

Chapter 12 Scripting a Qualitative Purpose Statement and Research Questions

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Skills

- Develop the skill of writing a good qualitative purpose statement.
- Develop the skill of writing a complete qualitative central question and sub-questions.
- Develop the skill of creating a clear, understandable central phenomenon for your purpose statement and research questions.

Why the Skills Are Important

Stanley Fish's (2011) book *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One* is a helpful guide to writing research, especially the purpose statement. Fish tells us that we need to think about how sentences are put together: a "sentence is a structure of logical relationships" (p. 57). He adds that we should pay attention to the relationship of ideas rather than focusing on the parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, and direct objects. He asks, What are the "content's vehicles and generators" (p. 121) for carrying forward ideas in a sentence? What are the vehicles and generators and the logical parts of the structure of a purpose statement? This idea has led me to think about the use of "scripts" in which authors fill in the blanks around the key parts that belong in a purpose statement. "Scripts" can help authors design one of the most important statements in a qualitative research project—the purpose statement—and they can also be useful in the design of the research questions.

In this chapter you will find a "script" with the parts for writing a good purpose statement, and the logical order of the parts that carry forward ideas about the purpose or intent of your study. In short, this purpose statement needs to be carefully scripted so that it is absolutely clear and straightforward. I always say that if the purpose statement is fuzzy, the reader will be lost in the parts to follow in a research study. Second in importance, then, after the purpose statement would be the research questions that narrow the purpose down into questions to be answered in a study. These, too, need to be carefully designed to carry forward the key elements of the purpose statement, and a script can help authors design these questions. Embedded within both the purpose statement and the research questions is the core idea being explored in a study—the central phenomenon. Focusing on the nature of the central phenomenon, how to write it, and how to consistently use it are also important features of good qualitative studies.

Interrelating the Purpose, the Research Questions, and the Methods

The **purpose statement** is the overall objective or intent of the study. In some projects it is called the "study aim." It is the most important statement in your qualitative study. It is a statement that conveys the essence of a project. A **central question** is a single general question that reframes the purpose into a specific question. This central question is the broadest question that can be asked. It is unlike quantitative questions, in which authors try to narrow the questions down to specific variables that can be related. It is helpful to think about the qualitative central question by asking yourself, "What is the

broadest question I can ask about my central phenomenon?” The *central phenomenon* is the core idea being explored in a qualitative study. It needs to be stated in a way that is not too broad (e.g., experiences of individuals) or too narrow (e.g., identity when at work). It needs to rest somewhere in the middle, such as the “cultural identity” of individuals. The central phenomenon is stated within both the purpose statement and the central question. The central question can then be made more specific by writing five to seven **sub-questions** that subdivide the central question into parts or topics. If you were to ask questions about your central phenomenon when you explore it, what subtopics would you ask participants in your study? These sub-questions then become the major questions used during your qualitative data collection procedures. They can become key questions asked during interviews, questions to reflect on yourself during observations, or questions to ponder as you examine documents, pictures, videos, photographs and other forms of audiovisual materials.

Purpose Statements

I have probably written more about the purpose statement than what you will find in most research methods books. My book *Research Design* (Creswell, 2014) devotes an entire chapter to the topic. I believe in providing a “script” for writing this statement, a “script” in which the researcher fills in blanks with his or her own study using a template. My approach is quite applied and practical. I have even suggested that there are certain elements to include in this statement.

Elements to Include in a Good Purpose Statement

Here are some key elements I find useful in developing a good qualitative purpose statement:

- Use *key words* to denote to the reader that your statement is the purpose statement. Start your statement by saying, “The purpose is” You could also talk about the “intent” or the “objective” of the study. In many proposals for funding, the word *purpose* is replaced by the words *study aim*. Regardless of the precise terminology, you might consider how you alert the reader that the most important statement in a project is coming.
- Use an appropriate *verb tense* in the statement. For research that will be completed, use the future tense; for research already finished, the past tense; and for an active, dynamic statement voice, use the present tense. All three are possible in qualitative research.
- Keep the statement *short and to the point*. This means eliminating unnecessary words and explanations.
- Use *nondirectional language* that opens up the responses from your participants rather than closing them down. Words such as *positive*, *successful*, *effective*, and *useful* close down the discussion rather than opening it up.
- Include the following *elements* in your statement:
 - Mention that your study is qualitative research. Once you decide on the appropriate qualitative design to use (see [Chapter 30](#)), you can insert the name of the design.
 - Use an action verb to convey how you will learn about your topic, such as *understand*, *describe*, *develop*, *discover*, or *generate*.
 - State the central phenomenon. The central phenomenon is the core idea you want to explore (e.g., being a professional, buckling under stress, tolerating ambiguity).
 - Indicate the participants in your study. Who will be providing data in your project? If you are gathering data from documents or audiovisual materials, these need to be specified.

- Indicate where you will gather the data—the research site. If it is a virtual site, you could mention this fact. In some instances, it is wise to make the site anonymous (e.g., “a large public university in the Midwest”).
- Provide a general definition of your central phenomenon if the term or phrase is not self-evident to readers. You could provide a textbook definition, a rephrased definition, or the definition you plan to use that is acceptable in your field of study.

