

Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research in Psychology: What Are They, and Why Do We Need Them?

Everyone loves a good story. A well-written or well-told story can draw you in and make you care about an issue that you never considered before. It can open new doors and change relationships by helping you understand others' experiences more deeply. It can teach you to develop empathy or imagine how you might feel if you were in a certain situation, time, or place. It can affirm reactions you have had and values to which you aspire, and it can provide guidance on the type of person you would like to be.

Before I learned about qualitative research, I would turn to novels and short stories when I faced complex dilemmas in my life. There, I could see how people suffered through heartbreak, found inspiration, and overcame hardships. When trying to understand myself, significant others, or clients, I did the same. Experiences that were not making sense would become clearer as I could see how parts of a story fit within a holistic account of how a person or a group of people made sense of themselves over time.

Strong qualitative research can have these same effects on its readers, deepening their understanding of complex processes and guiding them to respond to an issue in a new manner. The qualitative reporting standards described in this book were designed to guide authors and reviewers to think through how to strengthen the presentation of their work to increase its impact. I encourage you, as you read this book, to consider how these standards can help you communicate the story of your research more clearly and persuasively.

What Are Qualitative Journal Article Reporting Standards?

Qualitative researchers are interested not only in telling stories but also in developing knowledge to answer questions or solve problems. Once they have concluded their research and gained new understandings, they want to communicate this information to their field so that it can be used by others. *Reporting standards* are guidelines that describe how to communicate findings clearly in journal articles so that readers can access and understand the story of the research endeavor.

Recognizing that reporting standards can aid authors in the process of writing and evaluating manuscripts and editors and reviewers in the process of evaluating those manuscripts, the Publications and Communications (P&C) Board of the American Psychological Association (APA) invited two task forces of researchers to develop standards for reporting quantitative and qualitative research in journal articles. The Quantitative Journal Article Reporting Standards (JARS–Quant) Working Group (Mark Appelbaum [chair], Harris Cooper, Rex B. Kline, Evan Mayo-Wilson, Arthur M. Nezu, and Stephen M. Rao) developed standards for quantitative research (Appelbaum et al., 2018), and a separate book (Cooper, 2018) details those standards.

The development of reporting standards for qualitative methods was an initiative that was important to the P&C Board because use of these methods has increased rapidly in the field of psychology. There are so many qualitative methods in use, framed within multiple philosophical frameworks, that it can be challenging for journal reviewers who are unfamiliar with qualitative methods to evaluate whether a manuscript should be published. Reviewers who are unfamiliar with qualitative methods entirely or familiar with only one method or one tradition of inquiry may inappropriately use that knowledge to evaluate research that uses a different method or tradition. Others may adhere to incongruous criteria that are based within quantitative standards. Similarly, editors who do not have a background in qualitative research may be at a loss on how to adjudicate when reviews of a manuscript differ. This state of affairs has meant that it can be quite challenging to publish high-quality qualitative research.

To develop these standards, the P&C Board convened six researchers (Heidi M. Levitt [chair], Michael Bamberg, John W. Creswell, David Frost, Ruthellen Josselson, and Carola Suárez-Orozco) who had experience in using a variety of qualitative methods on a diverse range of topics and shared experience in journal editing. The Working Group on Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research (JARS–Qual) considered readings related to qualitative reporting (e.g., Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Madill & Gough, 2008; O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007; Walsh, 2015), met in person to form the core of the standards, then worked together remotely to develop recommendations. They sought feedback on these recommendations from the P&C Board, the APA Council of Editors, and the International Committee of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology. In addition, they presented initial standards at an APA convention to invite feedback from the general membership (Levitt, Bamberg, et al., 2016). The final standards were published in *American Psychologist* (Levitt, Bamberg, et al., 2018).

This book is based on the reporting standards developed by this group. An advantage of this book is that it permits the space to expand on the ideas in those standards and to articulate the rationale behind each. Knowing these rationales can be helpful as

you write up your own qualitative research as they will assist you in making decisions about how to interpret the standards.

