

**LITTLE**

**QUICK FIX:**

**FIND THE THEME  
IN YOUR DATA**

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# Everything in this book!

**Section 1** Finding a theme is at the heart of qualitative research and brings together smaller categories or ideas that represent significant trends in your qualitative data.

**Section 2** The first thing to do when starting to look for themes is to organize your data and engage with it. You must *develop a relationship with your data through transcription*.

**Section 3** Once you've transcribed your data you can start to analyse it initially through a robust reading strategy. *Through reading you'll begin to familiarize yourself with what might be contained within your data.*

**Section 4** You will need to understand what coding and codes are before you begin a deeper analysis. *Codes are the building blocks of your final themes.*



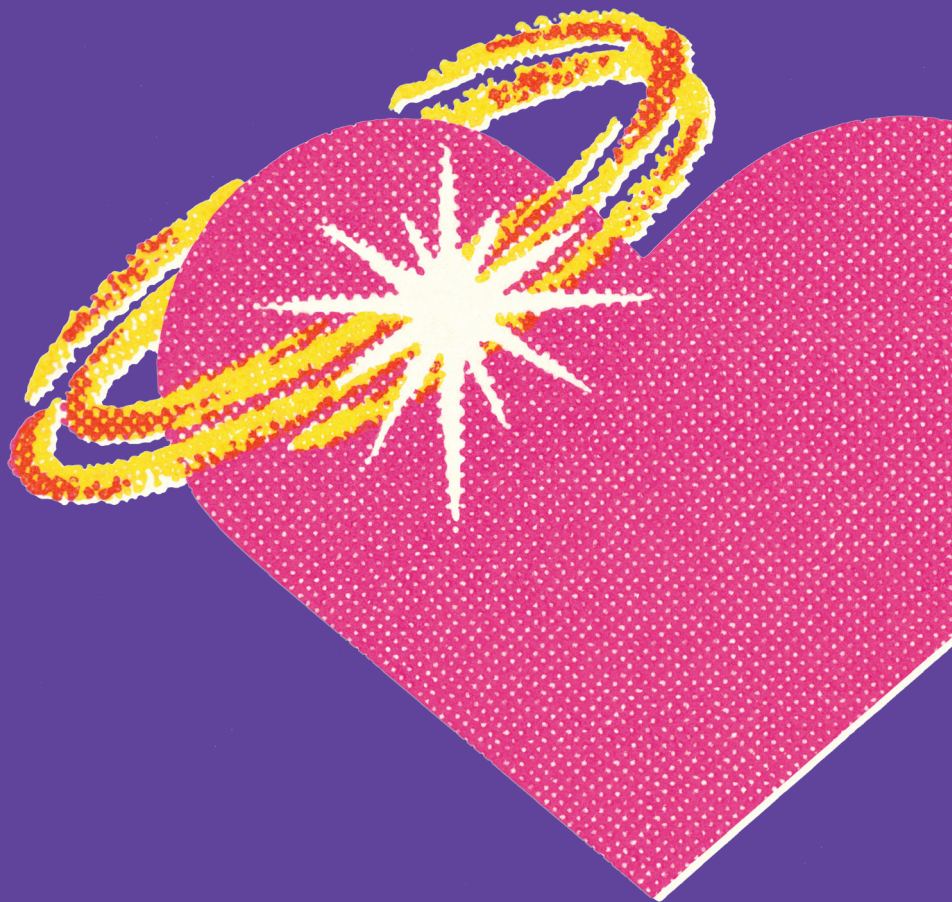
**Section 5** Now you can begin coding properly. Codes represent the researcher's first attempts to make sense of their data, so it's important to know what to look for.

**Section 6** Next turn your codes into categories. To begin to form categories, compare all your codes to see if there are relationships between them that might be summed up by a larger category.

**Section 7** Once you've developed your categories you can start to develop themes. Themes are built on significant and repeated ideas that have been established in your categories. Themes help you answer your research questions, but they need verification.

**Section 8** Constructing your themes is sequential but also a very personal process. So, to ensure your themes are relevant, meaningful and representative, it is important that you get your themes and your work overall verified.

**Finding a theme is at the  
heart of qualitative research**





**Section**





**What is a  
theme?**

# A



Themes should be thought of as the main issues that emerge from a systematic process of data analysis beginning with transcription, coding and categorization.



## Themes represent major repeating ideas in the data

A theme captures codes and categories that have similar meanings and unifies them under a significant heading, or a 'theme'. Themes help us then to understand fully what's been revealed by our participants in the data collection process and help present our analytical process more clearly. The good news is that you will decide what your themes are, as you will have analysed your own transcripts.

