

# Qualitative Methods for Marketplace Research

## Writing Field Stories and Narrative Reports

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Book Title: Qualitative Methods for Marketplace Research

Chapter Title: "Writing Field Stories and Narrative Reports"

Pub. Date: 2001

Access Date: April 03, 2016

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9780761922704

Online ISBN: 9781412985543

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412985543.n16>

Print pages: 223-234

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412985543.n16>

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## Writing Field Stories and Narrative Reports

*I should like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking.  
But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1958

Just when you think it's safe to conclude your study, you're hit with a startling realization: You must tell someone what you did and what you learned. The two aspects of the writing task are approached with these questions: Who is your audience? and What is the purpose of the report?

Who you are writing for is of paramount importance for determining your communication style. A client requires a business presentation, whereas a professor demands scholarly prose. Journal article audiences are used to a format compatible with the journal's purpose. Whether you have a single or multiple audiences is another reader-oriented consideration. Once you identify the primary audience for your report, ask yourself what this audience expects or needs from this document.

Clients expect professional, informative communication that addresses the research problem in lay terms. Brevity and economy are two considerations here. You must balance their need to know with your need to justify the fee they paid for the research. In this case, try to “bottom line” your report, letting the reader know exactly how the results will benefit their business or affect their decision-making process. You will tell a marketplace story with a purposeful narrative that is both interesting and informative.

Academic audiences, however, require a bit more detail and rigorous delivery. Professors and thesis committee members need a demonstration from you that you used the correct methodological approach and conducted appropriate data analysis and that your results make a logical connection to theory. Formats [p. 224 ↓ ] similar to the

ones presented in the Case in Point sections at chapters' ends are modified for journal audiences as specified by the publication's style and presentation requirements.

What I'm trying to say is, no one format is appropriate for all reports, and no style suits every situation; your writing must be adapted to fit the expectations and needs of your reader(s). So why bother with this chapter at all, you ask. Because writing up the results is a very important aspect of research. Rather than leaving you in limbo to flounder on your own, I will suggest a few models for writing reports to get you started.

## Writerly Roles<sup>1</sup>

Writers of qualitative reports often think of themselves not as researchers but as authors of cultural description. Field studies are reported in a narrative fashion to present an unknown to strangers. Whether you are explaining an audience culture or a national one, the purpose is the same—telling an informative story about the marketplace. As authors of field research, you function as an artist, a translator-interpreter, or a transformer.

As an *artist*, you apply sensibilities to the form and style of the written presentation. You might even be mistaken for a journalist, a fiction writer, or—even worse—a poet. By seeking imaginative connections between events and people, you bring delightful interpretive information to your readers. There are no rules that say reports must be boring!

As you work to understand the marketplace culture, you act as an *interpreter* of that culture for others. You *translate* the consumer's language into marketing strategy. You may be translating the teen-speak of mall rats to shopping center owners or interpreting a Belgian flea market negotiation strategy to antique buyers; in both cases, audience comprehension depends on your ability to communicate that culture vividly and with flavor. Drawing on your own experiences, knowledge, and disposition, you present your understanding of the consumption experience to readers. Inference and conjecture is the bedrock of the interpretive process. You are shaped by your field experiences, your sponsors, your theoretical positions, and your observational perspectives. And often,

you craft your reports to fit the needs of the audience. These and other forces shape our interpretations. By being aware of these influences, you serve the needs of research.

In the role of *transformer*, you persuade others that your research brings new insight to a phenomenon or subject. You want readers to identify with your problems and your discoveries about marketplace interaction. Called an *intellectual* [p. 225 ↓] *exorcism*,<sup>2</sup> good reporting takes the perspective of the consumer, getting us out of ourselves and into the world we are studying.

## Developing Form and Style

Tell me a story, tell me a story,

Tell me a story and then I'll go to sleep.

—Nursery rhyme, 1864

Our field reports should be communicated as awesome stories or field tales. Field studies rely on five conventions of the *tales*: realism, confession, impressionism, criticism, and formal tales.<sup>3</sup> The author takes a position of authority for *realist tales*, being an omnipotent observer. Thick description of people's lives, using quotations to portray the native point of view, are key for realism. Ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory are presented as realist tales.

