# Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

## Writing

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Like all language, writing is a constitutive force that creates a particular view of reality and inscribes particular values. Styles of writing reflect historically shifting paradigms; social scientific writing, like all other writing, is a sociohistorical construction, neither immutable nor dispassionate. Writing in the social sciences is a site of contestation. How one writes, what one writes, and for whom one writes are theoretical, ethical, and methodological issues, sometimes referred to as “the crisis in representation” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

# Historical Development

Beginning in the 17th century, the Western world of writing was divided into two kinds: literary and scientific. Literature was associated with fiction, rhetoric, subjectivity, and an ambiguous (interpretive) voice, whereas science was associated with fact, truth, objectivity, and an unambiguous voice. During the 18th century, assaults against literary writing grew severe. Jeremy Bentham proposed that the ideal language would have no words, only symbols; David Hume described poets as professional liars; and Samuel Johnson sought, through his dictionary, to fix the meanings of words in perpetuity. Into this linguistic world, the Marquis de Condorcet introduced the term *social science*, contending that if a precise language about moral and social issues were adopted, erroneous thought and action would be almost impossible. By the 19th century, literature and science stood as two separate domains. Literature was aligned with “art” and “culture,” containing the values of taste, aesthetics, ethics, humanity, and morality, whereas science was aligned with precision and objectivity. Because science’s status was greater than that of literature, some literary writers attempted to make literature a part of science. By the late 19th century, “realism” dominated both scientific and fiction writing, the latter spearheaded by Honore de Balzac and Emile Zola.

As the 20th century unfolded, the relationship between social scientific writing and literary writing grew more complex. The demarcations between “fact/fiction,” “subjective/objective,” and “true/imagined” blurred. The “New Journalists” made themselves the subjects of their writing; English departments positioned novels by minorities and postcolonials as “ethnographic fiction”; and social scientists, troubled by the “crisis in

representation," began publishing their research in literary formats—poetry, stories, and dramas (see creative analytical practice ethnography). In the 1970s, the crossovers spawned oxymoronic genres: "creative nonfiction," "faction," "ethnographic drama," and "true novel," to name a few. In the 1980s, John Van Maanen (1988) identified three kinds of ethnographic tales—realist, confessional, and impressionistic. By 1990, within social science, the schism between those who adhered to the scientific model of writing and those who chose to supplement that model with tools from the literary world widened. The schism shows no signs of narrowing.

Most of the social scientists who have expressly chosen literary tools are qualitative researchers. Unlike quantitative researchers, who can express their findings in tables and charts, qualitative researchers must depend upon words. Because a goal of contemporary qualitative research is to bring to life for the reader the world studied in all its complexities, literary tools (e.g., scene setting, dialogue, multiple points of view, tone) and formats (essay, poetry, letter, dialogues, etc.) other than the research paper's conventions and format have proved helpful.

Although most qualitative researchers purposefully choose literary devices, some continue to write within the general conventions of social science. Many of these view writing simply as a "mopping-up" activity, **[p. 1198 ↓ ]** "deskwork" following the real work or "fieldwork." They are committed to the science model, and many have turned to computer programs for help in analyzing their data. But, increasingly, qualitative researchers are defining writing itself as a way of "knowing"—not just "telling"—a method of discovery, inquiry, and analysis.

# Writing as Method of Inquiry

Writing as a method of inquiry departs from standard social scientific practices. It offers an additional—or alternative—research practice. The goal of writing as a method of discovery is to learn new things about one's project, one's self, and the relationship between the two. With this goal in mind, writers explore different writing formats, voices, points of view, and tones. In some ways similar to a free-ranging conversation with a trusted friend, a conversation without a preconceived notion of its outcome, this writing

exploration creates the conditions for new insights—insights that would not occur if one followed the canonical format.

Writing as method of discovery further coheres with the core of post structuralism, namely, the *doubt* that any one theory or method, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty has a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge. Rather, post structuralism encourages claims to local, historical, and partial knowledge. That knowledge, moreover, shifts depending upon the voice, format, tone, and so on of one's writing, along with shifts in one's life contexts. Knowing about one's research and knowing about oneself are inextricably intertwined, and unavoidably partial knowledges. Self and social science are "twin-born."

Post structuralism supports three writing strategies. First, the writing "I" that is always present, whether acknowledged or not, should be reflexively explored and inquired into by the writer. The writer asks, for example, "Why am I writing this text? What are my power interests?" Second, because one's subjectivity—the writing "I"—is created in a context of competing discourses and local squabbles, one's subjectivity is neither fixed nor rigid, but shifts. Consequently, what one writes is not immune to the writer's life situations. Writers are encouraged to contextualize their research in other frames, such as disciplinary, departmental, and familial relationships (see Richardson, 1997). Third, because knowledge is partial, the writer cannot say everything in one text, in one voice, in one format. Rather, the writer is encouraged to explore the material, shape it and cut it, from multiple points of view and in different formats. Examples of multiple takes on ethnographic materials are: *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*, edited by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner; *Troubling the Angels: Women Living With HIV/AIDS*, by Patti Lather and Christine Smithies; *Reading Auschwitz*, by Mary D. Langerwey; *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*, by John Van Maanen; *Travels with Ernest: Crossing the Literary-Ethnographic Divide* by Laurel Richardson and Ernest Lockridge; and *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility*, by Margery Wolf. In that book, Wolf tells about her research in Taiwan through a fictionalized story, her field notes, and a traditional social science article.

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