

10 Qualities of Qualitative Research

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So, what's qualitative research all about?

It's simple—it's about people. Their stories, their thoughts, their feelings. It helps us understand *why* people do what they do.

In this post, we'll look at **10 qualities of qualitative research** that make qualitative research so special. If you've ever been curious about how to really *get* what someone's going through, this is where it starts.

Let's dive in and see what makes it so powerful.

What Is Qualitative Research?

Qualitative research means learning from people—not through numbers, but through their words, actions, and stories.

You talk to them, watch them, and listen closely. You try to understand their world. How they feel. What matters to them.

It's not about charts or graphs. It's about meaning. About connection.

Where quantitative research tells you **what's happening**, qualitative research helps you understand **why**.

Qualitative research is all about understanding people and their stories. These 10 qualities help make sure the research is clear, honest, and meaningful.

1. Depth and Detail (Thick Description)

Good research goes beyond surface answers. Depth and detail—also called thick description—mean really understanding the full picture, with rich stories and clear context.

Definition

Thick description refers to richly detailed accounts of social actions and contexts. Instead of summarizing, researchers record gesture, tone, setting, and emotion alongside spoken words.

Why It Matters?

A 2018 review found that studies employing thick description were 40 percent more likely to yield novel insights than those using summary alone. Detailed data allow readers to see patterns and draw connections that thin descriptions miss.

Methods

- **Prolonged engagement** in the field, from weeks to months
- **In-depth interviews** lasting an hour or more
- **Detailed field notes** capturing nonverbal cues

Example

In a classroom study, instead of noting that “students participated,” a researcher records that a shy child raised her hand when the teacher used a story about her hometown. The note includes the child’s hesitation, the teacher’s encouraging nod, and the quiet murmur of classmates.

Challenges

- Managing large volumes of text and audio
- Deciding which details are essential versus distracting

Tips

- Use a coding framework from the start to tag themes
- Write reflective memos daily to track emerging ideas

2. Contextual Sensitivity

Contextual sensitivity means paying attention to the setting, culture, and background of the people you’re studying. It helps researchers understand things the right way, not just the easy way.

Definition

Contextual sensitivity means understanding behaviors and meanings within their real-world settings—cultural, historical, and environmental.

Why It Matters?

A landmark ethnography of urban youth showed that without context, researchers misinterpreted group norms as deviance. By studying in the neighborhood's basketball courts and corner stores, they gained insight into how local histories shaped social ties.

Methods

- **Ethnography:** living alongside participants
- **Participant observation:** joining daily routines
- **Document analysis:** reviewing local newspapers, letters, and archives

See also [Top 10 Reasons Why School is Bad: The Dark Side of School](#)

Example

Researchers studying health beliefs in a coastal village learned that fish rituals were both spiritual and practical responses to polluted waters. Observing ceremonies on the shore revealed layers of meaning lost in a hospital questionnaire.

Challenges

- Risk of researcher bias if an outsider misreads cultural cues
- Time and cost of immersive fieldwork

Tips

- Build rapport by spending informal time with participants
- Keep a “context journal” detailing setting, weather, and local events

3. Reflexivity

Reflexivity means thinking about how your own thoughts and feelings might shape what you see in your research. It's one of the 10 qualities of qualitative research that helps keep the work honest and real.

Definition

Reflexivity is the ongoing process by which researchers examine how their own backgrounds, beliefs, and actions influence the study.

Why It Matters

Studies that neglect reflexivity risk skewed interpretations. In one project, a researcher's prior allergy to a community's main crop led her to focus on health issues rather than economic concerns—a bias she only noticed through reflexive practice.

Methods

- **Reflexive journals:** logging personal reactions and assumptions
- **Peer debriefing:** discussing decisions with colleagues
- **Audit trails:** documenting every methodological choice

Example

A researcher studying gender roles realized her own upbringing in a matriarchal household made her less attuned to men's narratives. By keeping reflexive notes, she adjusted her interview guide to probe male experiences more fully.

Challenges

- Balancing self-examination with maintaining focus on participants
- Potential discomfort in sharing biases

Tips

- Schedule regular self-checks, for example weekly
- Invite a peer to review your reflexive entries

4. Credibility

Credibility means the research feels real and trustworthy. It shows that the findings truly match what people said and experienced.

Definition

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of findings—how well they reflect participants' realities.

Why It Matters?

In a healthcare study, credible work led to policy changes in patient-centered care. Less credible studies were dismissed by regulators as anecdotal.

Methods

- **Member checks:** sharing themes with participants for feedback
- **Triangulation:** using multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, diaries, and observations)
- **Thick description:** providing enough detail to support claims

Example

After analyzing 20 interviews on workplace stress, researchers returned to participants with draft themes. Participants confirmed which patterns rang true and clarified ambiguous points.

Challenges

- Participants' changing views over time
- Logistical constraints in arranging follow-ups

Tips

- Plan member checks during the project timeline
- Use diverse data sources to cross-validate findings

5. Transferability

Transferability means others can see how your research might apply in different settings. It helps your findings connect beyond just one place or group.

Definition

Transferability is the extent to which findings can apply or resonate in other contexts.

Why It Matters?

Readers often ask, "Can I use these insights in my own setting?" Detailed context descriptions empower them to judge applicability rather than rely on the researcher's claim.

