

## Thematic Analysis: A Step by Step Guide

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 [simplypsychology.org/thematic-analysis.html](https://simplypsychology.org/thematic-analysis.html)

### What is Thematic Analysis?

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Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of shared meaning (themes) within a given data set, which can be in the form of interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, or other textual data.

Thematic analysis is a useful method for research seeking to understand people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from qualitative data.

This method is widely used in various fields, including psychology, sociology, and health sciences.

Thematic analysis minimally organizes and describes a data set in rich detail. Often, though, it goes further than this and interprets aspects of the research topic.

### Key aspects of Thematic Analysis include:

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1. **Flexibility:** It can be adapted to suit the needs of various studies, providing a rich and detailed account of the data.
2. **Coding:** The process involves assigning labels or codes to specific segments of the data that capture a single idea or concept relevant to the research question.
3. **Themes:** Representing a broader level of analysis, encompassing multiple codes that share a common underlying meaning or pattern. They provide a more abstract and interpretive understanding of the data.
4. **Iterative process:** Thematic analysis is a recursive process that involves constantly moving back and forth between the coded extracts, the entire data set, and the thematic analysis being produced.

5. **Interpretation:** The researcher interprets the identified themes to make sense of the data and draw meaningful conclusions.

## Types

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It's important to note that the types of thematic analysis are not mutually exclusive, and researchers may adopt elements from different approaches depending on their research questions, goals, and epistemological stance.

The choice of approach should be guided by the research aims, the nature of the data, and the philosophical assumptions underpinning the study.

Feature	Coding Reliability TA	Codebook TA	Reflexive TA
<b>Theme Conceptualization</b>	Conceptualized as topic summaries of the data	Typically conceptualized as topic summaries	Conceptualized as patterns of shared meaning that are underpinned by a central organizing concept
<b>Coding Process</b>	Involves using a coding frame or codebook, which may be predetermined or generated from the data, to find evidence for themes or allocate data to predefined topics. Ideally, two or more researchers apply the coding frame separately to the data to avoid contamination	Typically involves early theme development and the use of a codebook and structured approach to coding	Involves an active process in which codes are developed from the data through the analysis. The researcher's subjectivity shapes the coding and theme development process
<b>Underlying Research Values</b>	Emphasizes securing the reliability and accuracy of data coding, reflecting (post)positivist research values. Prioritizes minimizing subjectivity and maximizing objectivity in the coding process	Combines elements of both coding reliability and reflexive TA, but qualitative values tend to predominate. For example, the "accuracy" or "reliability" of coding is not a primary concern	Emphasizes the role of the researcher in knowledge construction and acknowledges that their subjectivity shapes the research process and outcomes

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Coding Reliability TA</b>	<b>Codebook TA</b>	<b>Reflexive TA</b>
<b>Typical Applications</b>	Often used in research where minimizing subjectivity and maximizing objectivity in the coding process are highly valued	Commonly employed in applied research, particularly when information needs are predetermined, deadlines are tight, and research teams are large and may include qualitative novices. Pragmatic concerns often drive its use	Well-suited for exploring complex research issues. Often used in research where the researcher's active role in knowledge construction is acknowledged and valued. Can be used to analyze a wide range of data, including interview transcripts, focus groups, and policy documents
<b>Theme Development Timing</b>	Themes are often predetermined or generated early in the analysis process, either prior to data analysis or following some familiarization with the data	Themes are typically developed early in the analysis process	Themes are developed later in the analytic process, emerging from the coded data
<b>Role of the Researcher's Subjectivity</b>	The researcher's subjectivity is minimized, aiming for objectivity in coding	The researcher's subjectivity is acknowledged, though structured coding methods are used	The researcher's subjectivity is viewed as a valuable resource in the analytic process and is considered to inevitably shape the research findings

## 1. Coding Reliability Thematic Analysis

Coding reliability TA emphasizes using coding techniques to achieve reliable and accurate data coding, which reflects (post)positivist research values.

This approach emphasizes the reliability and replicability of the coding process. It involves multiple coders independently coding the data using a predetermined codebook.

The goal is to achieve a high level of agreement among the coders, which is often measured using inter-rater reliability metrics.

This approach often involves a coding frame or codebook determined in advance or generated after familiarization with the data.

In this type of TA, two or more researchers apply a fixed coding frame to the data, ideally working separately.

Some researchers even suggest that at least some coders should be unaware of the research question or area of study to prevent bias in the coding process.

Statistical tests are used to assess the level of agreement between coders, or the reliability of coding. Any differences in coding between researchers are resolved through consensus.

This approach is more suitable for research questions that require a more structured and reliable coding process, such as in content analysis or when comparing themes across different data sets.

## **2. Codebook Thematic Analysis**

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Codebook TA, such as template, framework, and matrix analysis, combines elements of coding reliability and reflexive.

Codebook TA, while employing structured coding methods like those used in coding reliability TA, generally prioritizes qualitative research values, such as reflexivity.

