

24

The Final Chapter

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Understand why a concluding chapter is necessary in a research report.
- See what this chapter should contain.
- Think about the theoretical implications of your research.
- Work out which audiences you are addressing and how you can shape your chapter accordingly.
- Recognize that writing a final chapter can be fun.

24.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I concluded with the recommendation to 'let go'. However, since all research reports (including dissertations) seem to end with a set of 'conclusions', you cannot finally let go until your concluding chapter is written. Having cycled painfully to the top of the hill, the great temptation at this point is to relax and freewheel down to the finish. In practice, such relaxation of effort is reflected in the all too common 'summaries' found in the final chapter of dissertations.

Although summaries are often quite useful devices at the end of data-analysis chapters, I suggest that you should never write a summary as your concluding chapter. If your readers need a summary at this point, then your 'macrostructure' (Alasuutari's concept discussed in the previous chapter) is not in place. If it is in place, then what you have said should already be crystal clear. So resist the temptations of a final downhill freewheel.

But does this mean that do you even need a concluding chapter? Cannot your thesis stop after you have finished your data analysis?

Take a musical example. Classical symphonies typically end with a fast movement marked 'allegro' or 'presto'. Rather than a mere recapitulation of earlier

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP

themes, they take them up and develop them still more. As such, they seem designed to provide listeners with some of the most stimulating material in the composition. So your final chapter is, indeed, necessary. But it should function to stimulate your readers by demonstrating how your research has stimulated you.

This chapter begins by showing you the interesting and liberating functions of a concluding chapter. It then provides some practical suggestions about what this chapter should contain and reviews the balance between confessing to your errors and proclaiming your achievements. I go on to show how your concluding chapter should reconnect your data analysis to the basic analytic questions that have inspired you and should think through what your research can offer to a range of different audiences. Finally, I demonstrate why writing your final chapter can be fun.

24.2 THE FINAL CHAPTER AS MUTUAL STIMULATION

Your final chapter should be stimulating for you to write. If this is the case, it is likely to stimulate your readers. Part of that stimulation arises in linking the particularities of your own research back to the more general issues that arise within (your part) of your discipline. As the authors of the standard British text on PhDs comment:

You are not doing some research for its own sake; you are doing it in order to demonstrate that you are a fully professional researcher, with a good grasp of what is happening in your field and capable of evaluating the impact of new contributions to it – your own as well as others. (Phillips and Pugh, 1994: 60)

Your contribution is what you must set out to demonstrate in your final chapter:

It is here that you underline the significance [to your discipline] of your analysis, point out the limitations in your material, suggest what new work is appropriate, and so on. (1994: 59)

Phillips and Pugh's remarks suggest part of the answer to the practical question: what exactly should your final chapter contain?

24.3 WHAT EXACTLY SHOULD YOUR FINAL CHAPTER CONTAIN?

In the most general terms it [your final chapter] is a discussion as to why and in what way ... the theory that you started with [is] now different as a result of your research work. Thus your successors (who include, of course, yourself) now face a different situation when determining what their research work should be since they now have to take account of your work. (Phillips and Pugh, 1994: 59–60)

THE FINAL CHAPTER

TABLE 24.1 SUGGESTED CONTENTS FOR YOUR FINAL CHAPTER

- The relation between the work done, the original research questions, previous work discussed in the literature review chapter and any new work appearing since the study began
- Some answer to the classic examiner's question: 'if you were doing this study all over again is there anything you would do differently? Why so?; that is, the lessons to be learned from the conduct of the study
- Any implications for policy and practice
- Further research that might follow from your findings, methods or concepts used

Source: adapted from Murcott (1997: 3)

A helpful way of looking at this is in terms of Murcott's question: 'What does the candidate want the reader to make of all this?' (1997: 3). As Table 24.1 shows, the final chapter offers you the opportunity to give your own twist to the wider implications of your research. Such implications must, of course, reflect your own critical sense of what is good and not so good in your own research. Always remember: unless you define your own sense of the limitations (and implications) of your work, your readers will do it for you!

You can, however, go too far in focusing solely on the limitations of your work. Research reports should not just be confessions! In the next section, I discuss the balance between owning up to where you feel you went wrong and blowing your own trumpet about your achievements.