# WHAT TYPE OF DATA GENERATES THEMES?

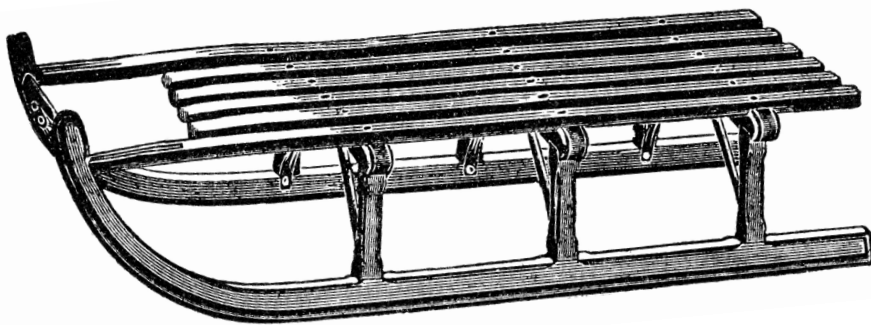
Any qualitative data collection method will generate what we call textual data. **Textual data is data taken from what people have said, and we use what people have said as evidence to support our research questions.** So, if you're engaging in any of the following, you're going to generate textual data:

- 1 Interviews (both structured and unstructured)
- 2 Focus groups (traditional, online and virtual)
- 3 Elite interviews
- 4 Event diaries
- 5 Ethnography

# IS IT A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY?

Very much so! **The data you'll have collected will be unique and what will be contained within it will also be unique.** It will have come from multiple individuals, multiple perspectives, and will provide multiple answers that will represent their experiences, ideas and feelings.

**Your themes will be contained within your collected data.** You'll find them through analysis; they're just waiting to be discovered in what your participants have said.



# SO, MY FINAL THEMES WILL BE BASED ONLY ON MY DATA?

This is an important question, and the answer is yes. But this is dependent on your approach to research, so there are two ways that themes might develop:

**Inductive approach** – themes generated inductively stem from an analysis of what your participants have said. This approach doesn't rely on existing theory to define its themes and is applied when theory-building.

**Deductive approach** – themes generated deductively stem from using pre-existing knowledge, pre-existing thought, and pre-existing terms. This approach is applied when the researcher is looking to test or support current theory.

# WILL I UNCOVER DIFFERENT TYPES OF THEMES?

You'll potentially discover several major or 'meta-themes' and several minor or 'sub-themes'. The differences are simple:

**Meta-theme** – this is significant theme that captures important, noteworthy, reoccurring and crucial elements within your data that clearly and identifiably answer your research question.

**Sub-theme** – this is a minor theme that has relevance in relation to answering your research question; it is of interest, but ultimately isn't as strong as a meta-theme. These should be used sparingly, unless they add to the answer.



# HOW CAN I ENSURE I GET CREDIBLE THEMES?

We get themes through our data, so it's worth recalling that we need to have the following in place to ensure we get good data:

- You know your research question
- Your questioning framework covers your research question
- You've piloted your questions and questioning framework for clarity (essential)
- You've practised your skills as a moderator (we don't want bias)
- You've recruited well (participants should be able to answer your questions)
- You've captured your participants' biographical data
- Your participants know what they need to consider and why they're involved
- You have recording equipment (vital)
- Make notes during the actual recording, this will help capture your thoughts



# FILL IN THE MISSING WORDS

A ..... should capture the major ideas and main issues that ..... from the ..... of your ..... Themes will be generated by the answers your ..... have already provided and you'll discover them through analysis of those answers. Analysis will begin by creating accurate ..... of what has been, and this will create ..... Once you've done that, you'll begin the ..... process and then move onto ..... Through this process, regardless of whether your approach is ..... or ..... you'll discover ..... and potentially ..... that will allow you to fully answer your .....

*Categorization*

*Research question*

*Inductive*

*Analysis*

*Meta-themes*

*Transcriptions*

*Textual data*

*Qualitative data*

*Coding*

*Sub-themes*

*Participants*

*Deductive*

*Theme*

*Emerge*



CHECKPOINT

# ANSWERS

A *theme* should capture the major ideas and main issues that *emerge* from the *analysis* of your *qualitative data*. Themes will be generated by the answers your *participants* have already provided and you'll discover them through analysis of those answers. Analysis will begin creating accurate *transcriptions* of what has been, and this will create *textual data*. Once you've done that, you'll begin the *coding* process and then move onto *categorization*. Through this process, regardless of whether your approach is *inductive* or *deductive* you'll discover *meta-themes* and potentially *sub-themes* that will allow you to fully answer your *research question*.

