**Writing as a Form of Analysis**

Arthur W. Frank

The best writing advice that I know for social scientists is offered by both Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour. Writing should begin with clarity about what is on trial. What is on abbreviated trial here is the idea that in qualitative methods the best part of the analysis takes place in the process of writing. I mean "best part" in both senses: most of the analytic time is spent writing, and writing well is the best way to analyze. Qualitative researchers do not "write up" what has already been found or discovered-that expression is seriously misleading. The process of writing is the discovery; the writing itself is the "finding".

Once a writer makes clear what is on trial, exposition and eventual editing become much easier. Each paragraph and each sentence can be interrogated with the question: How does this build the case that is on trial? The problem becomes how to sequence the argument. Writing is always narrative in the sense that each part must lead to a next part. Readers should have some expectation for what the next part will say, but they should also be surprised either by how the author says it or by some twist that at first seems strange but then makes sense.

In an age of word processing when it is too easy to make a manuscript look good, convincing students of the importance of editing can be tough. This semester graduate students in my qualitative methods seminar are reading the manuscript of my next book. They find it liberating to see how much work my fourth draft still requires; they realize the final book will be the sixth or seventh draft. I emphasize that in seeing where the writing breaks down, the researcher recognizes where the argument or theory breaks down. Bad writing is symptomatic of incomplete thinking. Good writing validates the ideas being presented. In qualitative research, the writing may be the best mode of validation.

To teach writing, for several years I have given students a handout of writing advice that has developed from my editing comments on papers. It's now five pages, single spaced. Much of the advice can be found in any style manual; for example, keep subjects and verbs close together, suspect sentences that are more than three lines long, use no more than one semi-colon per paragraph, and so forth. What is more difficult to convey as advice-it can only be shown in examples-is how to make writing vivid. My radical contention is that social science writing compels because it is vivid. Readers account post hoc for being compelled by talking about the method, but method in itself is not compelling. What compels is touching on a core human drama, whether that is suffering or some form of triumph. Action is dramatic when something is at stake. I ask students what is at stake in their writing. The question surprises some of them.

What is inevitably at stake in qualitative social science is how people are represented. Qualitative research reports put on trial a representation of some person or, more often, group of persons. The difficulty of representation, which is equal parts ethical and methodological, is sustaining a balance. On the one hand, lives are often affected and sometimes determined by multiple forces over which they have little control and scant awareness. Against that determination is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the unfinalizability of any human life. To maintain this balance, I think it's important to typify what forces affect people and what resources they have available (in my work, their narrative resources), but so far as possible to avoid typifying people themselves. The stages of a journey can be typified without typifying the journeyer. Claims to represent what people do and what they do it with are significantly different from claims to represent who those people are.

Everything has its dark side, including writing. Unlike many colleagues on this site, I do not write every day. Decades ago I heard Canadian philosopher George Grant quote a criticism that one 16th century theologian made of another: He learned too much by writing and not by reading. I fear I like to write too much. One of the most difficult questions is when to quit reading and start writing. The test, once more, is in the writing itself: Have I read enough that the writing is full of others' voices? Not crowded, but full. Do I believe I understand what is at stake in those voices, and am I ready to put that on trial?

What makes so much work not only worthwhile but exciting is the suspense of when my writing will break down-in logical progression or in syntax-and I will be brought up against the realization that I have to think differently about what I thought I understood. Perhaps the true danger is not learning too much by writing; what's dangerous is writing without learning from that writing. The greatest difficulty is becoming a critical reader of your own work.

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