In this approach, the researcher develops a codebook based on their initial engagement with the data. The codebook contains a list of codes, their definitions, and examples from the data.

The codebook is then used to systematically code the entire data set. This approach allows for a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the data, as the codebook can be refined and expanded throughout the coding process.

It is particularly useful when the research aims to provide a comprehensive description of the data set.

Codebook TA is often chosen for pragmatic reasons in applied research, particularly when there are predetermined information needs, strict deadlines, and large teams with varying levels of qualitative research experience

The use of a codebook in this context helps to map the developing analysis, which is thought to improve teamwork, efficiency, and the speed of output delivery.

### **3. Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

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This approach emphasizes the role of the researcher in the analysis process. It acknowledges that the researcher's subjectivity, theoretical assumptions, and interpretative framework shape the identification and interpretation of themes.

In reflexive TA, analysis starts with coding after data familiarization. Unlike other TA approaches, there is no codebook or coding frame. Instead, researchers develop codes as they work through the data.

As their understanding grows, codes can change to reflect new insights—for example, they might be renamed, combined with other codes, split into multiple codes, or have their boundaries redrawn.

If multiple researchers are involved, differences in coding are explored to enhance understanding, not to reach a consensus. The finalized coding is always open to new insights and coding.

Reflexive thematic analysis involves a more organic and iterative process of coding and theme development. The researcher continuously reflects on their role in the research process and how their own experiences and perspectives might influence the analysis.

This approach is particularly useful for exploratory research questions and when the researcher aims to provide a rich and nuanced interpretation of the data.

### **Six Steps Of Thematic Analysis**

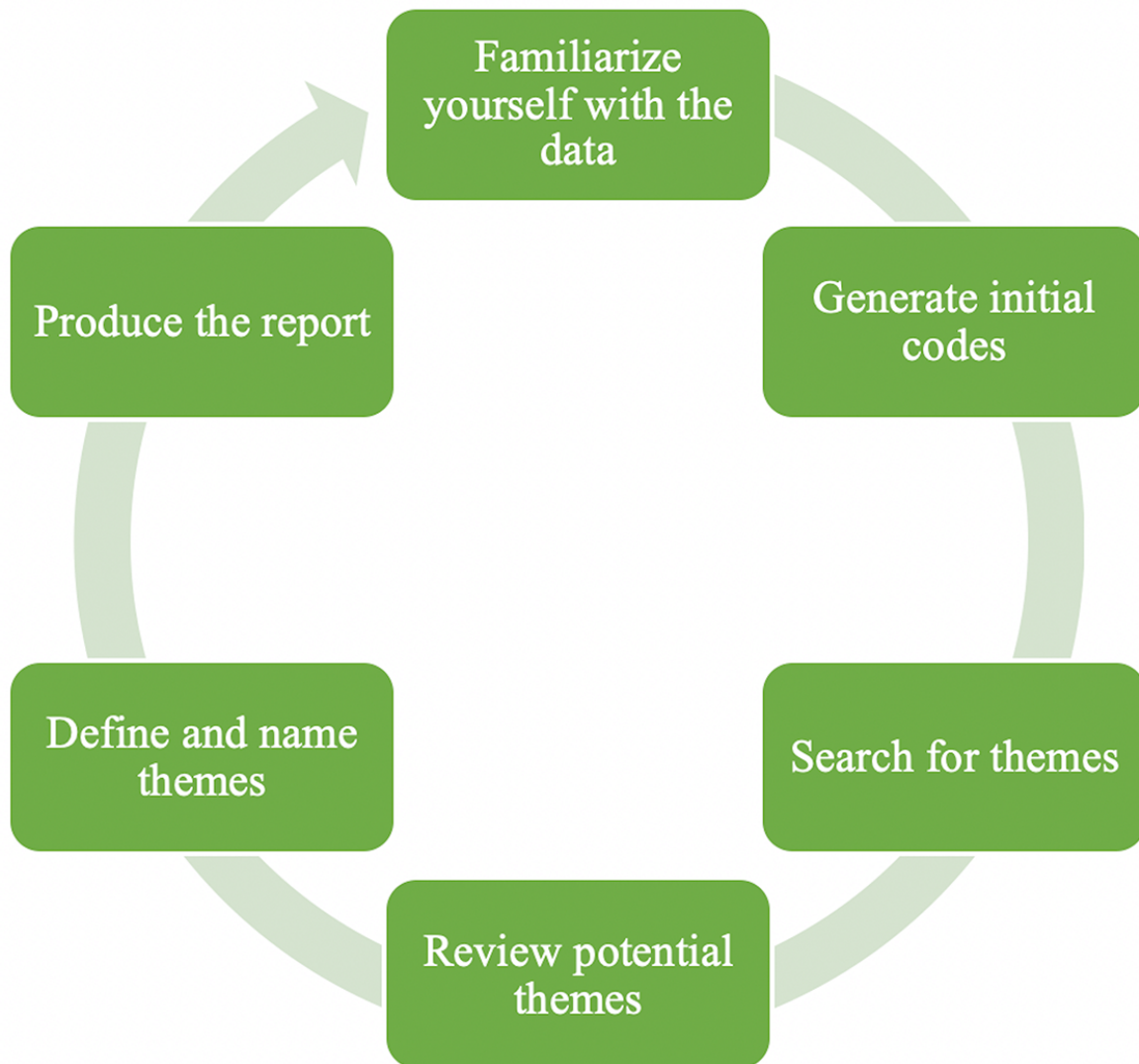
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The process is characterized by a recursive movement between the different phases, rather than a strict linear progression.

