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Qualitative Data Analysis Methods: Types, Techniques and Examples

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Abstract

Qualitative data analysis turns non-numerical material, such as interview transcripts, documents and field notes, into findings. Choosing the analysis method is a frequent source of difficulty: a study may name one method in its methods section and then apply another. This article defines qualitative data analysis and describes seven widely used methods: content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis, grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and framework analysis. For each method it sets out what the method examines, what it produces and its main limitation, and a comparison table summarizes the seven side by side. Five of the sections include an extract from a completed thesis that shows how a researcher named and applied a method. The article then offers a rule for matching the wording of a research question to a method, three practical checks on that choice, and guidance on combining methods. It is intended for students and early-career researchers planning a qualitative analysis, and for the educators who teach qualitative research methods.

Keywords: qualitative data analysis methods; qualitative data analysis techniques; types of qualitative analysis; thematic analysis; content analysis; grounded theory; interpretative phenomenological analysis; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

The choice of a qualitative analysis method is one of the decisions in a methods section that is easily made for the wrong reasons. A student may choose thematic analysis because it is common in the field, or grounded theory because it sounds rigorous, and then describe one method while carrying out another. A reviewer or examiner is likely to notice, because naming a method is a commitment about how the data were handled.

The most reliable starting point is the research question, and in particular what the question asks the findings to deliver. Each method focuses on a different aspect of the data and produces a different kind of result, so a method that suits one question can be a poor fit for another.

This article is written for students and researchers planning a qualitative analysis and for those who teach qualitative methods. Section 2 defines qualitative data analysis and the data it works with. Section 3 describes seven methods, compares them in a single table and, for five of them, analyzes an extract from a completed thesis. Section 4 sets out how a method can be matched to a research question and checked against practical constraints.

2. What Qualitative Data Analysis Is

Qualitative data analysis is the process of organizing and interpreting non-numerical data, such as interview transcripts, documents or field notes, so that they answer a research question. Where quantitative analysis applies statistics to numbers, qualitative analysis works with **words, images and observations**, and its findings are usually themes, categories, accounts or a theory rather than figures.

Qualitative data cover far more than interviews. Figure 1 groups ten common kinds by their source: what participants say or write for a study, what a researcher records by observation, and material that existed before the study began. Many studies draw on one group; some combine two.

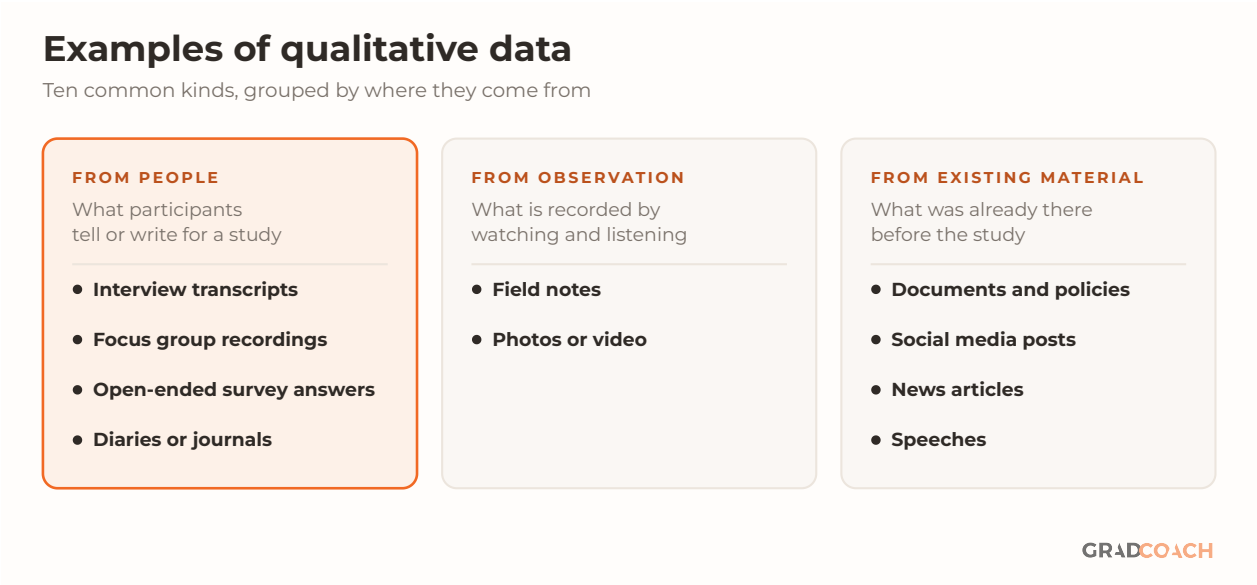

Figure 1. Ten common kinds of qualitative data, grouped by where they come from.