A Suggested Script for Writing a Qualitative Purpose Statement

The elements can be put together in a “script” in which you fill in the information on the basis of your study.

The purpose of this _____ (*qualitative approach*) study is (*was, will be*) to _____ (*action verb—understand, describe, develop, discover, etc.*) _____ (*the central phenomenon being studied*) for _____ (*the participants*) at _____ (*the research site*). At this stage in the research, _____ (*the central phenomenon*) will be generally defined as _____ (*provide a general definition*).

Example 1

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study [qualitative approach] was to generate a theoretical model that explores [action verb] what low-income rural families [research site] with young children do for fun [central phenomenon] from the perspective of mothers [participants]. (Churchill, Plano Clark, Prochaska-Cue, Creswell, & Ontai-Grzebik, 2007)

Example 2

Accordingly, the purpose of this multi-site qualitative case study [qualitative approach] is to explore [action verb] how adolescents [participants] talk about tobacco use [central phenomenon] in their schools and in their lives [research site]. (Plano Clark et al., 2002, pp. 1265–1266)

You will note that in both of these examples, the central phenomena were not defined, as the authors felt that “do[ing] for fun” and “talk[ing] about tobacco use” were self-explanatory ideas not needing definition.

Research Questions

The research questions then narrow the purpose statement to specific questions the qualitative researcher will answer by collecting and analyzing data. In qualitative research we ask research questions rather than posing hypotheses. Hypotheses would typically narrow the scope of our inquiry, and in qualitative research we try to keep our questions as open-ended as possible so that multiple

perspectives can emerge from participants. There are two types of research questions in qualitative research: the central question and sub-questions.

The Central Question

The central question is the broadest question that can be asked about the topic you are studying in your qualitative project. It is an interrogative statement in the form of a question, and it does not include directional words signifying a quantitative project, such as *positive*, *successful*, or *change*. It also does not compare groups or relate variables, as found in quantitative research. Often it uses language that is familiar to a wide audience and is not social or health science oriented, it repeats some of the wording found in the purpose statement, and it consists of logical parts. These logical parts are as follows:

- The central question begins with a word such as *how* or *what*. Typically it does not begin with the word *why*, which suggests a quantitative cause-effect language.
- It states the central phenomenon, the core idea you want to explore in the qualitative project.
- It identifies the participants in the study, the people from whom the data will be collected.
- It may identify the research site or the place where the study will be undertaken. Sometimes this element is implied by the statement and left out.

An Ideal Order of the Central Question Elements

Because the central phenomenon is the key feature of a study, we need to highlight it up front in a research question. Also, participants reside in specific research sites, and so we might mention the participants first, followed by the site. This flow of ideas in a central question might look like this script:

Position			
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
What	Central Phenomenon	Participants	Site
What (or how) does the _____ (central phenomenon) mean for _____ (participants) at the _____ (site)?			

As you can see, the central question is quite simple and short in form.

The central question subdivides into several sub-questions, and the sub-questions then form the core content for an interview or observation.

Examples of Improving the Central Question

Example 1: Revising a Central Question—Making It Interesting

Original question:

How first-year Chinese graduate students adjust at Midwest University? (X. Ma, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

Improved question:

What are the coping strategies that first-year Chinese graduate students use to adjust in their first year at Midwest University?

The original question had the key components of a research question. What was needed for this central question was to make the project more interesting (see [Chapter 3](#)). For instance, we could shift the central phenomenon to cultural aspects of the students or the coping skills they use. The revised question takes coping strategies as the central phenomenon.

Example 2: Revising a Central Question—Clarifying the Central Phenomenon

Original question:

How do ranchers use off-ranch information to make on-ranch decisions in the central Great Plains? (M. Siliwinski, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

Revised question:

How do ranchers in the Central Great Plains use information about the landscape to manage their own land?

Notice in the original question the ambiguity of the central phenomenon being explored. In the revision, the central phenomenon, “use information,” is much clearer.

Example 3: Revising a Central Question—Adding the Central Phenomenon

Original question:

How do employee resource groups operate? (S. Schlachter, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

Revised question:

How do employee resource groups establish and maintain their social identity?

It is necessary to mention the central phenomenon in the research question, yet it was missing from the original question. The original phenomenon from the purpose was the “inner workings of the employee resource groups.” Perhaps the central phenomenon is better clarified as the social identity of employee resource groups. The revised question adds this revised central phenomenon.