This means that researchers might revisit earlier phases as their understanding of the data evolves, constantly refining their analysis.

For instance, during the reviewing and developing themes phase, researchers may realize that their initial codes don't effectively capture the nuances of the data and might need to return to the coding phase.

This back-and-forth movement continues throughout the analysis, ensuring a thorough and evolving understanding of the data



*The continuous cycle of Thematic Analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012)*

## **Step 1: Familiarization With the Data**

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Familiarization is crucial, as it helps researchers figure out the type (and number) of themes that might emerge from the data.

Familiarization involves immersing yourself in the data by reading and rereading textual data items, such as interview transcripts or survey responses.

You should read through the entire data set at least once, and possibly multiple times, until you feel intimately familiar with its content.

- **Read and re-read the data (e.g., interview transcripts, survey responses, or other textual data):** The researcher reads through the entire data set (e.g., interview transcripts, survey responses, or field notes) multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data's breadth and depth. This helps the researcher develop a holistic sense of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and the overall narrative of the data.
- **Listen to the audio recordings of the interviews:** This helps to pick up on tone, emphasis, and emotional responses that may not be evident in the written transcripts. For instance, they might note a participant's hesitation or excitement when discussing a particular topic. This is an important step if you didn't collect the data or transcribe it yourself.
- **Take notes on initial ideas and observations:** Note-making at this stage should be observational and casual, not systematic and inclusive, as you aren't coding yet. Think of the notes as memory aids and triggers for later coding and analysis. They are primarily for you, although they might be shared with research team members.
- **Immerse yourself in the data to gain a deep understanding of its content:** It's not about just absorbing surface meaning like you would with a novel, but about thinking about what the data *mean*.

By the end of the familiarization step, the researcher should have a good grasp of the overall content of the data, the key issues and experiences discussed by the participants, and any initial patterns or themes that emerge.

This deep engagement with the data sets the stage for the subsequent steps of thematic analysis, where the researcher will systematically code and analyze the data to identify and interpret the central themes.

## **Step 2: Generating Initial Codes**

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Codes are concise labels or descriptions assigned to segments of the data that capture a specific feature or meaning relevant to the research question.



The process of qualitative coding helps the researcher organize and reduce the data into manageable chunks, making it easier to identify patterns and themes relevant to the research question.

**Think of it this way:** If your analysis is a house, themes are the walls and roof, while codes are the individual bricks and tiles.

Coding is an iterative process, with researchers refining and revising their codes as their understanding of the data evolves.

The ultimate goal is to develop a coherent and meaningful coding scheme that captures the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences and helps answer the research questions.

Coding can be done manually (paper transcription and pen or highlighter) or by means of software (e.g. by using NVivo, MAXQDA or ATLAS.ti).

	INTERVIEWER: So, what do you think of the current strategies to prevent road traffic collisions and neurotrauma in your city and country?	Codes
	<p>PARTICIPANT: You know, the government has instituted things like traffic rules and all that, but these are not being enforced properly. There don't seem to be enough traffic police to cover the many areas in the city where there is a lot of traffic, and I suppose what you could call accident-prone areas. I have read on the internet that many other countries are having things like speed cameras and all that to prevent speeding. I know we have things like speed bumps and maybe the signs which show the speed limit. The problem is people are not following the rules. For that reason, it would be good to have these speed cameras, for example, so that people will realise that some enforcement is being carried out. The other thing is that</p>	<p>Gov. role</p> <p>Lack of compliance</p> <p>Lack of enforcement</p> <p>Accident reduction strategies</p> <p>Lack of compliance</p> <p>Accident reduction strategies</p>

*Codes usually are attached to 'chunks' of varying size-words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs. They can take the form of a straightforward descriptive label or a more complex interpretive one (e.g. metaphor).*

## Decide On Your Coding Approach

- Will you use predefined deductive codes (based on theory or prior research), or let codes emerge from the data (inductive coding)?
- Will a piece of data have one code or multiple?
- Will you code everything or selectively? Broader research questions may warrant coding more comprehensively.

### **If you decide not to code everything, it's crucial to:**

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1. Have clear criteria for what you will and won't code
2. Be transparent about your selection process in research reports
3. Remain open to revisiting uncoded data later in analysis

### **Do A First Round Of Coding**

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Start identifying preliminary codes which highlight important features of the data and may be relevant to the research question.

