INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

# Writing up IPA: *presenting your findings.*

The findings section of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study is an interpretative account of how a small number of people made sense of an experience that matters to them. It is organised by group experiential themes, it unfolds rather than lists, and it keeps each participant audible within the group. This guide is written for dissertation and thesis writers and for anyone preparing a journal article, and it continues the fictional study of our step-by-step guide to the seven steps of analysis.

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Alex, Sam and Rowan are fictional participants written for these guides. Their words, line numbers and analysis are invented; two short lines were added for Sam and Rowan so that the worked example could be written. The terms follow Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022).

WHAT YOU ARE WRITING

## What an IPA findings section is for

The findings section, called the results or the analysis in some departments and journals, presents the group experiential themes from the last step of the analysis, with the evidence for each and your interpretation of it. Its job is not to summarise what participants said, but to show how particular people made sense of an experience, and how you made sense of them.

Three things follow. The account is interpretative: each extract is there because of what you make of it, and the making is on the page. It unfolds: a theme is a short argument, not a heading with quotations beneath it. And it stays idiographic: a group experiential theme is a pattern across cases, but the reader should still be able to tell Sam from Rowan inside it.

Most dissertations and articles keep the findings and the discussion separate, and this guide follows that convention; some IPA papers merge them, which is acceptable where the venue allows it. If the method is new to you, our overview of what IPA is sets out its stance.

THE SHAPE OF THE SECTION

# How to structure the findings: an overview, a table, then one section per theme

A findings section that works has a predictable shape.

1. **An overview paragraph.** How many participants, how many group experiential themes, and in a sentence or two what they together say, named in the order you will present them.
2. **A table of the group experiential themes.** Each GET, its group-level sub-themes if any, and which participants contribute to each.
3. **One section per GET,** headed with the theme's name: the shared experience first, then each participant in turn, with an extract and your interpretation.
4. **A short closing paragraph,** if the themes need bringing together. The discussion will do the rest.

## The table of group experiential themes

| GROUP EXPERIENTIAL THEME | GROUP-LEVEL SUB-THEME | CONTRIBUTING PARTICIPANTS |
|---|---|---|
| **Care without return** | Being the one everyone rings | Sam, Rowan |
| | Unsure anyone would be there | Sam |
| | Unable to put it down | Rowan |

The table shows one theme from the fictional study; yours has a row for every GET. It should claim only what it shows: that these participants' personal experiential themes fed this group theme. It should not claim that a theme matters more because more people contribute to it, that absent participants had nothing to say about care, or that the table is itself a finding. A GET will not always include everyone; the table is where you say so, and Alex's absence from this one is not hidden.

## Convergence and divergence within a theme

Open each theme section with what the participants share, because that is why the theme exists. Then let the differences do some work. Convergence is not sameness: Sam and Rowan both describe care that runs one way, and the theme would be thinner if it pretended they described it alike. Say where the experience diverges and what the divergence shows. Avoid two traps: separate small cases with nothing joining them, and a group so smooth that no one in it can be heard.

## Where a single-case study differs

A single-case study has no group experiential themes. Its findings are organised by the personal experiential themes of the one participant, with sub-themes where they help, and the account can follow the shape of that person's experience. The demands on the writing are the same: extracts as evidence, interpretation as analysis, an account that unfolds. Depth takes the place of convergence and divergence, as our worked example of one case shows with a different fictional participant.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

# How to use quotations: extracts as evidence, interpretation as analysis

An extract is the participant's words, set out so that the reader can judge your reading against them. The interpretation is your account of what those words do. Extracts alone are description; interpretation alone is assertion.

Aim for roughly half extract and half interpretation by length, with the interpretation usually a little longer. A draft that is mostly quotation shows the reader the data and leaves them to analyse it; an extract followed by one sentence that restates it has not been analysed.

## How long an extract should be

Long enough to carry its own context and short enough to be read closely. A sentence or two is usual, sometimes with the question that prompted it. Alex's "part of me quietly packs a bag" needs the words before it, because the packing follows "when someone gets close". A page of transcript asks the reader to do your analysis; a single word, Alex's "still" or "just", can be the strongest evidence of all.

