



The Topos Approach to Analysis

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This is a guide to help you succeed as a Topos analyst. Each project will have its own unique set of goals and challenges, but the points sketched below can serve as a useful guide for just about any Topos project.

Notes and Observations

The first step in the analytical process entails researchers and interviewers recording their impressions, observations, hypotheses, etc. shortly (or immediately) after the completion of each interview. This will vary depending on the type of research being done, and the research lead should give you specific instructions.

The Annotation Process

The next important step in our systematic and collaborative treatment of data is an annotation process. You will have access to a certain number of transcripts, some of which may be assigned specifically to you.

Before you begin reading transcripts, familiarize yourself with the goals of the project—the specific questions, issue areas, dynamics, and so on that the interviews were meant to explore. Hold these in mind as you review the texts. The second half of this document lists many different kinds of patterns you might find.

Making annotations

As you read the transcript, look for short, pithy, interesting passages that seem most relevant to our understanding of the topic; or which demonstrate or encapsulate one of the points we might be making in our analysis; or which seem to crop up in multiple interviews and point to a shared cultural model or area of consensus; or examples of variations that could indicate demographic differences within the data set.

Select the relevant passage and use the comment function to enter a pair of brief assertions:

“Paraphrase:” *Summarize what it is in this passage that seems worth noting.*

“Significance:” *Explain why this could be relevant for the project goals.*

Comments should be succinct—never exceeding 80 words. As a rule of thumb, please try to identify 1-2 such passages per page, even if in some cases you may not be confident about their

significance. You might be hypothesizing about a pattern you are just starting to see, or you might be pointing the passage out as an example of a pattern you are confident about and which you have laid out in more detail in your Evolving Insights document. In some cases you might even write, simply, “Significance: uncertain.”

This task should pick up speed as you progress through more transcripts, so keep track of your pace. If after a couple of hours you find yourself spending more than 2 minutes per each minute of interview, please consult with your research lead about ways to speed up your pace.

Yellow Highlighting

Our understanding of what is relevant and not relevant will evolve over the course of the project, and we may want to return to the texts to answer questions that we didn’t have on the first read-through. For this reason we ask that you also highlight passages that seem on topic and interesting, or which seem to show up regularly in different people’s talk, but whose significance isn’t obvious at the moment.

Be selective, because part of the point is that a later reader will be able to skim the highlights quickly. As a rule of thumb, you shouldn’t be highlighting more than 10-15% of a text. It may take some trial and error—and feedback from Topos—before you hit upon the right balance. Ask to review some examples.

Quote Gathering

You will need to include quotes as evidence in your own analyst documents, and you might be asked to put together an assembly of quotes. Also, in our reports we like to include numerous illustrative quotes from our interviews, so please use the comment function to indicate such passages, because this will be the first place that our writers will look when they seek to flesh out our analysis.

The Analyst Documents

Although every analyst will have their own ways of working with the data, we’ve established some shared documents (“internal deliverables”) that allow for more efficient sharing and collaboration. Unless otherwise instructed, each analyst will be responsible for maintaining their own versions of the following:

An Evolving Insights document

Here you will record the top analytical observations you have, based on your own interviews (and the transcripts from others if you have read any).

You will create a bullet point list of valuable insights (25-word max), each in the form of an assertion or “topic sentence,” each with a short paragraph (80-word max) of explanation. Include anything that might count as valuable insights: neck-snapping findings, surprising patterns, challenges, pitfalls, opportunities, etc.

These are ranked with the most interesting and important at the top. Each insight is categorized as HC (high confidence); SC (some confidence); P (provisional or in need of confirmation and further analysis).

The research lead can direct you to the appropriate [template](#).

A Key Takeaway Slide

This is meant to be the analyst's best effort to crystallize the Key Idea or Message that the client should be taking away from the project. This is different from a final report, which will include a great deal of detail and nuance. You can think of the Client Takeaway slide as a PowerPoint Slide that can sum up the single most exciting outcome of the research project.

You can be creative about how to present this—as a short Word document or an actual slide—but the key is to be succinct and focused on a single, or at least unified, takeaway.

The Analysis: What characterizes current patterns of thinking?

The rest of this document will focus on some of the general kinds of questions researchers and analysts should be asking over the course of the project, in order to discover useful insights and recommendations.

The questions overlap, but it is still useful to consider all of them, in case they trigger different insights.

Under-emphasis and over-emphasis

What ideas do respondents consistently overlook? And what ideas do they exaggerate / put too much emphasis on?

E.g., they tend to stress how good health depends on making healthy choices and downplay the role that the physical and social environments play.

What are some ways in which respondents' perceptions are limited to particular, incomplete views?

E.g., thinking about art may be limited (by default) to thinking about artists expressing themselves and art-lovers enjoying it, without much thought about how the effects of an arts scene affects the larger community.

American culture

How do Americans look at a topic in ways that might be different from how the topic would be thought of elsewhere? Alternately, how might an ethnic or cultural minority understand things differently?

E.g., Americans may be much more likely than others to assume it's completely up to the employer to decide on wages and benefits and everyone else should stay out of it.

What stances do they take by default? And what relevant stances do they seem to never/rarely take?

E.g., they default to a passive, consumer stance towards the arts, and rarely take an active stance where they have a role in creating the kind of arts environment they would like their community to have.

Use of broader cultural/cognitive models

How do understandings related to a specific topic / issue area seem to be based on much broader patterns of thinking—i.e., about broader, more basic topics?

