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Narrative Analysis in Qualitative Research: Types, Steps and a Worked Example

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Abstract

Narrative analysis is a family of qualitative approaches that interpret the stories people tell in order to understand how they make sense of their experience. Its defining feature is that a story is analyzed as a whole, with its sequence and the teller's evaluation of events treated as data, rather than broken into coded fragments. Studies that describe themselves as narrative do not always follow this principle, and the method is frequently confused with thematic analysis and with narrative inquiry. This article defines narrative analysis, distinguishes inductive from deductive work, and describes four types of narrative analysis as Riessman groups them: thematic, structural, dialogic or performance, and visual. It sets out Labov's six-part model of narrative structure and explains how the choice of type determines the level of transcript detail required. It then offers a six-step sequence for conducting a narrative analysis and follows a published single-case study through those steps, before discussing strengths, limitations, sample size and when the method is appropriate. It is intended for students and early-career researchers planning a qualitative analysis, and for the educators who teach qualitative research methods.

Keywords: narrative analysis; narrative analysis in qualitative research; types of narrative analysis; how to do narrative analysis; narrative analysis example; narrative inquiry; qualitative data analysis; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

Stories are among the richest data a qualitative study can collect, and among the easiest to damage in analysis. If a two-hour life story is cut into coded fragments, the features that made it a story can disappear: the order in which events were told, the links the teller drew between them and the meaning the teller gave them. Narrative analysis is designed to keep those features in view.

It is also easy to name the method without applying it. A study may call itself narrative while coding transcripts line by line and reporting themes gathered from across the whole dataset, which is closer to thematic analysis. A study may also treat narrative inquiry, a research design, and narrative analysis, an analysis method, as if they were the same thing. A reviewer or examiner is likely to notice either error.

This article is written for students and researchers planning a narrative analysis and for those who teach qualitative methods. Section 2 defines narrative analysis and what counts as a narrative. Section 3 distinguishes inductive from deductive work. Section 4 describes four types of narrative analysis, including Labov's model of narrative structure. Section 5 sets out a sequence of steps, and Section 6 follows a published study through them. Section 7 discusses strengths and limitations, and Section 8 considers when the method is appropriate and how it differs from narrative inquiry.

2. What Narrative Analysis Is

Narrative analysis is a qualitative analysis method that interprets the stories people tell in order to understand how they make sense of their experience. Riessman (2003/2005) describes it as "a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a storied form" (p. 1), and she identifies what makes such texts narrative: "sequence and consequence: events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience" (p. 1).

The four verbs in that definition describe choices the teller makes. **A narrative analysis takes these choices as its data**: which events are included, in what order they are placed, how they are connected and what they are said to mean. These choices are not neutral. As Riessman (2003/2005) puts it, narratives "do not speak for themselves or have unanalysed merit; they require interpretation when used as data in social research" (p. 2). Instead of coding a transcript line by line, the analyst therefore treats each story as a unit and asks how it has been put together. The story is kept whole rather than divided among themes (Wong & Breheny, 2018).

What counts as one narrative varies between fields. Riessman (2003/2005) notes that in social history and anthropology a narrative can be an entire life story, assembled from interviews, observation and documents. In sociolinguistics it is often a brief, topically specific story told in answer to a single interview question. In another tradition, common in psychology and sociology, it encompasses long sections of talk about a life in context, developed over one or more interviews. Riessman adds that each definition leads to different methods of analysis, but all of them require the researcher to construct texts for analysis by selecting documents, writing field notes or choosing sections of interview transcripts.

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As Riessman (2003/2005) notes, the analysis of narrative is no longer confined to literary study. Her examples draw on interviews, observation, documents and field notes, and written accounts such as journals can also serve (as in the study in Section 6). In most social science research, the stories come from participants, and that is the case this article addresses.

3. Inductive and Deductive Approaches

As with most qualitative methods, stories can be approached **inductively or deductively**. The choice shapes what the analyst looks for and the kind of conclusion the analysis can support, so it should be decided at the outset and reported if it changes.

In an **inductive** analysis, the stories lead. The researcher begins without a theory to test and builds an interpretation from the patterns that appear. In a hypothetical study of mid-career teachers who have left the profession, the researcher might find that most participants describe their exit as a gradual erosion rather than a single breaking point, and that a change of principal frequently appears as the moment the erosion sped up. That pattern, which the researcher did not set out to find, becomes the finding.

