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TIGHTENING UP

. . . and now I am trying to do it again to say everything about everything.

—*Gertrude Stein (1937:80)*

Some of the best advice I've ever found for writers happened to be included with the directions for assembling a new wheelbarrow: Make sure all parts are properly in place before tightening.

One can press that analogy. Fieldwork and organizing one's data might be likened to collecting and identifying the parts of a wheelbarrow. Once you have gathered all the parts, you need a basis for sorting them and a workable sequence for assembling them. Then, before you begin tightening, take a look at how the whole thing is coming together. Do you have everything you need? Conversely, do you need everything you have? Remember, you're only supposed to be tightening that wheelbarrow, not filling it!

Whether writing up your research entails a project report, a journal article, a thesis, a technically oriented monograph, or a book, my guess is that as the material takes shape, you will worry that the descriptive account is too long, the interpretation or analysis lacks the power you hoped to achieve, and you cannot figure out what to say in conclusion.

Dismaying as these problems may appear, you are making headway if they are yours. Think how much better off you are than a researcher who discovers that the data are thin, the analysis and conclusions unwarranted, and the basic research question misdirected.

No amount of editing can transform an inadequate database into a solid piece of research, although candor on the part of the researcher may preserve ideas, insights, and questions that have merit independent of fizzled fieldwork. But don't fool yourself that some fancy combination of boldface type, shadow letters, underlined words, or whatever format or lettering tricks you can do with word processing or color printing can improve anything except the look of a manuscript. (Fancy title pages on term papers always aroused my suspicion.) Qualitative studies are judged by how they read, not how they strike the eye.

Fieldwork may be the dramatic element in qualitative work, but the real test lies in the way everything is assembled in the final product. That is why method consists of more than collecting data, and more than simply reporting the data one has collected. Writing is not the only thing involved, but it is the focus here. Writing is integral to qualitative inquiry, not adjunct. Some researchers achieve brilliant results through seemingly effortless prowess with prose, but what most of us accomplish is achieved through sustained effort at editing and revision. Those are the processes discussed next. As for trying to say everything about everything, rest assured that that is not the way to go about writing up qualitative research.

Reviewing for Content and Style

If I have given the impression that I believe style to be more important than content, let me hasten to correct that point. Content is paramount—what you have to say, not how you say it. Style is critical but secondary in reporting qualitative research; like data collection, it is necessary but not sufficient. An attractive feature about style is that it is amenable to discussions like this. No one can teach you how to write; lots of people can suggest ways to write better. I have never met anyone

who reads qualitative studies for their style. What Clifford Geertz says of anthropological writing applies to qualitative research in general: "Good anthropological texts are plain texts, unpretending. They neither invite literary-critical close reading nor reward it" (1988:2).

For the most part, our inquiries are concerned with how other humans work through their everyday lives. Everyday experience is common to us all; our studies should not be pretentious. There is a fundamental fascination with the way other humans live, and our accounts should bubble with the stuff of life itself. When they do not—when accounts appear sterile and lifeless—how often is inattention to writing at fault? Our peculiar genius seems as often to take the life out of our studies as to celebrate the lives in them. Our opportunity is also our challenge: to portray real people doing and saying real things, as seen through the eyes of another observer intent not only on helping us to see but helping us to understand.

A first step is to compare what you have in the draft in hand with what you promised or implied in your original problem statement or Table of Contents. With a completed draft of the full account—including initial attempts at analysis or interpretation, no matter how rudimentary—the process of tightening begins in earnest. Tightening is the part of the writing process that I enjoy, although I do not suggest that working through successive drafts of a manuscript is without agonies of its own. I try to express my thoughts clearly the first time. I do not write poorly simply to make revision challenging. I take little delight in recognizing long, unnecessarily complex, and poorly formed arrangements of words in sentences or paragraphs that I thought were OK when I wrote them.

Worse yet, behind many such sentences and paragraphs lurks a poorly formed idea. I often wonder if my thinking is as convoluted as my writing. (If so, is the problem diminishing with experience or getting worse with age?) Thoughts seemingly satisfactory in the abstract seldom appear so crystal clear when they are rendered into words.

With an entire manuscript drafted, you may suddenly become aware that it is no small task even to get description and interpretation to match. We carry in our heads rich details of our studies that we never commit to print, a fact always more apparent in reading the work of others than our own. One sometimes wonders whether researchers pay sufficient attention to what they have written. Does the narrative account support the analysis? The resolution lies not with faulting the analysis, but in seeing to it that the analysis helps to shape the descriptive account, just as the descriptive account provides the substance for analysis. I have suggested that writing the narrative description is a good place to begin, but that does not mean that the descriptive account then becomes sacrosanct. Until a manuscript is in print, not a word you have written is sacrosanct. (You cannot be that cavalier with material quoted from your sources, but the choice and extent of such quotations remains yours and yours alone.)

As the analysis takes shape, some material originally included may become superfluous, just as other sections may need to be fleshed out with more detail. Anthropologist Michael Agar offers this homespun description of the process:

> You learn something ("collect some data"), then you try to make sense out of it ("analysis"), then you go back to see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experience ("collect more data"), then you refine your interpretation ("more analysis"), and so on. The process is dialectic, not linear. [Agar 1996:62]

The nexus between description and analysis in the writing is also dialectic, each facet informing the other, each helping with the important work of reducing the detail, maintaining the focus, and moving the account ahead. Where your descriptive elements are thin because your data are thin, it is advisable to exercise both candor and restraint. There is nothing wrong with sharing hunches or impressions, provided they are labeled as such. Nor can you be faulted for pointing out whatever data would have been necessary to support a generalization that you believe is warranted but are not prepared to make.

This critical tightening phase is also a time to be looking for needless repetition. Because our studies sometimes take years to research and months to write, we forget that they can be read in a matter of hours, even minutes. Sentences written weeks apart and revised days apart

may be read moments apart. Astute collegial reviewers can be especially helpful in identifying repetitions that authors themselves are no longer able to recognize. How surprising to find a comment penned by a colleague, "Didn't you just say all this about three pages back?" But how much better to receive gentle admonition from a friend than to find a terse comment from an anonymous reviewer: "Redundant. Needs rewriting."