## Labelling extracts

Every extract carries the pseudonym and its place in the transcript: (Sam, lines 44 to 45). Use one format throughout. Line numbers are usual; page and line, or a timestamp, also work, provided the appendix tables use the same system. Use each pseudonym everywhere, including the tables.

## Editing an extract honestly

| CHANGE | HOW TO MARK IT | EXAMPLE |
|---|---|---|
| Words left out | An ellipsis in square brackets, distinct from a trailing off | “I’m the one everyone rings […] I’ve never been sure who I’d ring.” |
| Words supplied for sense | Square brackets | “[When someone gets close] part of me quietly packs a bag.” |
| Pauses, laughter, tone | Square brackets, in the transcript’s notation | “When someone gets close… [pause] part of me quietly packs a bag. [laughs]” |
| Identifying detail | A bracketed description, stated in the method | A named town becomes [the town]. |
| The interviewer’s words | Kept where the answer depends on the question | Interviewer: So leaving first feels safer? Alex: “Not safer. Just… less of a surprise.” |

Grammar, dialect, repetition and false starts stay as they were said. Alex’s transcript already contains an ellipsis, “When someone gets close…”, marking a trailing off; if you also cut words, mark the cut differently and say in your method which is which. Never cut a passage so that it says something the participant did not say, and if a participant said the opposite elsewhere, the theme section needs that too.

## How many participants to quote in each theme

Smith’s (2011) guide for evaluating IPA papers set a practical benchmark. With one to three participants, each theme should carry extracts from every participant; with four to eight, from at least three of them; with larger samples, from at least three participants, with some indication of how many the theme represents. These are standards for evidencing a theme, not measures of its importance. If a theme falls short, as “Care without return” would in our three-person study, either return to the missing case and look again, or report the theme and say plainly who it does and does not include. Do not pad it.

THE QUALITY OF THE WRITING

# How to write interpretatively rather than descriptively

"A bit descriptive" is the comment IPA writers hear most often, and the most useful, because it names something the writing can fix. Nizza, Farr and Smith (2021) describe four markers of high-quality IPA. Written for judging finished work, they double as instructions for the writer.

1. **A compelling, unfolding narrative.** Each theme section tells a story with a beginning, a development and an end, its extracts in the order the argument needs.
2. **A vigorous experiential or existential account.** The writing stays with what the experience was like and what it meant: closeness, being relied on, who would hold you. It does not drift into opinions about the topic or about services.
3. **Close analytic reading of participants' words.** Interpretation attends to the particular words: the metaphor, the repetition, the tense, the question that stands in for an answer.
4. **Attention to convergence and divergence.** The writing shows what is shared and how it is lived differently, and treats the difference as part of the finding.

## From "Alex describes" to what the words do

| DESCRIPTIVE | INTERPRETATIVE |
|---|---|
| Alex describes feeling distant when people get close. | **For Alex, closeness arrives with its own preparations: part of Alex "quietly packs a bag" before anyone has left.** |
| Sam says that everyone calls Sam for help. | **Sam's first sentence gives Sam a place in other people's lives; the second, "I've never been sure who I'd ring", leaves Sam's own place empty.** |
| Rowan talks about having to hold things together. | **Rowan's question, "who holds the rest?", has no answer in the account, and its lack of an answer is what keeps Rowan holding.** |

The left column reports that something was said. The right column says what the saying does, and shows the words doing it; nothing in it could not be checked against the quoted words. That anchoring separates interpretation from speculation.

## Making the double hermeneutic visible

IPA's double hermeneutic is the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of their experience, and both layers should be visible. The participant's sense-making is in the extract and in your report of it: Alex corrects the interviewer, "Not safer. Just… less of a surprise", and the correction is Alex's own account of what the leaving is for. Your sense-making is in the sentences that follow. Mark the difference with your verbs: "Alex corrects" and "Alex names" report the participant's work; "this suggests" and "I read this as" mark yours. Tentative language is not weakness here but accuracy about whose meaning is whose.

## The writer's reflexivity

Your reflexive diary is where you noticed what you brought to the reading, and a little of it belongs in the findings. A sentence noting that you first heard Sam's "never been sure" as sadness, and came to hear it as something untested, shows how a reading developed. Keep such moments brief; longer reflexive discussion belongs in the method or the discussion. The first person is accepted in IPA, because it says who is interpreting.

