

Checklist for Field Notes and Journals

Adapted from <http://minerva.union.edu/fiji99/assignments/wk1notes.htm>

Arch City Religion

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This checklist is a guideline for what to include in your field notes, but it is not a rubric. Read through the checklist before you conduct your field research/observations and consider what method of notetaking, transcription, and archiving will be most beneficial to you.

Field notes generally consist of two parts (see “How to Approach Writing Field Notes”): **Descriptive** information and **Reflective** information. Part of your job in your fieldwork is to learn how to separate these out from one another. You may create two columns on a sheet, two sections of a notebook, embed your reflections in your descriptions using brackets or some other visual cue, or develop some other method so long as when you return to your notes you are able to distinguish your observations from your reflections (see 2, 5, and 7 below). It may take some time to develop a method that works best for you.

CHECKLIST

1. ___ Have I dated each entry?

2. ___ Are my observations *concrete* and *specific*?

There is a tendency for descriptions of behavior to be too general or vague. For example, you might write “There was a lot of kneeling.” But when you go back to make sense of your observations, those descriptions are often too weak to be of much use. What does “a lot of kneeling” mean? How often are people kneeling? Is everyone kneeling in the same way? What are the contexts? What are they doing when they are kneeling? Was kneeling seemingly spontaneous or prompted? And so on. If kneeling appears to be important, you could ask some people what they think about it, why they participate, what they feel when they do it, etc. You can observe, and even count, people's behaviors. **The more specific you can be, the better.** You may think you know what “a lot of kneeling” is, but when it comes time to analyze your data and begin to write up your report you are likely to discover that you really can't describe with any accuracy what the actual pattern is.

3. ___ I used **subject headings** and **data tags** regularly.

You should have a subject heading for each category of information you write about. In addition, you should include data tags (which are a form of classification) to link your notes on a given topic. (class exercise)

4. ___ I sometimes used *diagrams* or *sketches* to describe the plan or layout of a building or a seating arrangement or the placement of important features or items in a room, building, park, or other location.

5. ___ I tried not to use too many abstract terms that don't have clear referents to real behavior (this relates to #2 above).

Here are some examples of abstract language: "The girls were very happy...", or "the museum patrons were very observant." What were the girls doing that indicated to you that they were happy? Did they say they were happy? Did they have big smiles on their faces? What were the museum goers doing that made them observant rather than, say, quiet?

Rather than descriptions, these abstract terms are often interpretations of your observations. Limit them in your descriptions (though you may want to jot them down in your reflections as angles to probe in your analysis).

6. ___ I remembered to use *quotations*.

Use quotations whenever your informants describe or say something that is particularly revealing. Try your best to capture just what words they used. When you have your recorder, and permission, use it. But even if you don't have the recorder with you, write down exactly what you hear if it strikes you as important for your research. Good quotations will give color and life to what you write; and they will give the reader a better feeling for who the subjects of your study are.

7. ___ I wrote about my **personal reactions** to the events, spaces, objects, and practices I observed and participated in.

Your personal reactions to people and things are data, and they can be as important as the more concrete, objective observations, so include them. But if they are embedded in your more objective observations and descriptions, set them off with brackets [] or parentheses (). Do the same with inferences.

8. ___ Have I numbered my pages?

9. ___ I jotted down brief notes during the day and especially while an event is happening or immediately afterwards.

10. ___ I understood that an anthropological field journal is NOT a diary and I remembered that the goal of the journal is to observe, notice, and try to make sense of the culture that surrounds me. Please feel free to keep a separate diary for yourself if you like to keep a diary. Do not turn this in.