Writing Up Your Research – or What Can I Say I've Found?

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Introduction

Once you have navigated your way through the minefield of planning, designing and conducting social research, you still have what, for many people, is the most intimidating stage remaining – that of writing it up, either in terms of a report for a funder, a dissertation or thesis for an academic qualification, or a paper or book for publication. Each of these different forms has its own rules – funders are likely to have a highly prescribed report format you have to comply with, dissertations and theses will have conventional structures that you are usually wise to follow, and academic papers are usually structured in particular ways with particular word lengths (books may offer more flexibility, but are based on a proposal the author him- or herself makes, so to some extent the structure can vary). In all the cases, though, there are a range of issues that the author would be sensible to think about in order to minimise problems during the writing process and hostile comments later on during peer reviews. This chapter explores these issues, offering suggestions that I hope readers might find helpful, as well as getting them to think about how the way the research has been carried out links to the way it can be written about.

The Differences Between Description, Analysis and Argument

A good starting point is to go back to your original research proposal or plan, and to the method or methods involved in that. Methods carry with them ontological and epistemological commitments that also colour the way you can subsequently write about your research. If you have claimed to be testing hypotheses that will require you to write about the research in a different way than if you have promised to describe what is going on in a particular research setting. A couple of examples should again help to illustrate this.

A Realist View

A research proposal will tend to have promised to find causes for particular social phenomena. Realists treat social categories such as class and ethnicity as having causal properties that are independent of individual agents acting in social situations, and which may also be ontologically prior to them – that is, these categories pre-exist individuals which have to then adapt to and work around them. Our ethnicity pre-exists us for a realist, but we may interpret that ethnicity in a variety of ways depending upon social convention, history, our position in relation to other ethnicities, social class and a variety of other factors. However, for realists, ethnicity is a ‘real’ category with real causal properties. As such, an investigation into ethnicity will be trying to find out how ethnicity matters in particular social settings and contexts, and to demonstrate the causal mechanisms by which it exerts its effects.

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Realism and Theory

Realists will usually have promised to find causes for social phenomena in their researcher proposals, and so must now find a way of communicating their research that shows how these causal mechanisms play themselves out. Realists will often be testing pre-existing theories, comparing their data to them, and attempting to work out which theory fits the data best, or elaborating on existing theory to show how it can be improved to better explain data. They will be happy to abstract from the data collected to try and generalise how the data collected might apply to other social contexts and situations – indeed they will regard it as a key part of the research process to try to achieve exactly that.

The realist position is analytical in that it is attempting to break the social world down into causal mechanisms, the results of which can be examined. This does not necessarily mean that the realist programme is reductionist, wishing to reduce the world to a few key variables. Complexity theory has a great deal in common with realism (Byrne, 1997), and the complex interactions between mechanisms are also a central part of the realist agenda. However, realists wish to make a theoretical contribution through their work, and this will involve trying to capture the most significant elements of particular social phenomena and attempting to explore how, when and where they work.

Actor-Network Theory and Description

In contrast, social researchers that find a greater inspiration in anthropological methods and accounts will tend towards the view covered earlier in the book that actor-network theorists prefer. In this view, the world does not pre-exist us in any way except through our own concepts. Even what we might regard as relatively mundane descriptive categories, such as mountains and hills, are human concepts that do not capture nature in some kind of neutral manner, but instead impose ideas upon it.[1] As such, the best we can do in these circumstances is to try and describe the social world in all the rich detail we find within it, adopting multiple perspectives and, unlike the realist, not adjudicating between them. The world is ‘messy’, and we must try and capture that mess through a careful description of it rather than attempting to break it down.

Theory and Actor-Network Theory

Actor-network theorists will regard pre-existing theories about a situation as concepts that actors in that situation may or may not be aware of using to understand the world, but will seek to reflexively challenge their own preconceptions of a situation in order to try and see it as freshly as possible. Pre-existing ideas and theories have no particular precedence over new ones, as the aim of the social research is description not theory generation. Researchers writing from this viewpoint are not really interested in attempting to find causal mechanisms, but in finding out how actors within social situations form relationships, and how ideas and theories become transformed and translated between them as a result. The agenda is explicitly anti-reductionist in that the accounts should be as detailed and rich as possible, with little or no claim that anything

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found in a particular social situation can be generalised to any other.