How to Use This Book to Improve Your Research

This book describes the distinctive elements of qualitative reporting and goes beyond what is presented in the *American Psychologist* article on qualitative reporting (Levitt, Bamberg, et al., 2018) and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.; APA, 2010). It articulates decisions you may need to make as an author as you decide how to present your work. It also provides examples to illustrate a strong presentation style, and these can serve as helpful models. It does not review all the information in the *Publication Manual* on writing style, so that book will be a helpful guide as well.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the conceptual undergirding for the reporting decisions that authors make during the writing process. Chapter 2 describes how the reporting of qualitative research is influenced by the purpose of a research project and the research traditions in use. For instance, constructivist authors writing up a participatory action study might intertwine their Method and Discussion sections as a way to highlight the coconstruction of the findings and their implications and to avoid a style of presentation that suggests that the results are objective while the discussion is subjective. Their approach to inquiry and their research tradition might guide them to present their work in a manner that highlights the strengths of their work in relation to their goals and as they are conceived within their tradition.

In Chapter 3, the concept of methodological integrity is discussed. Understanding this concept is critical to successful writing on qualitative research. It guides authors to report idiosyncratic aspects of their research in a way that conveys their rigor and also to explain how they addressed gaps in integrity.

Chapters 4 through 7 consider the typical sections of a qualitative research paper—the introductory sections, Method, Results, and Discussion. These chapters emphasize aspects of reporting that are unique to qualitative research. They describe the general elements that should be reported in qualitative papers and can assist authors in developing comprehensive reports that will support their review. Guidance is provided for how to best present qualitative research, with rationales and illustrations.

The reporting standards for qualitative meta-analyses, which are integrative analyses of findings from across primary qualitative research, are presented in Chapter 8. These standards are distinct from the standards for both quantitative meta-analyses and primary qualitative research. The chapter helps authors understand what is necessary to include in these reports.

Mixed methods studies use both qualitative and quantitative methods. Chapter 9 describes the reporting standards for this form of research. Although the reporting standards for mixed methods research draw on the standards for both quantitative and qualitative research, they emphasize the need to report how these methods work together to enhance understanding.

Finally, Chapter 10 includes a discussion of objectivist and constructivist rhetorical styles in research reporting. It encourages researchers to consider how the phrasing of their writing communicates their approach to inquiry and to engage readers using a style that is coherent with their approach. Also, this chapter describes the process of

communicating with journal editors during the process of submitting a manuscript for review, emphasizing issues that tend to arise when submitting qualitative research and providing tips to facilitate the review. Finally, it describes future directions for qualitative research reporting as receptivity to and understanding of qualitative methods continue to increase.

Three tables listing the JARS–Qual guidelines are presented in this book. Shortened forms of these tables can be found online (<http://www.apastyle.org/jars/>). I also include text boxes that excerpt portions of the JARS–Qual tables that are relevant to the topic of each subsection, as appropriate. Table A1.1, in the appendix to this chapter, presents the general qualitative standards. In the appendix to Chapter 8, the table presenting reporting standards for qualitative meta-analyses can be found. The appendix to Chapter 9 contains the table of reporting standards for mixed methods research, as well as a table that presents the JARS–Quant guidelines essential to understand when reporting a mixed methods study. As you read the text, these tables will be a helpful reference.

You will notice that the JARS–Qual tables have three columns, whereas the JARS–Quant table has only two. The first column of the JARS–Qual tables contains the element of the article to be reported. The divisions in this column suggest sections and subsections that can be used to structure an article (e.g., introduction, objectives, methods), but the tables also note that qualitative researchers sometimes alter or combine sections and may opt to use a narrative format in papers. The second column of the tables contains a description of the information to be reported. Whether sections follow the outline in the JARS–Qual guidelines or are combined, the information related to each element should be reported in the paper. The third column contains recommendations and tips that can be useful for authors and reviewers to consider.

