

Strategies Used by Experts

Overview

Analysis—Honoring the Stories
by Mary Anne Casey

Report Writing Without Guilt
by Reyn Kinzey

An Analysis Strategy Based on Post-Session Debriefings
by David L. Morgan

Computerized Analysis
by David L. Morgan

Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results
by Marilyn J. Rausch

I've invited several experts to share their strategies for focus group analysis. Note that they use different strategies and procedures. Some strategies are regularly used, but others are not. All of these individuals are masters at analysis. They consistently produce top-quality results. Give thought to their suggestions.

The experts are the following:

Mary Anne Casey, a focus group moderator and evaluation consultant in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. She works primarily with not-for-profit organizations. I've watched her analyze focus groups and found that she has a special gift in listening, analyzing, and reporting.

Reyn Kinzey, Vice President, Kinzey & Day Qualitative Market Research, in Richmond, Virginia. He is also a member of the adjunct faculty for the English Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. Through workshops, presentations, and articles, he has helped focus group moderators across the country on practical strategies for analysis and reporting.

David L. Morgan, a professor at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon. A sociologist by training, he has keen insight into the human condition, a scholar's eye for detail, and the wisdom that comes from academic research. He offers two strategies for consideration.

Marilyn J. Rausch, a focus group moderator in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. She has traveled throughout the country conducting hundreds of focus groups on a wide variety of topics. She has taught focus group moderating, coached beginning moderators, and is regularly sought out by other moderators for advice and counsel.

Analysis—Honoring the Stories

by Mary Anne Casey

I work with not-for-profit agencies, which usually means no money for rooms with one-way mirrors. This, in turn, means the people interested in the results often don't get a chance to experience the groups firsthand. They don't get a chance to feel the delight, concern, pain, or indifference. They don't get to hear people describe what they like or don't like. They don't see what makes people angry or what gives them hope. They don't hear the stories. So I become their storyteller. My role is to honor what people have shared and present it to the sponsor of the study in a way that is useful.

When I first started analyzing focus groups, I used the same process over and over. It didn't matter what the study was about, how complex the topic was, how much money was in the budget, or how many groups were being done. I didn't stray from this

process. It gave me structure, which gave me courage to wade into the messiness of analysis. I always knew how to start, and I always started as soon as the first group ended so I never had to face a pile of unanalyzed tapes. And I only dealt with manageable chunks of data. It made the thought of doing analysis less overwhelming.

Here is the process I have often used:

- I participate in the groups as the moderator or assistant moderator. For me, being present in the group makes analysis much easier. I have a feel for the gist of the group, which is lost if I only listen to the tapes.
- I type an abbreviated transcript as soon as possible after each group. I listen to the tape, and for each question, I transcribe only the comments that might be useful in analysis. I don't type the introduction. I don't type anything that is off track. I don't type the "uh-huhs," "yeah," or "you knows." I boldface all of the questions so they are easy to find. I use the cut-and-paste function on the word processor to move text to the appropriate question. (For example, if responses to question five are really answers to question seven, I move that text under question seven.)

As I listen to tapes, I ask myself:

Does the information answer the question?

What can I say about the responses to this question in a report?

How useful is the information?

Based on the purpose of the study, what else would I want to know if I were the sponsor?

- I try to finish each transcript before conducting the next group. It is amazing how this can improve moderating. While transcribing, I often catch things I didn't catch while I was moderating.

I may realize the participants never really answered the question, so I know I need to make sure they answer the question in following groups. Example: In recent groups with university faculty members, I asked them what their college should focus on in the next 5 years. They had a rousing conversation. It wasn't until I listened to the tape that I noticed the conversation was about the lack of direction of the college leadership, rather than which direction the participants thought the college should go.

Or I may realize that the group is interpreting a question in an unintended way, so we need to rephrase the question. Example: A health-care system

was trying to improve care of patients with chronic depression. The sponsor wanted to find out family members' perceptions of how family members were involved in the patients' care. We asked family members, "How involved do you feel you've been in your family member's care?" When listening to the tapes, I realized that family members thought the question was about how involved they were in caring for the patient on a day-to-day basis while at home, rather than about how health-care professionals had involved family members in the treatment process.

