

Sage Research Methods: Data and Research Literacy

How to Present Answers to Your Research Questions: The Fourth Stage of the Social Research Toolbox, QGAP

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Learning Outcomes

Having read this guide, readers should be able to . . .

- recognize the importance of presenting research findings once data and evidence have been gathered and analyzed;
- identify appropriate strategies for communicating qualitative and quantitative data; and
- understand what information research audiences require to appraise the credibility of research claims.

Introduction

This guide forms part of the social research toolbox, or QGAP, series, which offers a simple way of conceptualizing the research process. You can learn about QGAP by watching a short animation titled ‘What is the Social Research Toolbox?’ (which is included in this collection), and instructors can download some teaching PowerPoints that support the series here:



[Wheeler.FirstDraft.QGAP4_ProvideAnswers.pptx](#)

Within the toolbox, there are four stages: (1) questions, (2) gathering data and

evidence, (3) analyzing the data and evidence, and (4) presenting your answers to your research questions. The four stages occur in all social research projects (whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method), and though they have been presented in a linear way for teaching purposes, the reality is that each stage is shaped by the others, and it is usual to move between stages at different points of the research journey, depending on the type of research you are doing.

In this guide, the focus is on the “presenting” stage of the social research toolbox. Once you have gathered (G) and analyzed (A) your data/evidence to address your research question (Q), it is time to present the findings (P). This can feel like a daunting stage of the process, but effectively communicating your answers to your research question(s) is essential if others are to learn about your research and build on it in future studies. How you present these findings will depend on the context you are working within—for example, a student dissertation will be quite different from an academic journal article, as will policy research reports and conference presentations. We consider some of the conventions around presenting research and how best to display qualitative and quantitative data to effectively communicate your findings. For all types of research output, it will be important to explain the steps and processes that led to the conclusions presented. While you may have definitive answers to your original research question, it may also be the case that new questions emerge from your research. In this way, the presenting stage relies on all the previous stages in the toolbox and may also be the catalyst to start the process again.

Why You Should Present Your Research Findings

It is only by writing up or presenting your research findings that anyone will know about your research. You may have conducted the most innovative or interesting study, but if you are unable to tell your audience about its significance, then the research will not be read, it will not add to an evidence base, and it will not be built on by others. As researchers, we do have a duty to communicate research findings, especially if someone has funded us to undertake the research or has given up their time to participate in a research study. It is arguably one of the most important stages of the research process, but it is often the stage we struggle with most. Presenting research can help us—in terms of achieving a qualification or prestige—and it can also help those whose lives our research has documented by offering evidence-backed recommendations for policy and practice change.

By the time you reach the stage of presenting your findings, you should have engaged with all the previous stages of the social research toolbox. Your research question (Q) will have driven the collection (G) and analysis (A) of various forms of data and evidence, and now is the time write up or present what you have found and why it is important. I find that students are often unsure about the presentation stage and how best to condense the many hours of work that have led to this point. Part of the problem is that we often think of writing up research as the final stage, which places a lot of pressure on this point and ignores the role that writing should have played throughout the research journey. Writing is thinking, and it is not a good idea to leave all your thinking to the last stage of the process! I have advocated throughout this guide series about the importance of writing down key decisions and findings along the way in your personal research journal or diary (more on this later). Notes to yourself in your research journal and discussions

with supervisors and colleagues about your work may be different than formally writing for an audience. But if you have documented and verbalized your process along the way, you will be in a strong position to start developing outputs. It is completely normal for your writing to travel through multiple drafts before it is ready for submission.

The first thing to think about is why you want to communicate your findings and who the audience is. For research conducted at a university for a student dissertation, presenting findings will be partly driven by a need to complete your degree. The audience for your dissertation will be academics who are familiar with research and its conventions. A public talk with a nonspecialist audience will be quite different, and care will need to be taken to avoid too much jargon and to communicate findings straightforwardly. This is different again to research that has been commissioned by an organization, which wants research findings to be presented in a way that might inform future practice and has less interest in the theoretical framing of your findings. I recently led an evaluation of a Holiday Hunger program (free meals for low-income children in the school holidays), and the funder wanted very specific insights into program improvement rather than a theoretical account of social inequality and social capital. Though the latter informed my approach to data gathering, the submitted report was focused on recommendations for service delivery improvement. Ask yourself what your audience will expect to see in your presentation and what parts of your research findings will be most appropriate for this audience. The context you are operating within matters, and it is likely you will have different versions of your research for different audiences.

