

Tips & Tools #19: Managing Qualitative Data



A large part of the process of moving from a mass of words to a final report is about organizing and keeping track of the text. The systematic approach detailed in Tips and Tools #17 (Analyzing Qualitative Data) is really about organizing and reducing your data into informative themes. In essence, organizing your data will allow you to cut and sort as needed. Below are some data management tips we culled together that offers some ideas for organizing and managing your qualitative data:

- Check your data (in the beginning) to make sure everything is together and accurate. You will also need to decide beforehand if the data are of sufficient quality for a major analysis (or the analysis that you plan on undertaking).
- Add an identification code to each respondent or interview; create a system of ordering before you begin.
- Prepare data for analysis. You may need to transcribe interviews. This may depend on your purpose and resources. Sometimes, you may make a summary of what people say and analyze that.
- Make a copy of all your data. This gives you one copy to work from and another for safekeeping. With small amounts of data, you may work directly from original hard copy. Colored tabs are helpful for the coding process if you decide to do this.
- As you work with the data, you will need to keep track of the source of the information or the context of the quotes and remarks. So, make sure you have a way to identify the source of all the data, such as by individual, site and date.
- Once the coding is completed, you want to begin sorting data and you can create files or word documents of raw data and analytic memos based on the themes and categories.
- Decide whether you will enter all responses question by question, or whether you want to keep all text concerning one case, individual, group or site together. Create and save a file based on the parameters that you decide on.
- For data transcripts (as well as summary write ups and notes), it is helpful to leave wide margins so you have space to jot down labels, codes, and notes.
- As you read through the text, look for key ideas and mark emerging themes. Use abbreviations or symbols (codes) to label key themes, ideas, concepts, etc.
- Organize or combine related themes into major categories. Label these categories and create file (or Word document) for each major category.
- When cutting and sorting, keep track of the source of your data. Be sure to keep identifiers attached to all sections of data.
- In the cutting and sorting process, keep enough text together so you can make sense of the words in their context. As you cut and move data, text can easily become fragmented and lose its contextual meaning. Be sure to include enough surrounding text for context, so the text does not lose its original meaning.

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- Write down your data analysis choices (in essence, providing a “methods” section). If others understand how you came to your conclusions, your results will be more credible.

References:

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