

## **Document Comments: Describing the Nature, Context and Background of the Sources of Information**

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**March 12, 2016**

In this article I will touch on the process of writing comments on documents. Writing these comments is part of what I like to refer to as a 'documented' approach to data analysis with the software, whereby we make an effort to describe as much as possible the different components, steps and procedures involved in an analysis project. Comments and memos can be used in this documentation process, although with slightly different objectives. While comments are the ideal places to write descriptions, reflections or insights on individual objects of the project (e.g., the project itself, a specific document, quotation or code), memos are better suited to provide more of an integrated view of the process, bringing pieces together in a narrative.

### **Document Comments**

It is always a good idea to write comments on the documents that you are analyzing. Friese (2012: 62) suggested that researchers should include in the document comment space meta information on the document (e.g., interview protocols) as well as notes related to the context of data collection. To this I would add that document comments should include whatever piece of information about the document context, background, or its nature, that might enrich the data analysis process of that document. This may include demographic information when analyzing interviews if having that information close to you can enhance the understanding of the data and enrich your report writing. For instance, you might be able to provide a context when quoting from interviews, as follows:

*'Ms. Johnson, a 40 year-old woman mother of three children, said the following about this: ...'*

As I commonly tell people learning ATLAS.ti, always ask yourself the following question: What information about this particular document would enrich my analysis and writing process? Always keep in mind that the text that you write as a comment is part of the analysis process, not part of the data that you are analyzing. In other words, that text cannot be segmented or coded (unless you transform the comment into a project document, but that does not always make too much sense).

Let me propose a few items that you might consider including as document comments. The final decision about what to include can only be made by you, the researcher, and it will always respond to your analysis needs.

- Description of the data collection setting
- Synthesis of the demographic information
- Notes on the data collection process, including instruments of data collection
- Notes on the quality of the data

If working with bibliographic references, I suggest that in the document Comment space you include the citation and summary or abstract of the source. This will facilitate referencing the bibliographic source in your writing.

## Procedures

The procedure to write *comments* on documents vary a little between the Windows and Mac versions of the software. I will describe both below.

### ATLAS.ti 7 Windows

*Access the comment space from drop-down menu.* Select the document on the document drop-down menu, right click on it, and select 'Edit Comment'. Proceed to write.

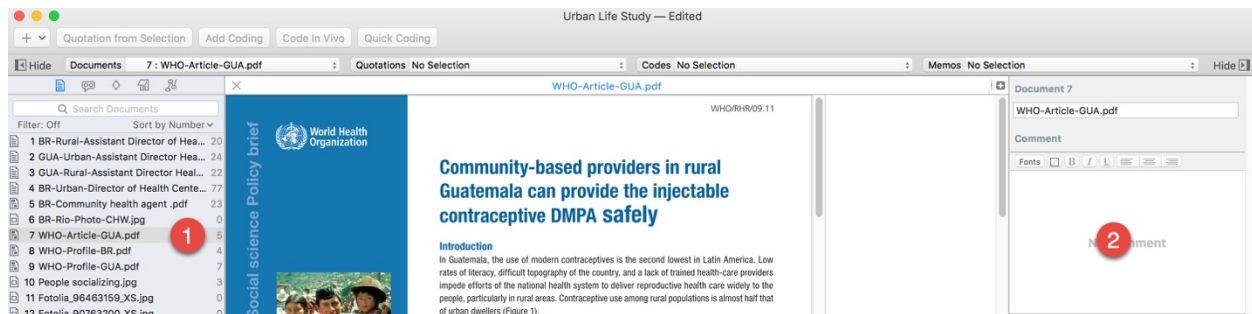


Figure 1. Accessing the document comment through drop-down menu in ATLAS.ti 7 Windows.

Access the comment space in Document Manager. Open the Document Manager, select a document, and write the comment on the space below.

