# 13

# WRITING THE REPORT

## Getting started

When all the hard work of gathering and analysing evidence is complete, you will need to write the final report. Bodgan and Biklen, writing about the problems of getting started, offer the following advice:

> Novice writers are big procrastinators. They find countless reasons not to get started. Even when they finally get themselves seated at their desks, they always seem to find diversions: make the coffee, sharpen the pencil, go to the bathroom, thumb through more literature, sometimes even get up and return to the field. Remember that you are never 'ready' to write; writing is something you must make a conscious decision to do and then discipline yourself to follow through.
>
> (Bogdan and Biklen 1982: 172)

All this is easier said than done, and it is not only novice writers who are procrastinators, but remember that a study is not finished until it is written up and, in your original planning, time has to be allowed for writing – and rewriting. That does not mean that you put off thoughts of writing until all the data have been collected.

If you have followed some of the earlier advice, you will already have produced an account of what you have read about the topic, so you will not have to waste time going back to books and articles read some time ago. You will have your bibliographical cards and/or computer records in good order, with notes and useful quotations to guide your writing, and you will not have started your project unless your objectives were clear, though you may have amended these as your investigation developed.

Report and thesis writing is not, or should not be, a frantic activity carried out at the end of the project. It is a process of varied stages all of which need to be recorded at the time they are completed. Your first drafts will need to be revised and in some cases completely rewritten, but the foundations for the report should have been established at the planning stage.

Writing requires discipline, and even the most experienced of researchers need to impose some sort of self-control to ensure that the task is completed in time. We all have different ways of working and what suits one person may not suit another. If you have adopted the principle of 'thinking on paper' (Wolcott 1990: 31), you will already have some drafts and even if they are rough, it's always better to face badly-written and incomplete drafts than a blank page.

You will, of course, have ensured that all references are complete and checked before you reach the final stages of your research but if, in spite of all your efforts, you do happen to come across an incomplete reference, make a note of it, but if you're in the middle of a good writing session, *don't stop*. Go back to it later.

There are no hard-and-fast rules about when and how to write. I accept that it would be sensible to write according to a strict schedule (always between 8–10 pm on weekdays; always between 6–8 am every day). I try to do that, but I just don't seem able to keep to such a regular pattern. Things and sometimes people get in my way. Ideally, I have to be quiet and alone to write, with all my source material around me. Other people say they can't write in silence. They need the accompaniment of the radio or a CD.

We're told it's a good idea to aim at so many words in every writing session and I did once know someone who could produce 1000 words of good quality writing most days, but only one. I've never managed to achieve that though I do make plans to

complete particular sections or even paragraphs at one sitting. I work to an agenda and if I can achieve more than one item, I feel full of virtue and have even been known to declare a dividend and to give myself time off for such good behaviour. We all have to have our little treats in life.

If I can, I set aside writing days (whole days sometimes, which everyone I know says is thoroughly bad practice), when I know I can be more or less alone and free from distractions, but I only write for two hours at a time. I've learnt that if I press on for hour after hour, I begin to write rubbish. I don't know it's rubbish at the time but when I read it after it has 'gone cold' the next day or next week, then I most certainly do. After two hours or so, assuming I've reached a stage from which it will be easy to move on, I can have a cup of tea, wander around, go to the Post Office. Anything to give myself a break before I move on to the next stage.

I am regularly told by colleagues that I have bad writing habits and I suppose I do. However, I am quite disciplined in a number of ways. My index and reference systems are generally quite good, so I can find what I need most of the time. Bitter experience has taught me that keeping unindexed notes, transcriptions, references and rough drafts in what Miles and Huberman (1994: 56) describe as an 'alpine collection of information' is a thoroughly bad idea. Experience has also taught me to write on one side of the paper only, and to try to keep to one paragraph to a page. I know that my early drafts won't be good enough, so I need to be able to move paragraphs around. I can, and do, cut and paste on the computer of course, but I only move to a proper draft on the computer after early drafts are beginning to take shape. You may work differently and that's fine, *as long as you have some system and plan of your own which enables you to write to an agenda*. As Barzun and Graff (1977: 325) remind us, 'The writer's problem is the inverse of the reformed drunkard's. The latter must never touch a drop; the former must always do his stint.' The way in which we always do our stint is up to us, but we have less discretion in the way our report should be structured.

