**A Short Note on Writing**

Harry F. Wolcott

In late November of 2008  I thought I had finished everything.  The autumn leaves had all fallen, I had cleaned out  the rain gutters for the last time in the season. I was waiting patiently for  the new third edition of my book, *Writing Up Qualitative Research,* recently revised for Sage Publications.  I trusted that this would be the last word on writing, or at least  *my*last word on the topic. As soon as the editors and the printer finished with the book, I anticipated receiving my first copy, so I could see how it finally turned out.

Instead I received an email request from Bob Simpson and Robin Humphrey asking if I would like to contribute "something" to their cause, an open letter to any graduate students who wanted a bit of help with their writing. My immediate thought was, "If they want to know how I go about writing, why don't they just read my book?" But on second thought I recognized a challenge to try to distill an essence from my latest effort, in order to provide  the kind of brief reflection that Bob and Robin were seeking, and here is what I came up with.  Of course, if it makes you want to read the new edition of the book, you would be most welcome, But as I thought about it, here are two major points that summarize the advice I offer anyone who needs a bit of help to get the writing started.

I assume that you have done your work well and you now have something to report.  What you most fear is that what you write will look too much like  a report. You would like to make it more than that, so that it reads well.

My first piece of advice is to work out the *sequence* you are going to use to tell your story.  Formulating the sequence will also cause you to  figure out who is doing the telling, as well as the order of the events or facts you have to present.  There are innumerable ways to approach the problem of sequence in addition to talking about what happened in the exact order in which it occurred. You might begin with how you became engaged with the problem or begin with the problem's own history, if you choose not to get personally involved. Or you can turn the calendar backwards, starting with  where we are now and then telling how we got here.

With the sequence clearly in mind, simply begin writing. No matter if you don't feel you are doing a great job of it. Most people don't.  I covet the advice rendered by a successful American author, Anne Lamott, who states simply, "The only way I can get anything written at all is to write really,  really, shitty first drafts" But she has already revealed the consequences, "All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts " (Lamott 1994: 21-22). Denise Crockett, a graduate student at the time, shared similar advice she received, but  condensed it succinctly to state : " If you can't write well, write shittily."

The point is that what you write at first does not really affect the world, but *you* must have something written before you can begin to edit it. Surely you don't  need to be reminded that no one in the world ever needs to see your first draft, and you make that plural, to read "early drafts," because, as others have observed, the only draft that matters is the final one.

Those are the two most powerful ideas I have about writing. You must think through how you plan to reveal your story-the sequence  you will follow-and you must have something down on the  paper before you will ever have an opportunity to work with it. I do not mean to make this seem simple, but neither do I see it as an obstacle that cannot be overcome. There are many alternatives to guide you as how to approach your topic,  and there is always the obvious one to ‘tell it like it happened." If beginning to write the whole piece (article, book?) appears an impossible task,  begin with some smaller  and easier part.  Later you can figure out where to place it. And you certainly don't need a special pen to write shittily -that comes easily to most of us.  You may even find that you are being too hard on yourself in your earlier attempts-it probably isn't as a bad as you feared.  So be patient and keep plugging (i.e. editing) away.

**REFERENCES:**

Lamott, Anne

1994 Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life. New York: Pantheon Books

Wolcott, Harry F.

2009 Writing Up Qualitative Research. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

***Harry F. Wolcott****is Professor Emeritus in Anthropology at the  University of Oregon, and focuses his research on anthropology and  education, cultural acquisition and the nature of ethnographic research. His publications include: Transforming Qualitative Data (Sage 1994); The Art of Fieldwork (2nd ed., AltaMira Press 2005); Ethnography: A Way of Seeing (2nd ed. AltaMira Press 2008); Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath (AltaMira 2002); and his recently revised Writing Up Qualitative Research.(3rd ed. Sage 2009). Most of his doctoral students discovered that they like writing.*