REVISING AND EDITING

Writers writing self-consciously about writing sometimes distinguish between **revising** and **editing,** the former in reference to reviewing content, the latter in reference to style, correctness, and other detail. The distinction correctly sets priorities: Content comes first. But I wonder if the distinction also fosters a mistaken image of a two-step process. Editing presupposes something to edit, and that something is the essence of it, not simply a first step. Still, the implication that everything I write needs revision is a little harsh on my author-ego, even if it is essentially correct. I find myself referring to manuscripts as revised *after* I revise them, but while actually engaging in the process, I prefer to think (and certainly to announce) that I am editing, whether I am performing a major overhaul or minor tune-up. I admit to revising only when I must change a format, make drastic cuts or revisions called for by an editor, or undertake a substantial rewrite, such as when I "de-dissertationized" my doctoral research for publication (Wolcott 1964, 1967).

Most of what I call editing probably would be considered as revising to anyone looking over my shoulder. You may recognize a subtle distinction you make between editing and revising whenever you assign the current working copy of a manuscript a new date, title, or code and relegate the earlier version to the archives. And, of course, you *should* occasionally save and set aside copies of your working drafts, so that you can track how the manuscript has evolved. That also allows you to go back to an earlier draft if you realize that some new improvement isn't an improvement at all.

HONING YOUR EDITORIAL SKILLS

Editing occurs in countless ways, and every researcher-cum-author employs many of them. One way to gain experience that seems particularly well-suited to academic and professional writing is through collegial review. I trust that you recognize editing as help that can be given to others as well as help you seek for yourself. Providing the service of editorial review for colleagues not only gains you valuable experience but enlists you in the collective responsibility we all share for the quality of our studies. Editing the work of others also affords opportunity to recognize desirable and undesirable practices in their writing that we are not always able to discern in our own.

If one's timing is right, graduate students polishing the final draft of a thesis are an especially receptive audience for editorial direction. The only caution is to try to avoid editing *for* them rather than helping them become better author-editors on their own. Because such writing is often (nay, usually) done under the pressure of complex power relationships and fast-approaching deadlines, well-intended efforts to be helpful can be perceived instead as intrusive. In that case, as with the analogy to assembling a wheelbarrow, perhaps all you can do is to make sure that budding authors have all the parts properly in place before they begin tightening. By all means, remember to commend those sections that sparkle with insight and clarity.

Reading published reviews provides another means for keeping tabs on colleagues' writing and offers a 3-for-1 return on your investment of time. First, you get an overview and critique of new publications, a great help with the ever-pressing problem of keeping up in your field. Second, you get one academic author's reaction to the writing of another in the same field. Few reviewers can resist the temptation to comment on organization and style, although most of us like to think we are above such things. Third, you sample the reviewer's own style, seen in a disciplined piece of writing addressing the delicate business of collegial (and sometimes not-so-collegial) review. Book reviews are an underappreciated art form in academic writing. Read them. Write them. Pay no heed to those who insist that book reviews don't count as a scholarly contribution.

When editing my own material, I experience a sense of diminishing return when I devote a too-sustained effort to the task. Manuscripts can always be improved (yes, this one too; how many more drafts of how many more editions to get it "just right"?), and successive, productive editings are the way to get there. But I also need distance from my words, lest I find that I am changing text without necessarily improving it. When time permits, I like to put a manuscript on a figurative back burner for a while, turning my attention to other things before returning to the editing. After a period of benign neglect, I can do a better job of strengthening interpretations; spotting discrepancies and repetitions; locating irregularities in sequence or logic; and discovering overworked words, phrases, and patterns.

When time does not permit, I look for other ways to gain a fresh perspective. One is to edit from back to front, attending first to final sections rather than always beginning at the beginning.[1] Others include reading aloud, reading a too-familiar manuscript in an unfamiliar setting, or reading a manuscript quickly, especially if all prior readings have been careful word-by-word ones. By simply changing font or format, which is easily accomplished in word processing, you can rearrange the spatial relationship of words on the page or screen to gain a different perspective on sentences previously fixed in your mind. Sometimes, I go through a manuscript in mechanical fashion to see if I can eliminate one unnecessary word from every sentence, one unnecessary sentence from every page. When editing directly on the screen, if the bottom line of a paragraph contains only one or two words, I accept an implicit challenge to try to eliminate an equivalent number of characters somewhere within the paragraph to reduce the overall length of the manuscript by one line. I still experience wonderment and delight when I watch paragraphs *literally* tighten before my eyes!

Every sentence containing any form of the verb "to be" is a candidate for rewriting in active voice if I can see a way to do it. Often, I cannot find a way to rewrite those sentences, which makes it all the more important to improve other sentences as I am able. I also go on search-and-destroy campaigns to ferret out overworked expressions and overused words as I become aware of them. My continuing rampage concerns the word "very," a *very* unnecessary word and habit. In their popular *Elements of*

Style, Strunk and White label *rather, very, little,* and *pretty* as "qualifiers" and offer succinct advice: Avoid them (1972:65). Other unfortunate word habits that I have become conscious of are my overuse of "even" and "however." I've always written with too many "buts," but I have a hard time eliminating them. (Does that reflect a contrary nature?) I also seem to pick up, yet remain unaware of, some new hard-to-break habit with each writing assignment. For example, I have just (just?) discovered that not only do I overuse the expressions "On the one hand" and "On the other hand," but I also frequently ignore the first hand altogether.

A bumper sticker imploring us to "Eschew Obfuscation" provided good advice for academic writers, but the slogan hardly rolls off the tongue. My own current checklist of things to watch for in the final editing stages is short, but it usually takes more than one reading to catch them all:[2]

- Unnecessary words
- Passive voice, especially forms of the verb "to be"
- Qualifiers, such as those noted above
- Overused phrases
- Excessive "anythings," quotes, italics, parenthetical comments

Having long ago discovered how (very) long it can take from the moment of first submission of a manuscript to finally seeing it in print, I continue to review drafts (even) after I submit them. (Remember, only the final version counts!) I advise publishers of my edit-while-I-wait practice, noting that I will be ready with a clean and current draft the moment a manuscript is ready to go into production. Production can sometimes be delayed for a year or two (I noted that material submitted for edited collections seems to take the longest), and no draft can fail to be improved by periodic review during a waiting period. Should the period of delay become an extended one, references also may need

updating. You may be both elated and dismayed at the number of additional references you discover *after* you send a manuscript away. Perhaps recent citations can be added at the last minute to keep your study up-to-date, but remaining current is a game you cannot win. Better to keep in mind that the earlier you suggest additions or changes to a manuscript already in production, the less resistance you are likely to encounter from an editor or publisher.