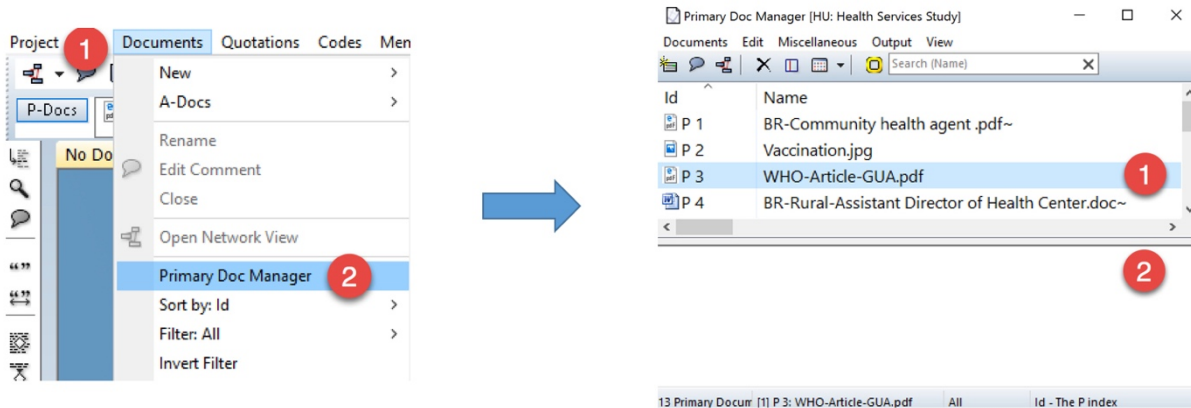


Figure 2. Accessing the document comment through manager in ATLAS.ti 7 Windows.

### ATLAS.ti Mac

Access Comment space through Inspector. Select the document in the Navigator and access the Comment space in the Inspector on the right.

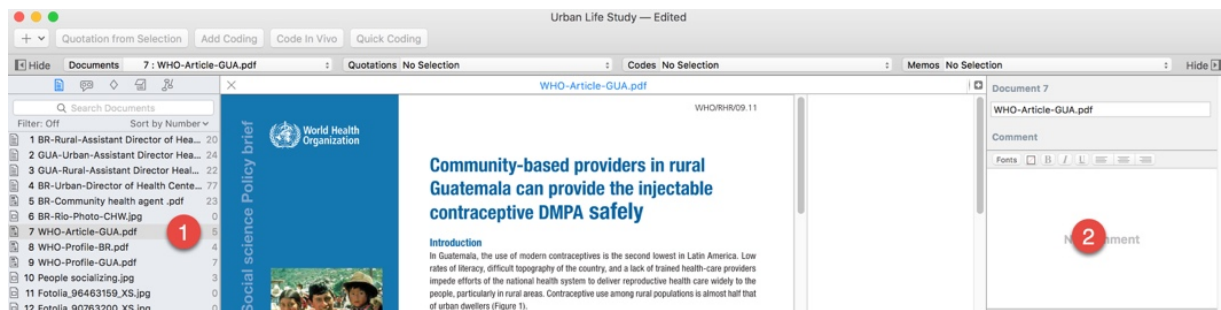


Figure 3. Accessing the document comment through Inspector in ATLAS.ti Mac.

*Access the Comment space through the Document Manager. Open the Document Manager, select a document, and access the comment space on the Inspector on the right.*



*Figure 4. Accessing the document comment through the manager in ATLAS.ti Mac.*

## Document Comment Outputs

Although writing notes on documents can enrich the analysis process just by making the context information easily accessible, producing outputs of them can be especially appropriate if you need to include these notes as appendices to your reports. If working on theses or dissertation projects, I would say that including an appendix with notes on the project sources of information can be as important as having an appendix of the codebook (i.e., codes with comments).

### ATLAS.ti 7 Windows

Open the Document Manager, select the documents whose outputs you want to produce, click on Output on top, and select List of Documents. Follow the prompts until you produce the output in Rich Text Format (RTF). The report can be edited and adjusted to your needs. For instance, I would suggest that do not include the information on the document location. You can either copy and paste the report into another document, or save it and open it using Word or word processor of your preference.

