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Thematic Analysis: Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Approach

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Abstract

Thematic analysis is one of the most widely used methods for analyzing qualitative data, yet it is often reported in ways that mix incompatible versions of the method. Braun and Clarke, whose 2006 paper is the standard citation, have since revised their account: they now call their approach reflexive thematic analysis, describe thematic analysis as a family of approaches, and say that themes are generated by the researcher rather than emerging from the data. This article sets out what thematic analysis is, how a theme differs from a code and from a topic summary, and when the method suits a research question. It distinguishes coding reliability, codebook and reflexive approaches, and explains the inductive–deductive and semantic–latent orientations. It then describes the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis under their current names, illustrating each with a published worked example: eleven interviews with educators in Irish post-primary schools, analyzed by Byrne (2022). It closes with common problems in published thematic analyses. The article is intended for students and early-career researchers planning a qualitative analysis, and for the educators who teach qualitative research methods.

Keywords: thematic analysis; Braun and Clarke thematic analysis; reflexive thematic analysis; thematic analysis in qualitative research; qualitative thematic analysis; codebook thematic analysis; qualitative data analysis; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

Thematic analysis is a method for developing patterns of meaning, called themes, across a qualitative dataset in order to address a research question (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-b). It is used across the social and behavioral sciences and in applied fields such as health and education (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-b), and Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that it should be the first qualitative method a researcher learns, because it teaches core skills that carry over to many other forms of analysis.

The method is often treated as the straightforward option, and it is frequently reported in ways that are hard to defend. Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) describe published studies that cite their 2006 paper as the source of their procedure and then report practices the paper does not recommend, such as codebooks (structured coding frameworks), consensus coding (settling the final coding by agreement between coders) and measures of coding reliability (statistics for agreement between independent coders). Much of the confusion arises because their own account has changed. In 2006 they presented thematic analysis as a single, theoretically flexible method, without acknowledging the diversity of approaches that share the name (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). They now call their approach **reflexive thematic analysis**, a name that places the researcher's subjectivity, and reflection on it, at the center of the analysis. They place it within a family of related approaches and have revised several of their original terms (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2023). Researchers who follow their approach are urged to "read beyond our 2006 paper!" (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 5).

This article sets out the method as Braun and Clarke now describe it, and notes where that account departs from the 2006 paper. Section 2 defines thematic analysis and distinguishes a theme from a code and from a topic summary. Section 3 considers which research questions the method suits. Section 4 describes the main types of thematic analysis and the orientations an analysis can take. Section 5 describes the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, each illustrated with a published worked example (Byrne, 2022). Section 6 summarizes common problems in published thematic analyses.

2. What Thematic Analysis Is

Braun and Clarke's (2006) original definition describes thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns, or themes, within data. Their current wording places the researcher at the center of that process: themes are generated by the researcher through data familiarization, coding, and the development and revision of themes (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-b). A theme matters because it helps to address the research question, not merely because it recurs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two researchers working with the same transcripts but different research questions can therefore produce different themes. The data are usually text, such as interview or focus group transcripts, open-ended survey responses or documents.

2.1 Codes and themes

Thematic analysis moves between two units of analysis. A **code** is a short label for a feature of the data that may be relevant to the research question; a good code is brief but carries enough detail to be understood without the extract beside it (Byrne, 2022, p. 1399). A **theme** is broader: in reflexive

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thematic analysis it is a pattern of shared meaning organized around a central concept, the core idea that unites the data it contains (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Codes are the building blocks; themes are constructed from them. Figure 1 shows the relationship in an invented example.