The traditional format for presenting social science research is displayed in Table

1 and follows the structure of introduction, literature review, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusion that can be seen in many academic outputs. Though other outputs like blogs or presentations will follow slightly different conventions, such as using visual aids, presenting conclusions in the opening lines/slides, and using hyperlinked references. The best way to familiarize yourself with the required format is to look at published works or repositories of previous student work (which many institutions will keep). An academic librarian at your institution would be a good place to start to find examples of previous works (both published and unpublished).

Table 1 Contents of most academic dissertations, reports, or articles

Section	Key Points to Communicate
Introduction	The rationale for your research question and what your research hopes to achieve
Literature review	Previous published research around your research question, highlighting the gap in existing evidence and the need for your research
Methods	What was your research design (method, sample, time period)? Were there any limitations with its application?
Findings	What did you find out? Use text, tables, charts, graphs, and quotations to provide evidence for your claims.
Discussion	How do your findings address your research question(s)? How do you interpret these findings in relation to previously published evidence? (Please note that in qualitative papers, it is common to see “Findings” and “Discussion” sections combined.)
Conclusion	What are the implications of your research? What recommendations do you make as a result? What further research still needs to be conducted?
References	A list of sources you have directly cited using a consistent referencing style

In terms of how to start writing up or presenting your findings, there is no better time to start than now! You may find it helpful to write a short bullet-point summary of the different headings you want to cover and make some notes as a springboard to get you started. I have found that freewriting has been very helpful when I have struggled to get my thoughts down—the idea of freewriting is that you set a timer (maybe 15 minutes) and write everything down that you can in that time without an expectation that anyone will see what has been written. You can repeat the process several times in one sitting or make a daily practice of writing, for “the precondition for writing well is being able to write badly and to write when you are not in the mood” ([Elbow, cited in Wolcott, 2009](#), p. 45).



Section Summary

- Effectively communicating research findings is essential for ensuring that your research is known about, read by, and built on by others.
- Writing should not only happen at the presentation stage of the social research toolbox, but it should also be an ongoing activity throughout the research journey to formulate and crystallize ideas.
- Tailor your research findings to different audiences to ensure that you convey key messages and recommendations in a format that is appropriate to their expectations.
- If you are struggling with this stage, use strategies like bulleted lists and freewriting to help get you started.

Conventions When Presenting Qualitative and Quantitative Data

While Table 1 reveals the standard format for academic outputs, the way that quantitative and qualitative projects are presented does differ because of the nature of the data that needs to be displayed. In this section, I will briefly overview some of the key conventions when reporting research findings based on qualitative or quantitative data, including what voice or narrative point of view to describe your findings from, the use of hypotheses, and how to display numerical and textual qualitative data.

Voice

Often students ask whether they can write their essays and assignments in the first person, using “I.” Different academics have different expectations around the use of the first person in formal writing (so if you are a student, you should check your institutional guidelines). As someone who mostly works with qualitative data, I tend to tell my students that I am happy for them to use “I.” In qualitative projects, the researcher/student is often the person who has gathered the research data and analyzed it, so it makes sense to connect the discussion of findings with the person who has made these insights. It is common to see statements about the positionality of the researcher in qualitative reports, such as their sociodemographic characteristics, experiences, and assumptions that have shaped the data and findings. On the other hand, in quantitative reports, it is rare to see findings discussed in the first person, and generally a third-person, passive voice is preferred. For example, if a researcher had performed a t-test, this would not be

reported as “I carried out a t-test’ but instead “A t-test was conducted by the researcher.” Quantitative reports strive for a more objective and formal tone in line with conventions of scientific reporting. In mixed-method projects, decisions need to be made about how to navigate between these conventions—for example, it might be a good idea to talk in the third person consistently throughout rather than alternating between the two in the same report. Or alternatively, data from different paradigms might be discussed separately before findings are synthesized later on. The choice will depend on the purpose of the report, discipline conventions, and expectations of the audience.

Hypothesis or Research Question?

If you have quantitative data that has been analyzed using statistical tests, it may be that a research hypothesis (or series of hypotheses) is a more appropriate way to discuss your research question or objectives. A research hypothesis is a testable statement about the relationship between variables, and it should have been developed from your research question. Because of the nature of inferential statistics, the widespread use of significance testing (the probability that there is no relationship between your variables), and the tendency for quantitative research to test theories about relationships between variables, it often makes sense to state which hypotheses the research report will specifically explore. As we saw in the first guide, research questions do tend to be more rigid in quantitative studies than in qualitative studies ([Wheeler, 2025a](#)), and using hypotheses in quantitative outputs will make it clear to the reader what the purpose of that out-

put is. On the other hand, hypotheses are inappropriate when reporting qualitative findings, and you should use the research question instead.

