

The *Unappreciative Inquiry* Checklist

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This 12 point checklist is for commissioners of evaluation to aid in reviewing evaluation reports, particularly at the draft stage, prior to utilization of the evaluation. It focuses exclusively on the critical examination of the **credibility** of an evaluation report.

Please note...the items below are inherently subjective, mutually non-exclusive, and collectively inexhaustive.

5 rules for reviewing a draft evaluation report

I. Remember what you asked for

Much can happen between the time an evaluation design was approved and the report is written. Make sure you remember what you asked the evaluators to do and why.

II. Know yourself and your limitations

If the evaluation relies on techniques that are outside your area of expertise, get help from a specialist in that area. Just because you hired an evaluator with technical expertise does not mean they always get it right.

III. Don't start with the executive summary

Go to the section of the report that describes the evaluation questions and the methods for answering them. Only after thoroughly understanding the question and methods should you read the executive summary.

IV. Don't get caught in the *utilization trap*

It is important to make sure that an evaluation report is written in a manner that is accessible for use by the intended audience. But start the review of an evaluation report with a focus on the credibility of the evaluation findings, not how well they are presented.

V. Try to demolish the argument not discredit the witness

Concentrate critical efforts on the "headline" conclusions and how well they stand up to scrutiny. Don't focus on small errors that are inconsequential to the overall report. Critique the argument not the evaluators.

12 problems to check for in a draft evaluation report

Evaluation Questions and Methods

1. Evaluating outside the realm of the researchable

Start with the evaluation questions. Was an evaluation question asked that really can't be answered with empirical evidence? Was the question really just a request for an opinion or so impossibly large in scope that an evaluation team could not possibly address it fully?

2. The question/method mismatch

The evaluation should describe the methods used to answer *each* evaluation question, and the relationship between questions and methods should make sense. For instance, a question about frequency that is answered with qualitative methods is a question/method mismatch. Is there a mismatch between the method implied by an evaluation question and the method employed to answer the question?

3. The *nonetheless statement* and the *methodological limitations graveyard*

It is good practice for evaluators to note the limitations of their chosen design. Do detailed descriptions of methodological limitations end with statements to the effect of "nonetheless we believe our methods are adequate" without clarifying why? Similarly, are descriptions of methodological limitations mentioned once in a "limitations section" but not referenced when findings or conclusions are discussed?

Findings

4. Mixed-up methods and triangulation magic

Many evaluators love to triangulate with mixed methods. That's fine as long as a reader of the report can unmix the methods to verify which specific methods support a particular finding and how. Is it possible to unmix the methods? Does the report present "triangulation" as if it is a magical means of combining different methods to generate a finding, but then fail to explain how data were triangulated?

Findings (cont.)

5. Tables and charts: missing sources and confusing Ns

Tables and charts are excellent places to check if evidence supports an evaluation finding. Does the information in the table or chart accompanying a finding adequately describe what is being presented? Does it specify the source of the data? Does the table include the N (population or sample size) and does it make sense? Is it adequate for supporting the finding that it is presented as supporting?

6. Empty words and equivocation

Empty words lack a specific meaning. Equivocation occurs when an ambiguous word slips between two or more meanings. Does the evaluation introduce key words that are so undefined or vague that it is not possible to even assess whether a finding is true or not? Is jargon used without explanation? Do key words (effective, quality, significant, etc.) change in meaning from a narrow specific use in the methodology to wider more general use in the findings and conclusions? Do the meanings of words change altogether?

7. Cause and effect without description

To assess a claim about *why* something happened, it is helpful to know exactly *what* happened. Did the evaluator provide sufficient descriptive information to understand the context for a causal claim? Were descriptive facts that are necessary for assessing the validity of a causal claim missing?

Conclusions

8. Invisible goalposts: judgments without criteria

If a normative judgment is made, explicit criteria that provide the basis for that judgment must be included. The reader should be able to determine if the criteria are appropriate and if the findings match the criteria. For instance, if a claim is made that a project is a *success*, it should be clear what criteria are used for a determination of *success*. Preferably the criteria are set *ex ante*. Are normative judgments presented as conclusions despite a lack of criteria for those judgments?

9. The overly-conclusive conclusion

Evaluators typically have an incentive to provide bold, unambiguous conclusions, even if a conclusion is not warranted. Do the conclusions overly summarize or generalize the findings, losing the important nuance, ambiguity, and messiness of the findings? Do the evaluators admit when it is not possible to provide a conclusive answer to an evaluation question due to the methods employed, data collected, or an overly ambitious question?

10. The just-so causal narrative

Humans are primed to assess narratives based on narrative coherence rather than the quantity or quality of evidence that supports the narrative. Beware of a good story. Is the evaluator putting descriptive findings together in a causal narrative without providing evidence of the causal linkages? Are details left out that contradict or complicate the narrative?

Recommendations

11. The evidentially emancipated recommendation

Ideally, evaluation recommendations are simply the logical extensions of evaluation conclusions. In many evaluations, though, it can be valuable to look outside the evaluated project for recommended actions to address programmatic problems identified in the evaluation. Such recommendations should be just as well-supported with evidence and argument as the evaluation findings and conclusions. Does the evaluation include a recommendation without including evidence to suggest that it would be a relevant or effective action to take in response to evaluation conclusions?

Annexes

12. The incomplete annex

Few readers of an evaluation report will check the annexes to an evaluation. Most busy readers won't even get past the executive summary. Yet the annexes are often where the detailed information resides for the careful reviewer to trace a conclusion back to the data source and understand how it was collected and analyzed. Is the evaluation report missing key annexes necessary for a thorough review of the evaluation, such as focus group transcripts or summaries, survey topline reports, data collection instruments, detailed methodological descriptions, etc.?

For a copy of this checklist, please request one at UnappreciativeInquiry@gmail.com