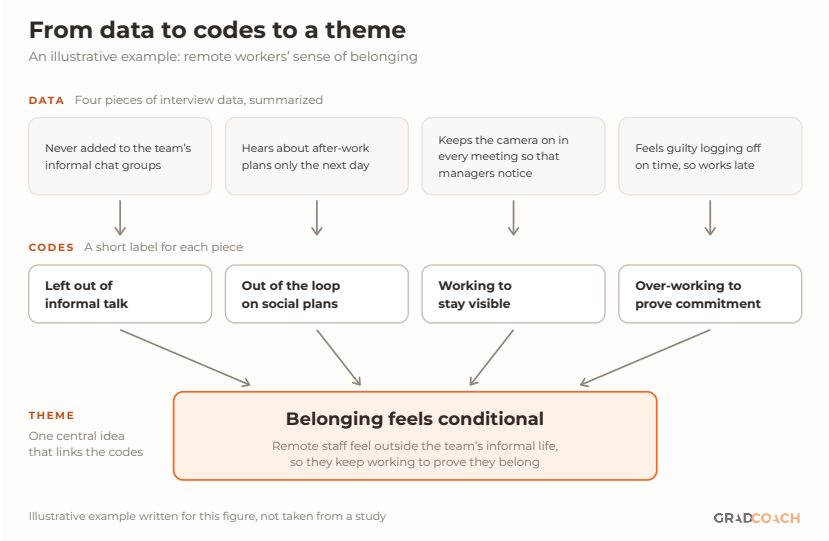


Figure 1. From data to codes to a theme, in an invented example about remote workers.

The theme in Figure 1 makes a claim that none of the four codes makes alone: that remote staff experience belonging as something to be earned. That claim is what distinguishes a theme from a list of related observations. In a real analysis, a theme would draw on data from many participants rather than four extracts.

2.2 Themes and topic summaries

Braun and Clarke (2023) distinguish two conceptions of a theme. A **topic summary** gathers what participants said about a topic, so what unites its data is the topic itself, such as "good experiences in healthcare." A **meaning-based theme** is united by a shared idea, and tells an interpretative story about it; such a theme can draw together data on topics that seem unrelated (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 2). Topic summaries are often used as themes in coding reliability, some codebook approaches and thematic coding (Section 4). In reflexive thematic analysis, however, Braun and Clarke regard them as conceptually out of place, and they offer a test:

> If you could conceivably have developed this theme before analyzing your data, or if it maps closely on to a data collection question, then it is quite likely to be a topic summary.
>
> Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 2)

Theme names can also signal a topic summary. Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 3) give as warning signs a one-word name that identifies a topic, or a name such as "Experiences of...," "Barriers to..." or "Influences on...." A theme with such a name may still be meaning-based but badly named; the test is whether a central idea unites its data.

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2.3 A method, not a methodology

Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 5) describe thematic analysis as closer to a method than a methodology: unlike grounded theory or discourse analysis, it offers few directives on philosophical position, research questions, data collection or sample size. This lack of directives is the source of its often-cited flexibility. Their view of that flexibility has narrowed, however. In 2006 they described thematic analysis as usable within realist frameworks, which take participants' accounts as reporting their experience and reality, and within constructionist frameworks, which treat meaning and experience as socially produced (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They now regard it as theoretically flexible only as a generic method, with each version of thematic analysis constrained by its own assumptions about knowledge, or epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For the reflexive version, they write:

> We originally stated that reflexive TA could be underpinned by (simple) realism (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but we now think the Big Q research values of reflexive TA make a simple or naive realist reflexive TA a tricky proposition.
>
> Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 4)

Big Q research values, which treat the researcher's subjectivity as a resource (Section 4.1), are the qualitative values on which reflexive thematic analysis rests. Because the method does not supply a theoretical position, the researcher must state one. A methods section should therefore say what assumptions the analysis makes about the data and what the data are taken to represent, rather than leaving the reader to infer them (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 4).

3. When Thematic Analysis Fits

Thematic analysis suits research questions about patterns of meaning across a dataset. Braun and Clarke (n.d.-b) list the kinds of question their reflexive version can address, which are questions about:

- people's experiences, or their views and perceptions
- how something is understood or represented
- the factors or social processes that shape a phenomenon
- the norms that govern a practice
- what people do
- how meaning is constructed.

They add that different question types call for different versions of the method, informed by different theoretical frameworks.

The method is not the right choice for every qualitative question. Table 1 compares it with methods that students commonly weigh against it. Content analysis can count how often categories occur, which Vaismoradi et al. (2013) identify as the main difference between the two. Narrative analysis works within a single account rather than across a dataset, and grounded theory aims to generate a theory of the phenomenon studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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Table 1. Thematic analysis compared with four methods it is often weighed against.