Displaying Numerical Data in Tables and Figures

It is common to present numerical findings through tables and figures (e.g., graphs and diagrams). If you are using any of these, you must make sure they have clear titles, are appropriately labeled with headings, and are placed close to where they are discussed within the text so that a reader can match your written description to the visual display of evidence. Never leave a table or figure to speak for itself—it is your job as the author to draw attention to the significant findings and explain why they are relevant to the reader. Be sure not to overuse tables and figures and remember that the goal of visually displaying numerical data is to enhance understanding and aid interpretation. When deciding whether to include a table or figure in the main body of your text or in the appendix consider its direct relevance to your argument. Key data that supports your main findings should remain central, whereas supplementary or very detailed information (like extensive raw data) is better placed in an appendix to avoid disrupting the flow of your argument. In a classic article on the pitfalls of displaying quantitative evidence, [Wainer \(1984\)](#) highlights how researchers can obscure (unintentionally) the meaning of their data through showing limited data, manipulating the scale within a graph, poor labeling, and ignoring conventions. He concludes his “12 rules for displaying data badly” by suggesting that researchers look to the work of others to learn how to communicate quantitative data effectively.

Displaying Qualitative Data Effectively

Data gathered through interviews, open-ended survey questions, or documents can run into thousands of words. The challenge when writing up this data is how much to show the reader, balancing between description and interpretation. Often verbatim quotations or extracts from documents are used to help the reader judge the fit between the data and the researcher's interpretation of it. Researchers use quotations or extracts to offer evidence for their claims, to give participants' voices and so add authenticity to their reports, and to display diversity or nuances between participants/cases. Together this can enhance the readability of your reports and deepen the understanding of the reader. However, a long list of quotations that are not discussed can become boring for a reader. As with quantitative tables and figures, quotations should not be left to speak for themselves and should be used illustratively or analytically to develop key points. In addition to deciding which quotations to include, researchers must also consider how to organize supplementary materials to support their analysis. In qualitative research, the appendix can be used to provide supplementary material that aids transparency and replicability, such as coding schemes, category frameworks, or sample excerpts of analyzed text. Handling transcripts is another important consideration—researchers/students should critically reflect on whether to include anonymized transcripts in their publications or dissertations, as this practice varies across fields and may depend on ethical considerations, journal requirements, or assessment criteria.

Another way to effectively present qualitative data is by grouping responses into

typologies. Sometimes, groups of responses can be reported together through typologies. These typologies highlight shared features amongst certain groups of participants or cases and describe how they differ from other typologies within your sample. For instance, in my field of work, it is common to see sustainable consumers described as either “deep green” (highly committed to sustainable practices) or “light green” (moderately committed to sustainable practices). Typologies can offer a way of displaying diversity with a few select quotations or thick descriptions rather than having to present lots of textual data. In general, quantification of qualitative data (including quasi-numeric terms like “some,” “a lot,” and “most”) should be avoided because the sampling for qualitative projects is purposive rather than probability-based and so claims cannot be generalized to broader populations. The exception is qualitative content analysis where some quantification is appropriate but must be handled with care so as not to claim representativeness ([Schreier, 2012](#)). There are some good guides for writing up qualitative data that describe how quotations can be used, how to display diversity, and how to handle (if appropriate) or avoid quantification ([Braun & Clarke, 2013](#); [Schreier, 2012](#); [White et al., 2014](#); [Wolcott, 2009](#)). But learning from published work and previous examples is really the best way to develop your skills in presenting answers to qualitative research questions.



Section Summary

- Quantitative data is best presented using third-person passive voice, hypotheses, and numerical data in tables and figures, while

qualitative data should use first-person voice, research questions, and select quotations or typologies.

- Do not leave data to speak for itself—all data selected for inclusion in written reports or other outputs need to be explained to the audience by drawing attention to its key features and how these support the claims of the author.
- To learn how to present data effectively, I recommend looking to previously published work/examples to see how others manage things like displaying quantitative data in tables and graphs and using quotations to communicate nuances within qualitative samples.

What Do You Need to Present to Enable Others to Critically Appraise Your Work?

