

From field notes to writing: How to get started

Jessica Smartt Gullion,

Author, "Transforming Field Notes into Text", *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research, Second Edition*

During the course of your qualitative project, you've amassed a lot of data. A horde of data. Notebooks and typed pages and audio files of interviews, fieldnotes, and other flotsam and jetsam of research. Not to mention all the books and journal articles you have on your topic. There could be thousands of pages of text in your stash. You know you have to write it up, but sometimes it can be a bit paralyzing to know where to begin.

I often begin by not looking at my data or other materials. I know that sounds counter-intuitive, but bear with me. I start by opening a blank document in my computer and free-writing my thoughts on the project. I may not use any of this writing in my final project, but it gets me past the fear of getting started. I find that--as Laurel Richardson advocates--this helps me to think through writing. Writing can be a process of thinking. You might be surprised at what emerges.

After your free-write, go back and read what you wrote. What seems to be the most important facet of your research? That's what you likely ended up writing about. Maybe something you wrote contains the title for your project. Maybe you wrote about an important theme in your research. Now you can go back into your empirical materials and look for examples (and counter-examples) of that topic.

Another technique that helps me is to review my field notes for a gem that catches my attention. Something that speaks to the crux of my research. I type that into my document and then write around it. Often that writing is a messy stream of consciousness, but it helps to get my thoughts out about the topic. I can organize it and add theory and literature and additional data later. The point is to just begin.

For a while now, I have been conducting ethnographic research on cheerleading. At a cheer competition I heard a coach say this as the team was about to walk on stage: "Hands on hips, smiles on lips!" You can bet that made it into my field notes. This is one of my favorites because it exemplifies so much about the sport of cheerleading. This one quote speaks to me about the pageantry, the excitement, the performance of it all. And it speaks to me about the darker side of cheer--the sexualization of girls and young women, the display of

their bodies for the heteronormative gaze, and the regulation of their bodies. And I could use this paragraph alone as a springboard for a paper about cheerleading.

The point is to get *something* on paper. If you spend a lot of time trying to think of the perfect first sentence, you may not accomplish anything. Remember that everything can be edited, changed, moved--it's temporary until it's published. Once you get your initial thoughts down, then you can write an outline and fill it using your fieldnotes and other materials.

Jessica Smartt Gullion,
Associate Dean of Research, College of Arts and Sciences
Associate Professor
Sociology
Texas Women's University