Comparing Writing Agendas

As such, a realist writing agenda would be far closer to the idea most lay-people would have of what social research might look like. It would explore existing theories and ideas in a review, conduct either a fieldwork or secondary review to find causal mechanisms, test what has been found in that fieldwork or secondary review against pre-existing theories, modifying and synthesising them as was required to improve them, and then produce conclusions that show what has been found. The actual sequence and form of a report written in this way can vary, but most of these elements will probably be present at some point or another.

An actor-network writing approach would, in contrast, attempt to provide a description that made as little use of existing concepts and theories as possible (unless they were a central part of the discourse of research subjects themselves), and to show how the social world was constructed by the actors (both human and non-human) through careful description. There would be little attempt at theory generation, but the work could still be political by giving voice to excluded actors and showing sources of resistance and possible change to dominant discourses.

The important thing, then, is that the approach a researcher has taken in conducting research has an influence in the way that the research is going to be written up. It is possible to produce work that is original, attempting to impose realist expectations upon an anthropological account, for example, but these will require a great deal more justification and care than writing in the form that 'fits' the research process more closely.

As such, we might present three research writing strategies – analysis (scientific, realist), description (analytical, interpretivist) and argumentation, which is probably generic to all writing at least to some extent, and to which the vast majority of writing depends upon in some form or another. It is therefore to argument that this chapter turns next.

Making an Argument – What Have You Found Out?

One of the most common criticisms that academics make of student work is that it 'contains no argument'. Now there is a view that, within the actor-network approach, there is no need for an argument, as description is the only goal of the research. This appears to me to be a little disingenuous though – what we describe and how we describe it have significant implications for any description we produce, but as well as that, how we choose to structure, order and take the reader through the description all matter profoundly. Even descriptions have arguments, whether the author intends them to or not. Humans cannot escape from attempting to impose order on what they find, even when there is actually no pattern there at all (Taleb, 2008). Being aware of argumentation is important for all social researchers, even if they are trying to avoid doing it as much as possible!

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The Bases of Good Arguments

The differences between an argument (which is what most academics want students to produce) and the way that many students structure their pieces is that an argument takes the reader through a set of reasons why the author should be believed about a particular point or claim that they wish to make, whereas what most students sometimes produce is a list of not obviously related points that may or may not be reasons and which may or may not be supported by evidence or example or anything else. The key question you should be asking yourself is to ask why your reader should believe you every time you make a point or present a piece of evidence.

An argument, then, is not an attempt to *have* an argument in the sense of a disputation or row (although it can be that too). Neither is it an attempt to state a particular viewpoint – that isn't enough. An argument is an attempt to support a particular view with reasons why it should be believed by others. In order to break down an argument it is useful to introduce some terms that can help a researcher think about the way they make claims when they write.

A conclusion is, as the name implies, the statement which you are attempting to convey, and for which you are going to give the reader reasons to believe. The reasons you give the reader for believing your conclusion are called premises.

An Example

An example should try and make this clear. The American Physiological Society makes the following argument:

> Animals make good research subjects for a variety of reasons. Animals are biologically similar to humans. They are susceptible to many of the same health problems, and they have short life-cycles so they can easily be studied throughout their whole life-span or across several generations. (http://the-aps.org/pa/animals/quest1.html)

So the conclusion is that ‘animals make good research subjects’ (we might also include ‘for a variety of reasons’ in that conclusion as well). The premises, or points made to support the conclusion, are that animals are biologically similar to humans, that they are susceptible to many of the same health problems and that they have short life-cycles (which allows them to be studied across their whole life span or across several generations). Now, when assessing that argument, the reader needs to look to see if the premises provide adequate support for the conclusion. There are a number of ways that the writer could try to achieve this.

Supporting a Conclusion

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Support by Authority

First, the writer can try to achieve support by authority – that is, they can cite studies in support of the individual premise that they are trying to make. A common mistake here is looking for studies that support all of the premises a researcher is trying to make – this is possible, but leaves writers open to the criticism of misreading authors who might have more finely grained views that this approach might suggest, or of bunching their argument together rather than exploring it point by point. Support by authority is clearly common in academic writing, and if there are key studies in the field that the writer is working, reviewers will often expect them to be cited to show that the writer is aware of them, and so can claim to know the field (not least if the reader has written extensively within it and so might expect to be cited!).

