



Tips & Tools #20: Writing Analytic Memos for Qualitative Research

What Are Analytical Memos?

Analytic memos are write-ups or mini-analyses about what you think you are learning during the course of your evaluation. They are typically written both during and after data collection. They can be a couple sentences or a few pages in length; whatever is needed to flesh out concepts and patterns that may be emerging in the data.

Throughout your evaluation you should step back and write about not only the process of collecting data, but more importantly, what you are seeing in the data (or not seeing). Memos can be summaries of your major findings or they can be comments and reflections on particular aspects of your evaluation. Writing memos also provides an outlet for you to think about any additional data that would be helpful to collect in order to fully “Tell Your Story.”

Why Are Analytical Memos Important?

Writing analytic memos is a critical aspect of effectively analyzing qualitative data (eg. key informant interviews; focus group interviews; observations; document reviews, etc.) and can help immensely in writing your results. Essentially, it provides the basis of your analyses that you will end up including in your final report.

How Do You Write an Analytical Memo?

Think of an analytical memo as something you are writing to yourself, and secondarily to your colleagues. As you go through your data and jot down marginal notes (and code, depending where you may be in the process), every so often you should write analytical memos. How often you do this depends on your data. For instance, if you are conducting 20 key informant interviews of MUH landlords and managers in order to find out ways you may be able to implement local smoke-free policy at individual complexes, after every four or five interviews, it would be incredibly beneficial to read over your notes and transcripts of the interviews and write about some of the main ideas, patterns and even interesting tidbits brought up by the managers/landlords. We at TCEC advocate writing these memos in a stream of consciousness style so you are not concerned about grammar and spelling and your wording. Instead, you want to “purge your thoughts” about what you are seeing and what you think is happening, according to the data. At a later point, you can edit your memos. With each new batch of interviews, you can follow the same routine, or else you can decide to write about different concepts or specific topics from the data. Regardless of how you decide to do

it, if you have written memos throughout the course of your evaluation, you will find it extremely helpful when you need to sit down and write the findings (and your final evaluation report). In some cases, if you are thorough and consistent with writing memos, entire sections of your findings will have already been written.

An Example of an Analytical Memo

We thought it would be good to show you an example of a memo. Below is an example of raw data (in excerpts) from interviews TCEC carried out in order to evaluate our Spring 2011 Regional Trainings on “Designing Effective Surveys.” The memo that was written was based on the raw data. The following are excerpts from the raw data:

“I thought it was really quite useful. I think in the work we do in tobacco that there’s a lot of webinars, and it’s really easy to listen to a webinar without actually listening. You can turn it on and still answer emails or do whatever you would normally do. But going in person gives you the time and lets you step out of your day to concentrate on that. And I think the exercises we did were the most productive part of the training.” (Onsite: Interview #7)

“Oh yeah, I would get more out of the face to face. I am a hands-on, visual person, so for anything in person will always help me gain more out of it. But with the travel constraints and so forth, it was nice just to be able to gain the information through the webcast.” (Remote: Interview #1)

“Sometimes webinars can be great, and at the same time they’re not great, because when you’re doing a webinar at your desk, you’re doing other work, and you’re not really listening. So you don’t really grasp things fully in the webinar. That’s what I liked about the training, we listened, we were focused, we were there, and we did exercises, so I liked the format a lot.” (Onsite: Interview #15)

“It fulfilled my needs fine because of time and cost, but if I had wanted more in depth and had been able to go, I would have chosen the in person [format]. I feel that webinars are very isolating. I like being able to have the interactions. But if you have to choose between time and money and all those things, webinars can fill the gap.” (Remote: Interview #6)

Here is an example of an analytic memo based on the raw data from above:

The notion that the onsite training was “interactive” and “face-to-face” and therefore seemed enjoyable and more helpful was often stated in contrast of trainings that are conducted via webinar. Participants tended to feel strongly that the onsite training—in contrast to a remote, webinar training—provided them benefits that they could not have obtained from a webinar alone. This idea was described in various fashions from both onsite and webinar participants, but the theme remained the same. Again, the seeming benefits of “interactivity” and learning concepts by “doing exercises” was most easily seen when participants contrasted it with what they considered the drawbacks of a remote webinar training. The drawbacks of a webinar, besides the lack of hands on exercises and face-to-face interactions, included the fact that following along with a

webinar could be difficult due to the many distractions available to participants. Respondents noted how email and doing other work during a webinar made it “easy to listen to a webinar without actually listening.”

Those who participated in the remote (webinar) training were generally appreciative that the training was offered via webinar. Many of the remote participants mentioned that the logistics of attending an onsite training—including travel and time constraints, and so on—made it difficult to attend an onsite training. The remote trainings were therefore seen as convenient. –Memo from Webinar Interview Study

As you can see from the sample memo above, this particular analysis provided a summary of the patterns found in the raw data. At a later point, any one of the patterns discussed may be fruitful for further analysis and a more specific memo, depending on what emerges in your data and also what is needed in your findings and final report. For more information on writing analytical memos and other insights into evaluations and data analyses, please visit the “Tips and Tools” section of TCEC’s website.

References:

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