Regardless of the type of data you have, your presentation of findings needs to be persuasive and authoritative. You need to convince the reader that your interpretation of the data and evidence gathered and analyzed is appropriate. This involves giving the reader sufficient information about the research process, the instruments of data collection, and the limitations of your approach. It is important to place your knowledge claims in context. You may remember that in the second guide in this series, the PROMPT framework (OU, 2020) was introduced when we

talked about reviewing a range of sources and determining their credibility ([Wheeler, 2025b](#)). This framework encourages the reader to evaluate each source by assessing how clearly the information is presented, who has authored the piece and why, whether the research methods used were appropriate, and whether limitations in the methodology were made clear. It is worth bearing these points in mind when writing up research as key elements that need to be communicated.

I have suggested at several points in this series that you should keep a research journal to document key decisions made throughout the research journey. This is partly about helping you stay in control of your project and to better understand your data and its interpretations along the way - but it is also an important part of demonstrating the credibility of your research process. Quality criteria in social research are often discussed under the headings of reliability (consistency of findings over time or between researchers) and validity (whether we have measured/described what we intended to and how accurate these measurements/descriptions are) ([Clark et al., 2021](#)). These terms were originally developed within a positivist epistemology, which strives for objectivity in its processes and replicability of findings across different contexts. There is some dispute about how far these terms apply within an interpretivist or constructivist epistemology, where multiple contexts and researcher positionality (e.g., researcher's unique biography) shape what can be seen and interpreted ([Guba & Lincoln, 1994](#); [Noble & Smith, 2015](#); [Seale, 2010](#)). In quantitative research designs, standardized research instruments are employed, and much scrutiny can and does happen before data is gathered. In qualitative research designs, the instrument of data collection is often the researcher themselves, which makes strict application of reliability and validity hard

to achieve. While for some researchers, it is possible to adapt the meaning of reliability and validity for qualitative research ([Seale, 2010](#)), others suggest that alternative criteria are needed, such as credibility (which can be enhanced by sharing findings with participants and using multiple data sources and perspectives) and transferability (providing thick descriptions to allow judgments about applicability) ([Guba & Lincoln, 1994](#)). In both scenarios, it is important to document key decisions and processes undertaken with particular attention to any biases that might be shaping the data gathering and interpretations. This is where a research journal is crucial and will become your best friend when you are writing up your research. Notes made in this journal can help you provide an account of what you did, why you did it, the problems or events that shaped the process, and a thick description of the research context. Though reflexive research journals are not normally advocated for in quantitative designs (as research findings are rarely reported from the perspective of the researcher), it makes sense to keep detailed notes of processes undertaken, coding of variables, and analytical techniques undertaken.

The following is a checklist of the sorts of information that I recommend including in your research journal:

- Research question/hypothesis and how you arrived at this
- Rationale for the study
- Literature and evidence consulted and how this influenced the research project
- Which theories and existing approaches are related to the research question
- Research design choices and why these were made (including ethical con-

siderations)

- Sampling of participants, cases, and documents, including thick description of context if needed
- Method and tools for data collection and how they were designed
- QUANT: Whether research instruments came from existing protocols and whether they were adapted
- QUAL: Researcher assumptions and biases before, during, and after data collection and how these have shaped data gathered and interpretations drawn
- Any deviations from the protocol or any strange occurrences and your reflections on these
- How data was cleaned and categorized and why
- QUANT: Which statistical tests were undertaken, why, and any unexpected results
- QUAL: Your ongoing interpretations of the categorized data, including nuances between and within cases
- How software was used to uncover and illustrate the comparisons between categories in your data
- How you explain the findings and what the implications of your study are
- Limitations of the study
- Questions that remain unanswered or need further research

By making good notes throughout your research journey, you will be in a strong position to communicate your findings in a transparent way by documenting the decision trail that led to your conclusions. If you are reading a research report or engaging with a research source, ask yourself if the claims made by the re-

searcher are sufficiently documented. While space is always limited in research reports, you should feel that most of the points in the preceding checklist have been addressed when deciding whether to trust this source.

If you have communicated your findings convincingly, your research may be taken up by others and/or applied in practice. You may also feel once you have presented your findings to your original research question that there are further questions that need to be addressed in future research projects. By communicating the unanswered questions and qualifying research claims alongside limitations, you open the door to the social research process circling again through questions, gathering, analysis, and presentation (QGAP).