24.4 CONFESSIONS AND TRUMPETS

As Wolcott notes, in assessing your thesis your examiners will recognize that chance happenings as well as your research design have limited (as well as improved) your research. Be upfront about these matters. So, in your final chapter, write:

a broad disclaimer in which (you) make quite clear (your) recognition of all the limitations of the study (e.g. that it occurred in a particular place, at a particular time, and under particular circumstances; that certain factors render the study atypical; that limited generalization is warranted; etc). (1990: 30)

However, what Wolcott calls 'this litany of limitations' should be coupled with a stress on what you believe you have achieved. So, as in life, be realistic but don't undersell yourself! This can be in the form of:

a conservative closing statement that reviews succinctly what has been attempted, what has been learned, and what new questions have been raised. (1990: 56)

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP

Wolcott's helpful suggestion is, in my view, somewhat undermined by his use of the adjective 'conservative'. Beware of employing so much caution that you bore the reader! If you can effectively show why you have been stimulated, then you are much more likely to stimulate your audience.

Stimulation requires an active imagination. And, in science, it is theory which feeds the imagination.

Theory has been extensively discussed in the first three parts of this volume. Here, I want to suggest a practical sense of theorizing which can help in writing an effective final chapter.

24.5 THEORIZING AS THINKING THROUGH DATA

An imaginative conclusion will move on from the careful description and analysis of your earlier chapters to a stimulating but critical view of the overall implications of your research. Without this, your research may amount to no more than a set of descriptions of data achieved by some mechanical use of a method.

Since much qualitative research works inductively, generating and testing hypotheses during data analysis, your final chapter is often the best place to present theoretical linkages and speculations. As Alasuutari comments, in qualitative data analysis:

One preferably starts directly from empirical examples, develops the questions by discussing them, and gradually leads the reader into interpretations of the material and to more general implications of the results. If one feels like discussing and constructing them, the best position for grand theoretical models is *in the final pages*. (1995: 183, my emphasis)

Grounded theory is a term used to describe a way of inducing theoretically based generalizations from qualitative data. However, it is crucial that, if grounded theory is your 'thing', you use it imaginatively rather than as a label to dress up a largely pedestrian study.

As I argue in Chapter 15, some grounded theory studies fall short of imagination. This possibility is recognized in a leading text on grounded theory:

It is entirely possible to complete a grounded theory study, or any study, yet not produce findings that are significant. If the researcher simply follows the grounded theory procedures/canons without imagination or insight into what the data are reflecting – because he or she fails to see what they are really saying except in terms of trivial or well-known phenomena – then the published findings can be judged as failing on this criterion [i.e. of being significant]. (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 256)

The final chapter is likely to be the place where your examiners will discover whether your theoretical pretensions are, as implied by Strauss and Corbin, merely

THE FINAL CHAPTER

mechanical. But, if theory must never be mere window dressing, this does not mean that theory is ultimately more important than research. Theory without data is empty; data without theory says nothing. This reciprocal relationship between theory and data is well captured by Coffey and Atkinson. As they put it:

Data are there to think with and to think about . . . We should bring to them the full range of intellectual resources, derived from theoretical perspectives, substantive traditions, research literature and other sources . . . [this means] that methods of data collection and data analysis do not make sense when treated in an intellectual vacuum and divorced from more general and fundamental disciplinary frameworks. (1996: 153)

The problem is that you may become so immersed in your highly specific research topic that you are ill-prepared to step back and to think about what Coffey and Atkinson call 'more general and fundamental disciplinary frameworks'. You can give your research this broader perspective by forcing yourself to think about how what you have discovered may relate to broader issues than your original research topic. In this way, a very narrow topic may be related to much broader social processes. As we saw in Chapter 15, this was how Mary Douglas's anthropological study of an African tribe took us from a very narrow issue (how the Lele perceive the pangolin) to a very broad social process (how societies respond to anomalous entities). In this way, argue Coffey and Atkinson:

qualitative data, analyzed with close attention to detail, understood in terms of their internal patterns and forms, should be used to develop theoretical ideas about social processes and cultural forms that have relevance *beyond these data themselves*. (1996: 163, my emphasis)

24.6 WRITING FOR AUDIENCES

A continuing message of this book is that, like any form of writing, writing a research report should always be framed for particular audiences. Drawing on this insight, many of my PhD students have organized their concluding chapters in terms of the different audiences who might be interested in their research.

Take the case of Moira Kelly's research on how her respondents describe the death of a spouse (discussed in Chapter 3). Her concluding chapter describes what her findings imply for four different audiences: methodologists, theorists, people with a substantive interest in the sociology of health and illness, and health policy-makers.

