

## FIELDNOTES: A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS

*Fieldnotes: "The observations written by a researcher at a research site, during an interview, and throughout the data collection process" (FW, 501).*

### I. REQUIREMENTS<sup>1</sup>

At times, you'll feel as though it's tedious to take fieldnotes; however, taking detailed notes gives you a set of data from which to look for patterns and ideas.

#### *General Requirements*

- Spend at least one hour a week observing your community;
- While you're observing, write *substantial* (several pages of observation for each visit) field notes.
- Take time after you've observed to write meaningful, thoughtful questions and reflections on the "analysis" side of your **double-entry field notes** (explained in "Strategies" below).
- Date each entry, and number each page
- Write legibly enough that someone else could read them.
- Keep them organized (in a notebook or folder)

Taking good fieldnotes requires you to divide the process into two phases: (1) notes you take while you are in the field (Observational/Descriptive fieldnotes) and (2) notes you take after you return from the field (Expanded/Reflective/Analytical fieldnotes).

#### *Requirements for Observations (while you are in the field)*

Each set of Observational/Descriptive fieldnotes should include the following:

- The date, time, and location of your fieldwork;
- Numbered pages so that you can keep track of your notes;
- A record of specific details and facts (Who was there? What happened? What did you notice?)
- Approximate transcriptions of conversations and language;
- Sensory details and images (Using all 5 senses - how might you describe the scene to someone not there?)

#### *Requirements for Expanded Fieldnotes (after you return from the field)*

Each set of Reflective/Analytical fieldnotes should include the following:

- Aspects that you want to pay special attention to during upcoming observations;
- Questions that arise as possibilities for your final project;
- Questions you have about the community that you'll need to ask an insider in an interview
- Questions for further research

### II. STRATEGIES FOR TAKING FIELDNOTES

For your first set of fieldnotes, try the format described below. After that, you may wish to switch to a format more comfortable for you (like typing the reflective part of the notes on your computer at home, for example).

- Divide several pieces of paper in half lengthwise.
- *On the left, record* only observations, and record those thoughts in the least biased ways possible (record them without analyzing them).
- *On the right side, reflect* on those observations. This is where you can: ask questions, consider ways of interpreting an event, and wonder about what you're seeing.

These are called "Double-Entry Notes," which are "[f]ieldnotes that are divided into at least two columns: one column lists the fieldworker's observations on the fieldsite, and at least one other column lists the fieldworker's personal reflections about the site and informants. Making such distinctions allows the fieldworker to become aware of the differences between verifiable, tangible facts about the chosen fieldsite and his or her thoughts and feelings about those facts." (FW, 500)

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Heidi Estrem, "Fieldnote Requirements" in *Guide to First-Year Writing at Eastern Michigan University* at <<http://www.emich.edu/english/fycomp/curriculum/pdfs/handouts.pdf>>.

### **A. The Observational/Descriptive fieldnotes**

#### **OBSERVE CLOSELY** (*in the field*)<sup>2</sup>

- *Write down as much as possible!* You never know what might become important later.
- Always write down the date, time, and place of observation at the beginning of your notes.
- Include conditions of color, weather, light, shape, time, season, atmosphere, and ambiance.
- *Write down specifics!* Note the time something happens, what a sign says, etc.
- When you're listening to people speak, write down their words. Specific words, phrases, and language can be very important. (If you write "conversation about food," there are hundreds of things that could mean. Don't expect your memory to be perfect.) As much as possible, write down or tape record (with permission) conversations word for word. Create a glossary of insider phrases and words.
- Pay attention to nonverbal cues as well. How do the people in your community use body language? How do people understand/interpret body language?
- Describe what you see. What are people wearing? How is the area you're in decorated?
- Write down your sensory impressions. What can you hear? What do you smell? Tastes, textures, smells, and sounds can be just as important as what you see.
- Map the space you're observing. Having a map that shows you the layout of the area can be extremely helpful to refresh your memory and to help others understand your site.

### **B. The Expanded Fieldnotes**

#### **BE ENGAGED WITH WHAT YOU'RE OBSERVING** (*even after you leave the field*)

- Respond to the notes you're taking.
- What questions do you have as a result of your observations?
- Are there things going on in the community that you'd like to know more about (the history of a story, the development of a ritual, where a specific phrase comes from, etc.)?
- Ask yourself questions about what you've seen. What surprised you? What intrigued you? What disturbed you?
- Analyze your position in this community. What assumptions/expectations do you bring to your observations? Ask yourself questions like: Why do I focus on this aspect of the community instead of that other one? Why do I focus
- on the people I do? Where in my fieldnotes do I find evidence for this description? What have I rejected, and why?
- Reread your fieldnotes shortly after you've taken them. Take the time to fill in details that you didn't fully write down, to make sure that everything is legible and understandable for later, and to mark places that you're interested in researching further.
- Reflect on what you've written down. What data relate to your positions as a researcher?

### **C. The Reflective Summary**

#### **REFLECT ON THE EXPERIENCE** (*after you've left the field*)

- Write a 1-page reflective summary (typed)
- Include information from the Observational/Descriptive and Expanded portions of your fieldnotes in a focused and coherent response
- Examine your progress in field research – what have you learned and how might that affect your next field experience
- Assess your experience doing field research – your strengths and weaknesses in objective observation and detailed description coupled with thoughtful analysis
- Reflect on your reaction to field research – analyze the way you engaged with the project and how you felt during the fieldwork and after you've left the field

---

<sup>2</sup> Sara Seyfarth, "Strategies for Taking Fieldnotes." in *Guide to First-Year Writing at Eastern Michigan University* at <<http://www.emich.edu/english/fycomp/curriculum/pdfs/handouts.pdf>>.