## Structuring the report

Institutions generally provide guidelines about the way the final report should be provided and it goes without saying that these guidelines should be followed to the letter. If for any reason guidelines are not provided, something on the following lines will generally be acceptable.

### 1 Title page

Include the title of your study, your name and the date. The title should accurately reflect the nature of your study and should be brief and to the point. A subtitle may be provided if it clarifies the purpose of the study.

### 2 Acknowledgements

You may wish to acknowledge the help given to you in the preparation of your report. If so, acknowledgements and thanks generally come after the title page.

### 3 Contents

### 4 The abstract

In most cases, an abstract will be required, though practices vary, so consult the 'house' rules. It is quite difficult to say in a few words what your investigation set out to do, the methods employed and what conclusions were reached. The following example is one way in which the task might be approached.

> This project attempts to identify effective teaching and learning strategies and any barriers to learning as perceived by mature students at Writingwell University. Data were gathered from questionnaires, interviews and observation of and participation in lectures, seminars and tutorials. The report concludes that there is scope for consideration of more varied approaches to the delivery of the curriculum and for consultations with mature students about ways in which changes might be introduced.

If you are allowed more space, you will be able to develop this abstract to provide the reader with more information, but for short reports, something on the above lines will generally suffice.

Get into the habit of looking at abstracts which are usually placed at the beginning of journal articles. Ask yourself whether they give a good idea of what the article is about, how data were collected, and what conclusions were reached.

## 5 Aims and purpose of the study

This should be a brief explanation of the purpose of the research. Explain the research problem in a few sentences. State aims/objectives/hypotheses. Provide any background to the study which is necessary to place the study in its context.

Draw attention to any **limitations of the study** at this stage. An individual researcher with only 100 hours or so to complete a project can neither hope to become involved in complex sampling techniques nor to interview hundreds of people. You cannot do everything in a small study, and your supervisor will know that, but in this section you should make it clear that you know what the limitations of the study are. Be honest.

## 6 Review of the literature

Not all reports will require a review of previous research, though for Master's and doctoral studies a review will normally be expected. In a short project, and subject to your supervisor's

agreement, you may have decided to use your reading mainly to support or to reject arguments throughout the report, but the value of a review to the reader is that it explains the context and background of the study. Remember Haywood and Wragg's warning that critical reviews can too often turn out to be uncritical reviews – 'the furniture sale catalogue, in which everything merits a one-paragraph entry no matter how skilfully it has been conducted' (Haywood and Wragg 1982: 2). A selection has to be made, and only books and articles which relate directly to the topic should be included.

The review, if required, can be written first and, if you have managed to discipline yourself sufficiently well to write up sections and sub-sections as you have completed them, much of the work of this section will be ready for revision before you begin to collect data. You may find that you need to adapt your original version, but you should not need to start from the beginning by reading through notes to decide what should be included and what left out.

In Chapter 6, I indicated that Clara Nai adopted this approach. She identified headings under which she could group her findings and in so doing, produced a framework which enabled her to highlight key issues and, at a later stage in her dissertation, to place her own research findings into the wider context.

## 7 Methods of data collection

An alternative heading might be 'Some considerations of method' – or any other title which in your view describes the content of the section well. This section explains how the problem was investigated and why particular methods and techniques were employed. Accounts of the procedure, size of sample, method of selection, choice of variables and controls, and tests of measurement and statistical analysis, if any, should be provided. Consult your supervisor about how much detail is required. Nisbet and Entwistle (1970: 169) point out that it is unnecessary to describe in detail any tests or procedures which are well known and frequently used, but if you have devised any of your own systems of measurement, it's likely that full information will be needed.

