Memo Writing

Fundamentals of Human-Centered Computing

Memo Writing

Today I will cover the following aspects about memo writing:

- Why write memos?
- Writing early memos
- Writing later memos
- Practical tips

Why write memos?

The philosophy behind memo-writing

Why write memos?

Memos organize your thinking **beyond** and **outside** the codes

Expressing thought by "talking to yourself"

Writing things down requires you to be more specific

It may highlight assumptions and raise questions

Explore those in further analysis!

Your most important tool for writing memos is **constant comparison**

Uses of memos

Memos are useful to:

- work through a nagging thought
- remind yourself of an important point you shouldn't forget
- start (or summarize) a group discussion
- make a start on your paper

Writing good memos makes writing your draft easier

They organize your thinking, so you save the time otherwise used to wade through codes

Memo-time!

Write memos when you run into a **problem** during analysis

Write down the problem and your solution

e.g. “I didn’t know what this statement meant; I could interpret this in two ways. I ended up going for meaning X, but I should check it more carefully in subsequent interviews.”

This is called an **operational memo**

Memo-time!

Write memos when you feel like you want to **say more about a certain incident or code**

Sometimes it is hard to capture a phenomenon in a single code; if so, write down the definition in a memo

e.g. “When I say choice overload, I mean…”

This is called a **coding memo**

Memo-time!

Write memos when you feel like there are **under-explored connections and evaluations**

> This could be the description of an axial code, or some other comparison of evaluation that cannot be captured easily in a code
>
> e.g. “It seems that choice overload is similar to, but not the same as information overload. Here is how they are different:”

This is called an **analytical memo**

Memo-time!

Write memos when you have a **discussion** with your group

Write down the arguments and the outcome

e.g. “We argued about the purpose of this code. Team member X argued that it meant A, while team member Y argued it meant B. We agreed that these were substantially different aspects, and decided to separate them.”

I call this a **discussion memo**

Memo-time!

Write memos after **each activity** (be it an interview, transcription, coding round)

Think about things that came up that you may not have captured sufficiently

e.g. "This interview was very different from the others because..." or "As I transcribed the interview I realized the participant was actually trying to tell me the following..." or "While coding this interview, I realized that..."

This is called a **journal-style memo**

Memo-time!

General rule:

Keeping things just in your head is bad. Whenever you have an idea, **stop and write it down!**

Early memos

Writing about your codes and data

Early memos

Early memos make an **insight** about your codes or data

- Often a connection or comparison
- Memos take on a **higher level of analysis** than the code or data itself

They **guide theoretical sampling**

- Use subsequent interview or go back to data to try and confirm, falsify, or qualify the insights

Especially useful to **pick apart in vivo codes**: how did these terms develop? What do they mean?

Early memos

Early memos usually describe:

- Something that remained **tacit** in the transcript
- A code that needs more **explanation**
- An expansion of a **process**

Tacit aspects

Something that remained **tacit** in the transcript

Usually a behavior, an omission, a facial expression, a hypothesized contextual influence

Memo structure:

- Describe the tacit phenomenon
- Highlight its meaning
- Give it context

Tacit aspects

Examples:

Expression: “The interviewee didn’t like talking about returning ill-fitting clothes; she felt like it consisted a personal failure. […]”

Hypothesized contextual influence: “I believe the interviewee didn’t know much about the privacy settings of device X because she hadn’t bought it herself. […]”

Omission: “The interviewee didn’t talk about rental prices much, I think this is because price wasn’t an issue. […]”

Explanations

A code that needs more **explanation**

Usually a category with a "condensed meaning"

Memo structure:

- Explain the code in more depth
- Describe the dimensions and properties of the code
- Explain why it is relevant
- Look for underlying assumptions
- Look for things that are missing

Explanations

Examples:

"Choice overload means that the choice is so difficult that a user is more likely to "give up" (not choose at all), or more likely to be unhappy with the outcome [...]

It is relevant here because there are too many choices in this situation [...]

It assumes that people have limited time to make a decision, or that the decision is simply too complex to fully grasp [...]"

Processes

An expansion of a **process**

Usually an axial code

Memo structure:

- Define the process and trace its origin
- Describe the feelings/thoughts/actions of those involved
- Analyze the timespan of the process
- Describe conditions for change
- Discuss the consequences of the process

Processes

Example:

"Resume padding is the process of adding and rewriting things on one's resume to look more competent.

It starts when a job searcher feels inadequate for a job.

When experience increases, padded elements are removed.

However, the job searcher needs to constantly keep track of what padding has been used in which job application, which causes further anxiety."

Later memos

Turning focused codes into theoretical categories

Later memos

Later memos **turn focused codes into theoretical categories**.

An important aspect here is to assess which codes deserve to be elevated

- Part of this can happen through **sorting**; which we will discuss on Thursday

In vivo codes are often good candidates

- Because they are really grounded in your data

Later memos

For each focused candidate theoretical category, describe:

- what the code entails and how it came about
- your support for it
- its implications for the activity and the people involved
- how it fits within the broader narrative of your paper
- the comparisons it entails
- links to theoretical codes (higher-level theories)

Comparisons

The most important part of a theoretical category memo is the description of the **comparisons** the category entails, and the **consequences** of these comparisons

This could involve comparisons between:

- codes (e.g. “job” vs “career”)
- categories (e.g. “decision” vs “choice”)
- people (e.g. expert vs novice)
- situations (e.g. previous and current relationship)
- subcategories (e.g. types of clothes people distinguish)

Practical tips

How to write good memos

Practical tips

Memos are like **pseudo-code**

- Use informal language
- Start short and quick, then iterate
- Don't treat them as final or fixed
- Even if you don't use them right away, store them, and revisit them later

Optional contents

A memo may contain the following:

- A title
- Some raw data (usually the starting point)
- The codes and meanings it involves
- Links to other things… constant comparison!
- Questions you can try to answer later
- Hypotheses for things you can check later
- Gaps you can check later

Starting tips

You can start your memo by **clustering** or **freewriting**

Clustering: More or less what I did on the board for “choice” vs. “decision”

Freewriting: Just start writing about the general topic of your memo (anything goes), until you hit your stride