Or I may discover that a theme is developing and that I need to explore this theme more deeply with the next groups. Example: In the same study of how to improve the care of people with major depression, we asked patients what they looked for in a caregiver. Over and over, people said, "someone who listens" and "someone who cares." In later groups, I pressed participants to give examples of what caregivers did that showed they cared or that they were listening and, in reverse, what caregivers did that showed they weren't listening or didn't care.

- If the sponsor wants a written summary of each group, I will write a short (one- to two-page) bulleted summary after I have completed the abbreviated transcript. The summary may list key points or may contain a two- to three-sentence summary of responses to each question. I also include recommendations for changes to the following focus groups based on what we learned in this group.
- After I have completed a series of transcripts, I start to analyze systematically across groups. Sometimes, I just get all the transcripts around me, read them looking for patterns and trends, and highlight quotes I want to use. Other times, I merge the computer files of the transcripts and then move all the answers to question one from all the groups to the same spot. I continue for each question. I end up with a master transcript—one document containing all the relevant responses. This way, I can look at one text rather than flipping through three or four transcripts. I examine all the responses to a particular question looking for patterns, trends, or themes across responses. I move quotes that illustrate a particular theme together. Then I write a paragraph summarizing that theme. Then I move down the list of questions. When using a master transcript, I delete quotes I don't want to use, rather than highlighting quotes I want.

- During this process, these kinds of questions run through my head:
 - What are people saying?
 - What are people feeling?
 - What is really important?
 - What are the themes?
 - How do the groups compare?
 - Are there any gems or bits of wisdom that were said only once but deserve to be noted?
 - Which quotes really give the essence of the conversation?
 - What will be useful to the sponsor?
- Before I am done analyzing across groups in this question-by-question process, I begin to struggle with how to present what was heard in a meaningful way. What are the overarching themes or messages? What does all this mean? How should it be presented? I don't really know how to describe how I do this. It is the art of analysis. Sometimes, I know immediately what and how to share what was learned. Other times, I walk around for days, even weeks, moving data through my head, mulling over what was said, waiting for inspiration to strike—to discover a categorization scheme, story line, or format that really describes what we learned from the groups. When it happens, I know.
- When I have prepared a written or oral report, I ask myself if it really reflects what participants said. I want to honor what they shared and be true to them.
- It may sound like I'm the Lone Ranger when it comes to analysis. I'm not. Throughout the process, I have sounding boards nearby—perhaps colleagues or assistant moderators who know the study. I can describe a finding, share my perspective on it, and ask for theirs. Additional filters or perspectives can be immensely helpful. In addition, I share what I have heard and my perceptions with the sponsor along the way. That way, I can make sure I am gathering information that is helpful to them.

Although this is the process that I often use, I do modify it.

- I don't always use transcripts. Although a part of me still wonders if I have given a study adequate attention if I don't use transcripts, another part is secure in knowing that most sponsors want and expect a small number of key points, and these points can be found without sifting through hundreds of pages of quotes. I've found that key points

usually resurface and repeat in various parts of the focus group.

- Sometimes, I use flip chart notes and field notes as a basis for a group summary. If I know a sponsor wants a summary of each group very quickly (like the day after each group), I take more notes on the flip chart during the group. There just isn't time to wait for a transcription as a basis for a summary.
- Sometimes, I use transcripts others have typed. Although I believe typing my own transcripts has made me a better moderator, I hate transcribing. Also, it isn't cost-effective for me to do it. So, these days, I often have someone else transcribe if transcripts are needed.
- Sometimes, I use only the assistant moderator's notes as a basis for analysis. I now know that different studies call for different degrees of analysis. Not every focus group study needs transcripts.
- Sometimes, I use transcripts for some groups and field notes for other groups in the same study. Recently, we conducted 16 groups for a study: four groups in each of four cities. The budget didn't allow for transcripts of all groups, but we felt some transcription would improve analysis. After completing a set of groups in a city, we would decide which two of the four groups would be transcribed. We then used a combination of transcripts and field notes for analysis.
- Sometimes, I use a moderator debriefing session and field notes as the basis for analysis. Sometimes, we have multiple moderators involved in the same study. As part of the analysis process, we convene the moderators at the completion of the groups and ask them to share what they heard in response to each of the questions. We ask them to compare and contrast groups. We ask them to provide verbatim quotes from their notes that illustrate the points. We ask them for their interpretations and what they see are the key points of the study. Then we use this as the basis for analysis.