- Go through the data and assign initial codes to chunks that stand out
- Create a code name (a word or short phrase) that captures the essence of each chunk
- Keep a codebook – a list of your codes with descriptions or definitions
- Be open to adding, revising or combining codes as you go

First level coding mainly uses these descriptive, low inference codes, which are very useful in summarising segments of data and which provide the basis for later higher order coding.

After generating your first code, compare each new data extract to see if an existing code applies or a new one is needed.

### **Coding can be done at two levels of meaning:**

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- **Semantic:** Provides a concise summary of a portion of data, staying close to the content and the participant's meaning. For example, "Fear/anxiety about people's reactions to his sexuality."
- **Latent:** Goes beyond the participant's meaning to provide a conceptual interpretation of the data. For example, "Coming out imperative" interprets the meaning behind a participant's statement.

Most codes will be a mix of descriptive and conceptual. Novice coders tend to generate more descriptive codes initially, developing more conceptual approaches with experience.

## **This step ends when:**

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- All data is fully coded.
- Data relevant to each code has been collated.

You have enough codes to capture the data's diversity and patterns of meaning, with most codes appearing across multiple data items.

The number of codes you generate will depend on your topic, data set, and coding precision.

## **Step 3: Searching for Themes**

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Searching for themes begins after all data has been initially coded and collated, resulting in a comprehensive list of codes identified across the data set.

This step involves shifting from the specific, granular codes to a broader, more conceptual level of analysis.

Thematic analysis is not about “discovering” themes that already exist in the data, but rather actively constructing or generating themes through a careful and iterative process of examination and interpretation.

### **1. Collating codes into potential themes:**

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The process of collating codes into potential themes involves grouping codes that share a unifying feature or represent a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data.

The researcher looks for patterns, similarities, and connections among the codes to develop overarching themes that capture the essence of the data.

By the end of this step, the researcher will have a collection of candidate themes and sub-themes, along with their associated data extracts.

However, these themes are still provisional and will be refined in the next step of reviewing the themes.

The searching for themes step helps the researcher move from a granular, code-level analysis to a more conceptual, theme-level understanding of the data.

This process is similar to sculpting, where the researcher shapes the “raw” data into a meaningful analysis.

This involves grouping codes that share a unifying feature or represent a coherent pattern in the data:

- Review the list of initial codes and their associated data extracts
- Look for codes that seem to share a common idea or concept
- Group related codes together to form potential themes
- Some codes may form main themes, while others may be sub-themes or may not fit into any theme

**Thematic maps** can help visualize the relationship between codes and themes. These visual aids provide a structured representation of the emerging patterns and connections within the data, aiding in understanding the significance of each theme and its contribution to the overall research question.

**Example:** Studying first-generation college students, the researcher might notice that the codes “financial challenges,” “working part-time,” and “scholarships” all relate to the broader theme of “Financial Obstacles and Support.”

### **Shared Meaning vs. Shared Topic in Thematic Analysis**

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Braun and Clarke distinguish between two different conceptualizations of **themes**: topic summaries and shared meaning

1. **Topic summary themes**, which they consider to be underdeveloped, are organized around a shared topic but not a shared meaning, and often resemble “buckets” into which data is sorted.
2. **Shared meaning themes** are patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept.

When grouping codes into themes, it’s crucial to ensure they share a central organizing concept or idea, reflecting a shared meaning rather than just belonging to the same topic.

Thematic analysis aims to uncover patterns of shared meaning within the data that offer insights into the research question

For example, codes centered around the concept of “Negotiating Sexual Identity” might not form one comprehensive theme, but rather two distinct themes: one related to “coming out and being out” and another exploring “different versions of being a gay man.”

### **Avoid: Themes as Topic Summaries (Shared Topic)**

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In this approach, themes simply summarize what participants mentioned about a particular topic, without necessarily revealing a unified meaning.

These themes are often underdeveloped and lack a central organizing concept.

It’s crucial to avoid creating themes that are merely summaries of data domains or directly reflect the interview questions.

**Example:** A theme titled “Incidents of homophobia” that merely describes various participant responses about homophobia without delving into deeper interpretations would be a topic summary theme.

**Tip:** Using interview questions as theme titles without further interpretation or relying on generic social functions (“social conflict”) or structural elements (“economics”) as themes often indicates a lack of shared meaning and thorough theme development. Such themes might lack a clear connection to the specific dataset

### **Ensure: Themes as Shared Meaning**

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Instead, themes should represent a deeper level of interpretation, capturing the essence of the data and providing meaningful insights into the research question.

These themes go beyond summarizing a topic by identifying a central concept or idea that connects the codes.

They reflect a pattern of shared meaning across different data points, even if those points come from different topics.

**Example:** The theme “‘There’s always that level of uncertainty’: Compulsory heterosexuality at university” effectively captures the shared experience of fear and uncertainty among LGBT students, connecting various codes related to homophobia and its impact on their lives.