You may be able to strengthen your interpretation or analysis during the time for reflection prompted by unanticipated delays. Recognize that your most profound insights may not occur for years. As the epigraph to this book suggests, should you come to realize with the passage of time "how much the views on all points will have to be modified," you are, nevertheless, in good company!

On the other hand (oops!), don't drive yourself crazy tracking down new leads or trying to stay up-to-the-minute with what you publish. Electronic journals are better suited for that kind of reporting, and such urgency seems a bit forced for descriptive accounts of the kind that most of us prepare. An invited chapter I once wrote for a prestigious audience of researchers suffered so many delays while the editor bullied and cajoled recalcitrant contributors that by the time the book was in print, a chapter to be touted as "state of the art" looked more like a historical review. The lesson for me was to edit with an eye for a substantial piece, one that can stand the test of time, rather than try to be so cutting-edge current. Neither our studies nor our audiences ordinarily have the aura of immediacy about them that one finds in more technical fields, which is all the more reason to make our contributions lasting—timeless rather than timely.

FORMAL EDITORIAL HELP

I have discussed the kind of help we can receive (and offer) in collegial review while a manuscript is in our own hands. Next, I turn to what you can anticipate by way of formal editorial help, including help that is out of your hands.

One thing you can count on is that you cannot necessarily count on receiving any editorial help at all with a manuscript submitted to a journal or publisher, nor can you predict the nature or extent of in-house editorial help if given. Let me provide an illustration. An author of my acquaintance submitted the draft of a book-length qualitative study to a university press eager to publish it. She was aghast to have her draft returned *in copyedited form*, ready for her final approval before being sent directly to the printer. What she had expected—counted on, really—was an editor's careful sentence-by-sentence examination to guide her own final editing. She had to make an agonizing decision (especially because this was her first book) to withdraw her manuscript, seek independent editorial help, and resubmit later in the hope that the publisher's enthusiasm would not wane. Fortunately, it did not. The alternative to seemingly rigid deadlines—in this case, at least—was to counter with a superbly revised manuscript.

Some time later, I had an opportunity to discuss my friend's dilemma with a representative from that press who was familiar with the circumstances. She appeared taken aback by the implied criticism that the publisher offered no help. "We would have been happy to be more helpful in providing editorial service," she explained. "We weren't aware that it would have been welcome." Authors are often reticent about soliciting help, concerned about giving the least hint that their work may be inadequate as submitted or inviting more help than they bargained for, especially should it result in a call for further revising or drastic cutting.

Matching editorial help offered with editorial help desired is an uneasy business under any circumstances. I am meticulous about editing, and I persisted in that practice during the years I served as editor of a scholarly journal. I encouraged outside reviewers as well as our in-house staff (a part-time, semiretired professional editor and several graduate assistants) to be equally rigorous. We penciled comments and suggestions on any manuscript under serious consideration, usually circulating a single copy so that each of us was privy to suggestions made by earlier readers. This was, in part, for our mutual edification. We read each other's comments and argued among ourselves—in the margins of the manuscript, if we felt it might be of interest to the author—whether

our suggested changes were necessarily improvements. Other than with format requirements, however, we neither insisted on the changes we proposed nor promised publication on the condition that authors made the changes suggested. Fresh draft, fresh review. When manuscripts came back revised—as they almost always did—we read them anew rather than comparing them sentence by sentence with the earlier submission.

I was told that when we returned one manuscript, a senior colleague at another institution stormed out of her office and announced, "I haven't had anything marked up like this since I was a sophomore in high school!" What we received at the editor's office, however, was a gracious thank-you for our careful reading and a much improved draft that we were delighted to publish. On another occasion, a contributor reacted upon seeing his article in print, "I didn't know I wrote that well!" Truth was, he didn't. With our insistence and some specific editorial suggestions, coupled with his willingness to rework the material, the result was excellent. Because we insisted on better writing, we got it. I would be flattered to have an astute reader/critic someday discover and commend the caliber of writing in the journal under my editorship, but that will never happen. Good writing does not call attention to itself, it enhances what is being written about.

That academic writers make little use of freelance editors can be attributed, I believe, to frugality and lack of precedent, for there is no shortage of professional help available. (Check the Yellow Pages of your local telephone directory.) We seem willing to invest great amounts of time at our writing, considerable sums on having at hand the latest hardware and software available, and nary a cent for editing. I do not recall ever seeing a line item budgeted for editorial assistance in a grant or project proposal, although the final product is often expected to be a publishable monograph or book rather than a technical report. An unstated but prevailing notion seems to hold that one's writing—like one's research—should be original, entirely one's own. Too bad, when writing so benefits from review by others!

Other arguments can be summoned against hiring professional editorial help, in addition to out-of-pocket costs that can run to hundreds of dollars. One problem is how to identify a good editor—the question of quality control in a field where virtually anyone who has ever written for publication or taken a few writing courses can feign expertise. Researchers also worry that the only help editors provide is with style, that is, that editorial consultants are uninformed on technical aspects and may not understand the material we place in their hands. Such an argument seems transparent when we claim that our objective is to help others understand themselves by seeing things through the perspective we provide. Editors ought to be able to help us accomplish that objective. Good editors do it without bruising tender author-egos, at the same time helping each of us to develop an individual style. If only your best friends, your closest colleagues, or your students are your reviewer-critics, you may need to be reminded of the advertising slogan adopted for a popular mouthwash: "There are things your best friends won't tell you."

How Do You Conclude a Qualitative Study?

You don't. Give serious thought to dropping the idea that your final chapter must lead to a conclusion or that the account must build toward a dramatic climax. In the dichotomous thinking said to be typical of Americans, research is sometimes portrayed as either decision-oriented or conclusion-oriented. Clearly, some research is decision-oriented, but I am not sure that "conclusion-oriented" is a proper label for the rest of it. In reporting qualitative work, I avoid the term "conclusion." I also avoid the word "findings," for it seems to have a similar effect on reporting style, calling undue attention to details amenable to rigorous analysis rather than to basic issues we often want readers to ponder. It all gets back to purposes. The more the problem seems to call for systematic data collection, reporting, and analysis, the more the research would seem to call for a quantitative approach. I do not work toward a grand flourish that might tempt me beyond the boundaries of the material I have been presenting, or might detract from the power (and exceed the limitations) of the observations themselves or what I have been able to make of them.

