

How to Approach Writing Field Notes

The ways in which you take notes during an observational study is very much a personal decision developed over time as you become more experienced in observing. However, all field notes generally consist of two parts:

1. **Descriptive information**, in which you attempt to accurately document factual data [e.g., date and time] and the settings, actions, behaviors, and conversations that you observe; and,
2. **Reflective information**, in which you record your thoughts, ideas, questions, and concerns as you are conducting the observation.

Field notes should be fleshed out as soon as possible after an observation is completed. Your initial notes may be recorded in cryptic form and, unless additional detail is added as soon as possible after the observation, important facts and opportunities for fully interpreting the data may be lost.

Characteristics of Field Notes

- **Be accurate.** You only get one chance to observe a particular moment in time so, before you conduct your observations, practice taking notes in a setting that is similar to your observation site in regards to number of people, the environment, and social dynamics. This will help you develop your own style of transcribing observations quickly and accurately.
- **Be organized.** Taking accurate notes while you are actively observing can be difficult. It is therefore important that you plan ahead how you will document your observation study [e.g., strictly chronologically or according to specific prompts]. Notes that are disorganized will make it more difficult for you to interpret the data.
- **Be descriptive.** Use descriptive words to document what you observe.

For example, instead of noting that a classroom appears "comfortable," state that the classroom includes soft lighting and cushioned chairs that can be moved around by the study participants. Being descriptive means supplying yourself with enough factual evidence that you don't end up making assumptions about what you meant when you write the final report.

- **Focus on the research problem.** Since it's impossible to document everything you observe, include the greatest detail about aspects of the research problem and the theoretical constructs underpinning your research; avoid cluttering your notes with irrelevant information. For example, if the purpose of your study is to observe the discursive interactions between nursing home staff and the family members of residents, then it would only be necessary to document the setting in detail if it in some way directly influenced those interactions [e.g., there is a private room available for discussions between staff and family members].
- **Record insights and thoughts.** As you observe, be thinking about the underlying meaning of what you observe and record your thoughts and ideas accordingly. This will help if you to ask questions or seek clarification from participants after the observation. To avoid any confusion, subsequent comments from participants should be included in a separate, reflective part of your field notes and not merged with the descriptive notes.

General Guidelines for the Descriptive Content

- Describe the physical setting.
- Describe the social environment and the way in which participants interacted within the setting. This may include patterns of interactions, frequency of interactions, direction of communication patterns [including non-verbal communication], and patterns of specific

- behavioral events, such as, conflicts, decision-making, or collaboration.
- Describe the participants and their roles in the setting.
 - Describe, as best you can, the meaning of what was observed from the perspectives of the participants.
 - Record exact quotes or close approximations of comments that relate directly to the purpose of the study.
 - Describe any impact you might have had on the situation you observed [important!].

General Guidelines for the Reflective Content

- Note ideas, impressions, thoughts, and/or any criticisms you have about what you observed.
- Include any unanswered questions or concerns that have arisen from analyzing the observation data.
- Clarify points and/or correct mistakes and misunderstandings in other parts of field notes.
- Include insights about what you have observed and speculate as to why you believe specific phenomenon occurred.
- Record any thoughts that you may have regarding any future observations.

NOTE: Analysis of your field notes should occur as they are being written and while you are conducting your observations. This is important for at least two reasons. First, preliminary analysis fosters self-reflection, and self-reflection is crucial for understanding and meaning-making in any research study. Second, preliminary analysis reveals emergent themes. Identifying emergent themes while observing allows you to shift your attention in ways that can foster a more developed investigation.

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[Writing Field Reports](#). Scribd Online Library; Pyrczak, Fred and Randall R. Bruce. *Writing Empirical Research Reports: A Basic Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 5th ed. Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing, 2005; [Report Writing](#). UniLearning. University of Wollongong, Australia; Wolfinger, Nicholas H. "On Writing Fieldnotes: Collection Strategies and Background Expectancies." *Qualitative Research* 2 (April 2002): 85-95; [Writing Reports](#). Anonymous. The Higher Education Academy.