One useful exercise to get you thinking about how to proceed in this way is simply to list all the possible audiences for your research. When I used this exercise recently with students doing business PhDs at the Helsinki School of Economics, the following audiences were noted:

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP

- disciplinary (e.g. management, organization studies, marketing)
- methodological (e.g. case study researchers, interviewers, etc.)
- practitioners (e.g. managers, entrepreneurs, marketers, etc.)
- the general public (clients, consumers, politicians, etc.).

Such a list of your likely audiences should give you a good idea of how you could structure an effective concluding chapter. But don't just guess what will most interest your audiences! Show your findings to groups drawn from each audience and find out what is relevant to them (see Chapter 28 for further discussion of audiences for research).

24.7 WHY YOUR FINAL CHAPTER CAN BE FUN

It may surprise you to think that writing your concluding chapter can be fun. Having struggled to reach the end of your data chapters, you may already be exhausted and tempted to try to get away with a short concluding summary. After all you feel, what more can you add?

I have good news for you! Until your final chapter, you have had to be highly disciplined. Not only have you had to stick to the point, you also (I hope) have had to stick closely to your data. Your only respite has been your footnotes. Used properly, footnotes are the place for asides and barbed comments (never the place for references).

But, if footnotes can be fun, so can your concluding chapter. For this is the place where caution temporarily should go out of the window and lateral thinking should rule. Here is the place to make broader links, eschewing the narrow focus found in the rest of your thesis. Here 'off the wall' comments ('from left field' as they say in baseball) are not only allowable but welcome. At last, perhaps, here is a space for you to reveal your true colours – providing that you recognize that such self-expression has always to be recipient designed for an audience.

24.8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me make an obvious point: when you have finished your final chapter, it is time to submit your thesis. Yes I know research reports can always be improved and the beauty of word processing is that the mechanical aspects of revision are quite simple. But how long do you want to stay a student? Providing your supervisor is supportive, isn't it better to submit right now? Even if your examiners require changes, at least your rewrites will have a pragmatic focus.

Being a perfectionist sounds like a nice identity. As Becker has commented:

Getting it out the door is not the only thing people value. A lot of important work in a lot of fields has been done with little regard for whether it ever got out the door.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

Scholars and artists, especially, believe that if they wait long enough they may find a more comprehensive and logical way to say what they think. (1986: 123)

However, Becker also makes us aware that rewriting can also be the alibi for the persistent waverer. By contrast, he tells us:

I like to get it out the door. Although I like to rewrite and tinker with organization and wording, I soon either put work aside as not ready to be written or get it into a form to go out the door. (1986: 124)

After a long period of study, do you really want to 'put work aside'? Follow your supervisor's advice (providing the supervisor is not a ditherer!) and get your work 'out the door'!

KEY POINTS

You should never write a summary as your concluding chapter. Instead, your final chapter must help the reader to decide what to make of your dissertation. This should explain:

- The relation between the work done, the original research questions, previous work discussed in the literature review chapter and any new work appearing since the study began.
- Anything you would do differently now.
- Implications for policy and practice.
- Further research that might follow from your findings, methods or concepts used.
- The limitations of your own study.

Above all, your final chapter should stimulate your readers by:

- Showing how theories have helped you think through your data.
- Addressing each of the audiences who might be interested in your work.

Further reading

Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh's *How To Get a PhD* (2nd edn, Open University Press, 1994), Chapter 6, is the best British account of the practical issues involved in concluding a research dissertation. On using theory to develop your conclusions, see: Pertti Alasuutari's *Researching Culture*:

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP

Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies (Sage, 1995), Chapter 13; Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1990), Chapters 1–4; Jennifer Mason's *Qualitative Researching* (Sage, 1996), Chapter 7; Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson's *Making Sense of Qualitative Data* (Sage, 1996), Chapter 6.

Exercise 24.1

Get into the habit of keeping files on each of the issues below (taken from Table 24.1):

- the relation between your present work and your original research questions
- anything you would do differently now
- implications for policy and practice
- further research that might follow from your findings, methods or concepts
- the limitations of your own study.

At regular intervals, attempt to write a summary of what you can currently say about each of these issues.

Exercise 24.2

As this chapter has argued:

Data are there to think with and to think about ... [this means] that methods of data collection and data analysis do not make sense when treated in an intellectual vacuum and divorced from more general and fundamental disciplinary frameworks. (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 153)

Find one or two recent journal articles which you think are important and, following Coffey and Atkinson, show why your dissertation does not exist 'in an intellectual vacuum'.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

Exercise 24.3

Make a list of the different audiences who might be interested in your research (e.g. disciplinary, methodological, practitioners, general public).

Now work out how you could write a chapter which framed the contribution of your research for each of these audiences.

