



Good Practice in Educational Research Writing

1. PREAMBLE

1.1 There are two main thrusts to educational research, viz:

- (a) to inform understandings of educational issues, drawing on and developing educational theory, and in some cases theory from related disciplines (eg sociology, psychology, philosophy, economics, history, etc); and
- (b) to improve educational policy and practice, by informing pedagogic, curricular and other educational judgements and decisions.

Much research includes both of these purposes, some contributes mainly to one.

1.2 These activities have a common purpose in the provision of warranted knowledge about education and much of this new knowledge is communicated in writing. Over the years various conventions and practices have developed about such writing. In publishing these guidelines, BERA seeks to draw attention to what a panel of its members have considered to be good practice in writing about the heterogeneity of work arising from educational research.

2. INTENTIONS AND AUDIENCES

2.1 In the simplest analysis, the research reasons for publishing the outcomes of educational research are:

- (a) to seek critique of the research in order to test for flaws and gain deeper understanding through the insights of others; and
- (b) to contribute to publicly available knowledge of educational theory, educational policy and educational practice.

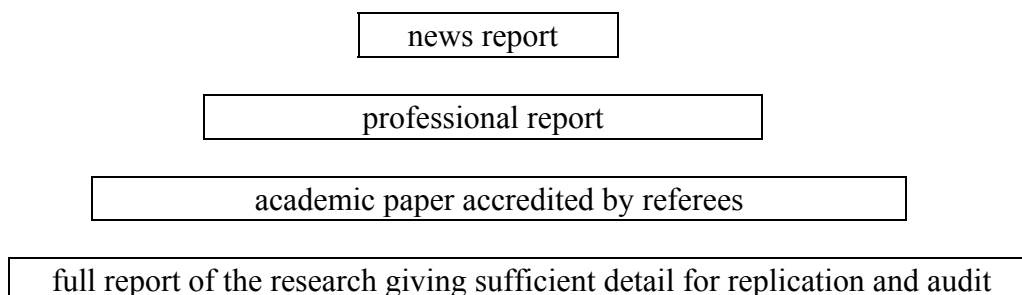
Where possible, it is good practice to make clear the intentions of the writer in relation to these reasons.

2.2 There are three major audiences for research writing: researchers, policymakers and practitioners. It is good practice to be clear for whom the researcher is writing. In these guidelines, papers for researchers are described as 'academic' and for policy-makers and practitioners as 'professional'. Sometimes publications can be suitable for more than one audience, eg a book reporting on a single research project.

2.3 It is good practice in all research writing to aim for lucid prose which communicates effectively to the intended audience and avoids what that audience may perceive as jargon and obscurantism.

3. PYRAMID MODEL OF CONNECTED WRITINGS

- 3.1 There are many forms of research writing with various purposes suited to various audiences. It is envisaged in these guidelines that the *complete* writings associated with a research project can be thought of as a pyramid.



PYRAMID MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH WRITING

- 3.2 At the base of the pyramid is the full report. This gives systematically recorded details of the research enquiry, not necessarily in a polished state. Perhaps at present such reports are not always prepared, but we commend this as good practice because it means that in principle another researcher could critique or, where appropriate, replicate the study and an academic referee (or 'auditor') could fully vouch for the trustworthiness of the findings.
- 3.3 Arising from the full report is the academic paper, addressed primarily to other researchers, and published only after peer scrutiny by academic referees. This is an essential step in establishing the quality of the research. Of course, academic referees may miss flaws in method or argument, but in general they are the gatekeepers of quality who give accreditation to the paper.
- 3.4 The academic paper may be of purely theoretical interest to other researchers and so not lead to a professional paper. More commonly however it will have a message for policy-makers or practitioners and these guidelines recommend that a specific professional report should be written for such audiences. As described in section 8 this has characteristics which may distinguish it from an academic paper.
- 3.5 While the professional report is the document which should facilitate professional discourse about the policy or practice discussed, the question arises as to how policy-makers or practitioners know of its existence. It is here, at the apex of the pyramid, lies the news report, the couple of paragraphs in an educational newspaper, or email circular, which attracts attention to the professional report.

4. WRITING IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

- 4.1 In terms of the research moving into the public domain it happens in different ways at the various levels of the pyramid.
- 4.2 At the level of the academic paper the writing is expected to move into the public domain as an article in a learned journal, subject to the decisions of academic referees who provide peer scrutiny. It may alternatively appear as a complete book, chapter in an edited book, or conference presentation: here the peer scrutiny may be less rigorous, editors, publishers and conference organisers being selective in various ways. The title will appear in journal content lists (or book lists) (mostly available on the internet) and in some form in the *British Education Index*. The abstract may be reproduced in various abstracting journals and also may be available on the internet.
- 4.3 Likewise the professional report will hopefully move into the public domain as a professional journal article, book chapter, sometimes complete book, or conference presentation, subject to the decisions of a variety of gatekeepers. It will usually feature in the *British Education Index*.
- 4.4 However the full report of the research, which is probably too long for publication in the above forms, may remain in the archives of the researcher unless put on a web page of the internet. In the case of research leading to a research degree the full report is the thesis or dissertation.
- 4.5 The news report is, by definition, in the public domain. What is important from the viewpoint of academic integrity, but contrary to the news-hungry aspirations of reporters and editors, is that the research should have been subject to peer scrutiny before it reaches the press! This is a thorny issue which can only be left to the common sense of the researcher. It is unlikely that the press would issue a report with a health warning: 'this has not yet been subject to peer scrutiny to vouch for its verity'!