All important terms should be defined precisely and any deficiencies in the methods mentioned. It's important to bear in mind that in certain kinds of investigation, the research needs to be repeatable, and a fellow researcher should be able to obtain enough information from this section to make this possible.

## 8 Statement of results

This is the heart of the report and will consist of text and, if necessary, tables or figures, depending on the nature of the project. The way results are presented is important. Tables, charts, graphs and other figures should illustrate and illuminate the text. If they do not, then there is no point in taking up space. The text, which should be written after the results are prepared, should not duplicate information in the tables and figures but should highlight significant aspects of the findings so that all relevant facts are presented in a way which draws attention to what is most important. It is quite an art to achieve this balance, and you may find you need several drafts before you are satisfied with the result.

All tables and figures should be numbered, given a title and carefully checked before you submit your report. Tables are generally numerical presentations, in lists or columns, though there can be tables of names or other items. Figures are other types of presentation of data. It's customary to place the number and name of tables above the table, and figures below. It is quite a good idea to look at the way other students have presented them – and take care to follow any institutional guidelines.

## 9 Analysis and discussion

It is often best to start this section with a restatement of the problem before discussing how the results affect existing knowledge of the subject. If your research aimed to test certain hypotheses, then this section should demonstrate whether they were or were not supported by the evidence. Any deficiencies in the research design should be mentioned, with suggestions about

different approaches which might have been more appropriate. Implications for improvement of practice, if any, should also be drawn out.

Most researchers find it best to write sections 6, 7 and 8 in sequence to ensure continuity and logical progression. It is quite feasible to write some sections as discrete units at different times, but these three sections need to be considered as a whole. If you have to take a break from writing, make sure you reread everything that has gone before to ensure a smooth continuation and to avoid repetition.

## 10 Summary and conclusions

The main conclusions of the report that have been discussed in section 8 should be summarized here briefly and simply. Only conclusions that can be justifiably drawn from the findings should be made. That sounds (and is) obvious, but there is often a great temptation to drop in an opinion for which no evidence is provided in the report. Take care or you may spoil a good report by including a throwaway remark.

Before you write this section, read through the whole report and make a note of key points. Readers who want a quick idea of what your research is about will look at the abstract, possibly the introduction and almost certainly at the summary and conclusions. This final section should be sufficiently succinct and clearly expressed to enable readers to understand quite clearly what research has been done and the conclusions that have been drawn *from the evidence*.

## 11 List of references

It is worthwhile at this stage in your writing to remind you about Blaxter, Hughes and Tight's guidance on the use and abuse of references. They write that references should not be included to 'impress your readers with the scope of your reading', nor to 'replace the need for you to express your own thoughts' but they should be used to:

- justify and support your arguments
- allow you to make comparisons with other research, . . .
- demonstrate your familiarity with your field of work.

(Blaxter, Hughes and Tight 2001: 127)

You are not in the business of producing the longest list of references ever known and it would be a pity to spoil a good report with irrelevant references, so check carefully that each one is there for a purpose.

Opinions vary as to whether a full bibliography or a list of references, or both, should be included. My view is that only items which have been cited in the report should be included. However, some institutions also wish to have a bibliography which includes all sources consulted during the preparation of the investigation. You will need to consult your supervisor about institutional practice.

If you adopt the Harvard method of referencing, which I have recommended in this book, then references will appear in alphabetical order, which simplifies the process and avoids overlap. The amount of time it takes you to produce a bibliography, list of references, or both, will depend on how meticulous you were when you first recorded your sources. This is the time when all your hard work and systematic recording will really pay off.

