

## **“You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?”**

### **Writing CA**

Let's turn this catchy saying around: “You can walk the walk, but can you talk the talk?” Vital to becoming an expert in any field is learning to talk like people in that field, learning to “talk the talk.” In the case of MA theses and doctoral dissertations, it means learning to write in ways that reflect an intimate familiarity with the knowledge base, methodological orientations and rhetorical practices of the candidate's chosen research area. This is not something superficial – nor something to be lightly glossed as “good writing.” Learning to “talk like an expert” goes down to the very core of what it means to “be an expert” in a given field. Talking in community-sanctioned ways involves internalizing the values, orientations, and practices of that community. Talking is one essential way of being-in-the-world, particularly from a CA perspective. So “talking the talk” is ultimately inseparable from “walking the walk.”

### **The organization of CA research writing**

Some of the earliest writings by Sacks and Schegloff, from the 60's to early 70's when CA was still being forged as an academic discipline, are characterized by an often fierce rhetorical logic (yet at the same time a refusal to theorize) and often perplexing word choice (“doing being...”) intended to reflect the radical –emic perspective of the work. These writings were occasionally “thin” on presented data, though clearly based on extensive empirical data.

Second (and subsequent) generations of CA writing, on the other hand, have settled into a fairly recognizable style with several identifiable features:

1. Just-the-facts-ma'am style with minimal theorizing
2. Fronting of the empirical basis of observations (“data outline”)
3. Minimal introductory discussions
4. Minimal or non-existent “data section”
5. Strong participant-orientation in the description

This style is well illustrated in the following classic CA papers, and in fact, most of the papers in Atkinson and Heritage (1984):

Pomerantz, A. (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessment: some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 57-101). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Terasaki, A. (1976). Pre-announcement sequences in conversation. *Social Science Working Paper 99*, School of Social Science, University of California, Irvine. In G. Lerner (Ed.) (2004). *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation*. Pp. 172-219. Amsterdam; John Benjamins.

One of Jefferson's classic papers is notable for the complete absence of any citations of prior work whatsoever. This is a powerful statement. It declares not only that this is ground breaking research with no scholarly antecedents but also, and more importantly, that CA analyses gain their robustness not from corroborations from other studies (the “house of cards” approach), but by virtue of their self-evident consistency within the empirical data presented. Once into the analysis sections it is rare to find citations to other work. In short, it doesn't matter what anyone else has found. The only things that matter are those things that matter for the participants as displayed in YOUR data!

**The mechanics of CA style**

At their simplest, many CA papers can be reduced to a data outline, that is, a set of illustrative instances ordered in a way to make the strongest possible argument. This data outline provides the overall argumentative framework for the paper. Note that a “data outline” is not the same as a “collection.” A collection consists of multiple instances of the same phenomenon. A data outline, on the other hand, might draw instances from number of collections.

Once the data outline has been put together, the author need only “fill in the gaps” between the excerpts with analytic text. The resulting overall rhetorical structure of a CA paper is then as follows:

Excerpt #1  
Description and analysis of #1

Excerpt #2  
Description and analysis of #2

Excerpt #3  
Description and analysis of #3

Excerpt #n  
Description and analysis of n?

Each small section of description and analysis follows roughly what I like to call the CA Double Burger. The lead-in briefly introduces the context for the extract. Then comes the data excerpt, rarely more than a dozen lines. This is followed by a “blow by blow” description of how the relevant parts of the excerpt unfold. Finally, there is a summary of what can be learned from this excerpt.

## THE CA DOUBLE BURGER



**LEAD-IN**

**DATA EXCERPT**

**WALK-THROUGH**

**ANAYLSIS/SUMMARY**

## How can I improve my CA writing?

The best way to become a good writer is to become an avid reader. This is particularly true of learning to write in one's academic specialty field. Read every CA paper you can get your hands on...particularly those by "first generation" researchers.

### Common problems

- Misuse/overuse of technical terms and jargon (e.g. "try-marking")
  - A lack of familiarity with "stock phrases" common to CA literature
  - Mixing terminology from competing research traditions
  - Difficulties getting down to the relevant level of "granularity"
  - A failure to adopt or maintain a participant-orientation
  - Attempts to "psychologize" instead of focusing on displayed behaviors
  - Doubts about how to organize CA research writing
  - The "audience" problem (i.e. will the readers be CA specialists?)
- \* Avoid "psychologizing" about what the participants "might have been thinking" or about their intentions. Stick to what is displayed in the data.
- \* Avoid turning actions into objects, e.g. "...and then he did an X." Consider a silence. A silence in conversation is most definitely not a thing – despite the fact that we are able to measure one (retroactively). A silence is the result of each of the participants doing something. Interaction is about processes and courses of actions taken by participants. Try to reflect this in your writing.
- \* Avoid mixing terminology from different, and perhaps even competing, "flavors of CA" (what Markee 2000 describes as ACD, Analysis of Conversational Data). Newcomers to CA often don't realize that there are competing approaches to the analysis of conversational data and that not all people claiming to do conversation analysis are going the same thing.

Backchannel  
Negotiation of meaning  
Trigger

Recast  
Communication strategy  
Confirmation check

**DATA DICTATION – SHEET A****Extract #1**

Your job is to orally “walk-through” this data extract in sufficiently fine detail to allow your partner to reconstruct the extract from your description. Remember that you should be describing the talk – not just the physical features of the transcripts. In other words, don’t say things like “hi is “underlined” since that’s just describing what’s on the paper!

01           ((ring))  
 02       N: H' llo:?  
 03       H: Hi:,  
 04       N: =HI::.  
 05       H: Hwaryuhh=  
 06       N: =Fi:ne how'r you,  
 07       H: Oka:y,  
 08       N:        [Goo:d,  
 09           (0.4)

**Extract #2**

Now it’s your turn! As your partner tries to “walk-through” the data extract, attempt to reconstruct the excerpt as perfectly as you can. You can ask questions, but ultimately it is your partner’s job to give you the information you need to complete your task.

01 \_\_\_\_\_  
 02 \_\_\_\_\_  
 03 \_\_\_\_\_  
 04 \_\_\_\_\_  
 05 \_\_\_\_\_  
 06 \_\_\_\_\_  
 07 \_\_\_\_\_  
 08 \_\_\_\_\_



**DATA DICTATION – SHEET B****Extract #1**

As your partner tries to “walk-through” the data extract, attempt to reconstruct the excerpt as perfectly as you can. You can ask questions, but ultimately it is your partner’s job to give you the information you need to complete your task.

01 \_\_\_\_\_

02 \_\_\_\_\_

03 \_\_\_\_\_

04 \_\_\_\_\_

05 \_\_\_\_\_

06 \_\_\_\_\_

07 \_\_\_\_\_

08 \_\_\_\_\_

09 \_\_\_\_\_

**Extract #2**

Now it’s your turn. Your job is to orally “walk-through” this data extract in sufficiently fine detail to allow your partner to reconstruct the extract from your description. Remember that you should be describing the talk – not just the physical features of the transcripts. In other words, don’t say things like “hi is “underlined” since that’s just describing what’s on the paper!

01 ((Phone rings once - possibly picked up during first ring))  
02 D: HI::!  
03 (.)  
04 Hello?  
05 L: It didn't even ring  
06 D: Wha'? It didn't ring?  
07 L: No.  
08 D: Did you hear me say hello?

