes us with him on his first visit to St. Ann’s, a central site for his study, he immediately provides us with a touching image of him as researcher: “A seven-year-old boy named Cliffie, whose mother has come to church to talk with Reverend Overall, agrees to take me for a walk around the neighborhood.” A paragraph later, he continues “Reaching up to take my hand the moment that we leave the church, he starts a commentary almost instantly, interrupting now and then to say hello to men and women on the street.”

Strategic detail bombardment
A second text device I call strategic detail bombardment. I apologize for the military imagery, but it’s borrowed from John Gardner, a revered writing teacher, who describes the task of realistic writing as arguing the reader into acceptance that the events the writer recounts really happened. He writes, that a writer must authenticate continually, bombarding the reader with proofs. These proofs are details. “He must present, moment by moment, concrete images drawn from a careful observation of how people behave and he must render the connections between moments, the exact gestures, facial expressions, or turns of speech that, within any given scene, move human beings from emotion to emotion, from one instant in time to the next (Gardner, 1985, p. 24).
Eight text devices for qualitative research

Getting good at qualitative research
S. Intrator

The texts that I studied heeded Gardner’s maxim. Not only do they bombard, or more gently imaged, bathe us in details, but they do so using three strategies.

First, they use profuse detail. This is a tactic of quantity. For example, Mike Rose (1995) begins each chapter in *Possible lives* with a parade of detail. In fact, I counted 55 phrases on the first page of the section titled Calixico, California. Fifty of those phrases are descriptive—that is, writing designed to evoke a reader’s sense of the scene.

Second, rather than just describe what they see, these writers seek to stimulate our entire sensory system. In this passage from Barbara Myerhoff’s (1978) *Number our days*: she excites our visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic senses. She begins: “Everyone seemed in motion… Virtuoso children and adults skimmed by”—our sense of movement; “A beautifully muscled young man, earring glinting in the sun”—deftly visual; “A dozen or so adolescents were banging exultantly on conga drums, garbage can lids, and wine bottles under a fragrant cloud of marijuana” (p. 83)—evocative to the auditory, olfactory, and gustatory senses.

The third detail device can be described as *unveiling the ordinary*. The writers I read discerned dim, hidden, ordinary details and illuminated them in ways that clarified the whole. For example, Mike Rose describes an old, worn Kentucky high school. Mike Rose evokes the elemental character of the high school with one sentence: “The stairs were worn and sagging in the middle, and they gave a little under my step” (p. 263).

**Grand slam metaphor**

The third device that I’ll speak out about in this section involves what I’m calling the *grand slam metaphor*. In re-reading these educational studies, I’ve come to believe that metaphor is imperative. Metaphor takes the ordinary and transforms it into discovery and surprise. Since so much qualitative research in education focuses on schools, classrooms, teachers, and students, all of which are eminently familiar to our readers, we must rely upon language to generate novelty and the kinds of fresh insight that will register on a reader’s mind. Metaphor allows us to recast the ordinary.

In reading these texts, I became aware of the writers using a device I call the Grand Slam Metaphor. The grand slam is a bases-loaded homer. Used in tandem with details, the writer loads the bases by offering readers a series of details and descriptions. Once the “proverbial” bases are loaded she launches the metaphor. Here’s an example of this from Sara Lawrence Lightfoot’s (1983) *The good high school*. In her chapter on John F. Kennedy High School she’s describing the attendance office—a familiar place for all teachers and students. Lightfoot describes the flow of students into David Epstein’s attendance office. They come with a myriad of explanations, excuses, and stories. She vividly describes these encounters with descriptive details and snippets of discourse. She loads the bases for her clincher of an observation: “Watching Epstein’s high
energy and perpetual motion, I am reminded of the small Dutch child with his fingers in the hole of the dike, holding back the dangerous water currents” (p. 100, emphasis mine).

**Corroborating details**

The last textual device I’ll mention used by writers to cultivate the quality of verisimilitude in their text I call corroborating details. Writers who use this device describe a scene from three distinct perspectives. First, they’ll describe a scene using stark, straightforward objective facts. Then they’ll describe their subjective first-person experience of being in the scene. Then they’ll follow-up with an informants’ corroborating perspective. The triangulation of descriptive perspectives poses a convincing argument. Take for example, another scene from Kennedy High School. Lightfoot begins by describing the objective statistics of the school: “There are 5,300 students in Kennedy High School, and during the changeovers between classes close to 4,000 students crowd on to these escalators that rise two floors at a time.” This objective report is followed by Lightfoot’s subjective report: “Since I have never been in a school of this large a scale… my first associations are of rising from underground at a subway station… Although I feel vaguely displaced an uneasy, everyone else seems to be totally used to the body crunch.” This subjective testimonial is then followed by corroborating evidence from a “native informant,” “Explains one helpful student, ‘You know, it’s like a big city.”

