

WRITING A RESEARCH REPORT

The last step in the research process is writing the research report. Each step of the process is important for a valid study, as negligence at any stage will affect the quality of not just that part but the whole study. In a way, this last step is the most crucial as it is through the report that the findings of the study and their implications are communicated to your supervisor and readers. Most people will not be aware of the amount and quality of work that has gone into your study. While much hard work and care may have been put into every stage of the research, all readers see is the report. Therefore, the whole enterprise can be spoiled if the report is not well written.

In addition to your understanding of research methodology, the quality of the report depends upon such things as your written communication skills and clarity of thought, your ability to express thoughts in a logical and sequential manner, and your knowledge base of the subject area. Another important determinant is your experience in research writing: the more experience you acquire, the more effective you will become in writing a research report. The use of statistical procedures will reinforce the validity of your conclusions and arguments as they enable you to establish if an observed association is due to chance or otherwise (i.e. whether a relationship is spurious or non-spurious) and indicate the strength of an association so readers can place confidence in your findings. The use of graphs to present the findings, though not essential, will make the information more easily understood by readers. As stated in the previous chapter, whether or not graphs are used depends upon the purpose for which the findings are to be used.

Developing an outline

Before you start writing your report, it is good practice to develop an outline ('chapterisation'). This means deciding how you are going to divide your report into different chapters and planning what will be written in each one. In developing chapterisation, the subobjectives of your study or the major significant themes that emerged from content analysis can provide immense guidance. Develop the chapters around the significant subobjectives or themes of your study. Depending upon the importance of a theme or a subobjective, either devote a complete chapter to it or combine it with related themes to form one chapter. The title of each chapter should be descriptive of the main theme, communicate its main thrust and be clear and concise. This is applicable to both types of research.

Writing about a variable

Having developed a chapter outline, the next step is to start writing. Though the way researchers organise their writing is extremely individualised, the following guidelines and format may prove helpful for beginners. When writing about the information obtained in response to a question (variable), write as if you were providing answers to the following questions:

1. Why did you think it important to study the variable? What effects, in your opinion, may this variable have on the main variable you are explaining? (This is where you provide your own rationale for studying the variable.)
2. In the case of a cross-tabulation, what relationships have other studies found between the variables you are analysing? (This is where the literature review is integrated into the findings of the study.)
3. What did you expect to find out in terms of the relationship between the two variables? (If you have formulated a hypothesis, state it here.)
4. What has your study found out? (Provide the hard data from your study here, as tables, graphs or text.)
5. What does the data show? (Interpret the findings of your analysis.)
6. What conclusions can you draw? How do the conclusions drawn from your study compare with those from similar studies in the past? Does your study support or contradict them?
7. What explanation can you provide for the findings of your study?

Referencing

The report should follow an academic style of referencing. According to Butcher (1981: 226), there are four referencing systems from which to choose:

1. the short-title system;
2. the author–date system;
3. the reference by number system;
4. the author–number system.

You need to adopt the one that is acceptable to your university and academic discipline: ‘The first of these is used in most general books, the second mainly in science and social science books; the third and fourth less frequently’. (Butcher 1981: 167).

Writing a bibliography

Again, there are several well-established systems for writing a bibliography and your choice is dependent upon the preference of the discipline and university. In the social sciences some of the most commonly used ones are (Longyear 1983: 83):

- the Harvard system;
- the American Psychological Association system;
- the American Medical Association system;
- the McGraw-Hill system;
- the Modern Languages Association system;
- the footnote system.