The author of *confessional tales* views fieldwork as an interpretive act and is very present in the text. Here, the point of view is of interpreter, not native; we are presenting rules we learned in the field. This section is found in the Description section of the IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) report format discussed later. Case studies, histories, and biographies are confessional tales.

Writers of *impressionist tales* make use of dramatic recall, artistry, and literary standards. You make the audience experience what you have experienced in a very colorful way by developing and naming characters with real needs, emotions, and motivations. Researchers using all models of qualitative study may present their field

reports as impressionistic tales, but they lend themselves best to self-narratives or personal life histories of consumption activities.

Occasionally, we become critics, drawing on neo-Marxist perspectives by demonstrating concern for the oppressed of a capitalistic society. *Critical tales* bring out a writer's crusading spirit. Authors of critical tales are focused on theory, using the field as a laboratory to answer research questions. Grounded theory studies often are written as critical tales.

Field writing that conforms to ethnographic conventions is useful for understanding market segments, niche, markets, or global markets that require a researcher's extended immersion. If, however, you have not been in the field for any length of time, you may wish to approach report writing in a more conventional way. In either case, use your proposal as a guide. A comprehensive proposal is the best blueprint you can have to direct the focus of your field study or business report.

## Organizing and Writing Qualitative Reports

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*Nothing really has happened until it has been described.*

—Virginia Woolf

Considering the report early in the research process enables writers to organize material in a storytelling fashion that can later be adapted for special applications. Reports are often approached as cases because they can be segmented into specific readable sections. An outline is presented here as one approach to report organization.

- *Preview:* This mini-story will get readers into the scene by introducing the situation, location, and time of the investigation.
- *Purpose and method:* Your audience may already know the purpose and is ambivalent about your methods, but it's wise to restate the study objectives and include a *brief* explanation of how you went about accomplishing them.

You might also summarize the issues involved in the case and your role in the research process.

- *Narrative*: An extensive story narrative describes and defines the case and its context. Without interpreting what you're reporting here, present a body of uncontested description to bring the reader farther into the story. Controversial information can be presented in the form of interview testimony, second hand so as not to appear biased.
- *Issues*: Develop a few key issues so the reader understands the case's complexity. Here, you may draw from past research or your own understanding of other cases to make your point and elaborate on the issues.
- *Description*: Some issues need additional probing. Include documents, quotations, and triangulated data to provide detailed descriptions.
- *Assertions*: If your reader is to reconsider his or her knowledge in favor of the illumination the case yields, you must, provide enough information to make your point. Interpretation and summation is the essence of this section, a very crucial one for making an argument or claim about research results.
- *Postview*: It's always a good idea to close with a reminder that this case is only one of many and that the report is written from your personal encounter with the marketplace situation.

## Narrating the Report

The title, client, and author of the study appear first. To separate each section, headings—formal or descriptive—help the reader focus on topics; they are also [p. 227 ↓ ] visual indications of topic transition. Additional visuals, such as charts, graphs, and tables, break up the narrative and provide readers with an abbreviation of the material presented. Using this format, here is a very abbreviated case report form to give you an idea of the flow of story narrative with descriptive headings, prepared for the New Zealand Kiwifruit Authority (NZKA).

## The Case of New Zealand Kiwifruit<sup>4</sup>

A study conducted for the New Zealand Kiwifruit Authority by John Jones

# Fruitful Introduction for Kiwi

(Preview)

Kiwifruit was virtually unknown to the western world 35 years ago: It was an exotic fruit produced and consumed in New Zealand (NZ). First introduced in England in 1952, kiwis were shipped with lemons and were an immediate hit. Australians also liked the fruit, providing two positive market tests for product launch. By the end of the 1980s, kiwi exports exceeded 46 million trays of fruit worldwide. Kiwi developed some identity problems over time, requiring the association to reposition the fruit in the marketplace.