## **2. Gathering data relevant to each potential theme**

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Once a potential theme is identified, all coded data extracts associated with the codes grouped under that theme are collated. This ensures a comprehensive view of the data pertaining to each theme.

This involves reviewing the collated data extracts for each code and organizing them under the relevant themes.

For example, if you have a potential theme called “Student Strategies for Test Preparation,” you would gather all data extracts that have been coded with related codes, such as “Time Management for Test Preparation” or “Study Groups for Test Preparation”.

You can then begin reviewing the data extracts for each theme to see if they form a coherent pattern.

This step helps to ensure that your themes accurately reflect the data and are not based on your own preconceptions.

It’s important to remember that coding is an organic and ongoing process.

You may need to re-read your entire data set to see if you have missed any data that is relevant to your themes, or if you need to create any new codes or themes.

The researcher should ensure that the data extracts within each theme are coherent and meaningful.

**Example:** The researcher would gather all the data extracts related to “Financial Obstacles and Support,” such as quotes about struggling to pay for tuition, working long hours, or receiving scholarships.

**Here’s a more detailed explanation of how to gather data relevant to each potential theme:**

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**1. Create a thematic map or table:**

- Start by creating a visual representation of your potential themes, such as a thematic map or table
- List each potential theme and its associated sub-themes (if any)
- This will help you organize your data and see the relationships between themes

## 2. Review coded data extracts:

- Go through your coded data extracts (e.g., highlighted quotes or segments from interview transcripts)
- For each coded extract, consider which theme or sub-theme it best fits under
- If a coded extract seems to fit under multiple themes, choose the theme that it most closely aligns with in terms of shared meaning

## 3. Copy and paste data extracts:

- As you identify which theme each coded extract belongs to, copy and paste the extract under the relevant theme in your thematic map or table
- Include enough context around each extract to ensure its meaning is clear
- If using qualitative data analysis software, you can assign the coded extracts to the relevant themes within the software

## 4. Ensure coherence within themes:

- As you gather data extracts under each theme, continuously review the extracts to ensure they form a coherent pattern
- If some extracts do not fit well with the rest of the data in a theme, consider whether they might better fit under a different theme or if the theme needs to be refined

## 3. Considering relationships between codes, themes, and different levels of themes

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Once you have gathered all the relevant data extracts under each theme, review the themes to ensure they are meaningful and distinct.

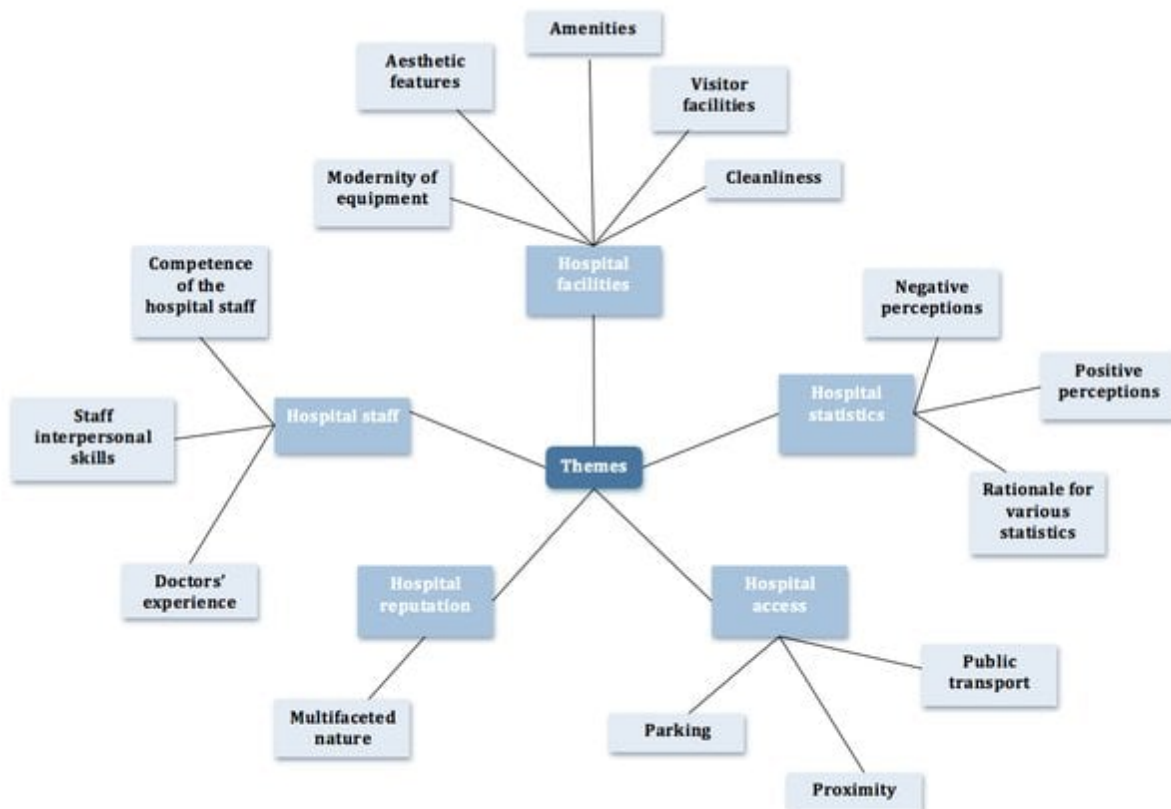
This step involves analyzing how different codes combine to form overarching themes and exploring the hierarchical relationship between themes and sub-themes.