If the study needs to...	Consider
Develop patterns of meaning across many participants or texts	Thematic analysis
Categorize content systematically, often with counts	Qualitative content analysis
Analyze how individuals structure and tell their stories	Narrative analysis
Examine how language constructs meaning or power	Discourse analysis
Develop a new theory from the data	Grounded theory

The boundaries in Table 1 are not fixed, and many studies draw on more than one method. Braun and Clarke (2021, 2023) accept such combinations when they are deliberate, justified and theoretically coherent; their objection is to combinations made without acknowledging that the procedures rest on different assumptions.

4. Types and Orientations of Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 1) describe thematic analysis as "a family of methods, not a singular method." They group the members into three main types (coding reliability, codebook and reflexive thematic analysis) and add a fourth, thematic coding, which uses grounded theory coding procedures to develop themes and was more common before thematic analysis was recognized as a distinct method (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2023). The approaches share the practices of coding and theme development, but they differ in how coding is done, in what a theme is taken to be and in the research values behind both (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Table 2 summarizes the three main types.

Table 2. Three main types of thematic analysis (after Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2023).

Type	What it values	How coding works
Coding reliability	Objective, reliable coding	A structured codebook, several coders working independently, and a measure of their agreement
Codebook (e.g., framework or template analysis)	Some structure, within qualitative research values	A structured codebook, with themes typically developed early; the codebook charts the analysis rather than measuring agreement
Reflexive	The researcher's interpretation, made visible	Open, organic coding with no codebook or agreement measure; codes evolve through repeated rounds

Template analysis and the framework method, the two codebook approaches named in Table 2, show how a codebook approach works in practice. In template analysis, the researcher builds an initial coding template from part of the data, sometimes starting from tentative themes chosen in advance, and then applies it to further data, revising it as the analysis proceeds (Brooks et al., 2015). In the framework method (also called framework analysis; Brooks et al., 2015), researchers agree on a working analytical framework of codes after coding the first few transcripts, apply it to the remaining data and summarize the data in a matrix, with cases as rows and codes as columns (Gale et al., 2013).

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4.1 Small q and Big Q

The differences in Table 2 follow from a distinction Braun and Clarke take from Kidder and Fine (1987, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2023). **Small q** qualitative research uses qualitative techniques within a (post)positivist framework. Coding reliability thematic analysis is an example: it emphasizes the objectivity, reliability or accuracy of coding, and uses structured codebooks, multiple independent coders, measures of intercoder agreement and consensus coding to control "researcher bias." **Big Q** qualitative research uses qualitative techniques within qualitative research values, treating the researcher's subjectivity as a resource and meaning as situated and partial. Reflexive thematic analysis is a Big Q approach; codebook approaches combine some of the more structured procedures of coding reliability thematic analysis with some of the qualitative values of the reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 2).

These assumptions decide which procedures make sense. Reflexive thematic analysis does not treat coding as accurate or inaccurate, so a measure of agreement between coders has nothing to measure. In their review of published studies, Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 2) describe reflexive analyses with "conceptually incoherent additions, such as small q consensus coding and measuring intercoder agreement." A second researcher is not excluded: where more than one person codes, the purpose in reflexive thematic analysis is to develop a richer reading of the data, not to reach consensus on its meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022, p. 1393).

4.2 Choosing a type

Many students and researchers code alone, and reflexive thematic analysis requires no second coder (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding reliability approaches, by contrast, depend on several independent coders. The number of coders is not the deciding factor, however. Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 4) recommend that researchers determine their research values and philosophical assumptions, and make sure that their approach and procedures cohere with them. A study that assumes a correct reading of the data can be found and checked belongs with coding reliability; a study that treats interpretation as the substance of the analysis belongs with the reflexive approach.

4.3 Orientations within an analysis

Whichever type is chosen, an analysis takes a position on several further questions. Two concern the analysis itself:

- **Inductive or deductive.** In a more inductive analysis, coding and theme development are directed by the content of the data; in a more deductive analysis, they are directed by existing concepts or ideas (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-b).
- **Semantic or latent.** Semantic coding captures the explicit content of the data; latent coding captures the assumptions and ideas that underlie it (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-b).

