

Making sense: Analysing qualitative information

This document gives supplementary information to [Evaluation Support Scotland Support Guide 3a: Analysing information for evaluation](#).

Qualitative information is non numerical. It can be about what people say, hear or experience. It can be about:

- their needs
- their experience or feelings about your service
- what works/matters for them
- what has changed personally for them or what outcomes have been achieved.

Qualitative information can come in a variety of formats, for example

- quotes
- photographs
- art work or creative responses
- stories (people telling you what has happened to them and how they feel).

Qualitative information helps us identify the factors or reasons affecting behaviour - the **how** and **why**.

Analysing qualitative data involves:

- looking through the evidence to identify themes
- mapping or marking your evidence against those themes
- getting a sense of how typical those themes are
- looking for relationships between the themes and other factors
- looking for examples or quotes that illustrate each theme

Example

Jane, a cookery class organiser wanted to explore what is important to attendees so she noted down comments made by attendees during the class. See below:

Date:

Context: I asked how she was getting on with cooking at home

Notes: Previously said she wasn't very confident about cooking with vegetables.

What was said:

"I'm cooking lots of vegetables in soup, my family call me the soup queen."

Said with pride and then laughed.

Jane might analyse the comments as follows:

- a) **Identify themes:** Jane's themes are: 'more dishes', 'confidence' 'healthier' and 'impact on family and friends'.
- b) **Map or mark your evidence against those themes:** The example on the left has evidence for all four themes.
- c) **Count the number of comments for each theme:** For example, Jane had comments that showed most participants were pleased with being able to cook more dishes with confidence – 5 people were pleased that family and friends were benefiting from healthier meals.
- d) **Look for relationships between different parts of the data:** For example, they found that those with children were more likely to be happy about the family benefiting.
- e) **Look for useful quotes that illustrate your outcomes well:** For example, a good quote for the impact on the whole family was '*me and the whole family are losing inches*'.

Ways of mapping your evidence

There are lots of ways to map or group information. The method you use depends upon the amount of data you have and the range of responses.

Post It® notes – Put comments on separate Post It® notes and group them into different themes. If a comment fits under more than one theme, duplicate it.

Themes from comments

More dishes

I've added three dishes to my list

My diet is more interesting, it's not just mince and tatties

Cooking lots of veg in soups

Cooking with rice, pasta and potatoes

My fave new dish is spaghetti carbonara

Learnt two pasta dishes, it's a beeze

Healthier

Spending less on food, fewer carry outs, healthier too

Me and the whole family are losing inches

Cooking lots of veg in soups

Up to 3 out of my 5 a day, making progress

Impact on family and friends

My daughter loved the stir fry, full of veg, win win

Cooked a meal for my 4 pals last week

My family call me the soup queen

Me and the whole family are losing inches

Confidence

Who knew vegetables could be delicious and easy to cook

I just feel more confident with a pan in my hand

My family call me the soup queen

Getting there, still a bit nervy around knives

Learnt two pasta dishes, it's a beeze

Highlighter pens – Use a different colour for each theme or grouping.

Example

- ✓✓ Me and the whole family are losing inches
- ✓ I've added three more dishes to my list
- ✓ My daughter loved the stir fry and it's full of veg, win win
- ✓ I just feel more confident with a pan in my hand
- ✓ My fave new dish is spaghetti carbonara
- ✓ Up to 3 out of my 5 a day, making progress
- ✓ Who knew vegetables could be delicious and easy to cook too
- ✓ Getting there, still a bit nervy around knives
- ✓ Spending less on food, fewer carry outs and healthier too
- ✓ Cooking with rice, pasta and potatoes
- ✓ Cooked a meal for my 4 pals last week
- ✓✓✓✓ Cooking lots of vegetables in soup, My family call me the soup queen
 - ✓ My diet is more interesting, it's not just mince and tatties.
- ✓✓ Learnt two pasta dishes, it's a breeze

● **More dishes** ● **Healthier**
● **Impact on family and friends** ● **Confidence**

Grid – Mark comments against particular themes or outcomes.

| Name | Comment | More dishes | Healthier | Confidence | Impact on family and friends |
|-------|--|-------------|-----------|------------|------------------------------|
| Carly | "Cooking lots of veg in soups, my family call me the soup queen" | x | x | x | x |
| Peter | "Me and the whole family are losing inches" | | x | | x |
| Jane | "I've added three dishes to my list" | x | | | |

You could create a table like this in a computer programme like Excel or Access. This can be helpful because you can use formulas to count numbers and to filter by headings.

Tips

- Ideally you want a sense of the situation for people at the start of your work with them (baseline) so you can identify what's different now. If that's not possible, look for evidence that people have done more or less of what you hoped they would. Your indicators should tell you what specific differences you expected to see.
- Take a sample. You don't have to analyse every session, body map or observation if you can get enough learning from a sample of participants.
- Get a second opinion to check that your conclusions make sense. Involve other workers, volunteers or even service users to check your groups and themes.
- If you have evaluation information in an electronic format, you can search and find keywords automatically. However, this will only help if people use the keywords! Service users may use slang, local terms and metaphors to describe things.
- Use word clouds¹ as a way of starting to identify themes from the words that people commonly use. Be aware that people may use different phrases for the same thing, for example people may refer to 'excellent support', 'great help' or 'fabulous guidance'. The word support might be linked to both negative and positive feedback. So word clouds are only a starting point.
- Keep a track of your analysis process, in case someone asks how you reached your conclusions or wants more detail. You might include a brief description of the process in your report, so that the reader is clear how you came to your conclusions.

¹ Word clouds (also known as text clouds or tag clouds, are visual presentations of the words used in. The more a specific word appears in a source of textual data (such as a speech, blog post, or database), the bigger and bolder it appears in the word cloud.

Related resources:

[Making sense sheet: Analysing quantitative information](#)

[Making sense sheet: Analysing as you go](#)

[Evaluation Support Scotland Support Guide 3a: Analysing information for evaluation](#)

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