In a **deductive** analysis, an existing theory leads. The researcher reads the stories through that theory and looks for evidence that supports, refines or challenges it. A hypothetical study might read nurses' accounts of leaving clinical work against a stage model of career transition, asking where the accounts fit the model's stages and where they depart from them. Figure 1 sets the two examples side by side; both were written for this article and are not real studies.

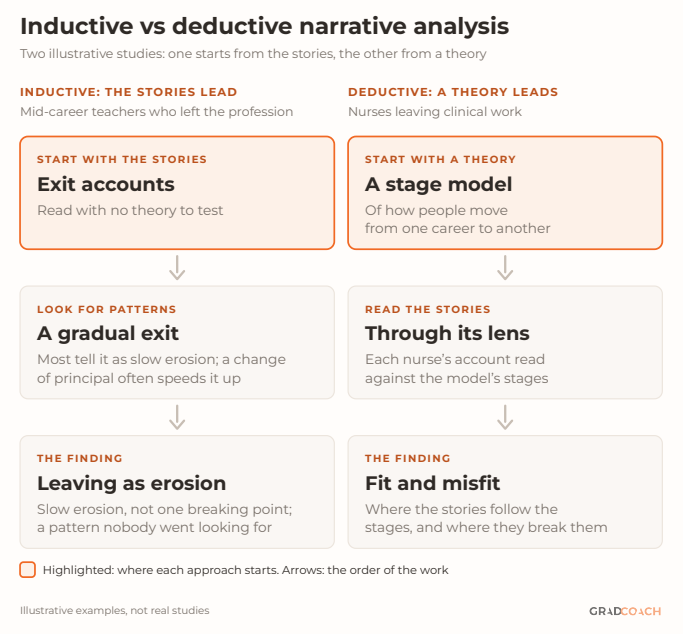


Figure 1. Inductive and deductive narrative analysis, with an illustrative example of each.

The research questions usually indicate which approach fits. An exploratory question, such as how first-generation students describe their first year, suggests inductive work. A theory-led question, such as how well a model of career transition explains nurses' accounts of leaving clinical work, suggests deductive work.

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The lens can also change during the analysis. Wood and Sawtelle (2022) followed a single student, given the pseudonym Nicole, as she transferred from a two-year college to a four-year university. Their wider project concerned self-efficacy, roughly a person's confidence in their ability to perform a task. They first coded Nicole's journal reflections and interviews with a codebook for statements of self-efficacy and its sources, and then coded deductively for one of those sources, physiological state. Later they concluded that her story was about something broader than self-efficacy and set that coding aside. They analyzed the data instead with the narrative inquiry framework of Clandinin et al. (2007, as cited in Wood & Sawtelle, 2022), which has three "commonplaces," or dimensions that the analysis must examine: temporality (time), place and sociality. The authors note that they typically refer to this approach as narrative analysis (Wood & Sawtelle, 2022). They also name the theory they started with and the framework that replaced it, and they direct readers to supplementary material on the change. A change of lens is defensible when it is reported in this way, with the reason for it.

4. Types of Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is not one procedure. Several typologies of narrative analysis exist (Cortazzi, 2001; Mishler, 1995; both as cited in Riessman, 2003/2005). Riessman (2003/2005) presents her own as a heuristic for describing contemporary approaches to oral narratives of personal experience, not as a hierarchy. Her typology has been published in at least two different versions. In a 2003 encyclopedia entry, reprinted as Riessman (2003/2005), she describes thematic, structural, interactional and performative analysis. In her 2008 textbook she groups the approaches as **thematic, structural, dialogic/performance and visual** analysis (Riessman, 2008, as cited in Duque, 2010). This article follows the 2008 grouping, summarized in Table 1. The example questions in the third column were written for this article.

Table 1. Four types of narrative analysis, after Riessman (2008, as cited in Duque, 2010).

Type	What it focuses on	Suits questions such as
Thematic	What the story says: its content	What turning points do career changers describe?
Structural	How the story is told: its parts, order and language	How do patients build a persuasive account of their illness?
Dialogic/performance	How teller and listener shape the story in context, and how the teller presents who they are	How do doctors and patients negotiate a diagnosis story in the consultation?
Visual	Images, interpreted together with words	How do residents picture their community through photographs?