Qualitative researchers seem particularly vulnerable to the tendency—and urge—to go beyond reporting *what is* and to use their studies as platforms for making pronouncements of *what ought to be*. A critical divide separates the realm of the observable from the realm of judgments as to what is good and better. This is not simply a matter of taking a big leap. You cannot bridge the chasm between the descriptive and the prescriptive without imposing *someone's* judgment, whether originating from the people in the setting ("What we really need around here . . ."), from expert opinion ("If these people knew what was good for them . . ."), or from the researcher's own assessment ("I know from personal experience . . .").

There is an implicit evaluative dimension in all description; the antidote is restraint. The urge to lend personal opinion and judgment seems to become strongest when we begin searching for the capstone with which to conclude a study. You can recognize it creeping into your work (or, if you prefer, into mine) with the appearance of words like "should," "must," "need," or "ought."

There is nothing wrong with offering personal opinion or professional judgment. But it is vitally important to label them as such, and to search out and acknowledge their origins in your thinking. While you're at it, you might give some thought to why we feel so duty-bound to come up with conclusions, and why the conclusions are supposed to be filled with cheery optimism. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict once observed that "American popular audiences crave solutions" (1946:192). As both producers and consumers of research, we need (need?) not only to recognize this collective penchant for closure but to recognize as well the corresponding urge it prompts in us to supply endings that are satisfying.

How often today do we read about films produced with multiple endings while producers argue over, or focus groups help determine, the finale likely to draw the biggest box office? Every article in our weekly news magazines, every report of on-the-spot TV coverage, has its dramatic tag line. The endings for qualitative studies do not have to be dramatic; they do need to be well-suited to the occasion. In a dissertation, nothing more may be necessary than a sentence or two tucked into the last paragraph of the chapter dealing with analysis or interpretation. Academic restraint predominates in journal publication and the more scientifically oriented monographs. Books seem to accommodate, and to demand, more author input, even a bit more flair in a closing statement. Thus, audience remains a key factor, as does one's stage in a professional career.

My suggestion for anyone new to academic writing is to work toward a conservative closing statement that reviews succinctly what has been attempted, what has been learned, and what new questions have been raised. Do not abandon a detailed case study in a last-ditch effort to achieve a grand finale. It is not necessary to push a canoe into the sunset at the end of every presentation. Recognize and resist the temptation of dramatic but irrelevant endings or conclusions that raise issues that have *not* been addressed in the research. Beginnings and endings are important; they deserve extra attention from the author because they tend to receive extra attention from the reader. Look for ways to make them better without letting them get bigger.

- Rather than striving for closure, see if you can leave both yourself and your readers pondering the essential issues that perplex you. In time, you may understand more. As noted, only in a 1989 Afterword to *A Kwakiutl Village and School* did I find an adequate way to conceptualize, and in that sense bring some closure to, the study I first presented in a doctoral dissertation completed in 1964. Lapsed time: a quarter century!

Nevertheless, be warned that where and how you might prefer to bring the account to a close may not go far enough to satisfy your critics. Commercial publishers and experienced editors like to remind the potential author that they "know their audiences." They may insist that you offer more by way of a summation, "because that's what audiences expect," even while they insist on a shorter manuscript. If you argue (and no doubt you would like to, whether or not you actually do) that the case stands by itself, or that the meaning of your research is not all that clear, then you may be pressed (by a wily editor, a granting agency, even a dissertation committee) to state what *you* learned, or to reflect on what *you* think it all means.

Alternatives to Concluding a Study

Some alternatives to writing a formal Conclusion include Summaries, Recommendations and/or Implications, or a statement of Personal Reflections. Any one or a combination of these may satisfy the need for closure without tempting you to go too far, losing your audience just as the final curtain descends. Each of these alternatives raises questions about purposes and opportunities in qualitative research and about your intended audience.

Summaries. An objective summary can provide a careful, restrained way to end on a strong note. It allows a review of what you have accomplished in terms of your original statement of purpose. It also provides opportunity to anticipate critical reaction—the well-intended kind, not your Worst Nightmare Critic—by pointing out shortcomings and discussing how, now that you are older and wiser, you might better have conducted the study. Restrict your comments to summarizing what has gone before. A summary is not the place to startle readers with important additional information that could, and should, have been introduced earlier.

When summarizing, do not be tempted to introduce an interpretive emphasis that gives a totally new twist. A summary provides opportunity for the repetition and emphasis to ensure that your message gets across, if, indeed, there was a message. But if your summary is also an editorial, join the title with some other word that signals your intent, such as Summary and Discussion, or Summary and Reflections (see below).

If the idea of summarizing appeals to you, consider going a step further by providing brief summaries *throughout* your study rather than saving everything for a grand finale. Academic authors could make better use of chapter or section endings if they reserved them strictly for summarizing. Too often, sections labeled as summaries are devoted to anticipating what is coming next, rather than fulfilling the promise of a succinct review of material already covered. Introductions, as the word suggests, belong at the beginning of new sections, not at the close of preceding ones. Concise and well-written chapter summaries can provide a sort of running "box score" for stating how things stood at the beginning of the chapter and reviewing important information and insights newly added. Summaries should help *everyone* remain on target, author as well as reader.

Recommendations/Implications. A frequent practice in resolving the how-to-conclude question is to prepare a final section or chapter that couples a brief summary with Recommendations or Implications. Whether to offer Recommendations boldly or to tease out Implications more tentatively depends on the nature and purpose of the study; its intended audiences (e.g., policymakers insisting on recommendations); and the posture (and status) of the researcher (e.g., dispassionate observer, consultant, critic, advocate).

A call for recommendations can put the more objectively oriented researcher in a bind. One would like to present the case so thoroughly and so well contextualized that the reader has the same basis for making judgments as the researcher—and thus the researcher is relieved of responsibility. Still, when one has devoted extensive attention to a problem or setting (e.g., Why don't the children of this ________ [ethnic minority of your choice] group perform better in school? What steps could be taken to curb the ________ [social problem of your choice] among these teenagers? What might be done to improve the ________ [socially desirable goal of your choice] among members of this group?), it is not unreasonable for sponsors or concerned readers to expect some helpful reflections or advice. And it certainly doesn't hurt to point to whatever is being done well, to counter the often negative tone that our studies take as we describe the consequences, intended or unintended, of programs designed to "help."