Within a theme, there can be different levels of themes, often organized hierarchically as main themes and sub-themes.

- **Main themes** represent the most overarching or significant patterns found in the data. They provide a high-level understanding of the key issues or concepts present in the data.
- **Sub-themes**, as the name suggests, fall under main themes, offering a more nuanced and detailed understanding of a particular aspect of the main theme.

## The process of developing these relationships is iterative and involves:

- **Creating a Thematic Map:** The relationship between codes, sub-themes and main themes can be visualized using a thematic map, diagram, or table. Refine the thematic map as you continue to review and analyze the data.
- **Examine how the codes and themes relate to each other:** Some themes may be more prominent or overarching (main themes), while others may be secondary or subsidiary (sub-themes).
- **Refining Themes:** This map helps researchers review and refine themes, ensuring they are internally consistent (homogeneous) and distinct from other themes (heterogeneous).
- **Defining and Naming Themes:** Finally, themes are given clear and concise names and definitions that accurately reflect the meaning they represent in the data.



**Thematic map of qualitative data from focus groups.** King, D., Zaman, S., Zaman, S. S., Kahlon, G. K., Naik, A., Jessel, A. S., ... & Darzi, A. (2015). Identifying quality indicators used by patients to choose secondary health care providers: a mixed methods approach. *JMIR mHealth and uHealth*, 3(2), e3808.



Consider how the themes tell a coherent story about the data and address the research question.

If some themes seem to overlap or are not well-supported by the data, consider combining or refining them.

If a theme is too broad or diverse, consider splitting it into separate themes or sub-theme.

**Example:** The researcher might identify “Academic Challenges” and “Social Adjustment” as other main themes, with sub-themes like “Imposter Syndrome” and “Balancing Work and School” under “Academic Challenges.” They would then consider how these themes relate to each other and contribute to the overall understanding of first-generation college students’ experiences.

#### **Step 4: Reviewing Themes**

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The researcher reviews, modifies, and develops the preliminary themes identified in the previous step.

This phase involves a recursive process of checking the themes against the coded data extracts and the entire data set to ensure they accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data.

The purpose is to refine the themes, ensuring they are coherent, consistent, and distinctive.

According to Braun and Clarke, a well-developed theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”.

#### **A well-developed theme will:**

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- Go beyond paraphrasing the data to analyze the meaning and significance of the patterns identified.
- Provide a detailed analysis of what the theme is about.
- Be supported with a good amount of relevant data extracts.
- Be related to the research question.

Revisions at this stage might involve creating new themes, refining existing themes, or discarding themes that do not fit the data

## Level One: Reviewing Themes Against Coded Data Extracts

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- Researchers begin by comparing their candidate themes against the coded data extracts associated with each theme.
- This step helps to determine whether each theme is supported by the data and whether it accurately reflects the meaning found in the extracts. Determine if there is enough data to support each theme.
- Look at the relationships between themes and sub-themes in the thematic map. Consider whether the themes work together to tell a coherent story about the data. If the thematic map does not effectively represent the data, consider making adjustments to the themes or their organization.
- It's important to ensure that each theme has a singular focus and is not trying to encompass too much. Themes should be distinct from one another, although they may build on or relate to each other.
- If a theme lacks sufficient supporting data or if the data within a theme are too diverse and lack a central unifying concept, it may be necessary to discard the theme or make adjustments. These adjustments might involve:
  - **Discarding codes:** If certain codes within a theme are not well-supported or do not fit, they can be removed.
  - **Relocating codes:** Codes that fit better under a different theme can be moved.
  - **Redrawing theme boundaries:** The scope of a theme can be adjusted to better capture the relevant data.
  - **Discarding themes:** Entire themes can be abandoned if they do not work.

## Level Two: Evaluating Themes Against the Entire Data Set

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- Once the themes appear coherent and well-supported by the coded extracts, researchers move on to evaluate them against the entire data set.
- This involves a final review of all the data to ensure that the themes accurately capture the most important and relevant patterns across the entire dataset in relation to the research question.
- During this level, researchers may need to recode some extracts for consistency, especially if the coding process evolved significantly, and earlier data items were not recoded according to these changes.

## Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

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The themes are finalized when the researcher is satisfied with the theme names and definitions.

If the analysis is carried out by a single researcher, it is recommended to seek feedback from an external expert to confirm that the themes are well-developed, clear, distinct, and capture all the relevant data.

**Defining themes** means determining the exact meaning of each theme and understanding how it contributes to understanding the data.