So in the case above, an argument by authority would attempt to find studies, particularly studies that are authoritative (in terms of the number of times they have been cited, or centrality within the field, or importance of the arguments made), and to cite them when the writer presents the particular premise. So, there might be studies showing the extent to which animals are similar to humans, and someone wanting to make the same argument as the APS would be showing support for authority by citing them next to that claim.

Support by Example

A second way of making an argument is supporting it by example, and is perhaps most often made by moving from the specific to the general, and occurs frequently in everyday speech. It is, however, an approach we have to be careful of when writing (especially for academic audiences). This type of argument by example might go as follows:

> Nobody I know would vote for Barack Obama, so he can't possibly win another term as President.

If we break this argument down into a conclusion and premises, you'll see that I reversed the order they appear from the earlier example (just seeing if you are still awake) – the premises are ahead of the conclusion rather than following it. The conclusion is that 'Barack Obama can't possibly win another term as President' and the premise is that 'Nobody I know would vote for Barack Obama'. This argument attempts to persuade us through the example that 'nobody I know' would do something, so it won't happen. Now this may or may not be a weak argument. If I know the majority of everyone who is eligible to vote in the United States, then the argument stands up pretty well. If I know only a tiny proportion of people in that category, it's not a good argument unless I can show that the people I do know are representative of the population at large, which will require an additional premise (and the people I know are representative of the people of America) and evidence of some kind that this is the case. We would then have to assess the extended version of this argument and make our minds up as to whether this is the case or not.

Argument by example is that it is widespread in our everyday lives and a great deal of opinion is formed using it (Weston, 2000). The point of reflexive social research is to understand argument by example, but to

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be able to see other viewpoints and to be actively questioning and challenging to it. In general, argument by example is a much weaker way of making an argument than argument by authority unless there is additional supporting premises and evidence.

Support from Empirical Research

Another kind of argument by example comes when researchers give examples from their empirical research to support their argument. You might make the point that research subjects in a certain context tend to talk about managers of their organisations, using examples from them that describe or present them as incompetent (and when you see examples being presented this is a sure sign that an argument by example is taking place). These examples might be also be illustrated by the managers failing to be able to deal with a particular incident.

This form of argument by example is a very common occurrence in any kind of qualitative social research, which as we know from earlier in the book, is often justified on the grounds that it aims to get close to research participants and demonstrate expertise by immersion in a particular social context for research. To demonstrate this expertise, researchers use quotations and examples.

The problem this form of argument by example has is that researchers must show (or be trusted in showing) that the examples or quotations that they provide are both credible and that they support their arguments (that they provide good premises for the conclusion they are trying to show). This can be extremely difficult to achieve in a short academic paper as researchers will usually have far more data than they are able to include, and, as noted earlier in the book, they may also have only limited room to report their methods so that they can be assessed. This gives researchers a range of choices.

Should researchers show one or two participants' data only, to show their responses throughout the paper or report and so offer consistency in that they give an in-depth insight into those participants? This works if the researcher can show that the participants chosen are representative of the group included, or if they are particularly illuminatory in some way – being an extreme example of a particular viewpoint perhaps. This strategy runs the risk of reviewers claiming that insufficient data has been presented to make the case for this reflecting the research site as a whole, but gains in terms of offering readers data that may have a greater coherence as it comes from just a few participants. Alternatively, the researcher might want to show as wide a range of participants as possible in his or her data, but this runs the risks of making the data appear extremely fragmentary, and of accusations being made by reviewers that they are just mixing and matching data they have collected to support whatever points they wish to make.

As such, using quotations and examples from the field appears to be the most obvious way of using argument by example, but carries with it problems however researchers choose to do it. The most important thing is for the researcher to be up-front and clear about how they have chosen to write their piece, to provide justification for it and to provide evidence that what they are claiming is in fact the case. So using only one or two subjects' data on the grounds that they are representative requires evidence to be produced that this is the case.

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Equally, producing evidence from a range of recipients requires researchers to demonstrate that the multiple fragments of data do cohere into some kind of story that they wish to present, rather than being just a range of isolated things that subjects happened to say or do.