The key to analysis is to know what will be useful to the sponsor. Once I understand the quest from the sponsors' perspective, then my job is to sort through the data to unearth or highlight the information that will be most helpful to them. So I always begin analysis with a clear understanding of the problem. Then I pass all information through a mental screen of "does this help solve the problem?"

For quite a while, my analysis consisted of describing what was said. I thought it was enough. It usually seemed so self-explanatory. Now I push myself to give my interpretation of what it means and to share what I think might be done based on what I heard.

Report Writing Without Guilt

by Reyn Kinzey

Many moderators, including some of the best and most experienced in the business, tell me they hate writing reports. They never question the importance of the reports—to provide a historical record of the findings, state recommendations, and provide a sense of closure to the project. They just hate writing them.

Some of that dread is understandable. The skills of a good moderator are not necessarily the same as those of a good report writer—moderators are extroverted, verbal people, while writers are often introverted, literary (visual) people. Nevertheless, I would argue that moderators already have the essential skills to be good, competent report writers: They are trained to be good listeners who hear people on their own terms; they can summarize what they hear; and they have the intuitive sense of where to go next in a conversation, and, by extension, in a research project. If moderators would allow themselves to think more clearly about the process of report writing, including an honest appreciation of the strengths and limitations of qualitative market research, I think most of them could write reports without so much anxiety and, perhaps just as importantly in today's competitive environment, more quickly.

First, we need to remember that the kind of qualitative research I am discussing here—focus groups and one-on-ones—is first and foremost based on people's self-reports of their own behavior and attitudes. We are not psychoanalysts. Our first duty is to report what people have said about their own behavior and attitudes. As a moderator, I believe as much as the next person in reading body language and paying attention to what is not said as well as to what is said. However, as a report writer, I finally have to report what was said. If I was able, as a moderator, to use "negative body language" to probe more deeply into what participants "were really thinking," then, good for me; I can use what I got from those probes in the report. If I didn't manage such effective probing, any speculation I might offer on "what they were really thinking" is just that: speculation. It doesn't have any place in the report.

This reliance on participants' self-reports of their behavior and attitudes is a great strength of qualitative research. It is a correcting influence on advertisers, product designers, service providers, and even politicians, who tend to forget what people in the real world really care about. Of course, if you want to look at it another way, this is a "limitation" of qualitative research, because we have only the self-report of a limited number of participants. But this is a tremendously liberating revelation to the report writer. Once we realize that our first (not necessarily our most important, but our first) duty is to report what we've heard from a limited number of participants, we have confined the report to a very manageable scope.

In academia, it's sometimes almost impossible to write anything, because we have a nagging feeling that there's one more article we should have read or one more source we should have checked. Not so with reports of qualitative research. Once the groups or one-on-ones are over, they're over. We have a finite amount of data to work with. We report those data, and we draw our conclusions and make our recommendations based on that finite amount of data.

This has some very practical applications. For example, if I am asked to write a full report, I simply organize my Detailed Summary of Findings according to the subheadings of the moderator's guide. My clients always sign off on the guide so I assume my basic responsibilities are

1. to find out what my participants think and feel about those issues outlined in the guide, and
2. to report what they said.

Using the guide as a scaffold for the report doesn't always make for the most creative writing, but it is very efficient and easy to read, and it certainly avoids writer's block. I always know what I have to cover next.