Understanding the rationale behind the reporting standards can help you make sense of how to apply a standard within your own project. As will be described, some of the standards may be adapted to better fit certain modes of research. As a researcher, you know your research best, and there may be ways you can support the methodological integrity of your work that are unique to your study and are not listed in the standards (which are meant to apply across qualitative studies). Be attuned to the modes of presentation that may strengthen your work and allow the story you are telling to be received as meaningful, innovative, and credible.

In addition, by describing the rationale for the standards, this book can help you explain your reporting decisions to reviewers or editors. There are many places in the reporting standards where we indicate that flexibility should be honored. In this book, I describe why a given standard might not hold for all studies, and you may wish to draw on these explanations in not only the writing process but the review process as well. Understanding the rationale for variations in reporting can assist you in crafting responses to reviewers and help reviewers and editors better understand your decisions. Because this book explains the thinking behind the standards developed by experts in qualitative methods in psychology, basing your explanations on this thinking can help you be persuasive when submitting your papers to peer review or responding to editors.

Appendix 1.1: Journal Article Reporting Standards for All Qualitative Research Designs (JARS–Qual)

Table A1.1. Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research (JARS–Qual): Information Recommended for Inclusion in Manuscripts That Report Primary Qualitative Research

Paper section or element	Description of information to be reported	Recommendations for authors to consider and notes for reviewers
Title page		
Title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key issues/topic under consideration. 	
Author note	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge funding sources or contributors. • Acknowledge conflicts of interest, if any. 	
Abstract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State the problem/question/objectives under investigation. • Indicate the study design, including types of participants or data sources, and analytic strategy, main results/findings, and main implications/significance. • Identify five keywords. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Authors:</i> Consider including at least one keyword that describes the method and one that describes the types of participants or phenomenon under investigation. • <i>Authors:</i> Consider describing your approach to inquiry when it will facilitate the review process and intelligibility of your paper. If your work is not grounded in a specific approach to inquiry or your approach would be too complicated to explain in the allotted word count, however, it would not be advisable to provide explication on this point in the abstract.
Introduction		
Description of research problem or question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame the problem or question and its context. • Review, critique, and synthesize the applicable literature to identify key issues/debates/theoretical frameworks in the relevant literature to clarify barriers, knowledge gaps, or practical needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reviewers:</i> The introduction may include case examples, personal narratives, vignettes, or other illustrative material.

Study objectives/aims/
research goals

- State the purpose(s)/goal(s)/aim(s) of the study.
- State the target audience, if specific.
- Provide the rationale for fit of design used to investigate this purpose/goal (e.g., theory building, explanatory, developing understanding, social action, description, highlighting social practices).
- Describe the approach to inquiry, if it illuminates the objectives and research rationale (e.g., descriptive, interpretive, feminist, psychoanalytic, postpositivist, critical, postmodern, or constructivist, or pragmatic approaches).

- *Authors:* If relevant to objectives, explain the relation of the current analysis to prior articles/publications.
- *Reviewers:* Qualitative studies often legitimately need to be divided into multiple manuscripts because of journal article page limitations, but each manuscript should have a separate focus.
- *Reviewers:* Qualitative studies tend not to identify hypotheses, but research questions and goals.

Method

Research design
overview

- Summarize the research design, including data collection strategies, data analytic strategies, and, if illuminating, approaches to inquiry (e.g., descriptive, interpretive, feminist, psychoanalytic, postpositivist, critical, postmodern, constructivist, or pragmatic approaches).
- Provide the rationale for the design selected.

- *Reviewers:* Method sections can be written in a chronological or narrative format.
- *Reviewers:* Although they provide a method description that other investigators should be able to follow, it is not required that other investigators arrive at the same conclusions, but rather that their method should lead them to conclusions with a similar degree of methodological integrity.
- *Reviewers:* At times, elements may be relevant to multiple sections and authors need to organize what belongs in each subsection in order to describe the method coherently and reduce redundancy. For instance, the overview and the objectives statement may be presented in one section.

