

Resources for qualitative story completion

We have organised this reading list into the following sections to help guide you through different uses of the story completion method in qualitative research.

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[Practical guidance on using story completion in qualitative research](#)

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.

Chapter 6 of Virginia and Victoria's qualitative research textbook provides an introduction to the story completion method and practical guidance on using story completion in qualitative research. Chapter 3 provides guidance on sample size in story completion research. Chapter 10 provides brief guidance on analysing story completion data. The companion website for this book provides examples of story completion research materials for use in student projects and story completion datasets for use in teaching: <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/successful-qualitative-research/book233059>

Braun, V., Clarke, V. & Gray, D. (2017). Innovations in qualitative methods. In B. Gough (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of critical social psychology* (pp. 243-266). Palgrave.

In this chapter, Virginia, Victoria and Debra Gray provide an introduction to and published examples of several innovative methods including story completion.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Moller, N. & Tischner, I. (2019). Story completion: A method with exciting promise. In Liamputtong, P. (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1-18). Singapore: Springer.

This is an abbreviated version of the Clarke et al. (2017) chapter, covering the evolution of story completion as a qualitative method, design, analysis and the strengths and challenges of story completion as a qualitative technique.

Clarke, V., Braun, V., Frith, H. & Moller, N. (2019). Editorial introduction to the Special Issue: [Using story completion methods in qualitative research](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 1-20.

This editorial introduction to a Special Issue of the journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on the story completion method provides a history of qualitative story completion and an overview of design, sampling and data analysis in story completion research. You can [access the entire Special Issue here](#).

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Frith, H., Hayfield, N., Malson, H., Moller, N. & Shah-Beckley, I. (2019). [Qualitative story completion: Possibilities and potential pitfalls](#) – Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Hannah Frith, Nikki Hayfield, Helen Malson, Naomi Moller and Iduna Shah-Beckley in conversation. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 136-155.

This 'Spoken Word' edited discussion paper features seven members of the Story Completion Research Group discussing their experiences of using the story completion method, with a particular emphasis on some of the challenges and unanswered questions of story completion research. This paper is also part of the Special Issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology*.

Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Moller, N., Tischner, I. & the Story Completion Research Group (2017). Once upon a time...: Qualitative story completion methods. In V. Braun, V. Clarke & D. Gray (Eds.), [Collecting qualitative data: A practical guide to textual, media and virtual techniques](#) (pp. 45-70). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This chapter provides an introduction to the story completion method and discusses the unique features and benefits of story completion, as well as potential challenges, provides guidance on design, sampling and implementation, as well as data analysis and includes activities for student readers.

Frith, H. (2018). [Exploring the meaning of orgasmic absence using the story completion method](#). SAGE Research Methods Cases, SAGE Publications Ltd, London.

In this paper Hannah Frith discusses [her orgasmic absence story completion study](#) and considers the merits of story completion as a social constructionist approach for researching sensitive topics such as sex and the benefits of creative and third-person responding as well as the practical benefits of low cost and quick data collection.

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Early examples of qualitative story completion research

Horner, M.S. (1972). [Toward an understanding of achievement-related conflicts in women](#). *Journal of Social Issues*, 28, 157-175.

As far as we are aware this is one of the first, if not the first, paper to use story completion in a qualitative design. Horner retained the psychoanalytic lens of the earlier clinical use of story completion as a projective technique and made the interpretative leap that the participant's responses to the story stems reflected their own thoughts and feelings about achievement, which was the focus of her research. Horner's research was controversial because she concluded that women have a 'fear of success'. This controversy seemed to extend to her use of the story completion method and relegated it to the margins of qualitative research. A commentary on this paper by [Robbins and Robbins](#) (1973), which disputes the generalisability of the findings, can be read [here](#).

Kitzinger, C. & Powell, D. (1995). [Engendering infidelity: Essentialist and social constructionist readings of a story completion task](#). *Feminism & Psychology*, 5, 345-372.