Now, some people will object that simply reporting what we've heard reduces the qualitative researcher to the position of a mere scribe. In fact, Pat Sabena, current president of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA), has recently made a point of arguing that European moderators see American moderators as "merely reporters." I am sensitive to that criticism, and that is why I said our *first*, not our most *important* duty is to report what was said. I believe our most important duty is to analyze what we've heard, draw conclusions, and make recommendations. That's what I try to do in the Executive Summary of Findings, which, by the way, I find increasingly is all clients want.

But here, too, we come back to the liberating aspects of the limitations of our endeavor: All of our analysis, conclusions, and recommendations need to be based on whatever our participants said in the two, four, or even a dozen groups under discussion. Even if it is a big project, the data are finite, and that's what we have to work with.

As qualitative researchers, we bring to bear on that analysis years of experience in many different fields—marketing, advertising, sociology, applied linguistics, and others. We have every right to apply what we know to the analysis of what we've heard, but, again, I'd argue that we have to apply it to what we've heard. If, for example, a moderator with a background in advertising has heard that a campaign isn't working, and the participants have suggested why it isn't working and what might work, that moderator can and should make recommendations based on what participants said. However, if that moderator wants to suggest a totally different campaign, based on nothing that he or she has heard in the groups, I would say that doesn't belong in this particular report. If such moderators also want to act as advertising consultants, then more power to them. But that shouldn't be confused with qualitative research.

This realization, too, I think, has a liberating effect on the report writer: We don't have to face every imaginable possibility. We deal with what is in front of us. We examine what we've heard, draw conclusions, and make recommendations based partially on our own years of experience.

Finally, that process does not need to be lengthy. As I've tried to insist, the data are limited and finite, and whatever experience we already have is already internalized. So, the analysis is generally an intuitive one. It has to be, because qualitative market research is inductive. We don't have numbers to play with, rearrange, cross-tabulate, and put through extensive analysis. We search the data we have for insights, and insights can come with the speed of light.

An Analysis Strategy Based on Post-Session Debriefings

by David L. Morgan

This is a simplified analysis strategy that basically consists of tape recording carefully formatted debriefing sessions following each focus group. Its chief advantages are its relative low cost and quick turnaround time. It is most useful for smaller projects involving four or five groups and an oral or brief written report. In addition, it works best for projects that use the same set of well-defined

questions across all the groups. The main thing that it requires is a reasonably sharp assistant.

Prior to Analysis

Before the first group, the assistant and the moderator need to agree on the assistant's observational goals—that is, what to watch for during the group. In addition, the assistant needs a consistent means for recording these observations. For assistants who do not have prior experience with this analysis strategy, I create a structured data recording sheet that is based on the interview guide. More experienced assistants can record their observations on a version of the interview guide that has lots of “white space” after every question. Either way, the key data to be captured are notes about which topics generated the most energy in the discussion and the extent to which a topic generated either consensus or differences of opinion. The assistant records this information for each question in the interview guide, along with any interesting quotations from that segment of the discussion.

The Debriefing Session

Immediately after each group, the moderator and assistant debrief together using a tape recorder to capture their thoughts. We begin by generating a thumbnail description of the group that includes information on how many participants there were, the group's composition, and any notable circumstances that influenced their discussion. After we discuss and decide on these issues, we turn on the tape recorder and the moderator dictates the thumbnail description. We then turn off the tape recorder and move on the first question. Using the assistant's notes, we go over the major points that came up in the discussion of this question. Once we decide what we should say to summarize this part of the group discussion, the moderator turns the tape back on and dictates this summary. This debriefing proceeds through each question in the guide, following the same process by first discussing and deciding what to say, then dictating a summary of what the group said. After we work our way through the whole guide, we conclude by deciding what were the major themes and most notable points in this group, and then dictate that information.