Argument by Analogy

A third way of making an argument is by analogy. Social science has a lot of these, as has everyday life. Every song that tries to explain that 'love is like… [something or other]' is trying to make an argument by analogy. In organisation studies Gareth Morgan (1986) produced one of the most influential books in recent times that is explicitly based on providing analogies for organisational life. Morgan's argument is that by breaking free of the metaphors that abound in organisation life (cultures, organisms, brains, political systems, psychic prisons, etc.) managers can do a better job of understanding what is going on around them. Karl Marx was also a thinker who made significant use of analogy, including the following:

> Capital is dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. *(Capital,* Volume 1, Chapter 10)

So capitalism is like an undead creature here, because it lives only by exploiting 'living labour'. The point about analogy is that is requires, in order to be persuasive, an example that is both relevant and similar. What is interesting in Marx's example is that you will tend to find vampires both relevant and similar to capital (and to some capitalists too) if you regard capitalism to be an economic system that exploits the many in favour of the few and where the very rich get richer on the back of the poor (even in writing that sentence notice the analogy 'on the back' and think about its connotations). However, supporters of capitalism will tend to regard this argument by analogy as silly and unsupported. Analogies can be very powerful – their use in everyday life is pervasive. But they won't work if others don't think your analogy is either relevant or appropriate. Again, then, they have a place in academic writing but an argument by analogy will usually not be regarded as being as strong as an argument by authority.

So arguments are most commonly based on authority, example or analogy, and in academic writing arguments by authority are usually regarded as the most credible (so long as the authorities they cite are also credible). Arguments by example are common when writing up field notes, but authors have choices to make about how they present their data. Examples by analogy surround us all the time, but care must be taken not to isolate readers who are confused by or disagree with the analogies chosen, in case this undermines the claims that the researcher is trying to make.

Other Concerns with Arguments

There are two other main interrelated areas worth discussing in relation to the way that researchers write up their arguments; arguments about causes and the underlying differences between deductive or inductive arguments.

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Arguments About Causes

In many approaches to social research, coming up with the causes of a particular phenomena are regarded as being key to the research agenda. However, we have seen in earlier chapters that causation is a complicated issue, with there being at least three approaches to it: the constant conjunction model; the generative mechanism model; and the model that stresses that causes aren't terribly important in social research. Each of these approaches to research requires that research be written up in a way that is compatible with the assumptions underlying the way the research was conducted.

Constant Conjunctions and Argument

A constant conjunction model, one that attempts to bring causes and effects together by showing that they always co-occur, has to show that the cause and the effect are inextricably linked with one another, or at least that they are inextricably linked within a particular research context or space or time. Within economics and finance this is often achieved through statistical testing, particularly through the use of correlation and regression. This approach has a range of well-established tests for demonstrating that the causes authors are showing form a statistically valid relationship with one another. However, of course, a statistically significant relationship is not the same as a substantively significant one – correlated events do not necessarily cause one another. The world is full of coincidences, and we have to be sure that just because data seems to indicate a causal relationship that one is actually occurring. Equally, a correlation doesn't tell us which variable is the cause and which is the effect – just that two things appear to be statistically related and many correlated events can have a single cause. We therefore have to be careful in ascribing the sequence of events as well as claiming that a relationship exists.

A constant conjunction model will be further supported if not only can a relationship be shown, but the researcher can explain how it is meant to be occurring. The researcher might use pre-existing theory here, or be able to give a persuasive new theory about the relationship he or she has found. One of the most contentious writers in recent times is Stephen Levitt whose work was popularised in the book *Freakonomics* (Levitt and Gubner, 2007). Levitt's work claims that falling crime rates in the 1990s are related to changes in abortion law decades earlier, and that the reduction in crime in the latter period had little to do with policies about ‘zero tolerance’ as is often claimed, but simply that many of those who would have been disruptive criminals in the latter period were simply not born. So Levitt has both a theory and a statistical model that he argues supports it. Whatever you think of this argument, and whether you think the data presented by Levitt supports it, it is clearly a provocative one that provides a model for social research of this type.

Generative Causation and Argument

A generative model of causation requires researchers to be able to show that the ‘deep’ causes they have identified in their work are actually related to the particular effects that they claim to have empirical evidence

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for. Again, correlation can help in this task by showing that there is at least a statistical relationship between two variables, but those in favour of generative causation tend to favour the construction of models to try and show how relationships work as well as demonstrating that they exist. Generative models of causation can be solely quantitative, but often incorporate approaches that include both quantitative and qualitative data, accepting that in order to explore how generative mechanisms manifest themselves in specific locations it is necessary to explore them in depth in a way that quantitative methods may not be able to achieve. Generative models are often about testing or elaborating particular theories, and showing which ones fit the data best – about showing which mechanisms seem to be having the most effect. As such, writing up a generative model requires the researcher to make the links between the mechanisms specified and the effects they cause, even if they are not immediately related to one another in terms of time or space.