A FINISHED SECTION

## A worked example: “Care without return” in finished prose

Below is how one group experiential theme from the fictional study might appear in a findings section. It is an original illustration written for this guide, with invented participants, words, line numbers and interpretation. Read it for its shape: a shared opening, each participant in turn, a paragraph where they diverge, and a close that returns to the theme.

### Care without return

Sam and Rowan both describe themselves as the person others turn to, and both describe a care that travels in one direction. The theme is not about being needed, which each of them accepts without complaint. It is about what happens at the other end of that need: the return that does not come, or cannot be asked for. The two accounts share this shape and differ in where the missing return is felt.

Sam’s account opens the theme because it states the shape in two sentences:

> I’m the one everyone rings. I’ve never been sure who I’d ring. (Sam, lines 44 to 45)

The first sentence places Sam at the centre of other people’s difficulties, and “the one” makes the place singular. The second turns the phone around: not that there is no one, but that Sam has “never been sure”, and the uncertainty has never been tested. Asked later what would happen if Sam did ring someone, Sam says, “I’d probably just sort it out myself” (line 61). The call is not made, so the question of whether anyone would answer stays open, and the care

goes on running one way. I read Sam's uncertainty as closer to a habit than a wound: the possibility of being helped has not been refused so much as left unused.

Rowan arrives at the same shape from a different direction. Where Sam's account is about who would be there, Rowan's is about whether stopping is possible at all:

> If I stop holding it together, who holds the rest?
>
> (Rowan, lines 102 to 103)

The question is asked and not answered, and the lack of an answer is doing the work. "Holding it together" is effortful and bodily, a grip rather than a feeling, and "the rest" is left unspecified, as though everything outside Rowan depended on that grip. Rowan does not say that no one would help; the thought of being helped does not arise, because the thought of stopping cannot be completed. Later Rowan laughs and adds, "I don't think I know how to put it down" (line 118), and the laugh carries the same weight as the question.

The two accounts converge on care without return and diverge on where the absence sits. For Sam, it is in other people: the unmade call, the open question of who would be there. For Rowan, it is in Rowan: a holding that cannot be released for long enough for anyone to take a turn. Sam could, in principle, ring someone; Rowan cannot imagine letting go. The theme holds both because both describe a care that is given and not received, and the difference between them is part of what it shows. Care without return is not one experience with two examples but a position two people occupy differently, one looking outward for a return that may not come, the other unable to make room for it.

Original illustrative section for this guide · fictional data and interpretation

## The opening claims the shape

What the theme is and is not, before any extract.

## Each extract is read, not restated

“The one”, “never been sure”, “holding”, “the rest”: the interpretation stays on particular words.

## The divergence is the finding

Sam and Rowan are not smoothed into one; the last paragraph says what differs and what that shows.

WHAT GOES WHERE

# Tables and figures: PET tables, the GET table and the appendices

IPA uses tables to make the analysis traceable, not to replace the prose. Two kinds matter.

## The PET table for each participant

Each case ends with a table of its personal experiential themes, the experiential statements under each, and where in the transcript each comes from. One of Alex's themes is shown below.

FROM ALEX'S PET TABLE

### Leaving before being left

| EXPERIENTIAL STATEMENT | WHERE |
|---|---|
| **Quietly leaving, while still there** | Lines 12 to 13 |
| **Closeness as something to prepare for** | Lines 12, 31 |
| **Smiling as a way out** | Line 13 |
| **Leaving first, so it is less of a surprise** | Line 18 |

## The GET table

The GET table sits in the body, at the start of the findings, in the form shown above. Many writers add a fuller version to the appendix listing, under each GET and sub-theme, the personal experiential themes that fed it: the clearest audit trail IPA offers, from GET to PET to statement to line. In a journal article the PET tables usually go to supplementary material.

## What belongs in the appendices

- The PET table for every participant.
- The GET table in full, with the PETs beneath each theme.

- A page or two of annotated transcript, anonymised and with consent.
- The interview schedule.
- A record of how statements were clustered: a photograph of the strips, or a capture of the map.
- Reflexive diary extracts that show how a reading changed.

Figures are rarely needed. A diagram of how the GETs relate can help if the relation is part of the finding; a word cloud, or a chart of how often each theme occurs, says nothing about experience.