The 2006 paper presented these as decisions, and described a thematic analysis as typically focusing exclusively or primarily on one level of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2019) later named one common misreading of their approach: treating these orientations as either-or choices, when coding can mix semantic and latent, and inductive and deductive. They

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now describe them as continua rather than fixed opposites, and state that all positions are possible within reflexive thematic analysis. Some positions do tend to go together: inductive, semantic and critical realist approaches often cluster, as do deductive, latent and constructionist ones (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-b). A purely inductive analysis is not possible, because researchers cannot set aside their theoretical and epistemological commitments when they code (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Braun and Clarke also ask researchers to address two further continua, which Byrne (2022, pp. 1394–1396) sets out in the worked example. The first is epistemological: essentialist (a realist position, as described in Section 2.3; Braun & Clarke, 2006) versus constructionist, framed on their website as more critical realist versus more constructionist (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-b). The second is the orientation to the data: an experiential orientation seeks to reflect participants' experience of a social reality, and a critical orientation examines how that reality is constituted. Figure 2 locates Byrne's study on the inductive–deductive and semantic–latent scales. The study was predominantly inductive, with some deductive analysis to keep the coding relevant to the research questions, and it used both semantic and latent codes without prioritizing either (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397).

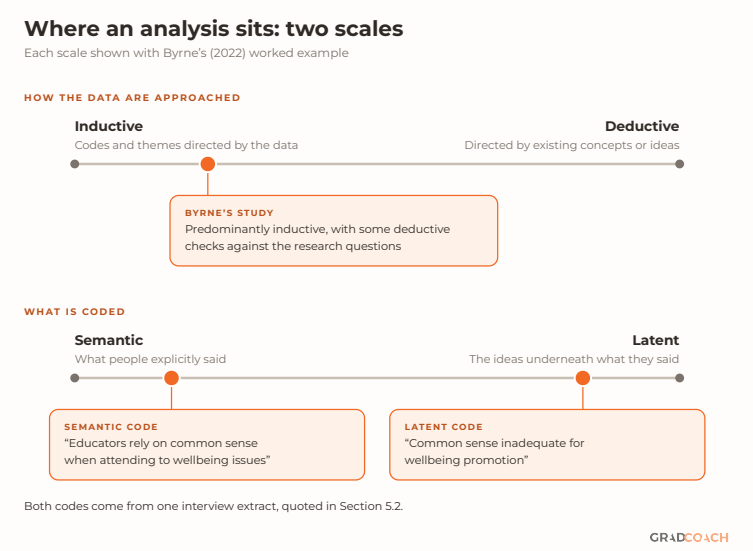


Figure 2. Inductive–deductive and semantic–latent as continua, located with Byrne's (2022) study.

A methods section needs a position on each scale, with the reasons it suits the research question (Byrne, 2022, p. 1395).

5. The Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke describe reflexive thematic analysis in six phases (Figure 3). The phases are sequential, each building on the one before, but analysis is typically recursive, with movement back and forth between them; they are tools to guide the analysis, not rules to be followed rigidly (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a). The 2006 paper made the same point: its guidelines were not rules, and were to be applied flexibly to fit the research question and data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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Figure 3. The six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, under Braun and Clarke's current names.

The names of the phases have changed since 2006 (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a), so older sources and many published studies use different labels for the same process. Table 3 sets the two sets of names side by side. The change from "searching for themes" to "generating initial themes" is deliberate: Braun and Clarke (2019) prefer the newer term because it emphasizes that themes are not in the data, waiting to be retrieved.

Table 3. Phase names in Braun and Clarke (2006) and their current names (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a).

Phase	2006 name	Current name
1	Familiarizing yourself with your data	Familiarizing yourself with the dataset
2	Generating initial codes	Coding
3	Searching for themes	Generating initial themes
4	Reviewing themes	Developing and reviewing themes
5	Defining and naming themes	Refining, defining and naming themes
6	Producing the report	Writing up

The phases say what an analysis should cover, not exactly how to carry out each step. Researchers should therefore cite the source they follow and describe what was actually done in each phase, including the decisions made, rather than restate the phases (Braun & Clarke, 2024). A study that uses a codebook or coding reliability approach should follow, and cite, the procedure of that approach instead.

The subsections below illustrate each phase with a published worked example of reflexive thematic analysis (Byrne, 2022), summarized in Figure 4. The data came from the qualitative phase of a mixed methods study: eleven semi-structured interviews, of approximately 25 to 30 minutes each, with core-curriculum teachers, wellbeing curriculum teachers, pastoral care staff and senior managers in Irish post-primary (secondary) schools. The research questions concerned educators'

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attitudes toward promoting student wellbeing and toward a set of wellbeing guidelines recently introduced in their schools (Byrne, 2022, p. 1394). Byrne's paper uses the 2006 names, or close to them, for three of its phase headings: "generating initial codes," "defining and naming theme" and "producing the report."