(table continues)

Paper section or element	Description of information to be reported	Recommendations for authors to consider and notes for reviewers
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Reviewers:</i> Processes of qualitative research are often iterative versus linear, may evolve through the inquiry process and may move between data collection and analysis in multiple formats. As a result, data collection and analysis sections might be combined.• <i>Reviewers:</i> For the reasons above and because qualitative methods often are adapted and combined creatively, requiring detailed description and rationale, an average qualitative Method section typically is longer than an average quantitative Method section.
Study participants or data sources		
Researcher description	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the researchers' backgrounds in approaching the study, emphasizing their prior understandings of the phenomena under study (e.g., interviewers, analysts, or research team).• Describe how prior understandings of the phenomena under study were managed and/or influenced the research (e.g., enhancing, limiting, or structuring data collection and analysis).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Authors:</i> Prior understandings relevant to the analysis could include, but are not limited to, descriptions of researchers' demographic/cultural characteristics, credentials, experience with phenomena, training, values, and decisions in selecting archives or material to analyze.• <i>Reviewers:</i> Researchers differ in the extensiveness of reflexive self-description in reports. It may not be possible for authors to estimate the depth of description desired by reviewers without guidance.

Participants or other data sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the numbers of participants/documents/events analyzed. • Describe the demographics/cultural information, perspectives of participants or characteristics of data sources that might influence the data collected. • Describe existing data sources, if relevant (e.g., newspapers, Internet, archive). • Provide data repository information for openly shared data, if applicable. • Describe archival searches or process of locating data for analyses, if applicable. 	
Researcher–participant relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the relationships and interactions between researchers and participants relevant to the research process and any impact on the research process (e.g., was there a relationship prior to research, are there any ethical considerations relevant to prior relationships). 	
Participant recruitment Recruitment process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the recruitment process description (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, mail, email, recruitment protocols). • Describe any incentives or compensation, and provide assurance of relevant ethical processes of data collection and consent process as relevant (may include institutional review board approval, particular adaptations for vulnerable populations, safety monitoring). • Describe the process via which the number of participants was determined in relation to the study design. • Provide any changes in numbers through attrition and final number of participants/sources (if relevant, refusal rates or reasons for dropout). • Describe the rationale for decision to halt data collection (e.g., saturation). • Convey the study purpose as portrayed to participants, if different from the purpose stated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reviewers:</i> There is no agreed-upon minimum number of participants for a qualitative study. Rather, the author should provide a rationale for the number of participants chosen. • <i>Authors/Reviewers:</i> The order of the recruitment process and the selection process and their contents may be determined in relation to the authors' methodological approach. Some authors will determine a selection process and then develop a recruitment method based on those criteria. Other authors will develop a recruitment process and then select participants responsively in relation to evolving findings.

(table continues)

■ **Table A1.1.** (*Continued*)

Paper section or element	Description of information to be reported	Recommendations for authors to consider and notes for reviewers
Participant selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the participants/data sources selection process (e.g., purposive sampling methods such as maximum variation, diversity sampling, or convenience sampling methods such as snowball selection, theoretical sampling) and inclusion/exclusion criteria. • Provide the general context for the study (when data were collected, sites of data collection). • If your participant selection is from an archived data set, describe the recruitment and selection process from that data set as well as any decisions in selecting sets of participants from that data set. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Authors:</i> A statement can clarify how the number of participants fits with practices in the design at hand, recognizing that transferability of findings in qualitative research to other contexts is based in developing deep and contextualized understandings that can be applied by readers rather than quantitative estimates of error and generalizations to populations. • <i>Authors/Reviewers:</i> The order of the recruitment process and the selection process and their contents may be determined in relation to the authors' methodological approach. Some authors will determine a selection process and then develop a recruitment method based upon those criteria. Other authors will develop a recruitment process and then select participants responsively in relation to evolving findings.