AFTER THE FINDINGS

# The discussion section, in brief

The discussion is where the literature returns. In IPA the findings come first, in the participants' terms and yours, and only then are they set against existing research and theory; brought in early, the literature turns the extract into an illustration of a theory instead of a person. Take each group experiential theme in turn and say what it adds to, confirms, complicates or departs from in the published work.

Keep claims proportionate to the sample. Three or six people analysed in depth tell you a great deal about how those people made sense of an experience, and nothing about how common that sense-making is. Write "for these participants" and mean it. What travels from an IPA study is the depth and particularity of the account; the reader, given enough detail, judges how far it travels.

Implications follow from the account, not from the numbers. Say what a practitioner, a service or a researcher might do differently if they took Sam's and Rowan's accounts seriously, and offer it as a possibility worth testing rather than a recommendation the data has earned. Then the limitations, briefly, and a reflexive note on what you brought.

WHAT GETS NOTICED

## Common faults examiners and reviewers notice

- **Lists of quotations with thin commentary.** Three extracts in a row, each followed by a sentence that repeats it. Cut an extract, and spend the words on reading the ones that remain.
- **Themes that are topics.** “Relationships”, “Coping” and “Support” are topics; “Leaving before being left” is an experience. Nigbur and Chatfield (2025) give practical advice on naming themes as experiences specific to the people who had them.
- **Losing the person in the group theme.** A section that speaks of “participants” throughout, with the extracts interchangeable, has stopped being idiographic.
- **Reporting frequencies as if they were the point.** “Five of six participants described” counts rather than interprets. Say who, and what it was like for them; leave how many to the table.
- **Using the 2009 terms inconsistently.** Older papers and many handouts use the first edition’s words: emergent themes for what are now experiential statements, superordinate themes within a case, and superordinate or master themes across cases. Examiners notice a thesis that cites the 2022 edition and uses the 2009 words, or mixes the two. Use the current terms throughout, and leave an older paper’s terms inside its quotation.
- **Overclaiming generalisation.** “People who care for others feel…” is a claim about a population from a sample of three. Keep the claim with the people who made it.

BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

# A reporting checklist for the findings section

## Structure

- [ ] Overview paragraph names every GET
- [ ] GET table with sub-themes and participants
- [ ] One section per GET, in the table's order

## Each theme

- [ ] Opens with what is shared
- [ ] Moves participant by participant
- [ ] Says where accounts diverge, and what that shows

## Extracts

- [ ] Every extract labelled with pseudonym and lines
- [ ] Cuts and additions marked in square brackets
- [ ] Enough participants quoted for the sample size

## Interpretation

- [ ] Each extract read closely, not restated
- [ ] Participant's sense-making and yours distinguishable
- [ ] The account unfolds from first extract to last

## Tables and appendices

- [ ] PET table for every participant
- [ ] GET to PET to statement to line traceable
- [ ] Annotated transcript pages, with consent

## Terms and claims

- [ ] Current terms used throughout
- [ ] Claims kept with these participants
- [ ] Literature held back for the discussion

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

# Common questions about writing up IPA

## Should the findings and the discussion be separate sections?

Usually, and most departments and journals expect it: findings first, the literature afterwards. Some IPA papers combine them, which is acceptable where the venue allows it. Either way, keep what the participants said and what you made of it apart from what other authors have written.

## How many group experiential themes should I present?

As many as your evidence and word count can carry in depth, and usually fewer than you developed. A theme that gets two paragraphs has been mentioned, not presented. Many student projects present three or four; a thesis can carry more.

## Can I write in the first person?

Yes, and in IPA it is often clearer, because the first person says whose interpretation it is. Use it for your sense-making, not the participants', and check your department's or journal's convention.

## What if a participant does not appear in a theme?

Say so, in the table and in the theme's opening, and do not search the transcript for a line that can be made to fit. Smith's (2011) benchmarks are a guide to evidencing, not a rule for forcing a fit.

## How long should the findings be?

There is no fixed length. In a dissertation the findings are usually the longest section; in a thesis each GET may have a chapter. If you are over the limit, cut an extract before you cut interpretation.

## References

The terms follow Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022). The four markers are from Nizza, Farr and Smith (2021), and the benchmark for how many participants to quote in each theme is from Smith (2011).


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