The types overlap. In the earlier version of her typology, Riessman (2003/2005) writes that different approaches "can be combined; they are not mutually exclusive" (p. 2), and that, as with all typologies, the boundaries are fuzzy. A study may lead with one type and borrow from another.

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4.1 Thematic narrative analysis

In **thematic narrative analysis**, as Riessman (2003/2005) describes it, the emphasis is on the content of a story, on what is told more than on how it is told. The researcher collects a number of stories and develops conceptual groupings from them, and findings are typically presented as a typology of narratives organized by theme, illustrated with case studies or vignettes. The approach suits research questions about what happened to people and how they account for it.

Thematic narrative analysis is the type most easily confused with ordinary thematic analysis, because both produce themes. The difference lies in the unit of analysis. Thematic analysis codes every transcript and gathers extracts from across the dataset into themes, so an individual account is broken up by design. In thematic narrative analysis, each story is kept intact, and the analyst builds theory from each case rather than from themes pooled across cases (Riessman, 2008, as cited in Ross et al., 2018). In the sequence set out in Section 5, comparison across cases comes afterward. Duque (2010) reports that Riessman's textbook draws a similar contrast with grounded theory: both produce themes, but narrative analysis does not "fracture" the data and is case-centered (para. 12).

Polkinghorne (1995) draws a related distinction between two kinds of narrative study. In the first, stories are the data, and the analyst applies paradigmatic procedures: the analyst identifies elements the stories share and groups them into categories. In the second, events and happenings are the data, and the analyst uses narrative procedures to produce explanatory stories. Riessman's thematic approach, which ends in a typology of narratives organized by theme, is closer to the first kind, although it keeps each story intact until the comparison across cases.

Riessman (2003/2005) also notes a limitation of the thematic approach. It treats language as a direct route to meaning (p. 2), and it does not usually study the setting of an utterance, whether the interview itself or wider institutional and cultural discourse. When many narratives are grouped under one theme, readers must assume that everyone in the group means the same thing. She asks what becomes of ambiguities and of responses that do not fit the typology (Riessman, 2003/2005, p. 3). A thematic narrative analysis is stronger when it reports these cases rather than setting them aside.

4.2 Structural analysis and Labov's model

Structural analysis shifts attention to the telling: the way a story is told and the narrative devices a teller uses to make it persuasive (Riessman, 2003/2005). Language is treated as an object of close investigation in its own right, not only as a vehicle for content.

The classic structural framework comes from William Labov and colleagues, and Riessman (2003/2005) describes it as arguably the first method of narrative analysis. The approach analyzes the function of each clause in the overall narrative. In a later version of the framework, Labov retained six basic components of a narrative's structure (Labov, 1982, as cited in Riessman, 2003/2005, p. 3):

1. **Abstract:** a summary of the story, its point, or both.
2. **Orientation:** the time, place, characters and situation.

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3. **Complicating action:** the sequence of events, or plot, usually with a crisis and a turning point.
4. **Evaluation:** where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on its meaning and convey emotion.
5. **Resolution:** the outcome of the plot.
6. **Coda:** the close of the story, which brings the action back to the present.

Riessman (2003/2005) notes that not all stories contain all six elements and that the elements can occur in varying sequences; she calls the evaluation the "soul" of the narrative (p. 3). Evaluation need not sit in a single place. Using Labov's framework, Eghosa-Aimufua et al. (2022) analyzed 55 written accounts of career turning points by women medical educators. They summarize his model as one in which evaluation of the experience is integrated throughout the narrative.

Labov's model was applied to brief, topically centered and temporally ordered stories (Riessman, 2003/2005), so it fits an episode better than a whole life history. For lengthy narratives that do not take the classic temporal form, Riessman (2003/2005) describes an alternative structural approach, associated with Gee (1991), which divides speech into units such as lines and stanzas according to how it is spoken. Riessman notes that because structural approaches examine the syntax and prosody (intonation, stress and pausing) of talk, they are not suited to large numbers of narratives, but they can be very useful for detailed case studies and for comparing a few accounts.

4.3 Dialogic/performance analysis

Dialogic/performance analysis attends to the context in which a story is told and treats narratives as multi-voiced and co-constructed (Duque, 2010). The 2003 version of the typology describes its two components separately. Interactional analysis, as Riessman (2003/2005) describes it, emphasizes the dialogic process between teller and listener, in settings such as medical, social service and court encounters, where the two create meaning together. It requires transcripts that include all participants in the conversation.