Data collection

Data collection/
identification
procedures

- State the form of data collected (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, media, observation).
- Describe the origins or evolution of the data-collection protocol.
- Describe any alterations of data-collection strategy in response to the evolving findings or the study rationale.
- Describe the data-selection or data-collection process (e.g., were others present when data were collected, number of times data were collected, duration of collection, context).
- Convey the extensiveness of engagement (e.g., depth of engagement, time intensiveness of data collection).
- For interview and written studies, indicate the mean and range of the time duration in the data-collection process (e.g., interviews were held for 75 to 110 min, with an average interview time of 90 min).
- Describe the management or use of reflexivity in the data-collection process, as it illuminates the study.
- Describe questions asked in data collection: content of central questions, form of questions (e.g., open vs. closed).

- *Reviewers:* Researchers may use terms for data collection that are coherent within their research approach and process, such as *data identification*, *data collection*, or *data selection*. Descriptions should be provided, however, in accessible terms in relation to the readership.
- *Reviewers:* It may not be useful for researchers to reproduce all of the questions they asked in an interview, especially in the case of unstructured or semistructured interviews as questions are adapted to the content of each interview.

Recording and data
transformation

- Identify data audio/visual recording methods, field notes, and transcription processes used.

Analysis

Data-analytic strategies

- Describe the methods and procedures used and for what purpose/goal.
- Explicate in detail the process of analysis, including some discussion of the procedures (e.g., coding, thematic analysis, etc.), with a principle of transparency.
- Describe coders or analysts and their training, if not already described in the researcher description section (e.g., coder selection, collaboration groups).

- *Reviewers:* Researchers may use terms for data analysis that are coherent within their research approach and process (e.g., *interpretation*, *unitization*, *eidetic analysis*, *coding*). Descriptions should be provided, however, in accessible terms in relation to the readership.

(table continues)

■ Table A1.1. (Continued)

Paper section or element	Description of information to be reported	Recommendations for authors to consider and notes for reviewers
Methodological integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify whether coding categories emerged from the analyses or were developed a priori. • Identify units of analysis (e.g., entire transcript, unit, text) and how units were formed, if applicable. • Describe the process of arriving at an analytic scheme, if applicable (e.g., if one was developed before or during the analysis or was emergent throughout). • Provide illustrations and descriptions of their development, if relevant. • Indicate software, if used. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Authors:</i> Provide rationales to illuminate analytic choices in relation to the study goals.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate that the claims made from the analysis are warranted and have produced findings with methodological integrity. The procedures that support methodological integrity (i.e., fidelity and utility) typically are described across the relevant sections of a paper, but they could be addressed in a separate section when elaboration or emphasis would be helpful. Issues of methodological integrity include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the <i>adequacy</i> of the data in terms of the ability to capture forms of diversity most relevant to the question, research goals, and inquiry approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reviewers:</i> Research does not need to use all or any of the checks (as rigor is centrally based in the iterative process of qualitative analyses, which inherently includes checks within the evolving, self-correcting iterative analyses), but their use can augment a study's methodological integrity. Approaches to inquiry have different traditions in terms of using checks and which checks are most valued.

- Describe how the *researchers' perspectives* were managed in both the data collection and analysis (e.g., to limit their effect on the data collection, to structure the analysis).
- Demonstrate that findings are *grounded* in the evidence (e.g., using quotes, excerpts, or descriptions of researchers' engagement in data collection).
- Demonstrate that the contributions are *insightful* and *meaningful* (e.g., in relation to the current literature and the study goal).
- Provide relevant *contextual* information for findings (e.g., setting of study, information about participants, interview question asked is presented before excerpt as needed).
- Present findings in a *coherent* manner that makes sense of contradictions or disconfirming evidence in the data (e.g., reconcile discrepancies, describe why a conflict might exist in the findings).
- Demonstrate *consistency* with regard to the analytic processes (e.g., analysts may use demonstrations of analyses to support consistency, describe their development of a stable perspective, interrater reliability, consensus) or describe responses to inconsistencies, as relevant (e.g., coders switching midanalysis, an interruption in the analytic process). If alterations in methodological integrity were made for ethical reasons, explicate those reasons and the adjustments made.