See also [10 Reasons Why We Study Chemistry](#)

Methods

- **Purposive sampling:** selecting cases rich in information
- **Thick contextual detail:** demographic, cultural, and institutional profiles

Example

A study of remote teachers in rural Alaska included a thorough description of climate, school size, and community ties. Educators in remote Australia could then compare conditions and adapt strategies.

Challenges

- Overgeneralizing to contexts that differ significantly
- Under-describing context due to word limits

Tips

- Be explicit about the boundaries of your study
- Offer enough demographic and institutional data for readers to assess fit

6. Dependability

Dependability means your research stays steady and makes sense, even if someone checks it later. It shows your work was careful and consistent.

Definition

Dependability means that the research process is systematic and could be repeated with similar results.

Why It Matters?

In one longitudinal study of neighborhood change, an audit trail showing every decision helped reviewers understand shifts in focus from safety to community identity.

Methods

- **Audit trails:** detailed records of decisions, meetings, and coding
- **Code–recode strategy:** coding the same data twice to check consistency
- **Methodological logs:** documenting changes in interview guides

Example

A team studying migration patterns kept a shared log of when and why they revised questions about belonging. This record clarified how emergent themes shaped subsequent interviews.

Challenges

- Field conditions that force mid-course changes
- Keeping logs up to date under tight deadlines

Tips

- Assign one person to maintain documentation
- Archive raw data and logs in a secure, organized system

7. Confirmability

Confirmability means your research is based on what people said or did—not just your own opinions. It shows that your findings are grounded and fair.”

Definition

Confirmability ensures that findings arise from the data and not the researcher’s imagination.

Why It Matters

When presenting findings to stakeholders, confirmability builds confidence that themes rest on evidence, not bias.

Methods

- **Reflexive memos:** linking interpretations to specific data points

- **Third-party audits:** inviting an external reviewer to assess links between data and conclusions

Example

Researchers investigating parent-teacher communication provided verbatim quotes for each theme. An external auditor checked that quotes matched the thematic labels.

Challenges

- Subjective lenses can steer thematic decisions
- Risk of selective quoting if not careful

Tips

- Conduct blind coding sessions where coders don't see each other's labels
- Store all transcripts and coding files for external review

8. Authenticity

Authenticity means the research shares real voices and experiences, just as they are. It shows people's true thoughts and feelings.

Definition

Authenticity is the fair and faithful representation of participants' voices, including diverse perspectives.

Why It Matters?

Ethical research demands respect for participants' experiences. Authentic narratives can humanize policy debates and shift public opinion.

Methods

- **Narrative analysis:** focusing on stories and how they're told
- **Participant transcript review:** letting participants read and edit their words

Example

In a study of refugees, researchers included both hopeful and traumatic accounts. They let participants remove or revise any section before publication.

See also [10 Reasons Why Year Round School is Good](#)

Challenges

- Balancing participant edits with researcher analysis
- Avoiding over-simplification of complex narratives

Tips

- Use participants' exact language when possible
- Highlight divergent voices, not just the majority view

9. Ethical Rigor

Ethical rigor means doing research in a fair and respectful way—protecting people's rights and keeping their trust.

Definition

Ethical rigor means safeguarding participants' rights, privacy, and well-being throughout the study.

Why It Matters?

In the digital age, confidentiality breaches can have severe consequences. Ethical lapses erode trust and can harm vulnerable groups.

Methods

- **Informed consent:** clear explanations of risks and benefits
- **Confidentiality protocols:** anonymizing data, secure storage
- **Debriefing sessions:** offering support after sensitive interviews

Example

A mental health study provided local counseling contacts and checked in with participants one week after interviews to ensure no distress remained.

Challenges

- Power imbalances between researcher and participant
- Managing emotional burden on both sides

Tips

- Secure ethics approval from an institutional review board early
- Maintain ongoing consent—remind participants they can withdraw anytime

10. Flexibility and Adaptability

Flexibility and adaptability mean being open to changes during research. It helps you learn and adjust as new things come up.

Definition

Flexibility and adaptability refer to the researcher's openness to follow emerging insights and shift focus as data unfold.

Why It Matters?

Rigid designs can miss unexpected but crucial themes. An adaptable approach captured how a new mobile app changed community health practices mid-study.

Methods

- **Iterative data collection:** refining questions after each interview
- **Emergent coding:** letting codes evolve from the data rather than imposing preset labels

Example

In a study on workplace culture, early interviews revealed that commuting stress mattered more than leadership style. The team then added questions about travel and work-life balance.

Challenges

- Risk of scope creep if too many new questions emerge
- Project management complexity

Tips

- Establish clear checkpoints to decide when to pivot
- Document every shift in focus with rationale

Conclusion

Qualitative research is all about people. Their stories, their feelings, and their everyday lives. It helps you understand what really matters to them—not just the numbers.

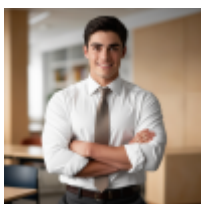
What makes it work? You listen closely. You ask real questions. You notice the small things. You stay open and ready to change if needed.

Instead of just collecting data, you're connecting with people. You're seeing life from their side. And that's where the real insight comes from.

It's not about being perfect. It's about being honest, curious, and respectful.

So if you're starting a project, slow down. Listen well. Stay flexible. And always care about the people behind the answers.

That's the heart of good research.



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Maroc Jameson is a dedicated educator with a strong commitment to enhancing learning experiences. He specializes in presenting information through concise “10 tips” formats, covering various topics such as “10 reasons to pursue a new skill” and “10 important benefits of reading.”