5. RESEARCH ETHICS IN RELATION TO WRITING

- 5.1 Researchers in a democratic society should expect certain freedoms, viz: the freedom to investigate and to ask questions, the freedom to give and to receive information, the freedom to express ideas and to criticise the ideas of others, and the freedom to publish research findings. These freedoms are essentially subject to good practice arising from the ethics of respect for persons and respect for truth (ie academic integrity).
- 5.2 The research ethic of respect for persons requires researchers, in reporting data on persons, to do so in ways which respect those persons as fellow human beings who have entitlements to dignity and privacy.
- 5.3 The research ethic of respect for truth, or academic integrity, requires researchers to be scrupulous in avoiding distortion of evidence and weakly supported assertions in the reporting of findings.

- 5.4 Where conflict between the above two ethical statements leads writers to use fictional constructions, it is good practice to make clear that this is the case.

6. THE INFLUENCE OF THE RESEARCHER

It is good practice to try to communicate to the reader, the position and role of the researcher and, where relevant, that of the sponsor of the research. All research is influenced by the ideology of the researcher: sometimes the researcher is also a major actor.

7. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES FOR ACADEMIC PAPERS REPORTING ON EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

- 7.1 It is good practice to draw attention to relevant work reported in the literature which provides the perceived audience with a conceptual context for the new work. Contrary positions to those adopted by the author(s) should not be wittingly suppressed. Where appropriate it may be sufficient to cite reviews of relevant literature made by others.
- 7.2 It is good practice to provide a clear statement of methodological stance in terms of the values and beliefs of the researcher, a justification of the choice of research methods with indications as to gains and losses, and reasons why the researcher has confidence in the evidence being offered.
- 7.3 It is good practice to report on the research questions which underpinned the investigation, but unsuccessful lines of enquiry are often omitted unless the lack of success with them is judged to be a significant issue.
- 7.4 It is good practice to explain the choice of data sources, viz:
- (a) where the research is based on case-study, making clear the reasons for the selection of particular case(s);
 - (b) where the research is based on experiment, making clear the reasons for the selection of particular locations);
 - (c) where the research is based on sampling of a population making clear how the sampling was made and how the sample relates to the population.
- 7.5 It is good practice for the reporting of methods used for data collection and for analysis of data to be sufficiently explicit that other researchers could repeat, where appropriate, the enquiry in other situations. Where this entails more writing space than a journal (for example) may offer it is appropriate to provide other researchers with a means of accessing more detailed information or the full report of the research (see pyramid diagram).
- 7.6 It is good practice to separate clearly the empirical findings of a research enquiry from any discussion of wider implications.

- 7.7 The abstract of an academic paper is a brief statement of a few sentences which:
- (a) conveys to the reader as accurately as brevity permits the claim to knowledge of the author(s);
 - (b) indicates the boundaries of space and time within which the enquiry has taken place;
 - (c) points out what methods of enquiry were used; and
 - (d) gives keywords as descriptors.

8. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES FOR PROFESSIONAL PAPERS REPORTING ON EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

- 8.1 Whereas for the writing of academic papers there are well-established practices, as encapsulated above, there is little more than the injunction 'strive to communicate an honest account of the research' to guide the writing of professional papers.
- 8.2 An audience of policy-makers or of practitioners may not want to spend time reading a review of the contextual literature nor the full technical details of how data was collected and analysed: the academic paper is the proper place for these. They will want to know how the research may impact on their own interests. Nevertheless this professional audience will want to have confidence that the research is not flawed, and so a reference to the refereed academic paper is appropriate.
- 8.3 A straightforward account of what was done and what was discovered is usually appropriate. Vignettes describing examples of educational action, or photographs that capture significant moments are often an appropriate way of conveying meaning. The professional significance of the findings needs to feature large and it may be appropriate to include statements made by key professionals after reading the academic paper.
- 8.4 The summary of a professional paper is a brief statement of a few sentences which:
- (a) indicates the professional issues that the paper addresses;
 - (b) summarises briefly the findings;
 - (c) suggests the potential value of the findings; and
 - (d) gives keywords as descriptors.

9. VARIATIONS

There may inevitably be writing situations where the above comments on what has been judged to be good practice may seem inappropriate and so not applied. In these circumstances it may be helpful to the reader to explain why this is the case.

These Guidelines were prepared by a Panel of Professor Margaret Brown (chair) (King's College London), Professor Anne Edwards (University of Birmingham), Dr Moira Evans (Denbigh School), Professor Richard Pring (University of Oxford), Shan Scott (DfEE), Emma Westcott (Local Government Association), and Professor Michael Bassey (Academic Secretary, BERA). A draft version was published in BERA's *Research Intelligence* in April 1999, debated by electronic discourse on BERAmail and comments from that published in *Research Intelligence* in August 1999, revised in consequence of this debate, and this version published in March 2000. Reprinted: July 2000, September 2000, November 2001 and April 2003

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