Performative analysis extends this by treating storytelling as a performance through which a teller involves and persuades an audience. It suits detailed studies of identity construction, that is, of how narrators want to be known (Riessman, 2003/2005). Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) study identity in small stories told in conversation. They analyze how a teller announces a story and negotiates with listeners before telling it, as well as the telling itself.

Dialogic/performance analysis therefore needs a transcript that records every speaker, usually in as much detail as structural analysis requires. Pauses, interruptions and the interviewer's own questions become part of the data, and Riessman (2003/2005) notes that such transcripts can be difficult for readers unfamiliar with the conventions.

4.4 Visual analysis

Visual narrative analysis is the newest of the four types. The 2003 version of the typology does not list it as a type; instead, that version describes the integration of film and photography with spoken narrative as an innovative contemporary turn (Riessman, 2003/2005). In the 2008 textbook (Riessman, 2008, as cited in Duque, 2010), visual analysis attends to how and why images are

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produced (including images made with participants) and to how they are interpreted. The textbook also argues that images need to be placed in context and explained rather than left to speak for themselves.

A doctoral dissertation from the Department of English at Purdue University shows a related approach. Carlson (2019) conducted a participatory photovoice study in which 11 community organizers in Appalachia took photographs, wrote narratives and took part in focus groups. In photovoice, participants photograph moments they consider important and then interpret their photographs, often in interviews or focus groups (Carlson, 2019, pp. 53–54). The dissertation reports the first six months of photographs and narratives, two focus groups and three site visits (p. 55). The analysis tagged participants' photographs by subject and theme and then connected repeated visual patterns with the narratives that had emerged from the written and spoken data (Carlson, 2019, p. 66). Those narratives came from coding the focus group and interview transcripts and the participants' written accounts: Carlson first identified dominant narratives about Appalachian life in this material, and then used a grounded theory approach to code for other narratives, most of which challenged the dominant ones (p. 65). Photovoice is a participatory research method rather than one of Riessman's types, but a study of this kind, in which participants make images or the sources are visual, is where visual narrative analysis is most relevant.

4.5 Choosing a type and transcribing for it

The four types need **different levels of transcript detail**. A thematic reading can work from a clean transcript of what was said. Structural analysis needs features of how it was said, and interactional analysis needs every speaker's contribution, including the interviewer's (Riessman, 2003/2005). Riessman leaves the decision to the investigator, according to the focus of the project. The research question should therefore select the type, and the type should then determine the transcription. Where the question concerns what happened to people rather than how they tell it, thematic narrative analysis is the usual choice and also the least demanding to transcribe.

5. Conducting a Narrative Analysis

There is no single prescribed procedure. Riessman's textbook teaches each type through published exemplars, and its thematic chapter offers guidelines and examples rather than step-by-step instructions (Duque, 2010). The sequence below was synthesized for this article from the sources cited in it and is offered as one workable order, not a standard. The analyst can return to an earlier step at any point.

1. **Define what counts as a story in the data.** It may be a whole life history, an episode told in answer to one question, or a written account. Definitions vary by field (Section 2), and Duque (2010) notes Riessman's observation that many researchers do not make their definition of narrative or their unit of analysis explicit. A written definition settles which parts of the data are analyzed.
2. **Transcribe at the level of detail the chosen type requires** (Section 4.5).
3. **Read each account as a whole before coding.** A short summary of each story, recording who is in it, what happens and how it ends, keeps the case in view.

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4. **Analyze each story through the chosen lens.** This might be Labov's six elements, plot elements such as characters, setting, problem, actions and resolution, or the themes within the single account.
5. **Compare across stories.** Look for shared turning points, contrasting endings and different ways of telling the same kind of event, and record the accounts that do not fit. An account that departs from the rest can inform the analysis of the whole dataset (Wong & Breheny, 2018). The thematic approach, for example, theorizes across a number of cases at this stage (Riessman, 2003/2005).
6. **Write up the findings.** A narrative study can organize its findings by story, scene or character rather than by theme, and should quote enough of each account for a reader to follow it. Thematic narrative studies typically illustrate their typology with case studies or vignettes (Riessman, 2003/2005).

