

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *On Your Mark . . .*

*Writing is the only thing that . . . when I'm doing it, I don't feel that I should be doing something else.*

—Gloria Steinem

The original idea for this book came about in 1988 from Mitch Allen. At the time, he was an acquisitions editor for SAGE Publications who was attending the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association to exhibit SAGE books and to meet with authors. We were introduced by Jean Campbell, one of my graduate students. She had been telling Mitch how she appreciated my writing. Mitch said he was looking for someone to write a monograph for SAGE's new Qualitative Research Methods Series. He wanted something that would address the problems that graduate students and others were having writing up their qualitative studies, which at that time seemed to be flourishing. He asked if I was interested in such a project. I was flattered to have an editor approach *me* with an idea for a book, although writing about writing had never crossed my mind. I accepted his challenge.

But by the time I got back to my hotel room, I had an outline for a little book clearly in mind. My first pass at the writing did not completely satisfy Mitch, but he patiently persisted. I did not recognize at the time the influence he was to have on my writing, but in the next few months, I was able to satisfy both of us with a finished manuscript, and the monograph that resulted became Volume 20 in the SAGE series.

Most of what I had learned about writing prior to that time was the result of doing it, along with some careful—and carefully meted out—suggestions from numerous critic-readers along the way. Three of my own studies had been published, and my writing was becoming known. A few people (including, of course, graduate students like Jean) were telling me that I was a “natural writer.” I appreciated being told that I am a good writer (by academic standards, not literary ones), but in my judgment I am not, at least in the sense of doing something that comes easily and naturally.

An honest claim that I can make is that I care about my writing. I work diligently at editing. What others read are always final drafts, not early ones. Pride and perseverance substitute for talent. Although I do not write with a natural ease, I have learned what it takes to produce (final) copy that may make you think I do.

I will say something about introductions later (in Chapter 6), but for now, let’s see what it will take to get you to get some words on paper or on your computer screen for purposes of doing a fieldwork-oriented term paper, a thesis, a doctoral dissertation, even an article or book for publication.

From my book title, you know that the focus is on writing what has come to be known as *qualitative* or *descriptive* or *naturalistic* research. This “naturalistic paradigm” goes by various labels. In 1985, researchers Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba identified several aliases for the term *naturalistic*—postpositivistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, subjective, case study, qualitative, hermeneutic, humanistic—the list just kept growing. Those of you who pursue any of these strategies or some closely related approach are my intended audience. You constitute a special subset of field-oriented researchers who not only work in a broad qualitative vein (along with biographers, historians, and philosophers) but apply the label “qualitative” or “qualitative/descriptive” to your research, in contrast to those who specify that they are *doing* biography, history, philosophy, and so forth.

## WRITING VERSUS OUGHT-TO-BE WRITING

You do think of yourself as a writer, don’t you? Or are you an ought-to-be-writing writer, or worse, an ought-to-be-researching researcher who simply can’t get started? You are among the latter if you realize that the pressure is on for you to publish but find yourself at a loss even

for a research topic. This is sometimes a problem for recent PhDs who accept university teaching assignments in professional schools or applied fields only to find—as they had suspected all along—that advancement depends on sustained “scholarly production” instead. That usually means writing—a professional lifetime of it.

I know there are some ought-to-be-writing types lurking out there. With the growing acceptance of qualitative approaches in such diverse fields as business administration, communications, cultural studies, economic development, education, international aid, leisure studies, nursing, physical education, public health, social justice, and social psychology, academics have been turning to qualitative research out of desperation as well as inspiration. Having reached a stage in their careers when they are expected to publish, these professionals suddenly find themselves inadequately prepared to conduct research. They look for ways to become what they believe they must become: qualified qualitative researchers. Qualitative approaches beckon because they appear natural, straightforward, even “obvious,” and thus easy to accomplish. Were it not for the complexity of conceptualizing a qualitative study, conducting the research, analyzing it, and writing it up, perhaps they would be.

This is not a manual on conducting qualitative research or the basics of grammar. There are books aplenty on those topics, standing by ready to help you.<sup>1</sup> Style is part of the writing process; I will add what I can, or, as often, reiterate advice that seasoned authors have offered for years, but I’d like to think you will develop your own style.

My purpose is to help ensure that whatever you have written down in the way of field notes gets written up into a final account, and written so well that your qualitative study is also a quality one. I write not for professional writers but for professionals who must write. And not for those of you who have always delighted in the art of personal expression, but for those of you who write because others expect you to demonstrate what you are prepared to do (if you are in student status) or to contribute to the ongoing research dialogue in your field (if you are completing a doctorate or are a beginning professional).<sup>2</sup>

Although I address a particular subset of researchers, you should find helpful suggestions for any academic writing. But my focus remains on qualitative/descriptive research and on processes related to getting it written up, rather than on related facets (e.g., conceptualizing, research design, conducting the fieldwork, analyzing),

despite the fact that these processes are virtually inseparable. No doubt disappointing to some readers, you may find a mechanical cast to much of the advice I offer. Instead of wheedling you to attempt great leaps of intuitive insight, and to write with such panache that you feel that writing is exactly what you should be doing instead of doing something else, you are more likely to find me arguing in favor of pedestrian coding and sorting to construct your study one brick at a time.