## 12 Appendices

Copies of any data-collecting instruments (questionnaires, interview schedules, etc.) that have been used should be included in an appendix, unless you have been instructed otherwise. Your tutor will not wish to receive all the completed questionnaires and would no doubt be dismayed if weighty parcels arrived on the doorstep, but one copy of any data-collecting instrument that has been used is generally required.

## 13 Length

Guidelines about length will be provided by your supervisor and many institutions will have rules about this. If you have not been

told what length is expected, ask. If a maximum number of words is stipulated, try not to exceed that number. You may be penalized for exceeding the limit.

## 14 Quotations

All quotations must, of course, be acknowledged. Remember that your tutor has probably read the same books, so is likely to recognize the source. As I have said in Chapter 4, if you are quoting only a few words or one sentence, it will be sufficient to indicate this by using inverted commas in the main text, with the source in brackets. For example, as Laws (2003: 424) says, 'Your style should be determined by your own natural way of expressing yourself and the needs of your audience . . .'. If the quotation is longer, indent it and use single spacing unless institutional rules say otherwise:

> Your style should be determined by your own natural way of expressing yourself and the needs of your audience. However, bear in mind that while some audiences might be impressed by a complex way of writing, the main purpose of the exercise is to convey information. Clear and simple expression will help people to make sense of the material you present, and therefore act upon it.
>
> (Laws 2003: 424)

## 15 Presentation

These days, reports are generally typed or word-processed in double line spacing. Pages should be numbered. Type or write on one side of the page only, leaving a left-hand margin of one and a half inches. Incidentally, if you are hopeless at typing and can afford to pay for your copy to be produced by someone more skilled than you, make sure your writing is legible. It is not the typist's job to correct spelling, punctuation, headings, grammar or wording. Do not expect your abbreviations to be interpreted, nor your arithmetic to be checked. It is your job to hand in good, clear

copy with very precise instructions about how things are to be done. If you make changes after the final copy is produced, you may have to pay more than you had bargained for, so take care.

## The need for revision

I've never known anyone who has been able to produce a perfect first draft so don't delude yourself that you will be the exception. You won't be. You may find you need two, three or even more drafts before you are satisfied with the final result, so time must be set aside for this writing and refining process.

One problem about spending so much time on drafts is that parts of them may seem right simply because you have read them so often. Another is that you may be so familiar with the subject that you assume something is understandable to the reader when it is not. Time will give you a better perspective on your writing, so you should put the script aside, for several days if you can, so that you can return to it with a more critical eye. This will help you to identify repetitive passages, errors of expression and lack of clarity.

Work through your first draft section by section to ensure its sense, accuracy, logical sequencing and soundness of expression. If you wrote or typed only one paragraph on one side of each sheet, as suggested, this correcting and reordering stage will be relatively straightforward and the cut and paste facility on computers has greatly eased the burden of draft writers. Check spelling. Computer spell checks help, though remember that most computers will use American spelling, so always keep a dictionary to hand, to make sure you are right. Check quotations, punctuation, references, repetition, consistency of tenses and the overuse of certain terms. *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* may help you to find alternative forms of expression.

Remind yourself as you read that whatever structure has been selected, your readers will wish to be quite clear why you carried out the investigation, how you conducted it, what methods you used to gather your evidence and what you found out. It is not enough to describe: you will be expected to analyse, to evaluate and, if the evidence merits it, to make recommendations.

If research findings are to be put into practice, they have to be presented in a way in which practitioners and policy-makers can understand them. Please bear this in mind when you present your projects. There is no special academic language that should be used in academic papers. Good, clear English remains good, clear English, whatever the context. Technical language may well save time when you are talking to colleagues with a similar background to your own, but it rarely translates well on to paper, and your readers (and your examiner) may become irritated by too much jargon or obscure language.