Descriptive studies can be maddeningly ambiguous. For the busy practitioner or policymaker, the bottom line is always, "So what?" or

"What's to be done about it?" For such audiences, a researcher's efforts to convey nonjudgmental objectivity is more likely to be perceived as an academic cop-out than as a laudable research stance. We may prefer not to be pressed for personal reactions and private opinions, but we must be prepared to offer them. One way to share this responsibility is to outline the additional information or insight a researcher would require in order to pose a solution, offer recommendations, or render the judgment requested.

Treated too cavalierly, or brushed aside with an unbecoming modesty ("Oh, we couldn't possibly say anything about that—we don't know enough yet"), the too-humble-to-be-helpful approach can indeed be a cop-out. Yet the very act of pointing to elements the researcher feels he or she has not understood, or that seem poorly defined, may help uncover inherent ambiguities. To the question, "Why don't you tell us how to make this program more effective?" a researcher might have to reply, with a discomforting but not altogether unlikely explanation, "Because I have been unable to get a clear sense of what it is you are trying to accomplish."[3]

Another way to offer help—although it, too, can lead to discomfort and denial—is to identify inherent tensions and paradoxes. The manner in which people go about things often produces a different, and sometimes opposite, effect from what they intend. Anthropologist Ray McDermott provided an instance of this in his microcultural description and analysis of differences in the organization of reading instruction for the "top" and "bottom" pupils in a first-grade classroom. He observed how the top readers practiced their reading skills, whereas the bottom readers rehearsed classroom protocols appropriate to their niche as "poor" students (McDermott 1976). Although such observation and interpretation offered by an outsider might bring little joy to a dedicated but harried first-grade teacher, comparable paradoxes permeate formal education whenever the quick get the lecture and the slow get lectured. Human social life is filled with paradoxes in which the consequences of behavior produce an effect opposite to what we hope to achieve, something that a detached outside observer is more likely to detect than is an engaged and committed insider.

A third way to offer help is to identify alternatives to current practice—or alternative solutions to current problems—and then systematically examine the possible consequences of each alternative. In this way, the analytical skills of the researcher can serve not only as a potential resource but also as a model for others who may conduct inquiries of their own someday.

The ideal extension of this approach is that change agents, nurses, police officers, social workers, teachers, and so forth, not only should be collaborators in research but also should ultimately *become* researchers who conduct studies among their own clients. Our problems with data overload should help us appreciate why such an idea, one that sounds so right, is usually so impractical. To an even greater extent than do researchers, practitioners must "get rid of"—which, in this case, means ignore—massive amounts of information before they can get on with their appointed tasks. To know more may hopelessly complicate assignments already hopelessly complex.

Drawing Implications is similar to making Recommendations but allows the researcher to remain more distant and contemplative. Identifying *possible* implications may offer an oblique approach in which questions are raised rather than solutions proposed. When one is addressing specialist audiences (e.g., practitioners, administrators, policymakers)—audiences whose members may not take kindly to boldly stated advice based on a neophyte researcher's modest study of perhaps only a single case—some tentativeness about suggestions seems warranted.

When our intended audience consists solely of research colleagues, I think it sufficient to conclude with a statement summarizing what has been learned and what appear to be the next steps in an ongoing process of inquiry. But we like to think we do more than simply talk to ourselves. If asked, we must be prepared to say more, to offer what help we can.

We also can do a better job of inquiring into the kind of help that practitioners want, or make clearer the kind of answers we are in a position to render. One of the intriguing questions constantly before us—our own professional paradox—is why social research has so little impact. Are

we scratching where it isn't itching? We do not give sufficient attention to the impact of our research efforts and the related question of whether that is the impact we want to have. We agonize over that issue as a global one; perhaps we would be more convincing if we addressed it case by case.

Personal Reflections. I welcome the prevailing mood that encourages researchers to be candid and "self-reflexive" about the fieldwork experience. Unquestionably, the fieldworker is most likely to be the individual most affected by the experience. Nevertheless, if you close on a note of personal reflection, keep the subject(s) of your study the focus of your reflections. The more you feel an urge to step into the spotlight, the more carefully you should distinguish your personal reflections from the observations on which they are based, especially if your presence and feelings have otherwise been muted. If you have maintained a presence all along, you probably have had (or made) opportunities to share your personal reflections, and you probably have said enough.[4]

RUNNING OUT OF SPACE

"When in doubt, leave it out," the guidebooks advise the traveler packing for an extended trip. It's good advice for qualitative researchers, too, although when we are unsure about how much to pack into our accounts, we're more likely to do just the opposite. How much description is enough to earn the accolade "thick description"? How much context is enough to make a study "contextual"? To avoid being shallow, how deeply must we delve to present a case "in depth"? Yet if luminaries like Malinowski or Margaret Mead can be faulted for "haphazard descriptiveness" (noted in Marcus and Fischer 1986:56), how can we ensure that our own descriptive efforts attain some higher order?

Faced with the dilemma of having more to pack than a suitcase can possibly hold, the traveler has three possibilities: rearrange so as to get more in, remove nonessentials, or find a larger suitcase. Qualitative researchers face comparable alternatives. Like learning to pack small items inside bigger ones, there are ways to pack more into a manuscript without increasing its length. "Tightening" implies that the end product will be more compact, although experience suggests otherwise. Unless revision is undertaken specifically to reduce manuscript length, my deletions are usually matched by seemingly minor changes and additions that leave total manuscript length about the same—or a tad longer. If clever repacking is not sufficient, some items simply have to be left out. As to the third possibility, seasoned travelers and seasoned researchers alike are aware that large containers are unwieldy, often require special handling that adds extra costs, and may be prohibited by regulation.

Under the two headings that follow, "Crowding More In" and "Cutting More Out," I offer suggestions of a mechanical bent for helping authors comply with space limitations. The underlying concern is not mechanical, however; it is an issue of focus. That is why I keep returning to the importance of the problem statement, "The purpose of this study is . . . ," and reiterating that the problem statement itself must remain under continual critical review.

Given lingering doubts about the criteria of inclusion for descriptive studies, I can offer another aphorism that has served to guide my writing and that I have frequently repeated to help others experiencing difficulties with organizing, writing, or editing: Do less, more thoroughly![5]

"Do less, more thoroughly" is my maxim, and the zoom lens on a camera provides an analogy for the principle in action. If you want to take in more of the picture, you must sacrifice closeness of detail; if you want more detail, you must sacrifice breadth. Michael Agar suggests what he calls the "funnel approach" to fieldwork: "The strategy is to *selectively* narrow the focus within a previously explored broad field" (1996:61; for another lens analogy, see Peacock 1986). Do you have the focus right? Keep in mind that the answer to that crucial question lies not within the research setting, and not within your choice of method; it is something you bring *to* the setting.