# Unpeeling the Advertising Message

(Purpose and method)

Although New Zealand has enjoyed much success with the marketing of its kiwifruit, NZKA is reevaluating several aspects of its marketing program. Accepting the fact that fruit does not lend itself to special promotions (you either like it or you don't), consumer advertising is the most important factor in determining the success of marketing kiwis. This case study analyzes three alternative creative themes for its consumer advertising by evaluating the context within which the advertising message will run and the competitive messages in the marketplace and analyzing consumer perceptions about kiwifruit. This researcher is a consultant hired by NZKA to conduct the study because of his familiarity with perishables and advertising expertise.

# Furry Fables

(Narrative)



Kiwifruit is widely known as New Zealand's odd little hairy berry. Originating along the border of the Yangtze River Valley in China, the fruit was called the Chinese Gooseberry. The name *kiwi* was first used in 1959 to capitalize on the value of a brand name that was associated with New Zealand, the world's largest producer and exporter of kiwifruit.

## *Enjoying the benefits of health awareness*

Among its attributes, kiwi is healthy. In the past decade, we've seen an increased Consumer interest in eating more fruits. Table 1 [tables are not included here] [p. 228 ↓ ] shows the worldwide per capita consumption trends of fruits between 1990 and 2000. Notice that the U.S. per capita consumption of kiwi is 40 times greater now than it was 10 years ago. Kiwifruit has only 34 calories each, has no pit or stone, can be eaten with a spoon by itself or in salads, and is an attractive topping for all foods.

## *Price follows the demand curve*

As demand increased, so did the price of kiwi fruit. Table 2 shows the average annual wholesale market price per tray for selected major world markets in 1987 and 1997. The centralized buying of supermarkets and their aggressive marketing strategies account for an increasing proportion of exotic fruit sales.

## *Competitive threats*

As kiwifruit developed into an accepted fruit by world markets, other countries experimented with growing it. By 1987, almost half of the world's production of kiwifruit came from countries other than New Zealand. Italy, which benefits from EEC free trade, is a serious threat to New Zealand's dominance of the European market. Chile is gradually taking over the market share in the southern hemisphere.

## *Working together for success*

In spite of the rise of strong competition, the NZ kiwifruit industry is one of the country's major sources of income. NZKA was established in 1977 to promote the interest and welfare of the NZ kiwifruit industry. NZKA controls the overseas promotion activities and collects fees from its growers and exporters for this purpose.

## *Generic branding strategy fails*

Many fresh fruits and vegetables are branding themselves with adhesive name labels or printed logos. Unfortunately for New Zealand, kiwifruit has become a generic term used by all producers of the fruit. Consumer testimony validates this notion:

I thought all kiwis came from the same place. (Mary, 36)

Doesn't Sunkist or Dole produce kiwi? (Fred, 42)

Is there a difference between one country's kiwi and another's? (Alice, 20)

## Sowing Kiwi Seeds

(Issues)

Promoting perishables has proven troublesome for many growers over the years. Chiquita created a Latin dancer in the shape of a banana who sang to us on television. Sunkist was the first to use ink branding directly on its citrus. Both companies called attention to themselves using a variety of integrated marketing communications. One issue for

NZKA was how to effectively promote the kiwi and to call attention to the brand, New Zealand Kiwifruit.

NZKA worked closely with food editors of magazines and journals to increase their knowledge of kiwi and to supply them with ideas for serving the fruit. Other promotional activities included point-of-purchase (POP) materials, trade articles, [p. 229 ↓ ] specialty advertising, premiums, and advertising. POPs have proved to be one of the most important forms of promotion for kiwi, improving sales in every instance of their use.

Advertising's role is a second issue. Using print, broadcast, and outdoor media, NZKA has advertised throughout the world with varying success rates. Because New Zealand no longer owns the kiwifruit market, its competitors use the “buy local” strategy to keep kiwi sales in the countries of origin.

## Creating Airwave Appeal

(Description)

Three themes were proposed by the advertising agency retained by NZKA to develop a campaign to increase brand awareness and position New Zealand as the best kiwi grower in the world:

- *Buy NZ kiwi because they are healthy, nutritious, and tasty.*  
This generic theme focuses on the fruit's main selling features. No differential advantage is included.
- *Buy NZ kiwi because it is the original and best on the market.*  
Associating kiwi with exotic and beautiful New Zealand may create an image for kiwi that reflects the country's attributes.
- *Buy NZ kiwi because of its distinctive personality.*

A brand character (a “fuzzy, ugly but cute fruit”) was selected for use with this theme to characterize the fruit and capitalize on its distinct taste and appearance.