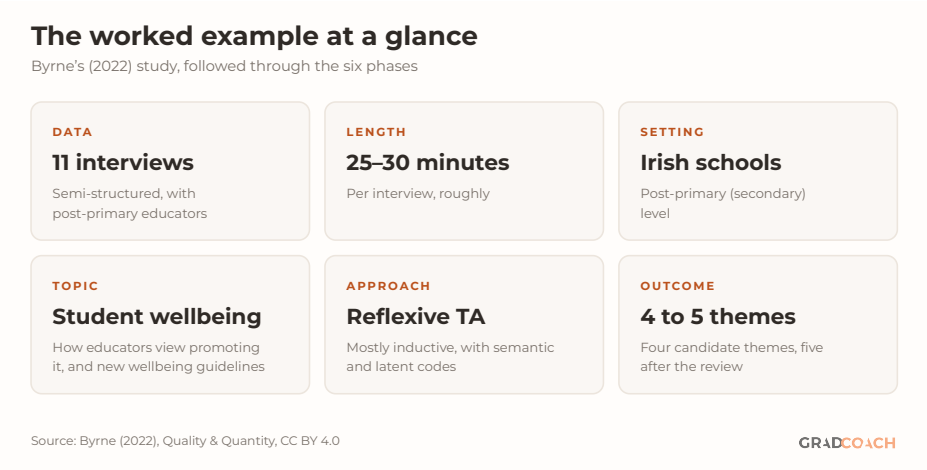


Figure 4. The worked example at a glance, summarized from Byrne (2022).

5.1 Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the dataset

Familiarization means reading and rereading the data until its content is intimately familiar, and making notes on initial observations. The notes cover each data item, such as a single transcript, and the dataset as a whole (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a). The aim at this stage is to form first impressions; conclusions come later.

Transcribing the data is one route to that familiarity. Byrne (2022) notes that manual transcription "can greatly facilitate a deep immersion into the data" (p. 1398). Byrne also notes that a researcher who did not collect or transcribe the data benefits from listening to or watching the recordings. In the worked example, Byrne listened to each interview once without taking notes and transcribed it immediately afterwards. Byrne then read every transcript several times, noting initial trends, interesting passages, and thoughts and feelings about the data and the analytic process. Byrne recommends keeping such notes throughout the analysis, for transparency (pp. 1398–1399).

Notes of this kind are the beginning of a reflexive journal: a record of what the researcher expected to find, what surprised them, and where their own experience may be shaping the analysis. Byrne (2022, p. 1409) recommends keeping a research journal over the entire course of the research. Together with the coding records described next, it forms an audit trail of how the analysis moved from data to themes.

5.2 Phase 2: Coding

Coding means attaching succinct labels to features of the data that may be relevant to the research question. The whole dataset is coded, usually in two or more rounds, and the codes and relevant extracts are then collated for the later phases (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a). A code may be descriptive or interpretive (Byrne, 2022, p. 1399); semantic codes are the descriptive kind, and latent codes the

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more interpretive (p. 1397). One extract can also carry more than one code. The worked example shows both points in a single extract, from a participant discussing how able they felt to attend to students' wellbeing needs:

> ...if someone's struggling a bit with their schoolwork and it's getting them down a bit, it's common sense that determines what we say to them or how we approach them. And it might help to talk, but I don't know that it has a lasting effect.
>
> Participant 2B, in Byrne (2022, p. 1402)

Byrne coded the extract semantically as "educators rely on common sense when attending to well-being issues" and latently as "common sense inadequate for wellbeing promotion" (2022, p. 1402). The semantic code records what the participant said they do; the latent code records what the researcher read beneath it, an implied doubt that common sense is enough. Both codes were revised later in the analysis.

The first round of coding in the worked example used the comment function of Microsoft Word. Later rounds were tracked in a spreadsheet, with each data item in one column and each round of coding in the next, and every changed code highlighted. Byrne recommends documenting how codes evolve, both for transparency and so that the researcher can return to an earlier point if a line of interpretation proves unproductive (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1399–1402). Such a record becomes part of the audit trail and allows a supervisor, examiner or reviewer to see how the codes developed.