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The choice between qualitative and quantitative research is, in large part, a trade-off between depth and breadth (Figure 2). A qualitative study usually collects detailed information from a small number of cases, whereas a quantitative study collects less information about each of a much larger number.



Figure 2. Qualitative and quantitative research: the trade-off between depth and breadth.

Qualitative analysis requires no statistics, but it does require time. An hour of interview can generate 15 to 30 pages of text (Gale et al., 2013), so a modest study can produce hundreds of pages, in addition to field notes and impressions that were never written down. Turning this material into defensible findings involves reading and re-reading, coding (attaching a short descriptive label to each relevant passage, so that passages with similar meanings can be grouped), comparing and rewriting. Gale et al. (2013) describe qualitative analysis methods in general as time-consuming. Writing about the framework method (Section 3.7), they also note that the interpretation stage often takes longer than anticipated, so a project plan should allow for it.

3. Seven Qualitative Data Analysis Methods

There are dozens of named approaches to qualitative analysis. This article describes seven that students commonly meet: content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis, grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and framework analysis.

The seven overlap considerably, because most of them involve coding the data at some stage. What separates them is **which aspect of the data each focuses on, and what each produces**. Table 1 compares them on both points.

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Table 1. Seven qualitative data analysis methods compared.

Method	What it examines	What it produces
Content analysis	What texts contain, coded into categories and often counted	Categories and patterns across many texts
Narrative analysis	The stories people tell, and how they tell them	An account of how people make sense of events
Discourse analysis	Language in its social context, including power	An account of how language shapes a social reality
Thematic analysis	Patterns of meaning across a dataset	A set of themes, each supported by extracts
Grounded theory	A process that existing theory explains poorly	A new theory, built from data collected in rounds
IPA	How a few people make sense of a major experience	Detailed case-by-case accounts, then shared themes
Framework analysis	The same topics across every case, compared in a matrix	A chart of cases by codes, then themes across it

The final column is the most useful guide to a choice. A researcher who knows what the findings chapter or results section must deliver is most of the way to choosing a method.

3.1 Content analysis

In **content analysis**, the researcher codes the content of texts, images or video into categories, then looks for patterns within or across them. It works well on large collections, such as newspaper coverage, policy documents, social media posts or speeches. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) distinguish three approaches: conventional, in which the categories are derived from the data; directed, in which a theory or earlier findings supply the initial codes; and summative, which counts and compares keywords or content and then interprets the context behind them.

The analysis can stay close to the surface or reach further. At the surface, a researcher might count **how often a concept appears**, such as how frequently news reports describe nurses as heroes. At a deeper level, the researcher might examine what the wording implies, such as how tourism brochures present a country as ancient or modern. Graneheim et al. (2017) distinguish descriptions of manifest content, which stay close to the text, from interpretations of latent content, the underlying meaning that the text implies.

Because content analysis often counts, it brings an element of quantitative thinking into a qualitative study. Counting is both the method's strength and its main weakness. Vaismoradi et al. (2013) identify the opportunity to quantify as the main difference between content analysis and thematic analysis, and note that the frequency of a category can be used, with caution, as a proxy for its significance. Counting can also detach a phrase from the context that gave it meaning. The method further requires a tightly defined question; without one, a researcher can code everything and conclude nothing.

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A doctoral dissertation in government from Cornell University provides a clear example. It analyzed presidential commemorative speeches from South Korea and Taiwan given between 1948 and 2022, a collection of more than 500 speeches. The extract sets a rule for borderline cases in advance:

> To systematically analyze these speeches, I construct a three-point coding protocol on two items of interest: oneness and objective (see Table 4.2). Oneness depicts the use of "One Korea" or "One China" narrative and records whether leaders portray South Korea and Taiwan as one with or separate from North Korea and China, respectively. [...] For replicability, I formalize principles of clarity in my coding practice: only when a speech explicitly supports a category, it is coded as such. Otherwise, it is coded as "mixed" or "status quo."
>
> Jo (2024, p. 55)

The passage names **two things to code**, gives each a three-point scale and defines them; the definition of the second is omitted here for length. It also decides in advance what happens to a speech that does not clearly fit. A footnote on the same page adds that inter-coder reliability, the extent to which different coders code the same material in the same way, was addressed by co-coding and cross-checking items with eight research assistants. A study using content analysis benefits from the same practice: decision rules written into the codebook before coding begins, so that two readers would reach the same codes.