(table continues)

■ **Table A1.1.** (*Continued*)

Paper section or element	Description of information to be reported	Recommendations for authors to consider and notes for reviewers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe how support for claims was supplemented by any checks added to the qualitative analysis. Examples of supplemental checks that can strengthen the research may include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> transcripts/data collected returned to participants for feedback; triangulation across multiple sources of information, findings, or investigators; checks on the interview thoroughness or interviewer demands; consensus or auditing process; member checks or participant feedback on findings; data displays/matrices; in-depth thick description, case examples, or illustrations; structured methods of researcher reflexivity (e.g., sending memos, field notes, diary, logbooks, journals, bracketing); and checks on the utility of findings in responding to the study problem (e.g., an evaluation of whether a solution worked). 	

Findings/Results

Findings/Results
subsections

- Describe research findings (e.g., themes, categories, narratives) and the meaning and understandings that the researcher has derived from the data analysis.
- Demonstrate the analytic process of reaching findings (e.g., quotes, excerpts of data).
- Present research findings in a way that is compatible with the study design.
- Present synthesizing illustrations (e.g., diagrams, tables, models), if useful in organizing and conveying findings. Photographs or links to videos can be used.
- *Reviewers:* Findings sections tend to be longer than in quantitative papers because of the demonstrative rhetoric needed to permit the evaluation of the analytic procedure.
- *Reviewers:* Depending on the approach to inquiry, findings and discussion may be combined or a personalized discursive style might be used to portray the researchers' involvement in the analysis.
- *Reviewers:* Findings may or may not include quantified information, depending upon the study's goals, approach to inquiry, and study characteristics.
- *Authors:* Findings presented in an artistic manner (e.g., a link to a dramatic presentation of findings) should also include information in the reporting standards to support the research presentation.
- *Reviewers:* Use quotes or excerpts to augment data description (e.g., thick, evocative description, field notes, text excerpts), but these should not replace the description of the findings of the analysis.

(table continues)

■ **Table A1.1.** (*Continued*)

Paper section or element	Description of information to be reported	Recommendations for authors to consider and notes for reviewers
Discussion		
Discussion subsections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the central contributions and their significance in advancing disciplinary understandings. • Describe the types of contributions made by findings (e.g., challenging, elaborating on, and supporting prior research or theory in the literature describing the relevance) and how findings can be best utilized. • Identify similarities and differences from prior theories and research findings. • Reflect on any alternative explanations of the findings. • Identify the study's strengths and limitations (e.g., consider how the quality, source, or types of the data or the analytic processes might support or weaken its methodological integrity). • Describe the limits of the scope of transferability (e.g., what readers should bear in mind when using findings across contexts). • Revisit any ethical dilemmas or challenges that were encountered, and provide related suggestions for future researchers. • Consider the implications for future research, policy, or practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reviewers:</i> Accounts could lead to multiple solutions rather than a single one. Many qualitative approaches hold that there may be more than one valid and useful set of findings from a given data set.

Note. Adapted from “Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Primary, Qualitative Meta-Analytic, and Mixed Methods Research in Psychology: The APA Publications and Communications Board Task Force Report,” by H. M. Levitt, M. Bamberg, J. W. Creswell, D. M. Frost, R. Josselson, and C. Suárez-Orozco, 2018, *American Psychologist*, 73, pp. 34–37. Copyright 2018 by the American Psychological Association.