E.g., support of EITC is based on a high cultural value placed on work and jobs. (It gets broad support because it is only received by people who earn an income.)

Metaphors

Are there revealing metaphors people (either average people or insiders such as journalists) use to talk about a topic?

E.g., Americans use many “interpersonal” metaphors to talk about complicated things they feel inexpert about. So instead of talking about international legal structures they will talk about how countries (or their leaders) get along with each other as though they were kids jockeying on a playground.

Gaps in understanding

What are things that Americans (or whatever target population) currently do not understand, that they should? (i.e., what are the important gaps in their knowledge/understanding?)

E.g., they tend not to understand how carbon emissions cause global warming. They tend not to understand how higher union membership leads to better economic outcomes across the population.

Misunderstandings

What key concepts do they misunderstand? What false perspectives do they have?

E.g., immigrants get lots of free stuff that citizens do not.

Contradictions

What are some interesting contradictions in how they think about a topic?

E.g., they know that private corporations are entirely motivated by profit, but wish they were not so “greedy.”

Engagement and lack of engagement

What aspects of a topic seem to get people engaged/excited/emotionally involved?

E.g., when thinking about how elections work, they are often emotional about the extent to which rich, powerful interests determine outcomes.

What ideas do they agree with, but without any apparent emotional engagement (as though they were “nodding along” or “agreeing at a distance”)?

E.g., they agree that science is valuable and important to our society, and this idea feels like an obvious but unengaging “no-brainer.”

Media talking points

What are some views they express that seem to reflect things they have heard in public discourse? (e.g., media talking points, adages and other shared wisdom, etc.)

E.g., the idea that inflation is caused by Democrats closing down fossil fuel pipelines is a talking point for conservative media.

Lay vs. Expert

What are some key differences, besides degree of knowledge, between how experts and laypeople think about a topic?

E.g., when thinking about international relations, laypeople may put a much stronger emphasis on the interpersonal relations among leaders, while experts may put a stronger emphasis on structures that are in place in order to create particular outcomes, such as treaties or negotiation schedules.

Images

How do images associated with the topic (in media, advocacy materials, etc.) reflect aspects of how the topic is framed?

E.g., if workers are consistently shown as isolated individuals, might this undermine the sense that they can achieve things by coming together, for instance to demand better pay?

Terms

Are there terms that get used a lot that reflect interesting aspects of people’s thinking about a topic?

E.g., if people talk about putting “flea soap” on their pets, are they ignoring the toxic properties of these products?

Identity

What are some important ways people's thinking seems to depend on aspects of their identity (e.g., by gender, race, income level, education, geography, etc.)? And what are the patterns that seem to transcend these differences?

E.g., while most White people take for granted that they are part of "the people," BIPOC may express more mixed feelings about the concept.

The Strategic Advice: What is it that the client most needs to know?

In some cases, Topos' task rests only in mapping the patterns of thinking as described above. In most cases, however, we are trying to offer sound strategic advice to a client about how to improve whatever it is that they are trying to do—primarily in terms of improving communication. This may be relatively narrow: for example, identifying how to talk about our current farming practices in a way that draws attention to their drawbacks (e.g., calling them "CAFOs, or confined animal feeding operations" instead of "factory farms"). Or it can be part of an effort to change the "cultural common sense" around an issue area (e.g., helping Americans to understand how structural racism or income inequality affects health).

Below are some of the most common concerns as we turn our analysis into practical advice.

Key shift

Does there seem to be a key shift in perspective, engagement, etc. (i.e., among the audience) that would be helpful? What distinguishes constructive from unconstructive thinking?

Key misstep

Do current communicators/advocates seem to be making a key mistake, which if corrected could really help communications?

Missed opportunities

Are there messages, settings or avenues for communication that communicators have been neglecting, which could be more useful and effective?

Alternative frames, constructive patterns of thinking

Can the issue be re-framed in ways that fundamentally change how people approach the issue and how they interpret information about it?

Message Testing

Not all projects involve the development of effective, recommended messages or organizing ideas—but for those that do, the following are questions to ask about messages, and that are addressed by various Topos testing methods.

Stickiness

Do messages stay with people? Do they remember and repeat the key points/terms? Do they continue to refer to them even as the exchange (conversation, survey, etc.) continues forward?

Clarity

Do people understand the message as it is intended, as opposed to misunderstanding it, only hearing a subsidiary part of it, etc.?

Persuasive argument

Is it hard for people to counter the argument conveyed by the message? Does it feel like common-sense reasoning that is hard to reject?

Engagement

Does the message get people more interested and engaged in the topic than they otherwise would have been?

“Aha” effect

Are there explicit signs that people are learning something new and interesting from the message, or that the message is causing them to think about the topic in an interesting new way?

Attitude shift

Does the message lead to helpful shifts in people’s attitudes relevant to the topic?

Active use

Can people actively talk about the ideas in the message—as opposed to mere passive agreement, for instance? Can/do they go beyond parroting and expand on the idea(s), e.g., by bringing in their own examples?

Bigger picture

Does the message help people look at the topic in a way that includes broader factors (e.g., systemic causal factors) and/or broader stakes?

Resist opposition

Does the message help people push back against opposition points of view?

Reasonable mode

Does the message cause people to think about the topic in a reasonable, constructive, open-minded way—as opposed to a defensive, identity-driven way?

Action

Does the message have potential to spur people to take relevant, constructive action?

Traps

What are some of the key traps messages fall into—i.e., ways in which messages are regularly misinterpreted or easily push the wrong buttons in audiences?