An essential read for any qualitative story completion researcher! The paper that rehabilitated and reinvigorated story completion as a qualitative method. Kitzinger and Powell argued that story completion data could be interpreted through an essentialist lens, as reflecting the feelings and thoughts of participants, or it could be interpreted through a constructionist lens, as reflecting the social meanings surrounding a topic available to participants. This paper has been hugely influential on subsequent use of the story completion method, particularly with regard to the reworking of story completion as accessing social (rather than psychological) meanings. You can read about Celia Kitzinger's reflections on this paper [here](#): Kitzinger, C. & Wood, M. (2019). [Story completion, methodological innovation, epistemology and social change](#): Matthew Wood in conversation with Celia Kitzinger. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 21-33.

Lewin, M. (1985). Unwanted intercourse: The difficulty of saying no. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 9, 184-192.

An early example of story completion, innovative in its use of a video-stem. Third person stem – participants were asked to write two different versions. Essentialist interpretation – participants' responses assumed to reflect their thoughts and feelings. Data analysed with 'content analysis' (similar to a coding reliability type of thematic analysis), with some qualitative description of the story content.

Moore, S.M. (1995). [Girls' understanding and social construction of menarche](#). *Journal of Adolescence*, 18, 87-104.

An early example of an essentialist interpretation of story completion data – assuming the stories reflect the thoughts and feelings of the participants, about menarche in this instance. Participants were asked to complete five third-person story stems and the stories were analysed with a coding reliability type of thematic analysis (using a structured codebook

and measuring the level of agreement between two independent coders). The story stems were part of a wider questionnaire.

Moore, S.M., Gullone, E. & Kostanski, M. (1997). [An examination of adolescent risk-taking using a story completion task](#). *Journal of Adolescence*, 20, 369-379.

An early example of third person story completion – participants each completed 4 stems, data analysed with a coding reliability form of thematic analysis, some qualitative reporting of the story content.

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Examples of first-person story completion

Livingston, J.A. & Testa, M. (2000). [Qualitative analysis of women's perceived vulnerability to sexual aggression in a hypothetical dating context](#). *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17, 729-741.

An example of a first-person story completion – the stem was third-person but participants were instructed to imagine themselves as the female character in the stem when completing the story. Story completion was used as part of an experimental design. The stories were analysed using a coding reliability form of thematic analysis and the authors reported and discussed three themes.

Beres, M., Terry, G., Senn, C.Y. & Ross, L.K. (2019). [Accounting for men's refusal of heterosex: A story-completion study with young adults](#). *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56(1), 127-136.

First person stem, comparative design (comparing male and female responses), participants each complete one stem, data analysed with qualitative content analysis.

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Examples of third-person story completion

Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2019). [How can a heterosexual man remove his body hair and retain his masculinity? Mapping stories of male body hair depilation](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 96-114.

The first published paper to explore Braun and Clarke's (2013) story mapping technique using thematic analysis through a constructionist lens. From a wider study exploring the meanings of (broadly) non-normative body hair practices (see also [Jennings et al](#)). One stem design.

Clarke, V., Braun, V. & Wooles, K. (2015). [Thou shalt not covet another man? Exploring constructions of same-sex and different-sex infidelity using story completion](#). *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 25(2), 153-166.

A constructionist thematic analysis of a comparative four-stem design – comparing participants responses to same-sex and different-sex emotional and sexual infidelity.

Frith, H. (2013). [Accounting for orgasmic absence: Exploring heterosex using the story completion method](#). *Psychology and Sexuality*, 4, 310-322.

A constructionist thematic analysis of a comparative two stem design – comparing the responses of female and male participants to a woman in a heterosexual couple not having an orgasm and a man in a heterosexual couple not having an orgasm.

Gavin, H. (2005). The social construction of the child sex offender explored by narrative. *The Qualitative Report*, 10, 395-415.

Unusual six stem design, in which participants completed each of the six stems. Data analysed with theory-led thematic analysis.

Hayfield & Wood, M. (2019). [Looking heteronormatively good! Combining story completion with *Bitstrips* to explore understandings of sexuality and appearance](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 115-135.

An empirical paper from the Special Issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on the story completion method. An innovative combination of story completion and visual methods.

Hunt, X., Swartz, L., Carew, M.T., Braathen, S.H., Chiwaula, M. & Rohleder, P. (2018). [Dating persons with physical disabilities: The perceptions of South Africans without disabilities](#). *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 20, 141-155.