Themes were tested in four countries for viewer recall and creating favorable attitudes. Results show that no single theme was appropriate for all four countries; they differed in their ability to promote recall or to create a favorable attitude toward New Zealand kiwifruit. The dilemma of whether to create a local campaign based on test results for each country or to adopt a single theme for a global campaign was hotly debated among members of the Authority. At this writing, no decision had been made. Meanwhile, the New Zealand kiwi continues to lose market share worldwide.

## Make Kiwi the “Real Thing”

(Assertions)

If you may recall, Coke's “Real Thing” slogan established them as a global power, not because the slogan was sent to a single global audience but because they gave it local appeal. NZKA must create a global awareness with a single brand idea—perhaps the brand character—while conforming to local perceptions of health and taste for a truly successful worldwide presence. As reflected in the literature, brands cross borders better than slogans. Visuals communicate faster and better than words. Using those considerations, the NZKA will do well to follow the Coke example.

## Ugly Is Beautiful

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(Postview)

As the VW Beetle has proven, ugly can be beneficial for marketing unique shapes to a sympathetic public. The idea of a self-conscious fruit in the Woody Allen sense is very appealing to many Western countries. For others countries, perhaps a macho kiwi character kicks off the campaign. If we are to remember New Zealand when we think of kiwifruit, we must be entertained by the idea of a beautiful paradise boasting about its ugly little taste sensation.

## The IMRD Structure of Qualitative Reports<sup>5</sup>

Typically, students and researchers write up qualitative reports in a four-section format of Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion—thus, the IMRD structure. The Discussion section is the lengthiest, especially when quotations are used to illustrate emerging themes. The generic approach of the IMRD structure lends itself to a variety of uses and can be easily adapted to journal or thesis requirements. The content of each section is briefly described here.

*Introduction:* Readers want to know in a very short time why this topic is of interest and what you hope to accomplish by conducting the research. Relevant literature and the topic's importance for your field are also expected here. You supply your readers with a sense of context and background to help them understand the nature of the report and its importance.

*Methods:* Because not all marketplace researchers or clients are familiar with qualitative methods, it's a good idea to ground them in your model and rationale for using it, as well as an explanation of each technique of data gathering and analysis. Provide the assumptions qualitative researchers have toward research and naturalistic inquiry, followed by nontechnical definitions of the terms used in the report.

*Results:* This section's only concern is with *what* you found, not *why*. If you identified four themes, state them. If you have numeric data (from a corresponding quantitative study or content analysis), present them in tables or charts. Confine your remarks to the bottom line—what happened during the study.

*Discussion:* This is the meat of your report, the *why* of your results. This section is what distinguishes qualitative research from quantitative because it contains detailed evidence to support and elaborate on what you found. Confessional tales (described earlier) are contained in this section. You can explain what was unexpected or surprising as well as compare your study with what other researchers have found in the past. Research usually produces unanswered questions; these can be proposed for future research in this section.

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## Last

Don't be fooled by the brevity of this chapter; it does not reflect the length of reports you will need to produce about your research outcomes. My advice is to take a look at qualitative journal articles in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, at masters' theses, and at Harvard Business School case studies. Writing reports can be a very cathartic experience; take advantage of it.

## Summary

- Two vital determinants of report writing are the audience or reader and the report's purpose.
- An ethnographic writer can approach field reports as tales of realism, confession, impressionism, criticism, or formalism.
- A seven-part organizational scheme can be used for writing case studies and organizational narratives.
- The IMRD format can be adapted for academic or professional reports on qualitative studies.

## Stretching Exercises

- Locate an article from the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Identify one type of tale that the article reflects, and explain your choice.
- From an article you locate in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, explain the usefulness of the Discussion section for understanding the marketplace phenomenon studied.

## Recommended Readings About Report Writing

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Longman.