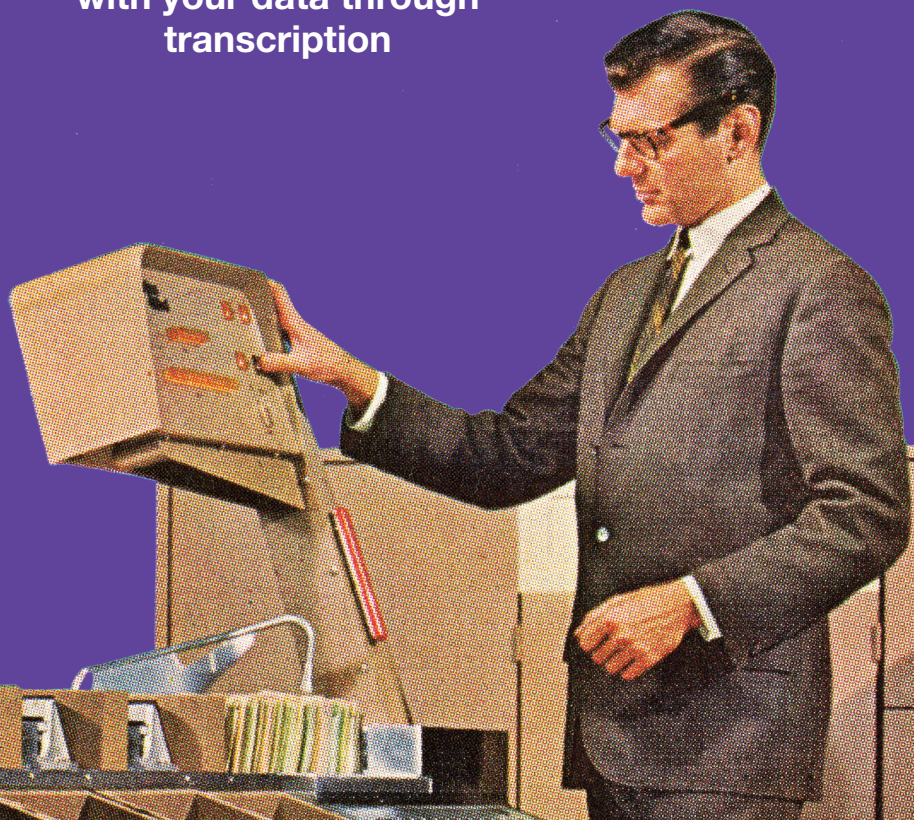


# 2

## Section



**Develop a relationship  
with your data through  
transcription**





**How do  
I start  
looking for  
themes?**

# A



You start to look for themes by firstly organising your data into transcripts, the written versions of your data.





## Creating accurate transcriptions is essential

Once you've audio recorded or filmed your participants answering your questions, it is crucially important to get what they have said into written form, this is called transcribing. Transcription will give you a detailed account of what was said by each participant, in each context, and this will allow you to begin your analysis: analysis that will ultimately lead to themes emerging that you can use to answer your research question and support your themes!

# DO I HAVE TO TRANSCRIBE ALL OF MY RECORDINGS?

Transcribing all your data is essential. And the reason for this is that it:

- Enhances **familiarity** with what was said
- Enhances **accuracy** and precision in data presentation
- Allows for immediate **immersion** into your data
- Facilitates greater **understanding** of the phenomena being discussed
- Helps understand **contexts**
- Allows you to understand **idioms**
- Helps establish the **reliability** and **validity** of the research



# CAN SOMEBODY ELSE DO IT?

Yes, potentially. **There are lots of available companies who will happily transcribe your data for you.** There are professional transcribers available (excellent, but potentially expensive), and online transcription services (relatively cheap and reasonably accurate) where you simply upload your file, either online or through an app, and transcriptions are produced within a day.

However, think carefully. **The more time you spend with your data, the better the relationship with it,** and in my experience a good relationship should start with personal transcription. However, it is undoubtedly a time-rich exercise, so it must be carefully considered against the time you have.



# HOW TO GET STARTED

**When beginning to transcribe it is of critical importance that you do so in a systematic way.** Before you begin the transcription process, consider the following:

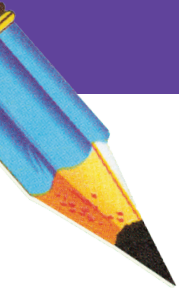
- Start each transcript with a list of those involved. This should be at the top of the page.
- Give each participant a code. This could be their name, or a pseudonym, but make sure to include their gender, participant number, and any information that makes them stand out (you'll need to know who they are, and it can be easily forgotten).
- Create margins on each side of the page that allow enough room for writing.

# CREATING POWERFUL TRANSCRIPTIONS

Once you begin to transcribe **consider the following to ensure you maximize your time:**

- Double space every sentence. This will leave room for making notes, notes that will shape your codes, categories and themes.
- Give each line a number, this will allow you to find extracts quickly and will help with comparisons.
- Don't try to type everything up in one go (breaks are essential).
- Type everything that is said. This includes bad language, pauses, repetition, stuttering, non-verbal nods, cultural references, when participants go off topic ... everything!
- Be completely consistent doing the above. Shortcuts, no matter how tempting, will mean you may miss something.
- Plan regular breaks (essential) and reward yourself (vital).
- Read through the transcript while re-listening to the audio. You'll be surprised at what you've missed or mistakenly added.

# TOP TIPS



- 1 Buy a recorder that has a button that will slow the audio down.
- 2 Time how long it takes you to do your first transcription. This will help you establish how long the whole process might take. Time management is key!
- 3 Use good headphones. If you block the world out, you'll get better transcripts.
- 4 Take lots of breaks (this is worth saying again).



Take lots of breaks!

# YOUR TRANSCRIPTION CHECKLIST



- I know why I need to transcribe my recordings
- I know what approach to transcription I'm going to take
- I have the right equipment and materials to help me transcribe my recordings
- I know what company I'm going to contact to transcribe my recordings

