

INVENTION

Observation requires a good deal of analysis and planning. It goes far beyond choosing a subject and writing down details. Writers usually go through a cyclical invention process, in which they return repeatedly to their original notes to find patterns and significant points. The following sections are designed to help you through this process: discover a topic (in Point of Contact), develop particular points about the topic (in Analysis), make it relevant to a community of readers (in Public Resonance), focus your ideas (in Thesis), and develop them into an essay (in Rhetorical Tools). The Invention Questions in each section are not meant to be answered directly in your final written assignment. They are designed to help guide you through an intellectual process and generate ideas.

Point of Contact

The goal here is to see something in a new way, beyond the casual glance. You may visit places and do things you have never done before, or you may visit the usual places but with more focused attention. Use the following questions as starting points for your observation.

Observing People

Supervisor, manager, line worker, server, religious leader, teacher or professor, principal, athlete, bingo player, student. Use notes, audio and video recorders, and/or photographs to gather details about the person. You might also interview the subject. (See the section on interviews in Chapter 14.)

- In what hidden ways is the subject working with or against the surroundings?
- Does the subject reinforce or work against rules?
- How do others treat the subject (with respect, disdain, indifference, or something else)?
- If the subject is a group, how do the individuals maintain harmony or unity? How do they conflict?
- What explicit or hidden rules do they follow?

Observing a Place

Job site, family restaurant, factory, office, break room, playground, park, movie theater, shopping mall, video arcade, college hall, college club, campground, woods. Gather details about the place. In addition to obvious details, consider the less obvious:

- What subtle behavior patterns do you detect?
- Is there a hidden competition or collaboration going on?



- What mood might the creatures (people, animals, plants) share? How do they unknowingly maintain that mood?
- Are people free to do as they please, or does something restrain them? (Do they know that something is restraining them?)
- What is the unstated, normal mode of behavior?
- Does anyone or anything break out of the norm? What are the hidden consequences?
- What is missing?

Observing an Animal

Family pet, friend's or neighborhood pet, stray cat or dog, birds, animals at a park or zoo, wild animals, farm animals. Gather basic information about the animal's behavior, but also look beyond the simple glance:

- What does it know?
- What secrets does it have?
- How does it signal its mood?
- Does it have dramatic mood changes?
- How does it get along with humans? With the world around it?
- What habits does it have?
- Is it a public or private creature?
- Does it compromise or alter its behavior to accommodate others?

Observing a Person or Event Involved in Your Major

Use the questions in this section to help gather information about a subject related to your major, but also develop more questions. By observing a particular person or event, what can you discover about the nature of your major?

ACTIVITY

Choose a category (a place, person, animal) and develop ten more questions that will help reveal something interesting about a subject.

OBSERVING A CULTURE: WRITING AN ETHNOGRAPHY ESSAY

One type of observing essay is an *ethnography* essay. *Ethnography*, from *ethno* (nation, culture, people) and *graphos* (something written down), observes the characteristics of a group of people. Although some ethnographies involve months or years of living within and observing a particular culture, we can also write an ethnography essay—a sort of mini-ethnography—based on a few weeks or days of careful observation. Because an ethnography is a type of observing essay, the Invention sections in this chapter (Analysis, Public Resonance, Thesis, and so on) will help you first invent ideas and then convey them as an essay. One essay in this chapter, “Red Raiders Fans,” is an example of an ethnography essay.

Point of Contact: After reading “Red Raiders Fans,” make a list of cultures you can observe—groups of people who meet at a place and time where you can observe them at least three times for more than an hour each time. It’s important to be sure the group of people share an identity, instead of just happening to show up at the same place at the same time. A shared identity is based on common characteristics such as language, food, religion, fashion, dress, habits, values, beliefs, music, and so on. The purpose of your observation is to observe the practices of a culture (what members routinely say and do) and discover how the particular culture *does*, or practices, their culture. For example, “Red Raiders Fans” explains how Red Raiders fans *do* the practice of Red Raiders fans. An ethnography essay on cowboys in Wyoming would explain how cowboys in Wyoming *do* the practice of cowboys in Wyoming.