So if you are making the argument that social class is an important factor in deciding the educational attainment of individuals, realists would want, not only to show strong statistical evidence of a link (probably including variables that might have considerable lags), but also to explain exactly how social class affects educational achievement through the use of detailed case studies that demonstrate in detail how the effects found in the quantitative analysis play themselves out.

Making an Argument Where Causation Isn't Important

Finally, there is the argument that causation isn't important. This has been most associated with the actor-network approach within this book. What is important here is that researchers relying upon an epistemological stance that is based on actor-network theory don't start building elaborate theories about the social world and don't claim to have found causes and effects beyond the local. If the aim of this research programme is descriptive, researchers have to find ways of writing up their research that complies with this goal, but also allows them to produce work that is sufficiently robust to be accepted by reviewers. This can be a considerable challenge as the accusation that research is just ‘telling stories’ can be made. However, Latour's work shows that research within this tradition can be vital and political (Latour, 2005), and this is an aspiration that work of this type can aspire to as a means of answering the ‘so what?’ question reviewers can sometimes ask of it.

This kind of argument is also likely to lend itself to unconventional presentations of findings. We have already described Mol's attempt to present her ethnographic results alongside her reflections on the research process. Attempting to present the results of research that provide as rich a picture as possible might include the use of images, film, interactive media or anything that can get across something about the case being explored in the research. Here, argument by analogy might be the explicit aim – to try to change readers' (or observers') minds by presenting research in a form that deliberately challenges their preconceptions.

Deductive and Inductive Arguments

In earlier chapters deductive and inductive research strategies have been discussed. Equally, arguments can

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be deductive and inductive, and it is worth spending a few moments to show how this is the case.

Deductive Arguments

Deductive arguments are those for which, if the premises are true, then the arguments must be true as well. There are two forms of this that are commonly found. The first is where an argument is structured as follows:

1. If (p) then (q)
2. p
3. Therefore q

So, we can say that:

1. If there are millions of habitable planets in the universe, then intelligent life must exist on more than one of them
2. There are millions of habitable planets in the universe
3. Therefore, intelligent life must exist on more than one of them

Now, in order for this argument to work, you would have to be able to demonstrate that the first statement is the case (that the 'if' leads to the 'then') and that the second statement is also the case (which is an empirical claim that could need justification). Only then would the third statement be deductively true and the argument be made.

A second form of deductive argument is in many ways the opposite:

1. If (p) then (q)
2. Not q
3. Therefore, not p

So:

1. If social class was important, then we would all still talk about it
2. We don't talk about social class
3. Therefore, social class isn't important

So for this argument to work, we have to demonstrate again that there is a link between the 'if' and the 'then' in statement one, and empirically demonstrate that statement two is also empirically the case. Only if both of those are the case is statement three deductively true.

Adding Several Steps

Deductive arguments can of course build chains of reasoning along the lines of:

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1. If (p) then (q)
2. If (q) then (r)
3. (p), therefore (r)

Or they can be expressed in terms of a choice:

1. (p) or (q)
2. Not (p)
3. Therefore (q)

What is important is not the many forms of deductive arguments that can be made, but rather that researchers are aware of what form *their* argument is making, and whether there is sufficient grounds to support it. Is the argument you are making based on logic (claiming that one thing must lead to another because of its form) or empirical (that one thing always seems to lead to another)? If you are structuring your argument in the form of a choice (as above) is it a genuine choice you are presenting, or are you presenting a false one (as in ‘Either you must be a racist or stupid, you're not a racist so you must be stupid’).

Inductive Arguments

A deductive argument is certain, provided that the premises can be shown to be true. This is because the conclusion is actually contained in the premises. An inductive argument, on the other hand, is one where the conclusion is probably true, provided that the premises are also true. This is because the conclusion goes *beyond* the premises. The classic example of an inductive argument is that, because the sun has risen every day of my life so far, it will rise tomorrow. So the conclusion is that the sun will rise tomorrow, and the premise is that it has risen every day of my life so far. Now the problem with this sort of argument is that, as we noted above, the conclusion goes beyond the premises.