The order matters more than the details. Analysis proceeds **within each story first and across stories second** (Wong & Breheny, 2018). If the within-story analysis is skipped, the result is likely to be thematic analysis under a narrative label.

6. A Worked Example: One Student's Story

The study introduced in Section 3 shows these steps in a published paper. Wood and Sawtelle (2022) report a single case from a longitudinal project that forms part of the first author's doctoral research in physics education. For Nicole's case, their data included around three hours of interviews with her, about 10 pages of her journal entries and more than 100 pages of field notes, whose focus was broader than Nicole alone. The data were collected between spring 2019, when she was at her two-year college, and spring 2021, when she was at the university (Wood & Sawtelle, 2022).

The authors read these data through **five plot elements** (characters, setting, problem, actions and resolution), an approach they adopted from an earlier narrative study (Wickersham & Wang, 2016, as cited in Wood & Sawtelle, 2022). They combined these with the three commonplaces of the narrative inquiry framework described in Section 3. In that framework, sociality covers a person's internal conditions, such as mental health, and external ones, such as supportive or unsupportive peers and mentors (Wood & Sawtelle, 2022). Figure 2 lays Nicole's story out on the five plot elements, alongside the theme that the analysis identified. The authors qualify the resolution: with most of her classes online since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nicole's social anxiety made it hard for her to get to know people online, and her tie to the professor was one-directional (Wood & Sawtelle, 2022).

The study maps onto the sequence in Section 5 as follows, with adjustments that follow from having a single participant:

- **The story (step 1):** Nicole's academic experience across the transfer from one institution to the other, followed over two years.
- **Reading through a lens (steps 3 and 4):** the plot elements and the commonplaces, applied to her account as a whole and presented as four vignettes, or short scenes.

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- **Comparing (step 5):** with one participant, the comparison runs across scenes rather than across people, setting her sense of community at the two institutions side by side.
- **Writing up (step 6):** the results are organized as a story, under headings named for plot elements, such as the conflict (the problem element) and the resolution, and each scene quotes Nicole at length.

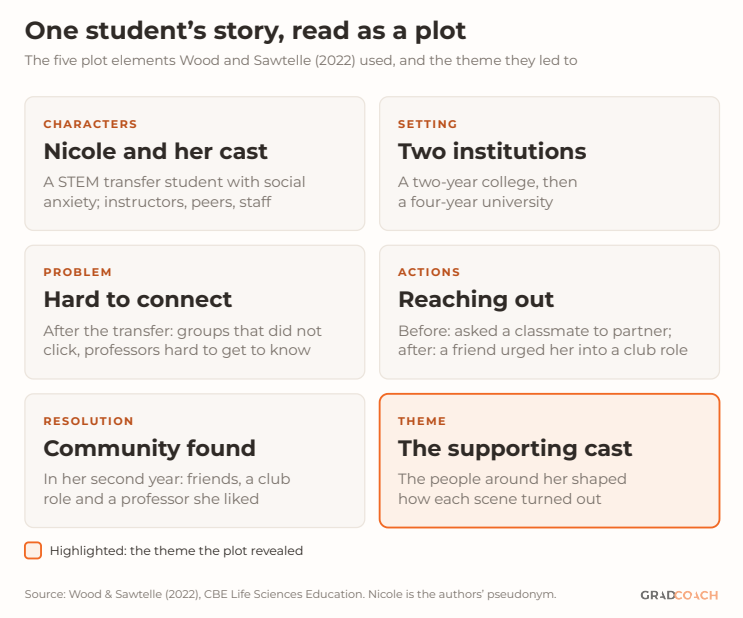


Figure 2. One student's story read through five plot elements, drawn from Wood and Sawtelle (2022).

The paper does not describe its transcription procedure in detail, so step 2 cannot be observed. What the paper does show is a full statement of the researchers' positionality, that is, their own position in relation to the study, including what each author brought to it and how that shaped the choice of Nicole as a case (Wood & Sawtelle, 2022). Such openness matters more when a whole study rests on one account.

A single participant is a defensible sample for a journal article that reports one case from a larger project. A whole thesis built on one participant is less common, and the choice needs to be justified against the research question and agreed with the advisor (supervisor, in UK usage) in advance.

7. Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of narrative analysis is **depth**. Because each story is kept whole, the analysis can show how a person links events and judges their own part in them, which is precisely what is lost when a transcript is broken into codes. Close analysis of a few cases can also build theory. Drawing on a small set of narratives and on Goffman's earlier work, Labov developed a theory of the rules of requests (Riessman, 2003/2005). Riessman also argues that microanalysis of a few cases can relate language and meaning in ways that are missed when language is assumed to be transparent. A second strength is that the analysis begins from participants' own interpretations of

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their lives: in Riessman's (2003/2005) words, "storytellers interpret the world and experience in it" (p. 1). She traces research interest in narrative in part to identity politics and the emancipation efforts of marginalized groups.

The first limitation is **interpretation**. Stories can be read in more than one way, and the analyst's own position shapes the reading. Wong and Breheny (2018) point out that researchers shape a narrative study at every stage: through the questions they ask, how they respond to what participants tell them and which narratives they judge to address the research question. Different researchers therefore arrive at different analyses. Riessman (2003/2005) observes that narratives "do not mirror, they refract the past" (p. 6): tellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it, which is what makes narratives useful as data and also why they cannot be read as a straightforward record. She also notes critics' argument that narrative research can idealize individual agency and claim an authentic voice for the teller, and she identifies over-personalizing the personal narrative as a real danger (Riessman, 2003/2005). The analyst therefore needs to understand each teller's context and to state how their own position affects the interpretation, the practice usually called reflexivity.

The second limitation is **generalizability**. Narrative samples are small: Riessman (2003/2005) states that narrative approaches are not appropriate for studies of "large numbers of nameless and faceless subjects" (p. 6). Guetterman (2015) reviewed 51 studies. For each of five qualitative approaches, he selected the most highly cited studies published from 2008 to 2012 in education and in the health sciences. In education, only three of the narrative inquiry studies reported a specific sample size, and these ranged from 1 to 24 participants; in the health sciences, sample sizes ranged from 1 to 52. Findings from samples of this size cannot be claimed to hold for a population, although they can build or extend theory.

The third limitation is **time**. Riessman (2003/2005) describes some modes of narrative analysis as slow and painstaking, requiring attention to nuances of speech, the organization of a response, the relationship between researcher and participant, and the social and historical context of each story. A project plan should allow generously for the analysis stage.

8. When to Use Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is usually appropriate when the research question concerns **how individuals make sense of something over time**. The wording of the question is a useful test. Questions such as "How do people tell the story of…?" or "How did their experience of… change?" point toward narrative analysis. A study of people facing social marginalization, for example, might analyze how participants say their experience began, whom they hold responsible and what changed for them.

Where the question concerns broader patterns across many people, such as what most participants think or how often something occurs, another method is likely to fit better. Thematic analysis suits shared patterns of meaning across a dataset, content analysis suits categorizing and counting, and discourse analysis suits questions about how language constructs social reality.

A common confusion is between the **research design and the analysis method**. Narrative inquiry is usually treated as a research design: Creswell's typology, for instance, lists it alongside case study, ethnography, grounded theory and phenomenology as one of five approaches to quali-

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tative inquiry (Creswell, 2013, as cited in Guetterman, 2015). Writing in education, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) base narrative inquiry on the view that people lead storied lives. On this view, studying narrative means studying how people experience the world. As a design, narrative inquiry shapes who is recruited and how the researcher works with participants over time. Narrative analysis is the method by which stories are analyzed, and it can also be used within other designs: Ross et al. (2018), for example, used thematic narrative analysis within a mixed methods study. The terms are not always kept apart in published work: Wood and Sawtelle (2022) analyze with a narrative inquiry framework and refer to the analysis as narrative analysis. A methodology chapter that uses both should name both and state the role each played.

9. Conclusion

Narrative analysis interprets the stories people tell in order to understand how they make sense of their experience, and its defining commitment is to analyze each story as a whole before comparing across stories. It can proceed inductively or deductively, and a change of lens is acceptable when it is reported. Riessman's typology offers four overlapping types (thematic, structural, dialogic/performance and visual), each suited to different questions and each requiring a different level of transcript detail. Labov's six-part model remains the classic framework for structural work on short spoken stories. The method's strengths are depth and attention to participants' own interpretations; its limitations are the weight it places on the analyst's interpretation, small samples and the time it takes. Whichever type is chosen, a reader has good grounds to trust the analysis when the study states what it counted as a story, the lens through which each story was read and how the findings follow from that reading.

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