3.2 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis studies the stories people tell, and how they tell them. Riessman (2003/2005) describes it as a family of approaches to texts that share a storied form, and identifies what makes a text a narrative: "sequence and consequence: events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience" (p. 1). Because stories are one of the ways people make sense of what has happened to them, analyzing their structure, sequence and emphasis can show **how a person understands their own experience**.

A study might analyze how entrepreneurs describe the setbacks in their careers, or how patients with a chronic illness tell the story of their diagnosis. The analysis asks what happened, and also which events the teller places first, whom the teller holds responsible, and where the turning point falls.

Narrative studies usually work with a small number of participants, because each story is long and read closely; Riessman (2003/2005) notes that narrative approaches are not suited to studies of large numbers of participants and that some modes of analysis are slow and painstaking (p. 6). A small sample limits how far the findings can be generalized. Close reading also places the researcher's interpretation at the center of the analysis, so the researcher needs to be open about how their own background shapes what they see.

A doctoral dissertation in English from Purdue University studied community organizers in Appalachia, using participants' photographs and written stories, focus groups and interviews. The extract shows the order in which the stories were analyzed:

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> Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that researchers are often uncertain about how to write up results derived from narrative-focused studies because of their "knowing, and caring for" participants (p. 145), and that was certainly true in my case. Using this care, I read through focus group and interview transcripts, as well as participants' written narratives, first identifying dominant narratives about Appalachian life (as outlined in Chapter One). I then coded transcripts for other narratives that emerged through a grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987), most of which challenged or critiqued dominant narratives previously identified. This structure shaped the structure of Chapters Four, Five, and Six, as they each respond to prevailing narratives about Appalachian life.
>
> Carlson (2019, p. 65)

The analysis runs in two passes: first the familiar stories told about the region, then **the stories that push back against them**. For the second pass, the study borrows the coding procedure of grounded theory, names it and cites it, without claiming to be a grounded theory study. Borrowing of this kind is acceptable provided the methods section does what this passage does and states which method did which job. The findings chapters can then follow the structure of the analysis, as the chapters of this dissertation do.

3.3 Discourse analysis

Discourse is language in use, written or spoken. **Discourse analysis** examines language within its social context: how the way people talk about something reflects, and helps to create, the culture and power relations around it. A study might analyze how managers and junior staff in a company speak to each other, or how politicians talk about immigration after an election.

Much of the analysis depends on context. A junior employee may speak casually to the chief executive in a company that prides itself on a flat structure, and very formally in one that does not. Discourse analysis asks what that difference reveals about the organization.

Approaches range from close readings of grammar and word choice to **critical discourse analysis**, which describes, interprets and explains how discourses construct, maintain and legitimize social inequalities (Mullet, 2018). Mullet (2018) also notes that critical discourse analysis is not a single procedure: the methods used depend on the research goals and theoretical perspective. Where the aims of a study concern culture, identity or power, discourse analysis is a strong candidate. Because almost any text can be read in this way, a precise research question helps to keep the analysis within bounds.

Discourse analysis is easily confused with content analysis, since both often work with documents. The Cornell dissertation quoted in Section 3.1 describes how the two relate: its hand-coded content analysis "aims to bridge the interpretive foundations of discourse analysis and narrative comparability afforded by content analysis" (Jo, 2024, p. 56). Put simply, **discourse analysis interprets what language does**, whereas content analysis makes texts comparable by coding what they contain. A researcher should decide which of the two the research question requires.

3.4 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis identifies **patterns of meaning, called themes, across a dataset**, such as a set of interview or focus group transcripts. The researcher codes the data, groups related codes and develops themes that answer the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe themat-

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ic analysis as a widely used method in psychology that offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to qualitative data. They set out a guide in six phases, from familiarization with the data to producing the report, and stress that analysis moves back and forth between the phases (pp. 86–87). The thesis discussed later in this section follows their version.

A hypothetical example illustrates the method. A study of why customers keep returning to a popular sushi restaurant might use 100 online reviews as its data. The researcher codes each review, then groups the codes into themes such as "feeling known by the staff" and "freshness as proof of care." Each theme is supported by quotations from the reviews, and together the themes answer the research question.