Writing the Report

I have each debriefing tape transcribed and word processed immediately. Since such a tape typically contains 20 to 30 minutes of dictation, it should take less than an hour to transcribe. If the

turnaround time for the project is really tight, I reserve the transcript typist's time in advance, so that the tape can be delivered and picked up according to schedule. To assemble the actual report, I bring all of the debriefing files together in a word processor. If the report requires a group-by-group summary, I recast each transcript as a "top-line" report for that group. I then go over the full set of debriefing summaries to determine what were the key themes across the full set of discussions, as well as how similar the groups were to one another.

I usually begin a brief report by stating the major themes that apply across the full set of groups. If there were important differences across the groups, I describe them here. Then, I go through the rest of the report, question by question from the interview guide. For the write-up of each specific question, I first relate the discussion of that question to the big themes that I stated at the beginning of the report. Then, I summarize additional topics that came up in the discussion of that specific question.

I conclude a report like this with either recommendations or a less forceful statement of my own observations if the research's sponsor did not specifically request recommendations.



**See Chapter 11
For More
Information on
Top-Line Reports**

Computerized Analysis

by David L. Morgan

My work often calls for me to analyze focus group data for publication in refereed, academic journals. I call the approach I use "qualitative content analysis," and I've described various aspects of it in a series of publications that I did from my research on caregiving for family members with Alzheimer's disease. This was a large project (35 focus groups), so I conducted the analyses using the computer. In addition, analyzing large data sets often means working with a research team, and that was definitely the case in the project I will describe here. Although I supervised and participated in every phase of the analysis, five research assistants did the bulk of the coding.

For this summary of my analysis process, I want to emphasize the role that the computer plays. What I describe below is based on using The Ethnograph, but working with other software packages would be similar. For those who are not familiar with using qualitative analysis software, it is important to clarify just what the computer does and does not do. First of all, it doesn't "do the analysis." I find it more useful to think of the computer as a powerful indexing and cross-referencing tool. As you locate segments of the data that you want to label or "code," the program records your analytic efforts; later, it allows you to

search for and retrieve these codes, just as a good index in a book would. Still, it is up to you to figure out not only what set of coding categories to use but also where to apply each code in the text you are analyzing. In other words, you do the analysis, and the computer records and systematizes your work. Using a computer is no substitute for reading and thinking about the data!

During the Group

To record the data in the most useful fashion, it is necessary to keep track of who said what during the group. The easiest way to do this is to have the assistant keep a “speaker log.” We give each participant an ID number at the start and then keep a running record of the first phrase or so of what each speaker says. For example:

#3 The hardest part for us was . . .

#6 We never had that . . .

During the transcription process, the typist both listens to the tape and follows through the log, inserting the proper ID number at the start of what each participant says. The transcript thus contains clear data about who said what. The obvious advantage of this system is that it makes it easy to tell if the whole group has an interest in a topic or if just one person mentioned it repeatedly.

You may also want to include data that the software will attach to either individual speakers or the group as a whole. This may be from the observer’s note taking or from variables in a questionnaire. For example, in our work with Alzheimer’s caregivers, the assistant noted each participant’s gender. Using this information in the software allowed us to do separate searches to list the codes from statements by male and female caregivers.

To move from the tape recordings to the computer involves transcribing the data in a word-processing program according to the analysis software’s required format. This is usually not difficult for a trained typist, but it does take some careful planning and checking. When working with new typists, we usually have them do a small trial section of a transcript and check that, rather than having to reformat a whole transcript that didn’t match what the software required.

Codebooks Are Central to the Analysis Process

In order to mark and retrieve sections of text, you need a set of codes that capture your key analytic constructs. For example, in the Alzheimer’s caregiving research, we used two basic types

of codes. The first type captured social network data by marking all references to other people, using code categories such as spouse, neighbor, or doctor. The second type of code captured the different types of stresses associated with caregiving, including problems with time, money, exhaustion, emotions, lack of information, and family conflict.

I usually plan to make at least two coding “passes” through the transcripts. In between the two passes, our research team updates and refines our initial codebook, based on what we learned in our first pass through the data. We thus start with a simpler set of codes and expand it as we become more familiar with the data.