CROWDING MORE IN

In spite of growing interest in the performance of text, qualitative research weds us to prose. But we are not limited only to words. Charts,

diagrams, maps, tables, and photographs provide valuable supplements to printed text and help condense and expedite the presentation of supporting detail. I have noted my inclination to "think sections," "think chapters," or "think Table of Contents" from the moment I begin a study. That advice can be restated more universally, applicable to the presentation of quantitative and qualitative data alike. Miles and Huberman state succinctly: Think display (1994:11 *passim*).[6] Display formats provide alternatives for coping with two of our most critical tasks, data reduction and data analysis.

Charts and diagrams offer additional ways to give our thoughts "embodiment." They invite us to sort and categorize data, to explore what goes with what, to contemplate how seemingly discrete data may be linked in previously unrecognized ways. Where most of us are constrained by the regimented vision of prose, researchers who think spatially work through their charts and diagrams in order to literally "see" their studies. From the outset, some qualitative researchers conceptualize their studies in charts and diagrams drawn on inexpensive newsprint spread across their walls or floors. Anyone who has been a presenter in a poster session has experienced the challenge to "think display."

In more conventional formats, tables and charts can also relay or summarize information that provides context for a study but is of interest to only a portion of one's readers. Similarly, maps are an expedient way to locate a region and community, and sketch maps are a convenient way to plot movement or show before-and-after comparisons. Pictures are still worth a thousand words, more or less, and with the caveat that they raise no insurmountable issues with confidentiality or permissions.

Graphics also enhance the likelihood of capturing the attention of readers who see facts or visualize relationships in other ways. They also keep us mindful of exploring alternative forms of representation and presentation by augmenting the always potentially tedious flow of words on the printed page.

Display has a function in data analysis as well. Charts and diagrams developed in rough form during preliminary efforts to organize data (as well as get rid of it) can help researchers tease out relationships and patterns spatially. Don't hesitate to explore alternative ways and means for displaying and summarizing data. But do keep them easy to follow, easy to understand, and purposeful rather than decorative.

By way of example, I reproduce here a diagram prepared originally for the first edition of this monograph (see Figure 5.1). The diagram was designed to provide a visual representation of the major approaches to on-site research. One purpose for organizing the material was to emphasize a variety of strategies, so that students new to qualitative research would not slap a catchy label like "ethnography" on their studies merely because they assumed that any one term covered them all. Prior to preparing the diagram, I had condensed some comparative material about each approach into a columnar table (Wolcott 1982), but that format lent an unfortunate rigidity by seeming to "box in" each approach. I wanted to convey a sense of the interrelatedness among the approaches without implying a sense of hierarchy. A circle graph provided a way to represent the approaches in a continuum ranging from closely related ones to seeming opposites. Note that there are already more words in this paragraph than in the figure, which is another part of my message: The chart (almost) speaks for itself.

That the chart speaks for itself happens to be both a fact and a precondition for material that appears separate from the text: Accompanying material must stand independently. Supplementary material must be labeled adequately so that it can be understood without having to consult the text, a function performed with captions and subheadings. The challenge is to ensure that the material is self-explanatory, not text-dependent. To determine whether your charts and tables stand by themselves, ask someone unfamiliar with the text to interpret your visual displays.

Captions and explanatory material accompanying tables, charts, and photographs deserve careful editorial scrutiny. And nothing should be considered for inclusion that is not of high quality (i.e., clean lines, sharp image). Materials also must be relevant to the purposes at hand, not used simply to break up space or create an impression. As revising and editing continue, so should the review of supporting materials. Charts or tables critical to early drafts sometimes become superfluous

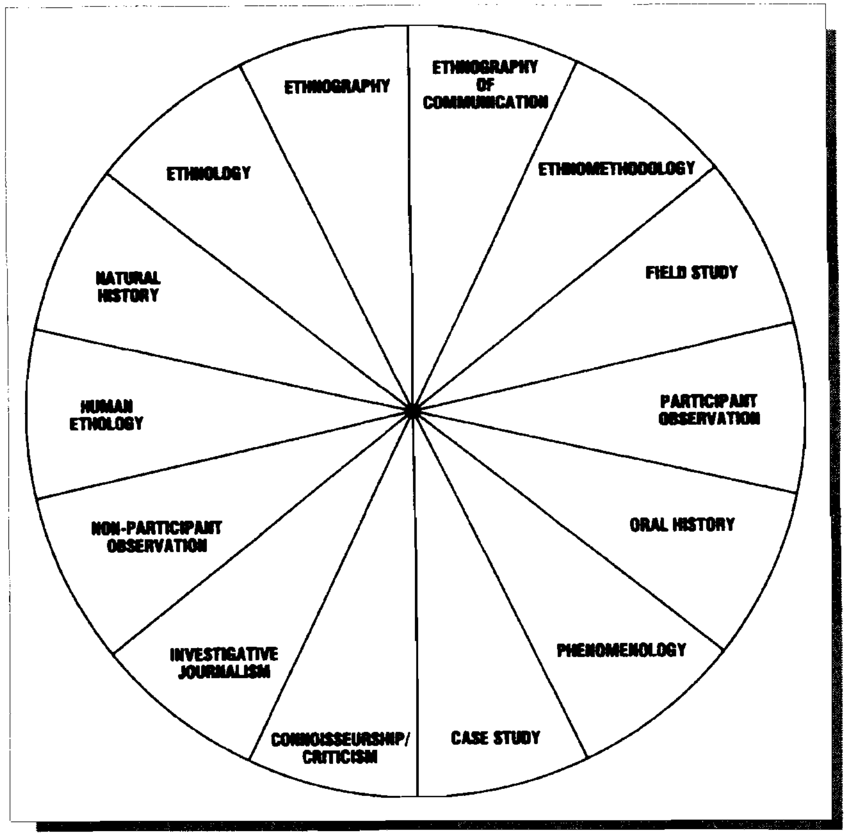

Figure 5.1. Qualitative/Descriptive Studies Organized by Research Approach

after the writing is finished. Conversely, maps and diagrams may have to be simplified to be effective. Several maps may be needed to accomplish competing purposes originally designed to be achieved in one (e.g., locating the region of study in one map, accompanied by a map of larger scale providing important local detail). Everything should be orchestrated. Don't leave the reader wondering why something was included that seems to bear little relationship to the purposes of the study.