This process involves formulating exactly what we mean by each theme. The researcher should consider what a theme says, if there are subthemes, how they interact and relate to the main theme, and how the themes relate to each other.

Themes should not be overly broad or try to encompass too much, and should have a singular focus. They should be distinct from one another and not repetitive, although they may build on one another.

In this phase the researcher specifies the essence of each theme.

- What does the theme tell us that is relevant for the research question?
- How does it fit into the 'overall story' the researcher wants to tell about the data?

**Naming themes** involves developing a clear and concise name that effectively conveys the essence of each theme to the reader. A good name for a theme is informative, concise, and catchy.

- The researcher develops concise, punchy, and informative names for each theme that effectively communicate its essence to the reader.
- Theme names should be catchy and evocative, giving the reader an immediate sense of what the theme is about.
- Avoid using jargon or overly complex language in theme names.
- The name should go beyond simply paraphrasing the content of the data extracts and instead interpret the meaning and significance of the patterns within the theme.
- The goal is to make the themes accessible and easily understandable to the intended audience. If a theme contains sub-themes, the researcher should also develop clear and informative names for each sub-theme.

- Theme names can include direct quotations from the data, which helps convey the theme's meaning. However, researchers should avoid using data collection questions as theme names. Using data collection questions as themes often leads to analyses that present summaries of topics rather than fully realized themes.

For example, “There’s always that level of uncertainty’: Compulsory heterosexuality at university” is a strong theme name because it captures the theme’s meaning. In contrast, “incidents of homophobia” is a weak theme name because it only states the topic.

For instance, a theme labeled “distrust of experts” might be renamed “distrust of authority” or “conspiracy thinking” after careful consideration of the theme’s meaning and scope.

## Step 6: Producing the Report

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A thematic analysis report should provide a convincing and clear, yet complex story about the data that is situated within a scholarly field.

A balance should be struck between the narrative and the data presented, ensuring that the report convincingly explains the meaning of the data, not just summarizes it.

To achieve this, the report should include vivid, compelling data extracts illustrating the themes and incorporate extracts from different data sources to demonstrate the themes’ prevalence and strengthen the analysis by representing various perspectives within the data.

The report should be written in first-person active tense, unless otherwise stated in the reporting requirements.

### The analysis can be presented in two ways:

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1. **Integrated *Results and Discussion* section:** This approach is suitable when the analysis has strong connections to existing research and when the analysis is more theoretical or interpretive.
2. **Separate *Discussion* section:** This approach presents the data interpretation separately from the results.

Regardless of the presentation style, researchers should aim to “show” what the data reveals and “tell” the reader what it means in order to create a convincing analysis.

- **Presentation order of themes:** Consider how to best structure the presentation of the themes in the report. This may involve presenting the themes in order of importance, chronologically, or in a way that tells a coherent story.
- **Subheadings:** Use subheadings to clearly delineate each theme and its sub-themes, making the report easy to navigate and understand.

## Tips

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The analysis should go beyond a simple summary of participant's words and instead interpret the meaning of the data.

Themes should connect logically and meaningfully and, if relevant, should build on previous themes to tell a coherent story about the data.

The report should include vivid, compelling data extracts that clearly illustrate the theme being discussed and should incorporate extracts from different data sources, rather than relying on a single source.

Although it is tempting to rely on one source when it eloquently expresses a particular aspect of the theme, using multiple sources strengthens the analysis by representing a wider range of perspectives within the data.

Researchers should strive to maintain a balance between the amount of narrative and the amount of data presented.

## Potential Pitfalls to Avoid

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1. **Failing to analyze the data:** Thematic analysis should involve more than simply presenting data extracts without an analytic narrative. The researcher must provide an interpretation and make sense of the data, telling the reader what it means and how it relates to the research questions.
2. **Using data collection questions as themes:** Themes should be identified across the entire dataset, not just based on the questions asked during data collection. Reporting data collection questions as themes indicates a lack of thorough analytic work to identify patterns and meanings in the data.

3. **Conducting a weak or unconvincing analysis:** Themes should be distinct, internally coherent, and consistent, capturing the majority of the data or providing a rich description of specific aspects. A weak analysis may have overlapping themes, fail to capture the data adequately, or lack sufficient examples to support the claims made.
4. **Mismatch between data and analytic claims:** The researcher's interpretations and analytic points must be consistent with the data extracts presented. Claims that are not supported by the data, contradict the data, or fail to consider alternative readings or variations in the account are problematic.
5. **Misalignment between theory, research questions, and analysis:** The interpretations of the data should be consistent with the theoretical framework used. For example, an experiential framework would not typically make claims about the social construction of the topic. The form of thematic analysis used should also align with the research questions.
6. **Neglecting to clarify assumptions, purpose, and process:** A good thematic analysis should spell out its theoretical assumptions, clarify how it was undertaken, and for what purpose. Without this crucial information, the analysis is lacking context and transparency, making it difficult for readers to evaluate the research.

