

Interpreting Qualitative Data for Actionable Insights in Eight Steps

This guide is meant to provide general tips for educators interested in using qualitative data to guide their practice. It is based on the process of two qualitative researchers at the UChicago Consortium. Qualitative information can be overwhelming in its complexity and richness, and it is easy to get lost in the details. While there is no uniform way to do qualitative analysis, the following “steps” can help you get the most out of your data. Let’s get started!

Step IDENTIFY YOUR PURPOSE

01

Perhaps you have identified a problem of practice, maybe you have a hunch you want to explore, or maybe you simply want to get to know your students better. Whatever the reason, make your purpose clear because it will guide how you will look at your data and ultimately what findings you generate.

Some common goals in qualitative data analysis include:

➔ Corroborate	Confirm an existing finding from your quantitative reports.
➔ Complete the picture	Add more information to an existing problem you’ve identified.
➔ Explain	Clarify a trend or pattern you see elsewhere in your practice.
➔ Develop	Create a tool or new set of questions to better understand an issue.
➔ Understand	an experience that your students appear to share.

Step

02

STATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

We all have assumptions and predictions about what we might find in our data — this is a natural impulse. When doing analysis, you should:

- Identify and record your assumptions about what you think you will find. You can revisit later.
- Make sense of your data at face value — from the perspectives of your students.

Step

03

GET TO KNOW THE DATA

It is best practice to read *all* of the responses you received at least once. This helps you understand the range of responses.

Step

04

DESCRIBE THE DATA

In your own words, begin describing the data.

- Ask yourself, “What is the respondent saying here?” If you’re working in a spreadsheet, add a column to type in comments just to the right of the response.
- Complete this step for the first 10 to 20 responses.

Step

05

IDENTIFY THEMES

Once you have started describing the data in your own words, patterns begin to emerge.

- Ask yourself, “Do I see the same words or phrases being used to describe a process or experience shared by a group of students?”
- In a second column, begin to group the data into similar buckets of ideas (these are often big groups that will be broken down into manageable themes in the next step). Complete the second column for the first 10 to 20 responses.
- Add a third column where you label each data response with a theme.

Step

06

SORT THE DATA

Once you have assigned a theme to each response in your data, sort your spreadsheet to organize the data according to each of the themes. This step will allow you to start to visualize patterns in the data.

Step

07

INTEGRATE YOUR THEMES TO IDENTIFY PATTERNS

What explains the patterns you are starting to see in your data? You can think about this by identifying the types of patterns that emerge.

Ask yourself these questions:

 Frequencies	How often do you see the same theme occur?
 Magnitudes	What does the character of responses tell you about the level of intensity of a meaning or sentiment?
 Structures	Are there distinctions in categories created in the responses? Is there a typology?
 Processes	Is there an order of operations being described in the data? Or, is there a relationship between when things happen?
 Causes	What are the preceding events to some outcome or response? Is there a mechanism that triggers a particular experience?
 Consequences	What are the long-term effects or changes that result from some behavior?

Step

08

SHARE YOUR FINDINGS

At this point, you've spent a good deal of time thinking about your data. This can make writing or otherwise sharing out your thoughts somewhat daunting. Oftentimes, this is thought of as the final step in process. While this can be true, you can also consider it another step in the process — getting input from colleagues, peers, and leaders can help you further develop your perspective about the data and may reveal insights you did not initially see. →

Step

08

SHARE YOUR FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

A few things to consider as you share or present your findings:

Describe the analysis process you conducted.

- How many responses were you working with?
- What observations about your responses seemed important?
- Which pattern did you identify?

What were the themes? At some point, you want to return to the goals you set out at the outset.

- What were your motivating questions?
- Do these data help address those?
- Using the same document where you wrote down your predictions and assumptions about what you thought you would find, start to write out what you found.

Finally, what stories present themselves in the data?

- Does your analysis tell one story or multiple?
- Are the stories connected? How?
- Do they contradict any existing popular thinking?

Audiences respond best to stories. There is probably no better way to tell stories than by using qualitative data — in the complexity and depth lies its beauty.

If after going through this process you are not confident in your conclusions or want to dig deeper, go back to Step 4 and Step 5 and code more of your responses.