Two stem comparative design, thematic analysis.

Jennings, M., Braun, V, & Clarke, V. (2019). [Breaking gendered boundaries? Exploring constructions of counter-normative body hair practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand using story completion](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 74-95.

From a wider study exploring the meanings of (broadly) non-normative body hair practices (see also [Clarke and Braun](#)). Comparative two stem design, thematic analysis.

Moller, N. & Tischner, I. (2019) [Young people's perceptions of fat counsellors: "How can THAT help me?"](#) *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 34-53.

An empirical paper from the Special Issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on the story completion method. One stem design, thematic analysis.

Shah-Beckley, I. S. (2017) [Therapists and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex: A story completion study](#). DCounsPsych, University of the West of England. Available from: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/29521>

Four stem comparative design, comparing the responses of female and male participants and therapist and non-therapist participants to scenarios depicting heterosexual couples, data analysed with a constructionist thematic analysis. One of the few examples to date of a non-student sample.

Shah-Beckley, I., Clarke, V. & Thomas, Z. (2018). [Therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex: A qualitative story completion study](#). *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*.

A paper based on the sexual refusal stem in used in Iduna's doctoral research.

Tischner, I. (2019). [Tomorrow is the start of the rest of their life — so who cares about health? Exploring constructions of weight-loss motivations and health using story completion](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 54-73.

An empirical paper from the Special Issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on the story completion method. Two stem design, constructionist thematic analysis.

Walsh, E. & Malson, H. (2010). [Discursive constructions of eating disorders: A story completion task](#). *Feminism & Psychology*, 20, 529-537.

A discursive analysis of a two-stem design.

Whitty, M.T. (2005). [The realness of cybercheating: Men's and women's representations of unfaithful internet relationships](#). *Social Science Computer Review*, 23, 57-67.

A follow-up to the [Kitzinger and Powell study](#), used two stems to explore responses to women and men engaged in internet infidelity. Data analysed with qualitative content analysis.

Wood, M., Wood, G. & Balaam, M. (2017). ["They're just pixel tits, man": Disputing the 'reality' of virtual reality pornography through the story completion method](#). *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, New York: ACM, pp. 5439-5451.

Social constructionist, single stem design, participants from online writing communities to ensure writing fluency, thematic analysis.

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Story completion history | Some examples of quantitative story completion

Story completion was first used in quantitative research, particularly in the area of child development and attachment. The participants' stories are coded using structured coding frameworks and transformed into numerical data for statistical analysis. For some examples of quantitative story completion see:

Bretherton, I. Oppenheim, D., Emde, R.N. & the MacArthur Narrative Working Group 2003, The MacArthur story stem battery. In R.N. Emde, D.P. Wolf and D. Oppenheim (Eds.), *Revealing the inner worlds of young children: The MacArthur Story Stem Battery and parent – child narratives* (pp. 381-396). New York: Oxford University Press.

Smeeckens, S., Riksen-Walraven, J., Van Bakel, H.J.A. & De Weeth, C. (2010). Five-year-olds' cortisol reactions to an attachment story completion task. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 35, 858-865.

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Story completion history | Story completion as a projective technique

Story completion was first developed as a projective technique, informed by psychoanalytic theory, for use in clinical practice and assessment. The assumption was that by providing people with an ambiguous stimulus like a story stem or an ink-blot, as in the famous Rorschach ink blot test, the person completing the test would be compelled to 'fill in the blanks' and reveal something of their unconscious desires and motivations; they would 'project' these onto the test (hence the term 'projective technique'). The following book provides a discussion of story completion as a projective technique:

Rabin, A.I. & Zlotogorski, Z. (1981). Completion methods: Word association, sentence, and story completion. In A.I. Rabin (Ed.), *Assessment with projective techniques* (pp. 121-149). New York: Springer.

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Other resources on story completion

Smith, B. (2019). [Some modest thoughts on story completion methods in qualitative research](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 156-159.

A commentary on the Special Issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on the story completion method.

Stainton-Rogers, W. (2019). [Are you sitting comfortably? Then I will begin](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 160-162.

A commentary on the Special Issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on the story completion method.

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