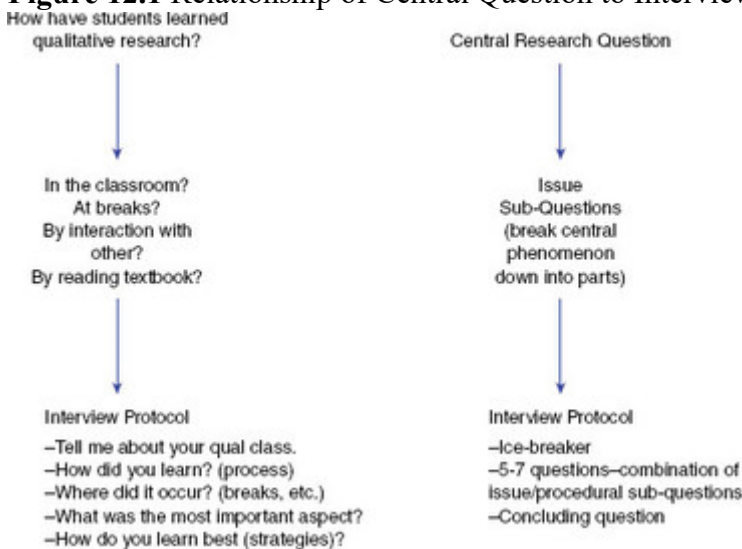
Sub-questions

Sub-questions then narrow the central question to specific aspects. I recommend that a small number of sub-questions, say five to seven, be written. I further suggest that qualitative researchers look closely at their central phenomena and ask themselves, “How can this central phenomenon be subdivided into several parts?” These parts, the sub-questions, then become the key questions asked during the data collection, such as the questions asked of interviewees or the questions researchers ask themselves as they observe. As shown in [Figure 12.1](#), the central question subdivides into several sub-questions, and the sub-questions then form the core content for an interview protocol (see [Chapter 15](#)).

For example, the central question “What is the campus climate toward diversity?” (diversity is the central phenomenon) might be subdivided into several sub-questions, such as:

- “What are student attitudes on campus toward forming diverse social groups?”
- “How is diversity encouraged by the central administration?”
- “How is diversity encouraged in the undergraduate classes on campus?”
- “How is diversity encouraged by the campus police force?”

Figure 12.1 Relationship of Central Question to Interview Questions



The Central Phenomenon

One of the most challenging parts of writing good purpose statements, central questions, and sub-questions is clarifying the central phenomenon in a study. Part of this challenge lies in understanding what you would like to explore or study in your project. It may take you several attempts to identify your central phenomenon, and the final version may result from sharing it with others, going back to the literature and reviewing key studies on your topic, or collecting some data, analyzing it, and

determining what participants in your study actually talk about when you ask them questions. So, you may find yourself working backward from the themes or findings to clarify the central phenomenon in your study. Here are some suggestions for identifying the central phenomenon that may help:

- State your central phenomenon in two to three words or fewer, such as “professional development,” “integration of technology,” or “mothering.” Make your central phenomenon as concise as possible.
- Realize that your central phenomenon may change during your study as you collect data and actually analyze them. It is more important that you end with a clear central phenomenon rather than start with one.
- Settle on a label (or name) for your central phenomenon, and then stay with it. Be consistent, and do not change the words of the central phenomenon throughout your project, as this will confuse the reader. Use the exact same name wherever the central phenomenon appears in your study (e.g., in the title, in the purpose statement, in your research questions, in your conclusion). In short, do not change the label (or name) of your central phenomenon in your study by the time you conclude the study.

Example of a Changing Central Phenomenon

Look at the following example that illustrates a changing central phenomenon in a study.

From the abstract of a study:

The purpose of this study is to understand how college students interact in a diversity class taught by a White teacher.

From the introduction to the same study:

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover how students react to interactions to a White instructor teaching about diversity in a college classroom at a public four-year university in the Midwest.

Notice in this example how the central phenomenon in the abstract, “students interact,” changed to “students react to interactions” in the purpose statement. This type of changing central phenomenon is confusing for a reader and leads to ambiguity about the central phenomenon being explored.

The central phenomenon must be absolutely clear and consistently stated.

Other Ideas About the Central Phenomenon

Consider identifying a central phenomenon that is neither too broad nor too narrow, to help a reader understand your project. Examples of central phenomena that are too broad are “experience” and

“perceptions.” These broad examples do not communicate what you will be exploring. Examples of central phenomena that are too narrow are “eating bananas” and “sharpening pencils.” These narrow examples illustrate ideas being explored that may not be conceptually interesting.

Furthermore, state only one central phenomenon. The use of the conjunction *and* is a tipoff that more than one central phenomenon is being presented (e.g., “What do emotion *and* attitudes mean for young teenagers?”)

Summary

It is important to write the central question clearly. A “script” can help that includes elements of the qualitative approach, an action verb, the central phenomenon, the participants, and the research site. The central question narrows the purpose down to a general question that will be addressed through the data collection. This central question is the broadest question that can be asked, and its general nature enables participants to share multiple perspectives. The central question further subdivides into sub-questions that are asked in a qualitative study. A small number of sub-questions subdivide the central phenomenon into its parts. The central phenomenon is the key core idea being explored in a study, and it is challenging to write in a simple and clear way.

Activity

1.

Consider this central question:

What does mothering mean to women who are adoptive parents?

Identify the:

- Central phenomenon
- Participants
- Research site

2.

Consider this central question:

What is medical care to faculty/students at the Medical Center Sharing Clinic for underserved patients?

Identify the:

- Central phenomenon
- Participants
- Research site

Further Resources

Consider the specific chapter on writing a purpose statement in:

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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