

# WRITING FIELD NOTES

## Definition

Refers to notes created by the researcher during the act of qualitative fieldwork to remember and record the behaviors, activities, events, and other features of an observation setting. Field notes are intended to be read by the researcher to produce meaning and an understanding of the culture, social situation, or phenomenon being studied. The notes may constitute the whole data collected for a research study [e.g., an observational project] or contribute to it, as when field notes supplement conventional interview data.

## 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 one becomes more experienced in observing. However, all field notes generally consist of two parts:

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

Field notes should be written as soon as possible after an observation is completed. Your initial notes may be recorded in cryptic form and, unless they are fleshed out as soon as possible after the observation, important details 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 practice taking notes before you conduct your observations. This will help you develop your own style of transcribing observations quickly and accurately.
- **Be organized.** Taking accurate notes while observing at the same time can be difficult. It is therefore important that you plan ahead of time 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 to interpret your findings.
- **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 detail that you don't end up guessing about what you meant when you write the field report.
- **Focus on the research problem.** Since it's impossible to document everything you observe, include greatest detail on 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. Doing so will help should you want to subsequently ask questions or seek clarification from participants. To avoid any confusion, these comments should be included in a separate, reflective part of the field notes and not merged with the descriptive part of the notes.

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### 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 decision-making patterns.
- 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 that have arisen from analyzing the observation data as well as thoughts that you may have regarding any future observations.
- 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.

**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.