

Note to Self: Writing Analytic Memos

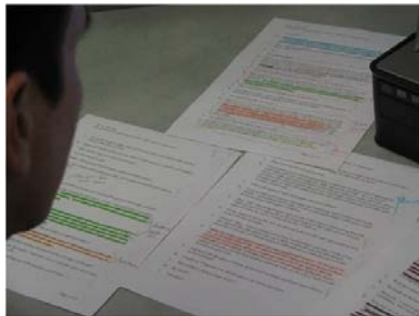
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Writing analytic memos is a critical aspect of effectively analyzing qualitative data (e.g., from key informant interviews, focus group interviews, observations, document reviews, etc.). This process can help immensely when writing your results. Essentially, memos can serve as the basis of the analysis that you will end up including in your final report. Sounds good, but what exactly are they and how do you go about writing them?

Think of analytic memos as notes to yourself (and your colleagues)—reminders of sorts. They should capture what you think you are learning during the course of your evaluation. This could include reflections on the data collection process as well as what you are seeing (or not seeing) in the data during analysis. Memos also provide an outlet for you to think about any additional data that would be helpful to collect in order to fully tell your story.

So, what should go in a memo? As you go through your data and jot down notes (and code, depending where you may be in the process), every so often you should write a memo. How often you do this depends on your data. For instance, if you are



conducting 20 key informant interviews of apartment owners and managers in order to get smoke-free policies

adopted at individual complexes, after every four or five interviews 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 or owners.



Don't be concerned about grammar, wording or spelling at this point; just write in a stream of consciousness style. Capture what you are seeing, what strikes you as important 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 you can decide to write about different 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 up and interpret the findings (and your final evaluation report). In some cases, if you are thorough and consistent with writing memos, you'll find that entire sections of your findings have already been written.

To give you a better idea of what the process actually looks like, here is some raw data (in excerpts) from interviews TCEC carried out in order to evaluate our Spring 2011 Regional Trainings on “Designing Effective Surveys.”

“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” (Onsite Interview #7).

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 1.14.12

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. We’ve got a series of new tipsheets on qualitative analysis that should be posted soon.

Photos by: TCEC staff and Microsoft