An inductive argument has much in common with the discussion on argument by example above – they are much the same thing. An argument by induction depends on three things:

1. Whether the previous observations are accurate, how frequent they are and how comprehensive they are. This question asks whether we can show that the observations of the past seem to have been accurately recorded, how many times we have recorded them and how many times these observations have been recorded in relation to the total number of times the phenomenon has occurred.
2. Whether the causal link between the two events seems to be persuasive and strong. This question asks whether the writer has explained how the two events are linked and asks whether that explanation is credible or not.
3. Whether the situation the inductive argument is now being applied to is similar or the same as the context in which it was generated. This question asks whether the case the author is attempting to show is relevant to the argument and in turn is relevant to the

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previous cases.

So in the case of the sun rising, there is a pretty good case for it rising tomorrow in terms of question (1) in that not only has the sun risen every day in my life, but also every day in every human being's life in recorded history. In terms of question (2), it is pretty dicey though – we have provided no explanation why the sun should rise tomorrow, and perhaps need to work on this. In terms of question (3), we also have a strong argument however – unless something occurs to make tomorrow significantly unlike today (nuclear war, for example), then it seems reasonable to assume that it will be much the same, especially given the answer to question (1).

Assessing an inductive argument therefore depends on assessing evidence carefully, as well as looking at the logic of what the writer is claiming – with the logic being especially important in relation to question (2).

Structuring a Piece of Writing to Bring Out Your Argument

Now that we've looked at the ways that arguments can be structured, we can address how they can be written up to bring out what you are trying to say.

Audience

The first thing to bear in mind is that you need to have an idea of who your audience is, and to be able to find an approach and structure that fits for them. In the case of research reports this will often be prescribed, so you will have few choices. However, it is still a good idea to get hold of a report that the funder or commissioning body regards as being a good example in order to get a sense of what is expected of you. In the case of writing a journal article, then, you need to look at the past few years of that journal in order to make sure that you are citing relevant research (remember, journals send papers to authors who have published with them for review), but also to get a sense of what the house style is. Journals usually have pretty comprehensive instructions for authors available, but there is no substitute for spending time looking at pieces that the journal has already published. For student essays and assignments, again ask to see examples of work that was highly regarded in order to get a sense of what is expected of you.

Once you've spent some time looking at work that is already out there, there are some general guidelines you can bear in mind that can help to make your argument persuasive.

Your Contribution

It is useful, for both yourself and your readers, to make clear, as soon as possible in your piece, what the contribution your piece makes to our understanding. Doing this will remind you to make sure that you cover what you promise and it will give your readers a reason for reading your work.

Balance

First, unless you are specifically trying to publish a polemic, you need to show that you are being even-handed in your treatment of both previous work and any new empirical material you have collected. When reviewing others' work, generosity is likely to provoke a more favourable response from reviewers than hostility, with the latter also requiring more space and time to justify adequately. Not only is it polite to treat others' work with respect, it is also probably more efficient in terms of the space that is available. It is perfectly reasonable to disagree with what others have said, but there is a world of difference between doing this in an aggressive and dismissive way, and doing it thoughtfully and carefully.

Examining others' arguments can be done in exactly the same way as I have suggested above for looking at your own. What are the conclusions other authors have drawn? What are their premises? Which premises seem to be supported and which do not, and how might this lead to you to revise the conclusions that authors have so far drawn? Do the premises that are supported lead you to new conclusions, or to the ones that previous research has led to?

Your Research Question

When designing your research, ideally you will have found a question that your work is aiming to address. This question might be something you have identified as a gap in current research – something that simply has not been covered (or covered in much depth), in which case you still need to show that your question is important – but just because your question is novel is doesn't mean it is important.

You might want to apply a finding from others' research to a new context to see if it applies there as well, in which case you need to explain why that finding is important, and why it might be transferable to the new context (in effect, you are attempting to establish an inductive argument). Whatever you are trying to address, you need ideally to be able to show that it arises in some way from previous work (which shows reviewers that you are an expert in the field, and so are qualified to conduct research), even if you are arguing that it arises from its absence, as in the case of identifying a 'gap' in the research.

Once you have come up with the question that you are attempting to answer, and have explained why it is important, you can then proceed to explain how you went about answering it. This is the tricky methods section.