The first pass involves reading the entire text of each transcript to apply the initial set of codes. I usually begin with relatively simple sets of codes that can be easily applied to the data as soon as they arrive. This first pass thus makes heavy use of so-called manifest content codes, which are concrete things that can immediately be recognized and marked. In the Alzheimer’s study, we used more than 20 manifest content codes for relationship categories: father, mother, sister, brother, and so on.

For more complex, and thus less “manifest,” codes, I prefer to start with broad categories in the first-pass coding. For example, among our initial stress categories, we knew that emotions would be a very complex area, but we wanted to let our coding of emotional issues emerge from the data. To do that, we began by finding as many instances of emotional stresses as we could during the first-pass coding.

The second coding pass through the data essentially refines and updates the code categories from the first pass. On the one hand, it cleans up manifest content categories if there were some items that we had not anticipated in the initial coding system. More critically, it expands and refines the coding system for initially broad codes into more specific categories. For example, an earlier broad code category such as emotional stress would become several well-specified subcategories.

How the Software Makes a Difference

The main thing that using a computer does is to make your analytic efforts very systematic. It forces you to think through what you are doing, prior to proceeding with each step, and it provides a formalized record of what you do. This is especially useful if your work is likely to be “audited” or otherwise reviewed by others. The computerized record, as embodied in codebooks and codes applied to transcript segments, makes any inconsistencies in the analytic process all too obvious.

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Using computer software also makes it much easier to update and modify your coding systems. This is especially useful in a two-pass coding system, because you can search out instances of specific codes that need to be expanded or updated. Thus, rather than having to reread all the text in every transcript to recode specific forms of emotional stress, the computer can locate every instance of the initial broad code category, so that the analyst can read each passage and assign the appropriate additional code(s) to it.

Using the computer to locate coded sections of the transcript is called searching, and this is one of the most powerful advantages in using a software package. The most obvious thing you can do is to find and list all instances of a particular code. For example, suppose you want to examine all the instances of a broad, first-pass code category, so that you can begin to create a more refined set of subcategories for a second pass. It would take only a single command to search through all of the transcripts at once, collect the appropriately coded material into a new file, and print it all out, along with information about from which group and speaker(s) each passage came. The computer also makes it possible to do more complex searches using the Boolean operators AND, OR, and NOT. For example, we could search for all instances of emotional problems that also involve family conflict, and we could further refine the results of this search to separate out instances that include siblings but not other family members—and so on.

To Count or Not to Count

One of the options that goes along with searching is counting. In the example about family conflict, combining searching and counting would make it easy to state the percentage of the instances of family conflict that involved siblings. In the caregiving study, we used Boolean searching to compose tables of counts, including one that compared the number of positive versus negative things that caregivers said about primary-care physicians versus specialists.

Such counting is not for everyone, but I use it for a specific purpose. My goal is to use counts to detect patterns in the data. If I want to compare what family caregivers say about using primary-care physicians versus specialists, it helps to know that they are much more likely to mention negative things about primary-care physicians. The advantage of this approach is that it reduces speculation. Within the limits of the coding system, I

I do not, however, stop my analysis once I have these descriptive numbers. Instead, I take the patterns that I detect as the starting point for a more reflective interpretation of why these patterns occur. This means asking questions like: If siblings provoke the majority of family conflicts, how does this occur? Or, if primary-care doctors are viewed so negatively, why is this so? Answering these kinds of question inevitably involves going back in and reading the transcripts again. Of course, the searching capacities of computer can help you locate what you want to read, but they do not provide any insight about the kinds of “how” and “why” questions that are at the heart of qualitative analysis. This is why I call the kind of content analysis that I do “qualitative content analysis.” Using computerized coding to describe the content in the data is just the beginning of the larger qualitative process of interpretation.

Do You Really Need to Use the Computer?