The need for revision and rewriting was emphasized in a recent radio interview, when a world-famous economist who had many scholarly books to his credit, was complimented by the interviewer on his style of writing. 'It must be a great advantage', said the interviewer, 'to be able to write so freely and so easily. How do you do it?' The economist revealed his secret as follows:

> First, I produce a draft and then I leave it alone. I go back to it after a few days and decide it has been written by an ignoramus so I throw it away. Then I produce a second draft and leave it alone for a few days. I read it and decide there are the germs of a few good ideas there but it is badly written, so I put it to one side. After a few days, I write a third draft. When I read it again, I discover the ideas are developing, that there is some coherence to my arguments and that the grammar is not too bad. I correct this draft, change paragraphs around, insert new thoughts, remove overlapping passages and begin to feel progress is being made. After a few days, I read through this fourth draft, make final corrections and hand over the fifth draft to the typist. At this stage, I find I have usually achieved the degree of spontaneity for which I have been striving.

You may not need five drafts. Three may be enough if you write well, but rest assured that no one gets away with one or two – and most of us take four or five.

When you have completed the writing to the best of your ability, try to enlist the help of someone who will read the manuscript to look for any remaining errors. Failing that, you could

read your report out loud, though make sure you are alone or your family may feel the strain has been too much for you! Reading aloud is particularly useful for detecting the need for better linking passages.

## Any possibility of plagiarism?



In Chapter 4, I discussed the issue of plagiarism but this is sufficiently important to repeat here. You are plagiarizing if you copy someone else's words and claim them as your own and you cannot use other people's data or their ideas unless you provide adequate attribution. I am sure some students fall into the plagiarism trap because they genuinely did not know that 'it is not acceptable to put together unacknowledged passages from the same or from different sources, linking these together with a few words or sentences of your own and changing a few words from the original text' (University of Manchester 1997: 2). I'm confident your institution will have guidelines on plagiarism, so make sure you see them. Excuses that 'nobody ever told me I couldn't take assignments or answers to exam questions off the Internet without acknowledgement' or 'everybody does it, so why not me?' are not acceptable and if it is discovered that you have committed the sin of plagiarism, you could be suspended or even expelled from your programme. So, take great care to ensure that you have been meticulous in recording sources, making it clear in your notes which are direct quotations, your paraphrasing or merely your own thoughts.

There has been sufficient publicity recently to ensure that all researchers know, or should know what plagiarism means and what the penalties for infringements are. There have been some unfortunate, well-publicized cases recently which have brought discredit to the individuals and the institutions concerned, and this issue is not going to go away. Make sure you are absolutely clear about what is permissible and what is not.

## Evaluating your own research

There are no universally accepted yardsticks for judging research reports but if you were asked to review a piece of research done by someone else, you would need to decide on the criteria by which you would judge it. Look at a journal article, or a novel, assuming you have had time to read a novel recently, and ask yourself, 'Is this a good report/novel?' If you consider it is good – or bad, try to decide how you came to this conclusion. Then, read your own draft. Do you think it is good? Are some parts better than others? Why? It's not easy to make such judgements about your own work, but there are some questions which should always be asked and better that you should identify areas of weakness, if any, while there is time to correct them rather than leaving it to the examiner. So, before you hand over what you hope will be your final draft, ask yourself:

1 Is the meaning clear? Are there any obscure passages?
2 Is the report well written? Check tenses, grammar, spelling, overlapping passages, punctuation, jargon.
3 Is the referencing well done? Are there any omissions?
4 Does the abstract give the reader a clear idea of what is in the report?
5 Does the title indicate the nature of the study?
6 Are the objectives of the study stated clearly?
7 Are the objectives of the study fulfilled?
8 If hypotheses were postulated, are they proved or not proved?
9 Has a sufficient amount of literature relating to the topic been studied?
10 Does the literature review, if any, provide an indication of the state of knowledge in the subject? Is your topic placed in the context of the area of study as a whole?
11 Are all terms clearly defined?
12 Are the selected methods of data collection accurately described? Are they suitable for the task? Why were they chosen?
13 Are any limitations of the study clearly presented?
14 Have any statistical techniques been used? If so, are they appropriate for the task?

