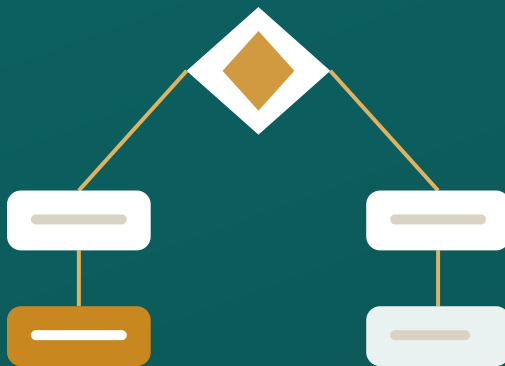


Thematic Analysis, Step by Step

The six phases done properly, the difference between a code and a theme that trips up most students, and how to show the rigour an examiner looks for. A working guide from PhD researchers.



Written by PhD statisticians dissertationstatistics.org

A theme is built, not found lying in the data

Thematic analysis is the most widely used qualitative method and the most widely done badly. The common failure is to treat themes as topics that simply appear, then summarise them. Done well, it is a deliberate, auditable process that moves from raw text to codes to themes you can defend, with your reasoning visible at every step.

PRINCIPLE

A code labels a feature of the data; a theme captures a patterned meaning across the data that speaks to your research question. A list of topics is not a set of themes. The analytic work is in moving from many codes to a smaller number of themes that each carry a clear, central idea, and being able to show how you got there.

The six phases

- 1 Familiarise yourself with the data**

Read and re-read the transcripts, noting first impressions. Immersion before coding is what stops you from imposing themes you expected to find.
- 2 Generate initial codes**

Work systematically through the data, tagging features that are interesting or relevant. Code generously and keep a short definition for each code.
- 3 Search for themes**

Cluster related codes into candidate themes. Ask what each potential theme is really about and whether it answers your question.
- 4 Review and refine, then name**

Check themes against the coded extracts and the whole dataset, merge or split as needed, then give each a clear name and definition. Write up with evidence for each.

Two choices that shape the whole analysis

State these up front. They determine how you code and how you defend the result, and an examiner will expect you to have chosen deliberately.

THE CHOICES TO MAKE AND STATE

Choice	The options	What it affects
Coding direction	Inductive (from the data) or deductive (from theory)	Whether themes emerge from the text or test an existing framework
Level of meaning	Semantic (explicit) or latent (underlying)	How far you interpret beyond what participants said directly
Analytic stance	Reflexive, codebook, or coding reliability	How themes are developed and whether agreement is measured
Theme type	Patterns of shared meaning, not a domain summary	Whether you report central ideas or merely group topics

WATCH OUT FOR

Do not report your interview questions as your themes. If your themes mirror your topic guide, you have summarised what you asked, not analysed what people meant. Themes should cut across the data and capture meaning the questions did not hand to you directly. This is the single most common weakness examiners flag in qualitative chapters.

Make the analysis auditable

Qualitative work is judged on whether the reader can trust how you reached your themes. Build the evidence of rigour as you go.

What to keep and report

Audit trail:	[dated notes on decisions as themes evolved]
Codebook:	[each code with a definition and an example]
Theme map:	[how codes were grouped into themes]
Extracts:	[quotes evidencing each theme, with source IDs]
Reflexivity:	[how your own position may shape interpretation]
Saturation:	[if claimed, how you judged it, honestly]
Software:	[e.g. NVivo, and how it was used to organise, not to decide]

PRINCIPLE

Software such as NVivo organises codes and extracts; it does not create themes or judge meaning. Describe it as a tool for managing your analysis, never as the source of your findings. The interpretive work, and the credibility of the themes, rests with you, and your write-up should make that judgement visible rather than hidden behind a program.

The thematic analysis checklist

If every box is ticked, your themes will read as analysed, defensible, and grounded in the data.

- You immersed yourself in the data before coding.

- You can distinguish a code from a theme, and your themes are patterns of meaning.

- You stated your coding direction, level of meaning, and analytic stance.

- Your themes cut across the data rather than mirroring your interview questions.

- You kept an audit trail and a codebook with definitions and examples.

- Each theme is evidenced with quotes tied to their sources.

- You addressed your own reflexivity in the write-up.

- Any software is described as organising the analysis, not making it.

WHEN THE ANALYSIS HAS TO CONVINC A
COMMITTEE

Have your qualitative analysis done with real rigour

If you want your transcripts coded systematically, themes developed and defended properly, and the whole process documented so an examiner trusts it, our PhD researchers work through it with you. You stay the author and understand every interpretive choice.

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