A word of caution: Charts and tables provide a ready trap for authors susceptible to what Lewis Coser labeled "misplaced precision," or the effort to compensate for theoretical weakness through methodological strength (1975:692-693). Misplaced precision is not inherent in charts and tables themselves. It becomes apparent whenever data are introduced at a distracting level inconsistent with the purposes of a study or with the level of detail provided elsewhere. As a dyed-in-the-wool qualitative researcher, the more charts and tables I find in a study, the more suspicious I become that the researcher may be trying to impress rather than inform.

In the case of my original circle diagram, however, its *lack* of complexity concerned me. Models should simplify, but this one oversimplified by representing each of the qualitative approaches that I had identified as independent and equal. The original diagram served my intended purposes in presenting an overview, but the complexity of the relationship among qualitative approaches called for more. The tree diagram described previously (see Figure 4.1) was the result. The circle diagram was a beginning that led eventually to something more satisfactory.

When they summarize or illustrate important information, tables, charts, photos, and other figures render valuable service. They also broaden the appeal for those who appreciate having data presented in nontextual form. But the presentation of data can itself become a preoccupation. Biographers and historians seem particularly susceptible to the temptations of data overload, sometimes seeming to include data for no apparent reason except that they were uncovered during the course of research. The most flagrant example of misplaced precision in qualitative reporting that I recall was the inclusion of a table of random numbers that appeared as an appendix for a monograph on social practices related to beer drinking among urban Africans. The intended message, I assume, was, "This is science." My reaction as reviewer was, "This is ridiculous."

Another practice that can help to hold manuscripts to a reasonable length is to provide only brief excerpts from interviews or field notes in the body of the text. When necessary, longer protocols can be included in an appendix or supplement, an alternative I discuss briefly in

Chapter 6. True, shifting data from one place to another does not change the overall length of a manuscript—it relocates the problem rather than alleviating it. Editorially, however, it helps lend emphasis and focus by drawing attention to critical elements rather than simply turning readers loose to forage for themselves. It also helps guard against the temptation to let informants prattle on, as they may have done (and been encouraged to do) in the original interviews. Allowing such prattling in the written account can be counterproductive, leaving readers bored rather than beguiled.

At times, informants do need to be given their voice, and there are approaches, such as the anthropological life history, in which that voice may be the only one heard. In general, however, brief quotes are more effective than lengthy ones, especially when multiple speakers are addressing the same topic. The longer your quoted passages (whether from informants or from printed sources), the greater the need to ensure that your reader understands the point *you* are making. Sometimes, by first relegating longer sections of interview material or quoted text to footnotes or supplementary appendixes, you may come to realize that they can be eliminated altogether. Once they are separated from the text, it is easier to judge how vital a contribution they make.

Cutting More Out

When outside readers agree that some section of a manuscript can be deleted, I hasten to follow their recommendation. In spite of general consensus about the need for cutting, my experience is that developmental reviewers will disagree among themselves as to just what should be cut and what should stay. If cutting is both major and mandatory, I appreciate the authoritative voice and experience of an editor for suggestions about how to proceed. I have discovered that invited readers of early drafts are not reluctant to identify possible cuts if I explain that my problem is no longer whether to cut, but where. To reassure them that I am serious about cutting, I have also discovered that if I provide a draft on which I have marked a few deletions of my own, they are more likely to render the help I need than if I present them with a clean draft. Some reviewers are reluctant to make notations on clean copy, so the copy they get has a few changes already marked.

I never ask anyone to review copy that is difficult to read or heavily marked on, nor would I ask anyone to read copy that is unpaginated or unproofed for spelling. I think it is rude to do so and totally unforgivable in a day when turning out clean, corrected, and properly formatted copy is so easy to do.

Whatever the motivation for cutting—the recommendation (or insistence) of others, or an intuitive feeling of your own—you will be better off to do the actual cutting yourself, along with any necessary rewriting, rather than to delegate it. If you do not have access to critic-readers willing to help you identify possible ways to cut, here are some places likely to yield most readily if you are on your own.

First, look for little diatribes where you may have gone off on a tangent. These become easier to identify after you gain some distance from a manuscript. You may suddenly realize that certain questions or issues were dropped rather than developed, or that you took advantage of an opportunity to get on a soapbox about a topic of perennial concern to you but not necessarily of interest to your readers. Colleagues can help spot such detours if you specifically ask, although they may be too polite to mention them if you do not. They are, after all, familiar with you and your ways.

Second, make a critical assessment of all points supported with multiple illustrations, multiple vignettes, or multiple quotations, with a sharp eye for repetition. Save the best and drop the rest. Summarize the general pattern you see, retaining only an illustrative example or two. You may be attempting to preserve and portray important nuances that *you* recognize among closely related examples, but such subtle differences are likely to go unrecognized, and therefore unappreciated, for readers lacking the same firsthand experience. Most of us see and hear our informants as we enter their words onto a manuscript. We forget that our readers cannot do that; to them, the words remain lifeless except for the voice we give them. The repetition of materials that appear to be virtually identical can be tedious.

Don't be hesitant about including an excess of illustrative material in your early drafts; you can winnow the material as you edit. Here, we are talking about how to tighten up a working manuscript, not about what goes into the initial draft. It is easier to synthesize or delete from too many examples than to go back through notes searching for an illustration or example dropped too soon. Your choice of quotes and vignettes also may change as the text develops. Be sure to code your excerpts (preferably right where they appear in your manuscript) so that you can locate original sources quickly. Your coding system also can serve as a reminder and relay important information in encapsulated form (e.g., "Field notes, 11/8/84," or "M-23" [male, 23 years of age]).

Third, carefully examine every beginning: the first sentence and paragraph of each chapter or section, the first section of every chapter, even the entire first chapter itself. In rereading my own drafts, I have discovered that my start-ups often prove little more than warm-ups. They helped me to get the momentum going but do nothing for readers likely to be cooled out by a slow start. You may be able to lop a bit off of every beginning—unless, of course, you heeded my advice to plunge into your account with that key sentence, "The purpose of this study is . . ." Several readers of early drafts asked why I hadn't begun this monograph that way, politely hinting that my Chapter 1, brief as it is, still seemed a slow start.