5.3 Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Once the dataset is coded, the focus moves from individual data items to patterns across them. Codes that share an underlying idea are grouped into candidate themes, and the data relevant to each candidate theme are collated so that its viability can be reviewed (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a). A thematic map or table showing which codes sit under which theme is a useful output of this phase (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1403–1404).

Byrne's first map held four candidate themes (Figure 5). One, "factors inhibiting wellbeing promotion," gathered everything that hindered educators, under four sub-themes: a lack of training, time constraints, a lack of value placed on wellbeing promotion, and knowledge of the necessary documents. Even at this stage, Byrne judged the theme "very dense and unwieldy" (2022, p. 1404) and likely to need revision.

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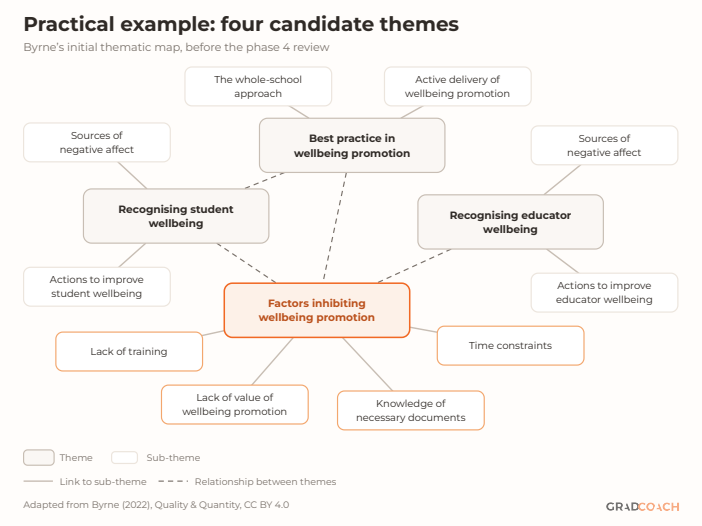


Figure 5. Byrne's initial thematic map of four candidate themes. Adapted from Byrne (2022), CC BY 4.0.

There is no correct number of themes. With too many, an analysis can become unwieldy and incoherent; with too few, it may fail to explore the depth and breadth of the data (Byrne, 2022, p. 1403). Nor does the importance of a theme depend on how many codes or data items support it. What matters is whether the pattern says something meaningful in answer to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022, p. 1403).

5.4 Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

In this phase the candidate themes are checked against the coded data and the entire dataset to establish whether they tell a convincing story that addresses the research question. Themes may be split, combined or discarded as they develop (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a). The 2006 paper describes the review at two levels: first the coded extracts within each theme, to see whether they form a coherent pattern, then the dataset as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 65, as cited in Byrne, 2022, p. 1404) propose five questions for this review:

- Is this a theme (it could be just a code)?
- If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?
- What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
- Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?
- Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?

In the worked example, the dense candidate theme, "factors inhibiting wellbeing promotion," had problems with the last three questions. Its boundaries were hard to identify, it was "particularly dense (or too thick)," and it was somewhat incoherent (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1405–1406). Byrne returned to earlier phases and broke it into three themes, reconceptualizing the data rather than simply relabeling the sub-themes:

- "Time constraints" became **"the influence of time,"** which captured a two-way pattern: existing time pressures made wellbeing promotion harder, and wellbeing promotion added time pressure on core curricular work.

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- "Lack of training" and "knowledge of necessary documents" were judged "topical rather than thematic" (p. 1406). Their data were read as a single story of educators attending to student wellbeing without a theoretical basis, and folded into one theme, **"incompletely theorised agreements."**
- "Lack of value of wellbeing promotion" became **"the axiology of wellbeing promotion"** (axiology is the study of values), once it was clear that participants saw educators and students as valuing wellbeing promotion differently, and that educators' views were not necessarily negative.

The review changed other themes too. Within "recognising educator wellbeing," the sub-theme "sources of negative affect" was split into "work-related negative affect" and "the influence of wellbeing promotion," and the sub-theme on actions to improve educator wellbeing was folded into these two (Byrne, 2022, p. 1405). The final map (Figure 6) holds five themes.