The method is popular because it is flexible: it is not tied to a single theory, so it suits a wide range of questions about people's **experiences, views and opinions**. That flexibility, however, needs explaining. A reviewer or examiner will want to know which version was used and why, including whether the themes were developed inductively from the data or deductively from existing theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83–84), a distinction that runs through thematic analysis more generally (Gale et al., 2013).

A master's thesis in education from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, which studied teachers' perspectives on their professional standards, addresses this directly. It explains its version of the method before listing any steps; in the extract, EC stands for the Education Council, whose workshop feedback forms were one of the three data sources:

> I used a theoretical thematic analysis approach to analysing data to make meaning of the focus group transcripts, documents and EC workshop data. Thematic analysis can be flexible, but to provide readers with an understanding of how the analysis has been done and why, it is worth discussing briefly the assumptions that underpin the approach selected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Taking a theoretical approach to the analysis rather than an inductive approach aligns with my desire to understand teachers' perspectives and experiences in relation to the theoretical framing of mature professionalism where standards can be a catalyst for professional learning. Through my analysis process, this theoretical framing influenced what I observed and noticed as I coded. I also sought to retain the rich descriptions and experiences that teachers relayed as I identified themes.
>
> Barnes (2019, p. 29)

The thesis names a **theoretical (deductive) approach rather than an inductive one**, ties that choice to its framework, and acknowledges that the framework shaped what was noticed during coding. The acknowledgment strengthens the thesis, because a reader can see where the themes came from. A methods section using thematic analysis should state in the same way whether the themes came from the data or from a framework, and why.

Two practical cautions apply. First, themes often shift as the analysis proceeds, so the schedule should allow time for rework. Second, a list of themes is not the end point: the findings need to explain what the themes mean together (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94).

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3.5 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is used to **build a new theory from data**, rather than to test an existing one. Strictly, it is a research design rather than only an analysis method, because it shapes how data are sampled and collected as well as how they are analyzed. It is included here because students often meet it as an analysis choice.

What makes a study grounded theory is a set of practices: constant comparison of new data with what has already been coded, memo writing (notes on codes and categories as they develop), and **theoretical sampling** (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Instead of choosing a representative sample at the outset, the researcher lets the developing analysis decide what data to collect next. Chun Tie et al. (2019) describe theoretical sampling as a practice that "is used to identify and follow clues from the analysis, fill gaps, clarify uncertainties, check hunches and test interpretations as the study progresses" (p. 3). Theoretical sampling continues until theoretical saturation is reached, that is, until the categories stop developing (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Figure 3 shows these practices as a loop, with saturation as the way out.