## Reducing Bias

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When researchers are both reflexive and transparent in their thematic analysis, it strengthens the trustworthiness and rigor of their findings.

The explicit acknowledgement of potential biases and the detailed documentation of the analytical process provide a stronger foundation for the interpretation of the data, making it more likely that the findings reflect the perspectives of the participants rather than the biases of the researcher.

## Reflexivity

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Reflexivity involves critically examining one's own assumptions and biases, is crucial in qualitative research to ensure the trustworthiness of findings.

It requires acknowledging that researcher subjectivity is inherent in the research process and can influence how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted.

## Identifying and Challenging Assumptions:

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Reflexivity encourages researchers to explicitly acknowledge their preconceived notions, theoretical leanings, and potential biases.

By actively reflecting on how these factors might influence their interpretation of the data, researchers can take steps to mitigate their impact.

This might involve seeking alternative explanations, considering contradictory evidence, or discussing their interpretations with others to gain different perspectives.

## **Transparency**

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Transparency refers to clearly documenting the research process, including coding decisions, theme development, and the rationale behind theme development.

This openness allows others to understand how the analysis was conducted and to assess the credibility of the findings

This transparency helps ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, allowing others to understand and potentially replicate the analysis.

## **Documenting Decision-Making:**

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Transparency requires researchers to provide a clear and detailed account of their analytical choices throughout the research process.

This includes documenting the rationale behind coding decisions, the process of theme development, and any changes made to the analytical approach during the study.

By making these decisions transparent, researchers allow others to scrutinize their work and assess the potential for bias.

## **Practical Strategies for Reflexivity and Transparency in Thematic Analysis:**

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1. **Maintaining a reflexive journal:** Researchers can keep a journal throughout the research process to document their thoughts, assumptions, and potential biases. This journal serves as a record of the researcher's evolving understanding of the data and can help identify potential blind spots in their analysis.

2. **Engaging in team-based analysis:** Collaborative analysis, involving multiple researchers, can enhance reflexivity by providing different perspectives and interpretations of the data. Discussing coding decisions and theme development as a team allows researchers to challenge each other's assumptions and ensure a more comprehensive analysis.
3. **Clearly articulating the analytical process:** In reporting the findings of thematic analysis, researchers should provide a detailed account of their methods, including the rationale behind coding decisions, the process of theme development, and any challenges encountered during analysis. This transparency allows readers to understand the steps taken to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis.

## Advantages

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- **Flexibility:** Thematic analysis is a flexible method, making it adaptable to different research questions and theoretical frameworks. It can be employed with various epistemological approaches, including realist, constructionist, and contextualist perspectives. For example, researchers can focus on analyzing meaning across the entire data set or examine a particular aspect in depth.
- **Accessibility:** Thematic analysis is an accessible method, especially for novice qualitative researchers, as it doesn't demand extensive theoretical or technical knowledge compared to methods like Discourse Analysis (DA) or Conversation Analysis (CA). It is considered a foundational qualitative analysis method.
- **Rich Description:** Thematic analysis facilitates a rich and detailed description of data. It can provide a thorough understanding of the predominant themes in a data set, offering valuable insights, particularly in under-researched areas.
- **Theoretical Freedom:** Thematic analysis is not restricted to any pre-existing theoretical framework, allowing for diverse applications. This distinguishes it from methods like Grounded Theory or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which are more closely tied to specific theoretical approaches.

## Disadvantages

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- **Subjectivity and Interpretation:** The flexibility of thematic analysis, while an advantage, can also be a disadvantage. The method's openness can lead to a wide range of interpretations of the same data set, making it difficult to determine which aspects to emphasize. This potential subjectivity might raise concerns about the analysis's reliability and consistency.
- **Limited Interpretive Power:** Unlike methods like narrative analysis or biographical approaches, thematic analysis may not capture the nuances of individual experiences or contradictions within a single account. The focus on patterns across interviews could result in overlooking unique individual perspectives.
- **Oversimplification:** Thematic analysis might oversimplify complex phenomena by focusing on common themes, potentially missing subtle but important variations within the data. If not carefully executed, the analysis may present a homogenous view of the data that doesn't reflect the full range of perspectives.
- **Lack of Established Theoretical Frameworks:** Thematic analysis does not inherently rely on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. While this allows for inductive exploration, it can also limit the interpretive power of the analysis if not anchored within a relevant theoretical context. The absence of a theoretical foundation might make it challenging to draw meaningful and generalizable conclusions.
- **Difficulty in Higher-Phase Analysis:** While thematic analysis is relatively easy to initiate, the flexibility in its application can make it difficult to establish specific guidelines for higher-phase analysis<sup>1</sup>. Researchers may find it challenging to navigate the later stages of analysis and develop a coherent and insightful interpretation of the identified themes.
- **Potential for Researcher Bias:** As with any qualitative research method, thematic analysis is susceptible to researcher bias. Researchers' preconceived notions and assumptions can influence how they code and interpret data, potentially leading to skewed results.

## Further Information

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## Example TA Studies

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