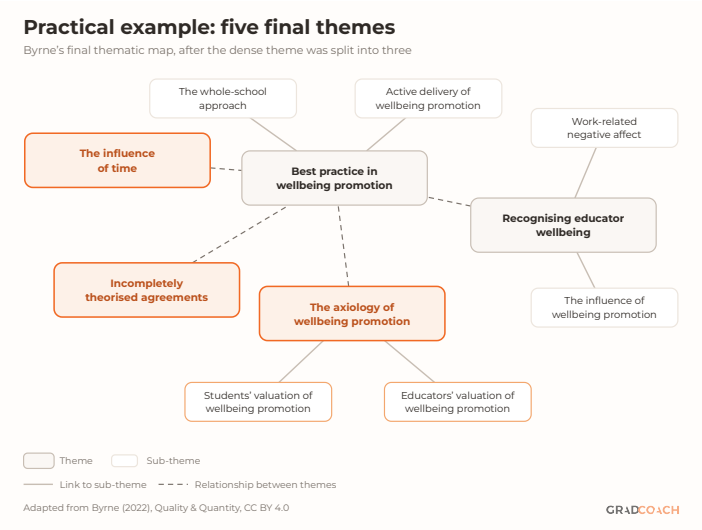


Figure 6. Byrne's final thematic map of five themes. Adapted from Byrne (2022), CC BY 4.0.

Four candidate themes became five because one was split into three and another, "recognising student wellbeing," does not appear on the final map. The paper does not say what became of that theme's data. An audit trail that records why a theme was removed, as Byrne recommends for significant changes (2022, p. 1406), closes exactly this kind of gap.

Two practical checks correspond to the two levels of review described at the start of this section: the coded extracts within each theme, then the dataset as a whole. At the first level, laying a theme's extracts side by side shows whether they share one idea or only one subject. At the second, rereading complete transcripts with the list of themes alongside shows what the themes miss.

5.5 Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes

In this phase the researcher analyzes each theme in detail, working out its scope and focus, determining the story it tells and giving it an informative name (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a). The 2006 paper offers a test of readiness: if the scope and content of a theme cannot be described in a couple of sentences, the theme probably needs further refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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A name can be short, but the definition behind it must say something about the data. The time theme in the worked example, reworked during the phase 4 review, shows the difference. Its starting point, "time constraints," named a problem; the final theme described a two-way relationship between time pressure and wellbeing promotion. The name "the influence of time" could still read as a topic (Section 2.2), and it is the definition that makes it a theme. Byrne (2022) advises names that are concise, informative and memorable, and reports that Braun and Clarke encourage catchy names that communicate an important aspect of the theme, sometimes built around a short extract from the data (pp. 1408–1409).

This is also the phase in which the extracts to be quoted are chosen. Byrne (2022, p. 1407) recommends several extracts per theme, drawn from across the data that inform it, to show both the range of expression and the coherence of the theme, and recommends interpreting each extract rather than simply reporting it.

5.6 Phase 6: Writing up

The write-up weaves the analytic narrative together with data extracts and places the analysis in the context of existing literature (Braun & Clarke, n.d.-a). Writing is not confined to the end: the 2006 paper describes it as an integral part of the analysis that should begin in the first phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and Byrne (2022, p. 1409) treats the final phase as the completion of a report begun much earlier.

Extracts can be reported illustratively, describing what participants said, or analytically, interpreting what was said and relating it to the literature. Byrne (2022, p. 1407) reports a simple test from Terry et al. (2017, as cited in Byrne, 2022): if an extract can be removed and the write-up still makes sense, the reporting is illustrative; if the write-up no longer makes sense, it is analytical. Both styles are acceptable (Byrne, 2022, p. 1407), but in either case the write-up must go beyond describing the data and make an argument in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A findings section that strings quotations together under theme headings reads as a summary of the data rather than an analysis.

The order of themes also matters. Themes should connect logically and build on one another, while each still tells its own story (Byrne, 2022, p. 1410). The worked example reported "best practice in wellbeing promotion" first, as an accessible introduction to the analysis. It then reported "the axiology of wellbeing promotion," followed by "the influence of time" and "incompletely theorised agreements," because time pressure on training helped push educators toward such agreements. Finally, it reported "recognising educator wellbeing" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1410). Braun and Clarke (2023) also recommend giving readers a clear overview of the themes as a list, table or thematic map.