Most of what I have described here is a logical process, consisting of steps like creating codebooks, applying them in two (or more) passes, separating out descriptive counting from interpretive reading, and so on. None of this really requires a computer, but it would be hard to do by hand if you had more than a few groups. I personally would judge six groups to be near the upper limit for doing this kind of systematic coding with colored pencils, highlighting pens, marginal notes, and the like. I don’t mean that you couldn’t do more than six groups by hand, but at that point the computer not only saves a great deal of time but also ensures that the work is done in a thorough and consistent fashion.

The real question, however, is not whether you want to use a computer, but whether you want to be this systematic. What is the purpose for doing such a thorough and detailed analysis? Most often, this is an audience issue: Who will you be responsible to and in what ways? If the analysis will be the basis for an article to be reviewed at an academic journal, then this kind of systematic effort may well be essential. Similarly, graduate students must be able to show their thesis committees exactly how they reached their conclusions. It might also be important to have the kind of record that a computerized analysis generates if you are working on a major grant, especially when there will be an outside audit or other assessment of your work. This style of analysis is a way of life for some of us, but for the vast majority of applied focus group projects in organizations and agencies, the procedures described here would amount to pointless “overkill.”

Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results

by Marilyn J. Rausch

If you have ever been handed a set of tapes or transcriptions and asked to analyze and write a report for focus groups you did not design or moderate, you may have discovered that the process should start at the very beginning, not near the end of a project. When I explore the study problem and objectives with my client, I am really asking, "What do you want in the report?" When I ascertain how the report will be used and who will read it, I begin to determine how I will write the report—how much depth, what language, which report style. When I bid the project or prepare a cost estimate, I may give clients the option of a summary report or a comprehensive report, and when they state their preferences, I know a lot about how I will be reporting the results.

The question flow or discussion guide can become the framework for your report. If the guide seemed logical during the sessions and if the questions resulted in data that were "on purpose," the report can be written from the guide. I write my guides in classic outline style because these lend themselves well to the process of report writing. The report falls easily into major headings and subheadings. If the "meat" of the session falls at the end of your question flow or discussion guide (as it often does), there may be a need to reorder sections from the most to the least important for the report.

When there are multiple sessions, you need to decide whether you will analyze vertically or horizontally. I decide what makes sense in terms of the research design and then stick with it throughout the report. For example, if the project consisted of four groups of school nurses talking about issues they face in administering medications to students, the report might best be written horizontally—common issues from across the groups are reported. If the same project comprised one group each of students, parents, school nurses, and principals, then the report might best be written vertically, where the issues voiced by each group are discussed separately, with commonalities addressed at the conclusion.

Not all results have to be reported. Off-the-topic comments are excluded. Nice-to-know data often just pad the report to no purpose. Deciding what to report and what not to report is an art—an art that can only be sharpened by experience. Here are hints to assist in the process of deciding what to report and not report:

- Look for common themes. If every topic discussed ends with “but we don’t think it can be done,” you have discovered an overall credibility or believability roadblock.
- Look for repeatedly voiced attitudes or opinions, and then try to identify the dissenting opinions. Regardless of the size of the camps, try to describe both sides.
- Be on the alert for the single response that for some reason seems worthy of note, even if it was heard only once. Occasionally, these responses identify a critical problem or a fabulous opportunity that others have not yet recognized.
- Always listen for what you do not hear. A whole discussion about a new product idea in which price is never mentioned until probed represents data that should be reported.
- When in doubt about whether or not to include something, go back to the problem definition and list of objectives and ask, “Does this information contribute to the accomplishment of these objectives?”

Typically, I follow these steps in analysis and report writing:

1. Read through all of the transcriptions, annotating and highlighting key findings and potential quotes.
2. Write a rough draft of the detailed findings.
3. Go back to the transcriptions and select verbatim quotes to illustrate the findings.
4. Reread and edit the draft with the executive summary in mind.
5. Write an executive summary with key findings and recommendations or concluding remarks sections. (This is placed at the beginning of the report.)
6. Append copies of the discussion guide and any other pertinent study material.