Or one bird at a time, to borrow a title from Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994). It seems that Lamott's brother, age 10 at the time, was overwhelmed ("immobilized" is her word) by the magnitude of a classroom assignment to prepare a report on birds due the following Monday. Father volunteered the comforting advice: "Bird by bird, Buddy. Just take it bird by bird" (p. 19). Good counsel for her brother also provided a ready-made title for her book about writing and the writer's habits. (I'll say more about titles in Chapter 6, including the risk of using a catchy but oblique one like *Bird by Bird*, but I commend Lamott for exquisitely capturing the essence of the message I want to convey.)

## Looking Ahead

I assume that anyone able to envision how to proceed from the top down, by introducing and developing an overarching concept, unifying theory, or persistent paradox, will do just that. If you know what you're about, get on with it. If you do *not* know what you're about, then I recommend that you proceed with less flair (and risk) and develop your account from the bottom up. The suggestions I propose—ranging from when and how to begin (in Chapter 2), or how to keep going (Chapters 3 and 4), to what to do by way of tightening (Chapter 5) and what needs to be included in the front and back matter of a book (Chapter 6)—can be regarded not so much as the best way to go about things as ways to get around thinking that you can't possibly do them at all.

I don't follow all these suggestions myself. Some I have tried but no longer use, a few seem like good ideas to pass along, although I have never tried them. Good advice from reviewers and resources consulted for the first two editions has informed this one; the basic ideas have aged well. Some points are raised merely to review the range of opinion or practice extant. I include an immodest number

of references to my own writing—writing done over a period of 40+ years—in part to avoid repeating myself but mostly because they are the studies I know best. I wrote them to be read—I take every opportunity to call attention to them.

A brief monograph cannot presume to be the *Compleat Guide to Writing Up Qualitative Research*. For example, extended dialogues have been underway about descriptive research as *text* and the role of critical analysis in the social sciences as part of the postmodern scene, but those issues are not addressed. Neither do I address issues of the *content* of the underlying theory or conceptual basis of your efforts, although I do discuss the *possible* roles these elements can play. Nor have I presumed to anticipate how electronic media will continue to modify the ways we communicate. You probably have as good an idea of what lies ahead, and you certainly have a greater need to know about such things than I do at this stage in life. But it seems certain that ideas will continue to be conveyed through words, and putting words into a form that can be conveyed to others is where the process begins. That remains a virtual reality—in the old sense of the phrase rather than the current one.

My focus is on the *immediate* task: helping you get your thoughts and observations into presentable written form. If you have conducted your research and are experiencing some uncertainty about how to proceed from here, recognize that you cannot possibly have come this far without some idea of what you thought you were up to when you started. I may be able to free you from feeling that you must pay homage to theory or method before you can press on. We'll get to issues of theory and method in Chapter 4.

I am not going to try to convince you that writing is fun. Writing is always challenging and sometimes satisfying; that is as far as I will try to go in singing its praises. You might think of it as comparable to getting up and going to work each day: Some days are more pleasant than others, but regardless of how you feel, you are expected to be “on the job,” whether in an inspired state or not. Keep in mind that even if you are writing only one page—or even one paragraph—a day, eventually you will have a working draft in hand. And that's what you will need to get a start on a polished manuscript.

Enough of these warnings, especially to announce what the book is *not* about. I don't know where I picked up the habit of beginning a writing project with so many disclaimers. Probably it started with writing my dissertation. I assumed (incorrectly, as usual) that I was

going to have to defend *every word*. A new term crept into my vocabulary: **delimitations**. I don't think I ever used the word again after completing my dissertation, but I'll admit to a great deal of satisfaction at the time in proclaiming all the things that my study was *not* going to deal with.

Inventorying some important delimitations might provide a starting place for your debut into academic writing, especially if you worry that your only writing experience to date has been personal and private rather than subject to scholarly scrutiny. If you aren't ready to declare exactly what your study is about, try listing some of the things it is *not* about. "Delimitations" is a handy category to include in a dissertation and, in some more subtle form, to include in any academic writing. That advice underscores another message that permeates this book: Anything goes that gets you going. During the editing and revising stages, you can decide whether you have overdone the delimitations, but if they have been worrying you, you may as well confront them from the first.

Throughout the text, I stress the importance of revising and editing. Careful editing is the antidote for the lack of giftedness among the huge corpus of us who recognize that we had better write but are not among the better writers. There is little point to writing up qualitative research if we cannot get anyone to read what we have to report, and no point at all to research without reporting.

A writing tip borrowed from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: When you come to the end, stop. I have said enough by way of introduction. Nobody minds short chapters, especially when there is a long one just ahead.

## SUMMING UP: JUMP-START

- Getting something written so that you can begin the necessary editing is a major theme in this book.
- You are unlikely to identify with Gloria Steinem's feeling that writing is the only thing that when you are doing it, you don't feel you should be doing something else. You are more likely to succeed with Anne Lamott's suggested "bird by bird" approach.
- If you can't get started, consider listing what you feel are the important *delimitations* for your proposed study. No limit on this;

make your list as long as need be. Like everything you write, it can always be edited later. Once you've written what your study is *not* about, maybe you can draft a statement of what it *is* about. Later, you may want to share the list with your readers, but for now, keep it to yourself. It is no way to begin a study!

- Anything goes that gets you writing. For now, let's see if there are some ways to get you started. How about making a (personal) list of all the things that seem to be getting in the way of your writing just now. Is the list immutable, or can you confront and "slay" your demons, one at a time?

## NOTES

1. For other writer-related problems, see, for example, any recent publication by William Zinsser, who has been writing about writing since 1976, or Diana Hacker, who has been writing about writing since 1979.

2. If you are writing a dissertation, you might also want to see Biklen and Casella (2007); Rudestam and Newton (2007); or Meloy (1993).