The Methods Section

One of the most important things to bear in mind when writing up a methods section is to be able to explain, even if in terms of a brief outline, how the research was conducted, which will often bring with it the researcher's commitment to a particular approach to social research, at least in terms of its attendant epistemology. When writing up methods sections, then, be clear about what you are communicating to

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reviewers not only in terms of how you did the research (in terms of the nuts and bolts of the process, how many subjects there were, what the specific tools and techniques you used were) but also showing how those methods were the most appropriate in answering the question that you asked and what kind of knowledge you expected to produce as a result. If you were attempting to prove or disprove a hypothesis, this carries with it an approach to research that carries through how it will have been conducted and what kind of results a reviewer will expect to find. If you claim to be testing a hypothesis, then you need to show how it is going to be tested, how you know whether it will have been proved or disproved, and to be able to draw conclusions that clearly link to the findings you have found in the research. This is a different way of writing about social research compared to someone conducting an ethnography, which might lead instead to largely inductive arguments based on harnessing what they have found in terms of their subjects' responses to open questions, and with no attempt to test hypotheses or show causes.

Arguments

When writing up your research, you need to make sure that whenever you make a claim, the premises supporting it are adequate to do the job. You need to be making the link between your conclusions and premises as clear as possible and showing how the two relate. You need to make sure that each premise is adequately supported by either logical or empirical evidence, and to make sure you have considered how your arguments might be interpreted differently by someone else. What other explanations might there be for what you have found? What objections might someone else offer?

Finally, there is a tendency for researchers to want to try and make a grand, eye-catching claim. If you have found something novel and important, congratulations and well done. However, most research, although it makes a contribution to the academic world, doesn't achieve that. Don't over-claim – specifically don't claim more than you have shown. Doing this gives reviewers an opportunity to discredit your work, undoing the good work you have done up to this point. Be clear about what you think the contribution your work makes – in fact put this in the opening of your paper or proposal. But don't over-claim – the bigger the claim you make, the more supporting evidence you are going to need to be persuasive.

Conclusion – Writing Up Research So That It Is Clear to You (and to Everyone Else)

In conclusion, then, you increase your chances of successfully writing up your research if you keep in mind a few principles that, in themselves, aren't that complicated to suggest in theory, but are rather more difficult to keep to in practice. Very few pieces of published research are perfect in the sense that they get everything right – that they are entirely clearly written, they are argued perfectly and they manage to achieve all of the research goals. However, you will be more successful in your writing by following a few simple ideas.

First, you need to know who you are writing for. Find out about the readership, be it a research council, an

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academic journal or a periodical of some other kind. Look to see what kind of research they seem to like, even if it means that you end up having to look for funding elsewhere or for a different outlet for your work.

Second, become more aware of the kind of arguments you tend to make. When writing, do you adopt inductive or deductive forms? Look at the conclusions you are trying to come to and the premises that support them. Are the premises based on logic or empirical information? Does the logic stack up? Is there sufficient empirical data to support the point you are trying to make with it? Are your arguments based on citing authorities that you can depend upon and which will be trusted by others, or are they less than authoritative? Do the sources you claim for authority actually support what you are trying to say, or are there differences that might be spotted by reviewers and which might undermine your argument?

Third, when reviewing others' work, be generous rather than hostile. However, do look to see what kind of arguments they are making and whether the premises support them. If there are gaps in the literature, are they there because those topics aren't that interesting, or are they genuinely new avenues for research?

Finally, make clear when you are writing exactly what your contribution is – make clear to reviewers and to readers what it is they can get from your work that they can't get elsewhere. Then make sure you live up to that. Don't claim more than you can deliver, and don't conceal your contribution to such an extent that a reader has to go through page after page before finding out what it is that you think your paper or report is all about.

Five Things to Remember About This Chapter

1. The way that you conduct your research places limitations in the way you can write it up. If you've conducted an experiment, there are definite expectations in the way you have to write it up. The same thing applies to other methods – find a good example in the published literature of the type of work you've done and see how it might provide you with a template.
2. Making an argument is a key part of presenting your work. Think on what basis you are making your arguments and make sure they are adequately supported.
3. You need to make sure that the way you argue about cause and effect is compatible with your research strategy – be clear what your assumptions are.
4. Think carefully who your audience is, make sure that you present your work in a balanced way (unless you are trying to write a polemic) and be clear what your contribution is – give your readers a reason to look at your work.
5. When reviewing others' work, bear in mind that they are human beings too. If you are going to be critical, do so in a generous spirit. It is fine to criticise others' work, but in doing so, you don't have to be rude.

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