

Sharing our experience in social research

# Writing for policy and non-academic audiences

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## Overview:

- Planning
- Forms of policy research outputs
- Assumptions to challenge
- Risk management
- Style
- Quality criteria

# Pre-reporting phase

## **Planning: 1**

- **Effective policy reporting begins at the set-up phase – quality considerations should underpin your decisions:**

### **Aims and objectives**

- **Tendency for scope creep following tender – set aims in collaboration with client – assertiveness required**

### **Timetable**

- **Viability regarding policy expectations and achievable analysis**

## Planning: 2

### Methods

- If cross method – which will take the lead, implications for structure and style

### Ethics

- Size of some policy evaluation requires caveats to confidentiality - implications for reporting style, quotes and use of case studies

### Cost

- What will the budget allow you to research and report effectively
- How many drafts required (including peer review)

### Output

- What is required – format underpins scope and style

## Forms of policy research output

Nature of output	Purpose	Written forms
Comprehensive	Full review of research findings, implications and methods	Substantive report Book
Developmental	Early indications of emergent findings, theories or ideas	Interim report
Selective	Focus on selected areas for specific audiences	Commissioned paper/ case study Book chapter
Summary	Condensed information about key findings and conclusions	1-3-25 (HO, MoJ, others to follow)

## Assumptions you need to challenge

- **Methodological clarity**
  - Communicating strengths and limits to one or both methods
  - How findings can be appropriately reported
  - Use Cabinet Office quality frameworks to support view
- **Assumed knowledge about area**
  - Not a journal audience – can be a transient workforce in the Centre so do not assume methodological or substantive expertise
  - Development of 1-3-25 format is policy explicitly asking for clear and concise presentation
  - Critical importance here is the conceptual narrative – more later

## **Risk management**

- **Process transparency ensures policy collaboration and manages evaluator risk**
- **Analytical plans**
  - **Link research questions to key evaluation aims and objectives – audit and quality trail**
- **Early presentation of findings**
  - **Structure expectations about depth and style**
  - **Useful to gather early sense of interest areas and other key issues to cover**
  - **Reduce re-drafting later in the process**

# Writing the report

## **Integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence**

- **Recognise they are different forms of calibration**
- **Think about integration of evidence at design stage, particularly if different research teams**
- **Decide whether qualitative reporting is leading quantitative or vice versa – i.e. which data is leading the telling of ‘the story’**
- **Advise ‘sewing together’ by one person after data combined**

## Narrative structure

- **Clear conceptual narrative critical – avoid sections beginning at the micro level**
- **Don't just say *what* is important but *why* it is important**
- **Use analytical narrative to structure chapters and sections**
- **Avoid passive structures**

## Textual focus

- **Focus on categories and concepts, not individuals or cases**
- **Focusing on categories will often mean using passive construction**
- **Tense**
  - **Dependent on summative or formative design**

## Quantification

- **For qual reports do not use quantitative or quasi-quantitative language**
  - Not conducive to quality outputs
  - Quant language often indicates implied quantitative question
  - Often indicates lack of depth
- **For quant reports describe and explain presentation of data – assumed knowledge issue**

## Language and repetition

- **Avoid use the phrase ‘in terms of X there was variation’**
- **Avoid empty language**
  - Faux narrative – ‘interestingly’, ‘indeed
  - Truisms – ‘People also discussed reports’
- **Avoid repetition in sections/ chapter**
  - Either need to re-draft or restructure chapter

## Quotes

- **Should make sense without transcript**
- **Should illustrate point immediately before it**
  - If necessary re-write paragraph so it does
- **Edit quote so only relevant part shown**
- **Edit quote for sense and speech fillers**
- **Add missing punctuation**
- **Quotes should vary in length**
  - Have a quote log
  - Avoid over-quoting one case or missing lots of cases

## Recommendations

- **Of critical interest to policy**
- **Chance to demonstrate the point of the analysis**
- **Need to be relevant and explicitly linked to the data**
- **Underpinned by earlier conceptual narrative**
  - **That's why the was issue important to cover**
- **Value – always look for cross-cutting policy issues**

## **‘Quality’ benchmarks of reporting and findings**

- **Ability to view links between data, interpretation and conclusions – i.e. how well the route to any conclusions can be seen**
- **Clarity and coherence of writing**
- **Credibility of the findings**
- **Extent to which knowledge or understanding has been extended**
- **Extent to which study addresses its original aims and purposes**
- **Explanation of drawing wider inference**

## Contact details

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