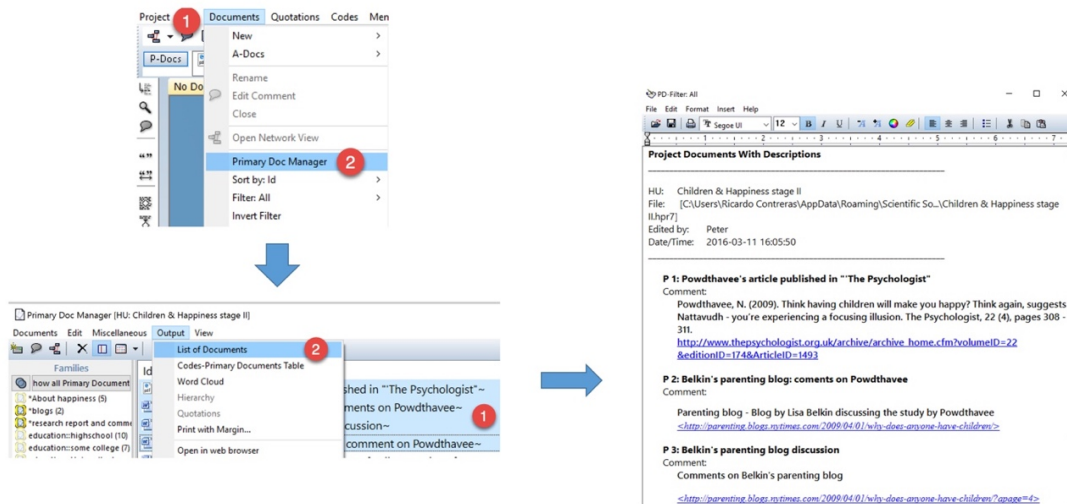


Figure 5. Document comment outputs in ATLAS.ti Windows.

## ATLAS.ti Mac

Open the Document Manager, select the documents whose outputs you want to produce, click on the output icon on the top right corner, and follow the prompts. An out in Excel will be produced. I would suggest that you edit the resulting table so that only the document name and its comment are included. That would be make a good appendix for your report.

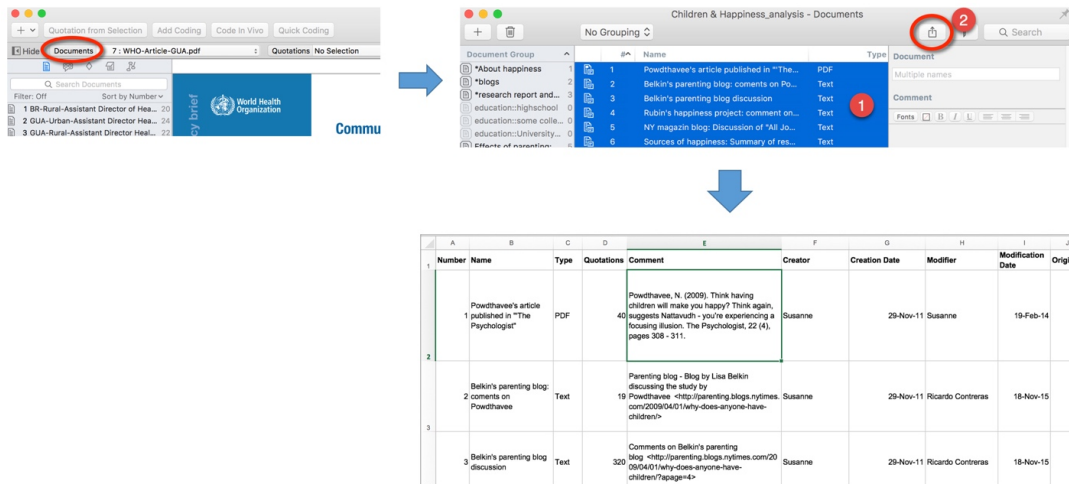


Figure 6. Document comment outputs in ATLAS.ti Mac.

## Conclusion

I usually tell ATLAS.ti users that writing comments on the project documents is not a technical requirement. That is, you will be able to move forward in the analysis process without writing these comments. However, I also say that not doing so limits in an unnecessary way the potential for a good analysis. I would add that writing notes on the sources of information is the starting point for a good description, and, paraphrasing Wolcott (2009: 27), description is the foundation upon which qualitative data analysis rests.

## References Cited

- Friese, Susanne. 2012. *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Wolcott, Harry. 2009. *Writing Up Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.

## About the author

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