In a thesis, the analysis is usually reported across the methodology, findings and discussion chapters. Byrne (2022, p. 1410) notes a tension here: Braun and Clarke recommend contextualizing the data within the literature as the results are reported, whereas many theses and journals separate results from discussion. A methods section should name the type of thematic analysis and the source followed, describe each phase as it was carried out, and state the position the analysis took on the orientations in Section 4.3.

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6. Common Problems in Published Thematic Analyses

Braun and Clarke (2021, 2023) have reviewed problems in published studies that cite their work. Five of them, each avoidable with the distinctions drawn in this article, are set out below.

1. **Topic summaries presented as themes.** Braun and Clarke (2023) identify themes organized around a topic, often named after it, as the most common problem in reflexive thematic analysis. The test in Section 2.2 applies: a theme that could have been written before the analysis, or that mirrors an interview question, is probably a topic summary. Even the worked example's first map contained a candidate theme that Byrne found dense, unwieldy and hard to bound (2022, pp. 1404–1406), and the review judged two of its sub-themes "topical rather than thematic" (p. 1406).
2. **Unacknowledged combinations of types.** A reflexive analysis that reports an agreement statistic, or a coding reliability study that presents the researcher's subjectivity as a strength, combines procedures that rest on incompatible assumptions. Braun and Clarke (2023) call the slide of positivist concepts such as "researcher bias" into reflexive analyses "positivism creep" (p. 2). Combinations are acceptable when they are justified; unexamined ones are not.
3. **Themes that "emerged."** The language of emergence suggests that themes exist in the data before the analysis. Braun and Clarke criticized it in 2006 and are blunter now: "In reflexive TA, themes are generated, created or constructed (for example), they are not identified, found or discovered, and they definitely don't just 'emerge' from data" (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 3).
4. **Quality practices that do not fit the approach.** Saturation (collecting data until no new codes or themes appear), triangulation (cross-checking findings across data sources, methods or researchers) and member checking (inviting participants to comment on whether the analysis represents their experience) are often reported in thematic analyses. However, Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 4) question whether these realist practices cohere with reflexive thematic analysis, and suggest that quality measures be chosen to fit the approach and its assumptions. Member checking (also called participant validation), for example, presumes an external standard against which an analysis can be judged accurate. Braun and Clarke (2024) argue that this assumption is incoherent with reflexive thematic analysis. They recommend member reflections instead: a practice, described by Tracy (2010, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2023), in which participants' responses are used to extend the analysis rather than to verify it. Where a study does use member checking, Birt et al. (2016) recommend that the report explain how the chosen procedure fits the study's epistemological position.
5. **No account of the process.** Braun and Clarke (2023) ask researchers to discuss exactly how they engaged with their chosen approach to produce the analysis. A study that cannot show how its codes became its themes gives a reader no way to judge the analysis; the coding records and thematic maps from phases 2 to 4 provide that evidence. For reflexive thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2024) propose the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) in place of general qualitative reporting checklists, such as the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR).

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Braun and Clarke (2023, pp. 1–2) describe the first of these problems as a confusion between the two conceptions of a theme set out in Section 2.2. When themes look like topic summaries, the test in that section and the five review questions in Section 5.4 are the first checks to apply.

7. Conclusion

Thematic analysis develops patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset in order to address a research question. It is a family of approaches rather than a single method. Coding reliability, codebook and reflexive thematic analysis differ in how they code, in what they take a theme to be and in the research values behind these choices; a study should name the approach it follows and use procedures consistent with it. In Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach, themes are meaning-based stories generated by the researcher, not topic summaries and not patterns that emerge unaided. The inductive–deductive and semantic–latent orientations are positions on continua rather than either-or choices. The six phases, under the current names given in Table 3, guide the analysis without prescribing it, and the analysis moves back and forth between them. Byrne's (2022) worked example shows the phases in practice, including a candidate theme that was rejected at review and rebuilt as three. Because Braun and Clarke's account has changed since 2006, a study using reflexive thematic analysis should cite their more recent work alongside the original paper and describe how each phase was carried out.

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