Analysis and Public Resonance: Once you decide on a culture to observe, you can use the Analysis and Public Resonance sections to record your observations and discover insights. Keep in mind that it’s difficult to have insights if you allow memories and expectations to get in the way of recording what you are experiencing with your senses. Although you will have preconceived ideas, the key is to acknowledge this and continue to record your observations, letting the practices of the culture you observed influence your thinking. An ethnographer observes and records the following:

- the location, including specific descriptions of the physical environment
- verbal exchanges, including what group members routinely say and more specific exchanges among members
- how the group uses writing, if they do
- routines, including what group members do routinely; what they do every day as part of their normal experience
- rituals, including activities that are viewed as highly important or sacred
- rites of passage, including significant practices that change a member's sense of identity, social role, or status
- values and beliefs
- timelines, including what happens when

Don't let these categories or the questions limit your observations. These are just examples of the kinds of observations you can make. Remember, *recording particulars* is an invention strategy. The particulars will help you think of more ideas. And these particulars are important later because you will select *some* of them to use in your ethnography essay.

Thesis: Because you want your insight to emerge from the observations themselves, not from what you think you might observe or conclude, it's important to wait until *after* you record your observations to make rhetorical decisions about how to convey your ethnography to your readers. The Thesis section will help you focus your essay on a particular insight. Your insight can be what it means to be a member of the group; what makes someone an insider or outsider; what unifying characteristic surprised you about the group; how your preconceived idea(s) about the group changed; and so on.

Delivery: After you record your observations and discover a focused and insightful thesis, turn to the Rhetorical Tools section for help delivering your ethnography to the readers. The following guidelines can help you make effective rhetorical decisions:

- An ethnography presents your observations while focusing on a particular discovery or insight about the culture.
- Your readers will expect you to explain why you chose the subject, what happened during your observations, and what you discovered.
- Your observation should identify the group and important background (orienting) information about your observations, where/when you observed them, and your relationship to the group; then your specific observations; and your conclusions.

- While you try to be an objective observer, you can acknowledge your role as an observer and the influence of your own biases on your observations. Your ethnography essay is about the culture you observed but need not ignore your role as observer.
- Document design features such as headings, font styles, and spacing can help readers understand and accept your thesis.
- Photos or video clips can help convey your main idea.

Other parts of *The Composition of Everyday Life* will help you with your essay:

- Use the Revision questions later in the chapter to rethink a draft of your essay and make changes.
 - Use Part II for help finding, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, integrating, and documenting information from sources.
 - Use Part III for help organizing and delivering your idea.
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Analysis

Details do not have their own meaning. It is up to people to *make* meaning from details. As we analyze, we move from observation notes to focused ideas, from a collection of potentially unrelated details to a set of particular points. Analysis prompts us to see patterns, connections, and paths within the particulars. The following questions can help you to make meaning out of your observation notes and look at the subject as something more than its physical characteristics.

- What is unique about the subject?
- What is ordinary about this subject? (How are its qualities common to other places, people, or animals?) What does that quality show?
- Is this subject symbolic of something? (Does it stand for some idea or ideal?)
- Does the subject seem different after the observation (more complicated, less intimidating, more human, less human, more predictable, and so on)?
- What does the subject “say” about life (about human interaction, social behavior, institutions, nature, and so on) in this place and time?

Although focusing on and gathering details may be a challenging aspect of observation, analyzing those details poses a difficulty of its own. Because a list of details offers so many options and no obvious path for making meaning, the process can be uncertain and confusing. However, it can be an intensive and valuable process. Imagine a student, Linda, who observed people at her place of work, a small factory. Her observation notes include long lists of details about the environment, the