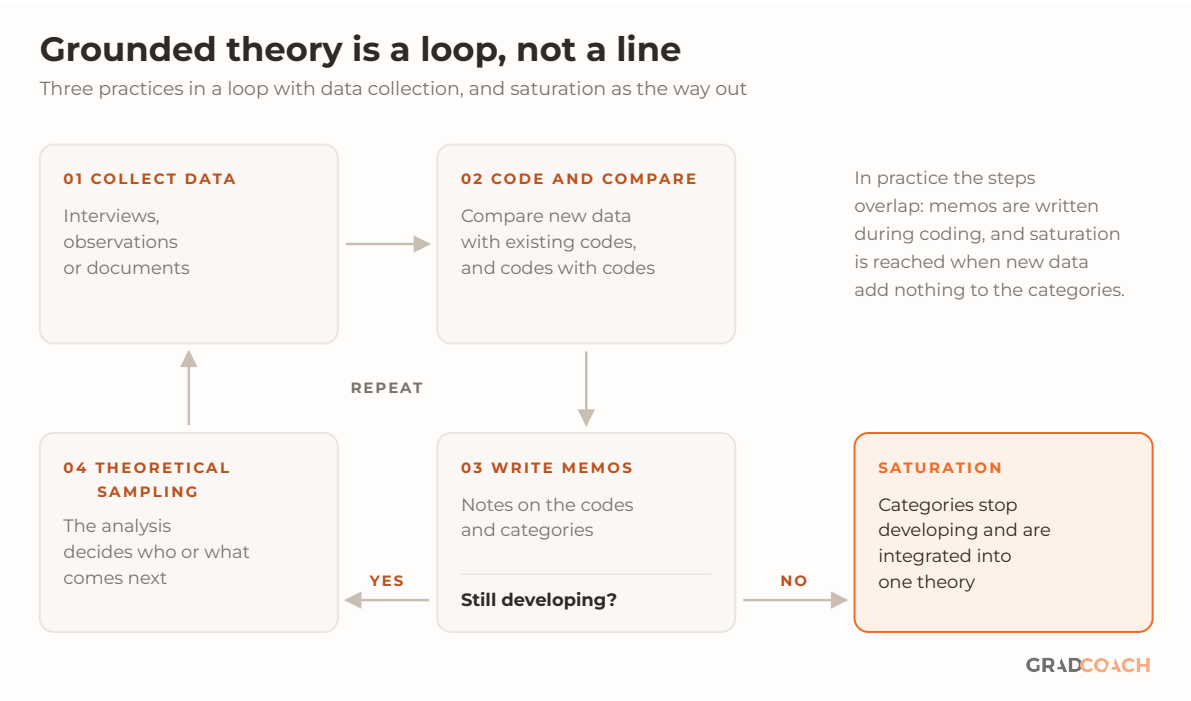

Figure 3. Grounded theory as a loop, with saturation as the way out.

A hypothetical example shows the logic. A study might set out to explain how part-time doctoral students decide whether to continue after a setback. The researcher interviews a small number of students and codes the interviews. If the early analysis suggests that contact with an advisor matters, the next round of interviews might deliberately include students who changed advisors, in order to test and refine that idea. Round by round, the categories develop into a theory of how the decision is made.

Grounded theory suits topics where **little existing theory explains what is happening**. It is demanding, however. Data must be collected in rounds, which can be difficult to fit into a one-year master's program. Grounded theory also exists in several versions, which differ on when to read the existing literature. Thornberg (2012) explains that classic grounded theory recommends delay-

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ing the literature review until the analysis is nearly complete. Later versions, including Strauss and Corbin's and constructivist grounded theory, allow existing literature to be used; Strauss and Corbin add the condition that it must not block discovery (Thornberg, 2012). A researcher should choose one version and follow it consistently.

A common difficulty is a study that describes itself as grounded theory but delivers a list of themes. A study that does not sample theoretically or build a theory is more accurately described by another name, often thematic analysis, and should be named accordingly.

3.6 Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) explores **how individual people make sense of a major experience**, such as a diagnosis, becoming a parent, losing a job or living through a disaster. This experience is the "phenomenon" in the method's name. IPA suits questions about lived experience, asked of a small number of people who share that experience.

The interpretative element is central. In IPA, the researcher tries to make sense of the participant's own attempt to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA is also idiographic: it examines **each case in detail before moving to general claims**, and IPA samples are usually small (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

That focus on the individual is easily lost. The data are still coded, but an analysis that reduces every account to a handful of codes can lose the depth that justified choosing IPA. And because the researcher's interpretation is part of the analysis, the researcher must state explicitly how their own experience shapes it.

IPA is one of several kinds of phenomenological analysis, and the differences between them matter. Neubauer et al. (2019) distinguish transcendental, or descriptive, phenomenology, derived from Husserl, in which the researcher brackets, or sets aside, their own subjectivity during data collection and analysis, from hermeneutic, or interpretive, phenomenology, in which the researcher acknowledges their preconceptions and reflects on how their subjectivity is part of the analysis. They describe IPA as an approach in which the researcher takes a more active role in interpretation than in other approaches.

A doctoral dissertation in nursing from the University of Massachusetts Amherst illustrates the contrast. It studied nurses who had witnessed dying patients' end-of-life dreams and visions (ELDVs), and it used descriptive phenomenology rather than IPA. The extract shows what that approach asks the researcher to do with their own experience:

> Another reason Husserl's phenomenology approach was chosen is its emphasis on "bracketing" for acquiring knowledge. Husserl believed that to achieve new knowledge, a researcher's former knowledge and experience should be bracketed so as not to influence gathered data. As a nurse with 33 years of experience and personal encounters witnessing ELDVs, I believe that bracketing provided the best opportunity to capture the pure essence of the participants' subjective and objective experiences.
>
> Herron (2025, p. 35)

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Descriptive phenomenology seeks to **set the researcher's experience aside**. IPA treats the researcher's interpretation as part of the analysis and asks for it to be made visible. Neither is wrong, but they are not interchangeable, so a researcher should establish which of the two the design actually follows, then name it precisely along with the analysis procedure that accompanies it. The nursing dissertation does this: one page before the extract, it names Colaizzi's method of data analysis as the procedure for its descriptive phenomenological analysis (Herron, 2025, p. 34).

