

## SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODS: TIPS FOR WRITING OBSERVATIONAL FIELDNOTES

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This check sheet summarizes the types of fieldnotes that researchers often take while systematically observing and gives advice for best practices for writing up fieldnotes.

### Types of Fieldnotes

- Jotted notes** are brief notes written on the fly in the field. Jotted notes may be taken overtly or covertly, depending on the setting. Jotted notes include temporary reminders—such as abbreviated words or phrases—of what is happening as it unfolds. These jottings are used later to construct full fieldnotes.
- Head notes** involve mental reminders to include certain events in one’s full fieldnotes. Given the amount of information you will observe in a field setting, it is important to rely on head notes sparingly. At the same time, certain settings may require that you not use a notebook or phone to write down notes, and, as such, you may need to rely on your memory as much as possible. When writing up your full fieldnotes and later presenting the data, you should always be transparent about whether you are drawing on head notes or actual notes written while in the field.
- Direct observation notes** are notes recorded immediately after leaving the field. Some researchers initially record these into phones, audio recorders, or other devices and then transcribe from these audio files. Other researchers leave the field and immediately begin typing up long-form notes. These notes should be chronologically ordered by date, time, and place for each entry. Direct observation notes include a great deal of concrete detail about the physical setting, the people in the setting, and interactions and activities taking place in the setting.
- Researcher inference notes** are notes that refer to what the researcher believed or inferred happened in a particular situation or context. These notes are kept in a separate section of the researcher’s written documents so that the special meanings of the inferences are kept apart from actual direct observations.
- Analytic memos** are notes a qualitative researcher takes while developing more abstract ideas, themes, or hypotheses from an examination of details in the data. Analytic memos may be written while still in the field and actively collecting data as well as after the researcher has begun the process of analysis. Indeed, these memos may inform decisions about how to proceed while in the field, often based on attempts to give theoretical meaning to what is being observed. Analytic memos can also help in the initial creation or eventual refinement of codes and subcodes that inform qualitative analyses. Analytic writing may include asides, commentaries, and in-process memos.
  - **Asides** are brief, reflective bits of analytic writing that succinctly clarify, explain, interpret, or raise questions about some specific happening or process described in a fieldnote. The ethnographic researcher often dashes off asides in the midst of descriptive writing, taking a moment to react personally or theoretically to something she has just recounted on paper, and then immediately turns back to the work of description. Asides are often included in the midst of descriptive paragraphs and set off by parentheses.
  - A **commentary** is a more elaborate reflection on some specific event or issue. It is contained in a separate paragraph and set off with parentheses. In contrast to descriptive fieldnotes, commentaries may explore problems of access or emotional reactions to events in the field, suggest ongoing probes into likely connections with other events, or offer tentative theoretical interpretations.

- **In-process memos** are products of more sustained analytic writing and require a more extended time-out from actively composing fieldnotes. In-process memos may address practical, methodological questions or may elaborate new interpretations developed from subsequent observations. The goal of these memos is to help the field researcher carry forward analysis contemporaneously with the collection of field data.
- **Personal notes** are written accounts of the feelings or emotional reactions that inevitably color what a researcher sees or hears. Personal notes also provide an outlet for coping with the stresses of emotionally challenging field research. This is the place for researchers to reflect on how their own positionality and background may be influencing research access, data collection, understanding, interpretation, and so forth.

## Tips for Writing Good Fieldnotes

- **Get organized.** There is no one method for organizing fieldnotes. Some people hand write them in notebooks. Others organize them in computer documents or spreadsheets. Regardless of which format you use, the key is to find a platform that is intuitive and makes sense based on the context of the field setting and the needs of the researcher. Researchers engaged in long-term ethnographies sometimes generate thousands of typed pages of fieldnotes. These data must then be carefully and rigorously analyzed. As such, researchers should spend time thinking in advance about their organizational structure to ensure that they are prepared for the next stages of their research project and eventual presentation of results.
- **Be specific.** Do not write, “Most people wore blue jeans.” Instead write, “I saw five boys (age 12-14) in blue jeans, one girl (age 10) in khaki slacks, and two young children (age 5) whose pants I could not see.”
- **Be clear.** Do not write, “It was intense” or “nice.” Describe what you actually saw and/or heard.
- **Use precise terms.** Do not write, “This store’s attitude towards...” Stores do not have attitudes, people do.
- **Do not make unfounded assumptions.** For example, do not write, “A group of 10 young men, all of whom appeared to be African American and in their early 20s arrived together.” Instead say, “A group of 10 people who appeared to be in their early 20s arrived together at the party at 10:15 p.m. I assumed they were college students based on their apparent age and their dress (all were wearing college gear and jeans and most had backpacks).” It is important to only label individuals by their profession, status, or demographic characteristics if you have that specific information; if you are inferring something based on appearance or action, make that clear in your notes.
- **Avoid evaluative summarizing words.** Instead of writing, “The house was fancy” say, “The house was three stories, painted white with maroon trim, and surrounded by a dark wooden picket fence. The grass was mowed short, there were several large trees, and four types of pink and red flowers were blooming out front.”
- **Be explicit.** Assume you are writing for a reader who knows nothing about the social or physical setting. Do not say, “It was a typical dive bar.” Instead, describe the setting in detail as if the reader has never been to such a place.
- **Find your focus.** In her book on qualitative methods in disaster research, Phillips, citing a classic work in the field, reminds us to focus on “the spaces that people use, the people who are in them, and the activities they do, the objects or physical items present in the setting, individual and interactive acts, events that occur, what happens over time, the goals of those present, and the feeling that can be observed” (p. 80).

## REFERENCES:

- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Phillips, B. D. (2014). *Qualitative Disaster Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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