Section Summary

- When presenting answers to your research question(s), you need to write persuasively and authoritatively, offering evidence for why your conclusions and recommendations are credible.
- Detailed information about the research process, data collection instruments, and study limitations need to be provided to readers, and it is a good idea to keep records of these things throughout the research journey.
- Though the criteria for the validity and reliability of your research will vary depending on the epistemology of your project, a research journal that records your decision trail is recommended as a tool to document relevant information that will need to be communicated to readers when writing up research.

Conclusion

In this final guide in the social research toolbox, or QGAP, series, we have considered how to present answers to your research question(s). Unless you can communicate your research findings effectively, it is unlikely that your research will be graded highly (if you are a student), read by and built on by peers (if you are an academic), or used to inform a policy or practice (for commissioned research). Writing up research in the form of reports, presentations, or blogs is often one of the hardest stages of the social research toolbox, but as this guide has stressed, it is important for personal, professional, and ethical reasons. Writing up research often feels daunting because it is where conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made, but this pressure can be lessened through regular writing about your research, data gathering, and analysis as an ongoing process throughout the research journey. This guide (and the others before it) advocated for meticulous record keeping in the form of a research journal or diary where important and reflexive notes can be made about what you have done, why you have done it this way, and how this has shaped the data and findings you created. This research journal can then form the basis of the description of your methodology in your presentations and outputs. It serves as an important decision trail that can improve the transparency and credibility of your research when presenting it to others. The guide also explored some of the conventions around the reporting of quantitative and qualitative data and how to write persuasively, using visual aids and quotations as evidence for your key claims. When evaluating the research of others, you should consider how far authors have contextualized their research claims, using evidence and description of the processes that have led to this evidence be-

ing created. One of the best ways to learn how to present research is to read and listen to examples from your field.

As you reach the final stage of the social research toolbox, it is important to remember that though all four stages occur in all research projects—(1) questions, (2) gathering data and evidence, (3) analyzing the data and evidence, and (4) presenting your answers to your research questions—they do not always happen in a linear way. By the time you are presenting your answers, you may also be generating new research questions and so starting the cycle again, or perhaps you will return to your data much like a secondary user and ask different questions of it. Research is a messy business, and it is normal for the stages to interlink and shape one another. A good write-up or presentation of research should describe all four stages, detailing how they were developed in practice, acknowledging potential biases or limitations in protocols or processes, and alerting the reader to any contextual information that ought to be taken into account when judging the credibility of the research claims made.



Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Why is it important to present your research findings after you have gathered and analyzed your data?

- ☐ a. To ensure that your research is known about, is read by others, and contributes to the existing body of knowledge

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer



b. To divulge confidential information about research participants

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.



c. To delay the research process and make it less accessible to others

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

2. Which of the following is a recommended strategy for presenting quantitative research findings?

☐ a. Using first-person voice and long textual narratives without tables



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

☐ b. Leaving tables and figures to speak for themselves without contextual explanations



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

- ☐ **c.** Displaying data in tables and figures with clear labels and explanations

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

3. What information should be included to help research audiences critically appraise the credibility of your findings?

- ☐ **a.** Only the personal opinions of the researcher



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

- ☐ **b.** Detailed descriptions of the research process, data collection instruments, and limitations

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

- ☐ **c.** An account of key research claims with no mention of methodology or evidence

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

4. Which of the following is NOT something that should appear in your research journal or diary?

- ☐ a. Your research design choices, including research tools, ethical considerations, and sampling



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

- ☐ b. Your ongoing interpretations of the data



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

☐ **c.** A list of personal achievements unrelated to the research

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

SUBMIT**CLEAR****START OVER**

Further Reading

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide*

for beginners. Sage Publications. (see chapters on quality criteria and writing up qualitative research)

Kumar, R. (2014) *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners* (4th ed). SAGE. (see chapters on establishing the validity and reliability of a research instrument, displaying data, writing a research report)

Wainer, H. (1984). How to display data badly. *The American Statistician*, 38(2), 137–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00031305.1984.10483186>

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Web Resources

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The Conversation. (n.d.). For examples of academic blogs that often report on research findings, see <https://theconversation.com/uk>

NYU Library. (2024). How to create a research poster. <https://guides.nyu.edu/posters>

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Wheeler, K. (2025a). *How to develop research questions: The first stage of the social research toolbox, QGAP* [how-to guide]. Sage Research Methods: Data and Research Literacy.

Wheeler, K. (2025b). *How to gather data and evidence: The second stage of the social research toolbox, QGAP* [how-to guide]. Sage Research Methods: Data and Research Literacy.

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