II. Text Devices of Description and Interpretation

I now turn to my second question: What text devices help description and interpretation work together?

I was particularly taken by this question because in John Gardner’s *Notes on craft for young writers*, a book that I used in my English classes, he harps on the principle of continuous action. While he’s writing primarily about fiction, he states that narratives must be vivid and continuous. Vivid in that they evoke with poetic force a sense of scene. Continuous in that narrative must unfold seamlessly. Breaks in the narrative flow distract the reader and disjoint the text. Some qualitative research like Sara Lawrence Lightfoot’s portraits opts to preserve the integrity of the action by designating explicit interpretation for a separate section at the end of the text. I am more interested in exploring text devices that manage to link narrative description to interpretive writing within the flow of text. I identify four text devices.

**Windowshading**

The most abrupt text device I discovered can be described as the windowshading method, as in pulling the shade up suddenly to reveal an intense and dramatic scene. This scene is often a stand-alone narrative that gets separated from the flow of the text by an expanse of white space or some kind of graphic rule like a line or stars.
Explicit style switch

The most common *text device* involves the presentation of a descriptive scene followed by an explicit style that signifies the transition from description to interpretation. Here’s an example from Laurie Olsen’s (1997) *Made in America: Immigrant students in our public schools*.

Olsen presents a series descriptions written by students. These are written in a different font and indented block text. She follows with a new paragraph: “These descriptions are rich in aspects of youth culture that are deemed important.” The style and voice explicitly changes.

Tone-switch transition

A less abrupt *text device* can be described as a tone-switch transition. The text moves from a rich description of narrative event to a larger conceptual point. Here’s an example from Peshkin’s *God’s choice*:

Pastor Muller and I sit in his comfortable, well-decorated office. Our matching chairs are separated by a large, black, bearskin rug, one of the many trophies of Pastor Muller’s hunting prowess that adorn the room’s walls and floors.

The richness of detail in Peshkin’s description generates a sense of intimacy. He invites us to eavesdrop on the conversation, but as the paragraph comes to a close he moves from an expository tone to a didactic tone.

Pastor Muller epitomizes the new type of pastor that was described at a meeting if his fellow Christian educators: “independent, fundamentalist,…” And his church, Bethany Baptist Church, fulfills each condition that Dean Hoge has identified as necessary for church growth during the past several decades: “(1) a demand for high commitment from their members…”

Seamless description–interpretation

The last text device, I discuss considers a technique for seamlessly weaving description and interpretation together. When description and interpretation entwine the narrative can proceed without interruption. I believe this text structure is rarely found in qualitative research. The one example, I discovered is in the Horace books by Ted Sizer. Sizer occupies role of the omniscient narrator, a textual stance that allows him to vividly describe life at the Franklin High School as a neutral narrator and to speak in the voice of Horace and the voices of other characters such as colleagues and students. These characters become his vehicles for description. He then uses Horace’s internal monologues to provide interpretive insight into the events. For example, chapter entitled the “Committee Meeting” begins with a description of verbal jousting between committee members:
Eight text devices for qualitative research  
S. Intrator

If it’s not broke don’t fix it.
Come on, someone said.
No I mean it. I do mean it.

The repartee continues to unfold in a way that describes an acrimonious school reform meeting. Mid-meeting, Sizer transitions to Horace’s internal monologue.

The debate continued, aimlessly… All Horace knew was that when the debate was done and a plan for a redesigned Franklin High School was readied, it had to mesh with the ethos of its community… Horace remembered the Tip O’Neill saying: ‘All politics is local.’ All education is local too. (p. 52)

What Sizer manages to do in this section is to provide the rich description that propels the momentum of the narrative, while still offering some cogent interpretations.

In sum, writing qualitative research involves a series of immensely complex decisions involving the organization and treatment of language. There’s no formula, no set of prescriptive rules, no way to mechanically compose an artistic work that as Susanne Langer (1963) describes is “congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental, and emotional life.” Nonetheless, qualitative researchers do use some writing devices that, for the most part, remain unexamined in our doctoral training. This paper, if only modestly, attempts to describe these text devices for those of us yearning to get better can first notice and then practice.
Eight text devices for qualitative research
S. Intrator

References