3.7 Framework analysis

Framework analysis, also called the framework method, was developed by Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer for large-scale social policy research and is now widely used in health research (Gale et al., 2013). Gale et al. (2013) place it within a broad family of methods often termed thematic analysis or qualitative content analysis. Its defining feature is a **matrix of cases (rows) by codes (columns)**, which allows comparison across participants and across codes at the same time.

Gale et al. (2013) recommend the method for interview data where themes are to be generated by comparing within and between cases, and note that its clear steps suit research teams in which not every member has experience of qualitative analysis. Its main limitation follows from the matrix: it **cannot accommodate data that vary widely in content**, so the interviews must cover similar topics or key issues, although individual participants may hold very different views on each.

A doctoral dissertation from the University of Calgary, in community health sciences, used framework analysis on interviews with 13 international experts in health technology reassessment and knowledge translation. The extract gives a reason for the choice, then names the method's five steps, the last of which combines mapping and interpretation:

> Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. The transcripts and field notes were entered into NVivo 12 plus qualitative data analysis software to organize and code data (QSR International, MA) (138). Framework analysis was used to analyze the data, as it allowed for a rich and in-depth analysis of the interview data through categorization of the characteristics (139-142). Framework analysis was initially developed by Ritchie and Spencer (143) and has been further developed by others (139, 140). It is a type of thematic analysis that has five distinctive steps: familiarization, identifying an analytic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation. Theme-based or case-based analysis, or a combination of the two, can be conducted through the development of charts (144).
>
> Esmail (2020, p. 163)

The passage also credits the method's originators. Authors count those steps differently: where the extract lists five, Gale et al. (2013) divide the same work into seven stages, from transcription to interpretation. A methods section should **cite the version it follows** and keep that version's step names consistent throughout.

4. Choosing an Analysis Method

The choice of analysis method should fit the research questions and overall aims of the study, and should already be considered at the proposal stage (Gale et al., 2013). The wording of the research question is usually the best guide:

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- "How often…?" or "How is X represented in these documents?" points to **content analysis**.
- "What are people's views or experiences of X?" points to **thematic analysis**.
- "How do people tell the story of X?" points to **narrative analysis**.
- "How is X talked about, and with what effect?" points to **discourse analysis**.
- "What process explains how X happens?", where little theory exists, points to **grounded theory**.
- "How do these people make sense of X?", asked of a few people, points to **IPA**.
- "How do these cases compare on the same set of issues?" points to **framework analysis**.

These are tendencies rather than rules. Where the research question and the method point in different directions, however, the mismatch is usually visible to a reader of the study.

Once a method is favored, it should be checked against three practical considerations. The first is **the data**: IPA needs rich accounts from a few people, whereas content analysis can handle hundreds of documents. The second is the **research philosophy** of the study, since some methods carry assumptions about knowledge that others do not. The third is **time**, because the rounds of data collection in grounded theory can require months that a short program may not provide.

More than one analytic approach can be used in a single study, as the dissertation in Section 3.2 shows. The reasoning resembles triangulation, the use of multiple methods or data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014). What matters is that each method has a clear purpose; an ad hoc combination of methods threatens trustworthiness (Morse, 2009, as cited in Carter et al., 2014).

A method should never be chosen only because it sounds impressive or because the researcher has used it before. Nor should a method be named unless its defining practices are followed: an analysis described as IPA but lacking the case-by-case reading is one example. The methods section should **name the method and its version precisely**, cite the source followed, justify each choice and show each step with a short example from the data. The findings should then be presented in a form that matches the method.

5. Conclusion

Qualitative data analysis turns non-numerical data, such as transcripts, documents and field notes, into findings that answer a research question. The seven methods described here differ in what they examine and what they produce: content analysis categorizes what texts contain; narrative analysis studies the stories people tell; discourse analysis interprets what language does in its social context; thematic analysis develops patterns of meaning across a dataset; grounded theory builds a theory through rounds of data collection and analysis; IPA interprets how a few people make sense of a major experience; and framework analysis compares cases on the same issues in a matrix. The research question is usually the best guide to the choice, and the choice should then be checked against the data, the research philosophy and the time available. Whichever method is chosen, a methods section that names the method and its version, cites its source and shows how each step was applied gives a reader no reason to doubt that the method described is the method used.

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