# Audit Trail

The notion of audit trails was introduced in [Chapter 3 [https://edtechbooks.org/-Vby]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Vby) and the need for audit trails was emphasized earlier in this chapter. Audit trails are simply records kept of how qualitative studies are conducted. The audit trail should include all field notes and any other records kept of what the inquirer does, sees, hears, thinks, etc. The "Descriptions of the Observer" field notes described in Chapter Three should contain most of these details or at least an index to documents that contain them. These notes not only describe where the inquirer is in relation to what she or he is observing or participating in, and what is being learned; but they also describe the inquirer's thoughts about how to proceed with the study, sampling decisions, ethical concerns, and so on. Each inquirer is free to create an audit trail that fits the study being conducted. The audit trail may be used by the inquirer to review what has been done, and to consider alternative plans, in addition to serving in the dependability and confirmability audit functions described earlier.

Often, the audit trail *is* the field notes; and if those notes are kept current and are easily accessible, no extra audit trail may be necessary (although some people like to keep a separate computer file or paper file for audit trail documentation). To help an auditor, many inquirers create a brief chronological index to their study. They list choices they made each day of the study, actions they engaged in, and some of their thoughts about how the study is going at that stage. The auditor can go from this listing to the field notes, audio and video recordings, and other files associated with the inquiry to reconstruct how the study was conducted, how conclusions were reached, and to

make the dependability and confirmability judgments described earlier.

An example of an audit trail index (the actual audit trail was 54 pages long) is included in an appendix to Marné's study in Appendix B of this book. Refer to it there as an illustration of the elements of an audit trail. As you can see there, Marné has simply listed what she did each day she engaged in this particular inquiry. The detailed audit trail is in the field notes, which could be made available to the auditor.
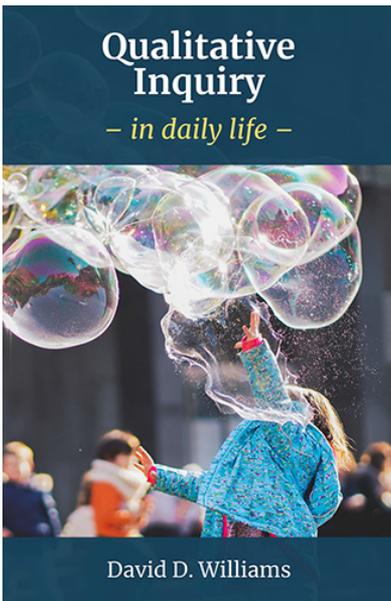


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