15 Are the data analysed and interpreted or merely described?
16 Are the results clearly presented? Are tables, diagrams and figures well drawn?
17 Are conclusions based on evidence? Have any claims been made that cannot be substantiated?
18 Is there any evidence of bias? Any emotive terms or intemperate language?
19 Are the data likely to be reliable? Could another researcher repeat the methods used and have a reasonable chance of getting similar results?
20 Are recommendations, if any, feasible?
21 Are there any unnecessary items in the appendix?
22 Would you give the report a passing grade if you were the examiner? If not, perhaps an overhaul is necessary.

When you have provided yourself with honest replies to the above questions, try to persuade a friend to read your draft, to mark typographical or grammatical errors and to question awkward wording. You will have read the script many times but another pair of eyes will often spot errors you never noticed.

Once you have satisfied yourself that you have been able to answer all the above questions to your satisfaction, and have made any corrections identified by your reader, you will be ready to produce the final draft. Check the final, typed copy because even expert typists can make mistakes.

Finally, congratulate yourself on an excellent job completed on time. Hand in your report and give yourself an evening off!

### Writing the report checklist

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| 1 Set deadlines. | Allocate provisional dates for sections, sub-sections and the whole report. You may need to make adjustments, but the handover date is fixed, so try to work round it. Keep an eye on your schedule. |
| 2 Write regularly if you can. | |

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| 3 | Create a rhythm of work, if at all possible. | Don't stop to check references, but tag or star any omissions or queries which must be checked later. |
| 4 | Write up a draft section as soon as it is ready. | Try to produce a draft of the literature review, no matter how rough, as soon as the bulk of the reading is completed. |
| 5 | Stop at a point from which it is easy to resume writing. | |
| 6 | Leave space for revisions. | Use one side of the paper only. Try to keep to one paragraph per page on your early drafts. |
| 7 | Publicize your plans. | You may need a little help from your friends to meet deadlines. |
| 8 | Check that all essential sections have been covered. | Abstract, outline of the research, review of previous work, statement of the scope and aims of the investigation, description of procedures, statement of results, discussion, summary and conclusions and references. |
| 9 | Check length is according to institutional requirements. | You don't want to be failed on a technicality. |
| 10 | Don't forget the title page. | |
| 11 | Any acknowledgements and thanks? | |
| 12 | Include headings where possible. | Anything to make it easier for readers to follow the structure will help. And it helps you to ensure you are following a logical pattern. |
| 13 | Number tables and figures and provide titles. | Put numbers and titles above tables, but below figures. |
| 14 | Make sure all quotations, paraphrases, good ideas of authors, etc. are acknowledged. | Check that quotations are presented in a consistent format and omissions indicated by . . . |

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|---|---|---|
| 15 | Provide a list of references. | Unless instructed otherwise, include only items to which reference is made in the report. Check that a consistent system is used and that there are no incomplete references. |
| 16 | Appendices should only include items that are required for reference purposes. Do not clutter the report with irrelevant items. | Unless instructed otherwise, one copy of each data-collecting instrument should be included. |
| 17 | Remember to leave sufficient time for revision and rewriting. | Check that you have written in plain English. Check that your writing is legible. |
| 18 | Try to get someone to read the report. | Fresh eyes will often see errors you have overlooked. |
| 19 | Read the report aloud. | This will often identify any dubious punctuation and poor linkages. |
| 20 | Check through the 22 questions above for a last time. Are you sure you have dealt with each one honestly? | Make one final check of the typed final draft. Even expert typists can make mistakes. |

## Further reading

Creme, P. and Lea, M.R. (2003) *Writing at University: A Guide for Students*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press. This second edition has coverage of report and thesis writing, electronic writing, learning journals and the Internet. Useful.

Denscombe, M. (2003) *The Good Research Guide*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Chapter 15, 'Writing up the research', goes through the procedures involved, including what should be included, style and presentation. A helpful checklist is provided.