Let me express one caution about beginning with the phrase "The purpose of this study is . . ." By the fifth word into your text, you will already have used the expression "this study." Surely those myriad references to "this study," "this dissertation," or "this research" (or to "this book" in initiating a review) must be the most frequently repeated phrases in all academic writing. Search out and destroy such phrases when possible. Give your readers credit for being able to remember what they are reading.

Finally, look for whole, intact sections—even entire chapters—that might be dropped or relegated to a separate writing project. I have already proposed (in Chapter 4) that an extended discussion of method is a likely candidate for a separate paper. You may discover that huge chunks (e.g., paragraphs, sections, a whole chapter) can be deleted where smaller pieces cannot. Deleting big chunks may leave glaring gaps that you can point to as major topics intentionally passed over, to be dealt with at another time.

At the suggestion (I like to think of it as a suggestion) of the editors, and in order to stay within space limitations imposed on all monographs originally published in the Qualitative Research series, I deleted two entire chapters from the first edition of this one. At the time, deleting them seemed to me to leave a gigantic hole in the monograph. But no one else ever seemed to notice, and each of the deleted chapters was subsequently developed into a separate article published elsewhere.

By contrast, fiddling with minor cuts may leave you feeling anxious that the account is becoming choppy and disjointed, perhaps even losing its integrity. Mitch Allen recalls advising me that my most recent book (Wolcott 1999) "needed to go on a diet." He recommended that I try to cut three pages from each chapter. At the time, that seemed a reasonable suggestion, something akin to the traditional New Year's resolution about losing a few pounds. As Mitch has since reminded me, "I don't think you ever got there." Was he fully aware that the book had 11 chapters? $11 \times 3 = 33$ pages shorter! Isn't a little dieting better than none at all? Granted, pruning stimulates growth, as our gardening friends tell us. Editorial pruning ought to be invigorating as well, for author and manuscript alike. But I always find it hard to do. And I always keep a record copy of earlier version(s). Unlike the gardener, we do get a second chance should initial cutting prove misguided or too severe.

How to fit qualitative-descriptive research into the prescribed limits of journal-length articles or monograph-length series, or how to compress two years of fieldwork and writing into a 15-minute time slot in a symposium, is vexing indeed. David Fetterman reports a rare case where management objected to the *brevity* of an evaluation report he had drafted, but he notes that the objection was based on the belief that "a physically weightier document would be more useful to them to sell the program in the future" (1989:17). That may be the only occasion on

record when someone wanted a qualitative researcher to write more, rather than less.

Faced repeatedly with the dilemma of having to compress qualitative reporting, both in my own writing and in trying to help students and colleagues with theirs, my resolution, advice, and philosophy is summed up in the idea of "doing less, more thoroughly." A strategy for accomplishing this is to look for parts or instances or cases that can stand for the whole. "Synecdoche," our literary colleagues call it. Reporting a part is all you can possibly do in a journal article or brief symposium paper. It is a reasonable guideline for developing a full-blown study as well.

Do you remember Alfred's dilemma described at the end of Chapter 2? (I'll bet you do. We tend to remember material presented through anecdotes and personal asides.) Had Alfred come seeking my advice, I intended to ask if he had considered taking some manageable "unit of one" for a focus, some portion of the year's activities that would have allowed him to represent what he had fathomed from his extended data collecting without having to recapitulate the entire year. Might he have constructed his study around *one* student in the class rather than all of them; meticulously analyzed *one* day in class rather than every day; dissected *one* social studies unit from inception to posttest rather than trying to review all the units presented during the year; analyzed *one* critical event rather than regard everything that occurred as critical? Thus, to the advice of writing a study "bird by bird," there may be an acceptable alternative: Write only, or mostly, about *one* bird, in depth. Then, discuss where that one example belongs in the broader spectrum. That has always seemed the more attractive alternative to me.

Returning to the zoom lens analogy, one way to keep a descriptive study manageable is to zoom in progressively closer until your descriptive task is manageable, then zoom out again to capture the broader perspective. Like a viewer, a reader also needs context to know how the single case fits into some larger scheme of things. What can we learn from studying only *one* or *one aspect* of anything? My answer may seem facile, but I stake my career as a qualitative researcher on it: all we can!

IN SHORT

- In and of itself, the relatively greater length of qualitative accounts should not be of primary concern. Providing an adequate descriptive basis calls for detail.

- Unnecessary length, on the other hand, is distracting, leaving the reader to wonder if the author has lost the way or is telling stories for the stories' sake rather than to achieve a purpose.

- Attending to sentence structure offers a first step to the kind of tightening that improves writing. Phrases such as "in and of itself" or "on the other hand" in the points immediately above can be eliminated in the interest of economy of style.

- Unless there is some compelling reason for presenting long interview protocols in an informant's own words, or drawing long quotations from the work of others, paraphrase and/or edit to lend emphasis to the material that you do quote.

- If cutting words per page or pages per chapter isn't sufficient to reach a desired (or imposed) page limit, consider deleting entire sections, even entire chapters, leaving some topics to be taken up elsewhere.

Notes

1. You also may have discovered that working from the back to the front of an article or chapter is an efficient way to transfer corrections when you have been editing on hard copy. Text remains exactly in place as it appears on both hard copy and screen, making it easier to locate whatever requires changing.

2. My checklist prompted a recollection of succinct advice that editor C. Deborah Laughton received from her writing teacher, Isabelle Ziegler, long ago:

Nouns are good,
Verbs are better.
Adjectives sometimes,
Adverbs never!

3. See Wolcott 1983b for an example of efforts to describe an ambiguously defined community development project.

4. See the discussion of two contrasting styles of researcher-reflective reporting, the Confessional and the Impressionist, in Van Maanen 1988, Chapters 4 and 5.

5. For years, I attributed this statement to Alfred North Whitehead, who most certainly was my inspiration if, inadvertently, I have coined an aphorism of my own. Whitehead's actual statement was delivered in the form of two educational commandments: "Do not teach too many subjects," and "What you teach, teach thoroughly" (Whitehead 1949 [1929]:14). I seem to have also illustrated Louis Wirth's observation that originality is the product of a faulty memory (noted in Becker 1986:136).

6. For more discussion on the role and importance of visual display, see Tufte 1983, 1990. For more on creating charts, see Wallgren et al. 1996.