Moch, S. D., & Gates, M. F. (Eds.). (1999). *The researcher experience in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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## Case-in-Point: Mmm! What a Tan— Presenting Beach Lore to Minnesotans

**Client:** 3M Company, Personal Product Division **The Brand:** *Mmm! What a Tan*

**Audience:** Marketing manager and national sales managers

**Purpose:** 3M developed the first suntan lotion with numbered screen designations. In preparation for a test market, they commissioned a study to determine what promotions were appropriate for the San Diego lifestyle. The researcher's job was to study the relationship between the beach culture and suntan lotion and present the results in an interesting and informative field narrative. The client was a Minnesota company with little knowledge about beach culture.

What follows is the process of developing a *video report* of a study conducted to develop concepts for product promotion.

**Medium:** 15-minute videotape

**Author's role:** Author as interpreter, presenting a confessional tale of the beach culture of young adults during a typical summer season along the California coast.

**Background:** In the early 1980s, 3M wanted a very splashy rollout promotion for their newly developed suntan lotion. The task is to conduct field research and create appropriate promotions for test market events. To understand the beach culture, the researcher spent 3 months observing, interviewing, and recording beach activity. Here's what she found out:

San Diegans hang out at beaches nurturing tans, playing Frisbee and volleyball, and of course, surfing. To characterize Southern California for Minnesotans, she condensed 27 hours of surfside lifestyle into a quarter-hour upbeat videotape.

**Video Narrative:** The tape begins with a long shot of the Del Mar beach: surfers catching waves, swimmers coming out of the water, sun bathers of all shapes and sizes, and dogs leaping in the air for Frisbees thrown to them at water's edge.

A voice-over narrates the scene: "Welcome to California where the sun always shines and a tan is the culture's most prized possession."



Segments from interviews with sun bathers feature discussions of their favorite lotions and their lifestyles. Young girls want an oily lotion, surfers like lotion that stays on in the water, and moms like sun block to protect their children from sunburn. With a hand-held microphone and video crew, the researcher captures beach activity and consumer commentary.

Beach Boys music continues throughout the tape, and the voice-over describes the blare of radios, proliferation of group sporting activities, and tanning rituals. The researcher interprets beach slang, explains the meanings of tan shades for their social significance (dark is beautiful, white is ugly), and translates fashion symbolism.

**Reception:** In Minneapolis, the clients sit around a conference table and the researcher begins the presentation by handing out visors with the new product logo, T-shirts, and small vials of beach sand labeled “California gold.” The video plays to an enthusiastic audience. An exhaustive ethnographic written report accompanies the tape to answer questions and describe research methods. Ultimately, the tape is made available for distributors and retail accounts to generate excitement for the product rollout and test market the following season.

**Results:** From the research, the researcher was able to prepare a promotional schedule to take full advantage of the activities identified as important to culture members. In the spirit of a popular television show called *Mod Squad*, the researcher recruits three young college women to act as beach ambassadors, calling them the “Tan Squad.” Clad in logo-emblazoned yellow visors, sandals, tank tops, and shorts, the Tan Squad arrives at San Diego beaches in a special yellow Mazda van for beach parties sponsored by different radio stations each week. Tan contests are held at each beach location, and winners receive a variety of prizes. To enter the contest, participants purchase the lotion and receive an *Mmm! What a Tan* decal to affix during exposure to the sun. Contests are judged by the crowds who gather to dance to music

provided by a radio station's mobile van and drink free Pepsi. Everyone receives a free *Mmm! What a Tan* visor.

Promotional sponsors include Mazda, Pepsi Cola, and Jantzen Sportswear, who provide prizes for our tan contest winners. Tan Squad members appear in local commercials and in newspaper accounts of each event. Their beach role was to hand out product samples to beachgoers and invite them to participate in the next tanning contest.

At summer's end, *Mmm! What a Tan* had gained a market share second to Coppertone, the leading lotion in national sales. As a result of the product's success, 3M commissioned another study for the San Francisco market the following summer.

## Notes

1. From Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (Chapter 8). New York: Longman.
2. From Shweder, R. (1986, September 1). Storytelling among the anthropologists. *New York Times Book Review*, 21, p. 38.
3. See Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. From a case prepared by C. Patti and S. Liangdeng for presentation to the annual conference of the American Academy of Advertising, 1992.
5. From Berger, A. A. (2000). *Media and communication research methods* (Chapter 16). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412985543.n16>