Hyatt, D. (2004) 'Writing research', in C. Opie (ed.) *Doing Educational Research: A Guide for First-time Researchers*. London: Sage. In this chapter, Hyatt discusses what is required for student academic writing, academic writing conventions, structuring a research-based assignment and 'Some advice I've been given (or wish I'd been given!)'. A useful chapter.

Laws, S. (2003) *Research for Development: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage. Chapter 21, 'How to write an effective research report', also includes guidance about what must be included in a research report (and what must be left out), and warnings about common pitfalls. Checklists provided.

Maimon, E. and Peritz, J. (2004) *A Writer's Resource: A Handbook for Writing and Research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. This is an interesting book which addresses many of the problems facing researchers, particularly as they write assignments, research papers, theses – and reviewing and editing what has been written. The only slight problem is that it is written for an American student audience. Good writing is good writing wherever you are, but particularly when it comes to referencing and documentation style, there are certain marked differences between American and UK requirements. Even so, there is enough in this book to make it well worth keeping on hand.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Chapter 12, 'Producing reports', provides brief but good advice about structuring a report, under the headings of 'Voices, genres, and stances' (How do we speak to the reader?), 'Style', 'Formats' and 'Structures'.

Murray, R. (2002) *How to Write a Thesis*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. This book is written mainly with Master's and doctoral students in mind, though the advice given can equally be applied to writing up any research. Rowena Murray takes us through the various stages of planning, structure, the writing process, dealing with deadlines and revising. The sections on 'Starting to write' and 'Seeking structure' are particularly useful.

Wolcott, H.F. (2001) *Writing up Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications. In Chapter 2, I said that everything Wolcott has written is worth reading and this book in particular is excellent. I still go back to it, particularly if I am stuck and just can't get going. If you can get hold of a copy, read it all! His chapter headings are 'Getting going' ('Writers who indulge themselves by waiting until their thoughts are "clear" run the risk of never starting at all' (p. 22)), 'Keeping going', 'Tightening up' and 'Finishing up'. He advises us to 'think on paper' and that is some of the best advice any researcher can be given. As I also said in Chapter 2, he can be funny – and that helps.

Woods, P. (1999) *Successful Writing for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Routledge.



# POSTSCRIPT

There may be occasions when, in spite of careful planning and preparation, a project does not go according to plan. For example, you may find that people who said they were willing to provide information by a certain date fail to do so, or that results are not forthcoming. If things do wrong, consult your tutor to discuss the best course of action. You may have learnt a great deal about conducting an investigation and the topic you were researching, even though the outcome may not be what you had hoped. If you are not able to produce a report on the lines you planned, you may be able to submit a report of what you have been able to do, together with an account of what went wrong and why and, if appropriate, how you would have planned and carried out the investigation if you were starting again. The important thing is to ask for help. Intelligent people who are first-time researchers sometimes feel they ought to be able to sort themselves out, and by not making use of supervisors, computer centre staff and librarians, may waste a great deal of time. I said in the Introduction to this book that we all learn how to do research by actually doing it. This is quite true, but anyone carrying out an investigation for the first time needs some assistance. Make sure you take advantage of any that is available.

Just one final word. People who agree to be interviewed or to complete questionnaires, diary forms or logs, groups who agree

to your observing meetings and keepers of archives who allow you to consult documents, deserve consideration and thanks. Daphne Johnson sums up the position well:

> If files are left in disarray, papers borrowed and not returned, or respondents subjected to too lengthy or frequent interviews at inconvenient times, the researcher's welcome will be worn out. All social researchers are to some extent mendicants, since they are seeking a free gift of time or information from those who are the subject of study. But researchers who bear this fact in mind, and who, without becoming the captive of their respondents, can contrive to make the research experience a helpful and profitable one, will almost certainly be gratified by the generosity with which people will give their time and knowledge.
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> (Johnson 1984: 11)