

# Kinds of Fieldnotes

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), field notes usually consist of two broad kinds of writing: *descriptive* and *reflective*.

**Descriptive field notes** constitute the longest part of most inquiry journals. These are detailed and accurate descriptions of what the inquirer sees, hears, and experiences. Detailed, concrete and vividly specific words should be used instead of abstract, superficial, summary, or evaluative language. Quotations are included when possible. It may be helpful to think of your making of this record as the creation of a library about your experiences as a teacher, administrator, a parent, or whatever roles you play. You want the richest library holdings possible to fill your record so you have access to these details when you want to interpret your experience, share it with others, or otherwise learn from your ongoing inquiry. Include as many of the following types of descriptive field notes as possible or necessary. You would rarely include *all these kinds of notes in any one day's entries and you may discover other kinds of field notes you would rather include*.

Descriptions of the **people** involved with you in your inquiry and the nature of your relationship with them. You might want to include what you have learned of their history, details about their appearance, mannerisms, style of talking and acting and so on. Your working relationship with them should definitely be documented, at least from your perspective but also from theirs if they are willing to share that information with you. Thorough portraits should be made at least once for each person involved in the social situation and then brief update descriptions may be made in later sets of field notes as people and details about them change. An example of a description Marn' made is of Tom as she observes him barely being able to sustain three minutes reading at the beginning of a seven day period and ending when he bursts into her room to announce that he stayed up until 3 A. M. reading.

Descriptions or representations of **communication** which include direct verbatim quotations of **verbal** statements you hear people make, literal transcriptions of interviews and informal conversations you have with people, as well as paraphrases in your own words if you were unable to obtain the exact quotations. The more you can get in their own words, the better. Do not translate the words and actions of others into your own personal 'professional' language when recording them into your field notes or you will lose much of the information you need to interpret their experiences.

These notes also include **non-verbal** communications you observe people making (such as body language) which will provide important context for understanding the emotional and circumstantial settings for interpreting the content of oral dialogue. Most people pay close attention what people say; but how they say it with their emotions and bodies in holistic communication is mostly noted at a subconscious level. The task of the qualitative inquirer is to bring these details to their own conscious awareness so they can interpret what is said more openly and accurately. The use of video tapes can greatly facilitate this work. But educators, such as Marn' are in excellent positions to develop their sensitivity to the intents and meanings students are communicating along with the words they speak.

She listened to what Tom was saying about reading and not only wrote down his exact words but also his facial expressions, intonation, and perceived emotional state to help her make sense of what he was really saying and to help her share this understanding with her readers (actually only herself when she first wrote these notes).

Descriptions of the **physical and historical setting** include drawings, maps, photographs, videotapes, and verbal descriptions of the settings in which you are participating and learning. Such descriptions provide important contextual information that may not have to be repeated every time you observe in the same setting. Of course, settings do change from time to time and particular physical or historical changes most likely influence the events and experiences participants have. The inquirer should be sensitive to these changes and include descriptions of them in the record. As noted earlier, Marn' did not include descriptions of physical settings in her report. She doesn't have such a description in her field notes and apparently didn't feel that was a critical detail to include as she was sharing her learning with readers. However, the historical setting is of central importance to the story she is telling about her use of journal keeping over a five year period. It would have helped to know more about the historical context during each of the periods from which her sample journal entries were drawn.

Accounts of particular **events and actions** in the setting including listings of who was involved, what the event was, how participants were involved, the nature of their actions, historical details that provide context for the event, etc. Marn's notes were essentially of this type, though the short excerpts she included in this report lack a lot of the detail readers might want. The story that began Chapter One is another example of this kind of descriptive account. Events, activities, and particular actions of participants in a classroom, school, or any setting reveal how people live their lives; and the meanings they attribute to their behaviors are implied by those actions. Combined with what participants say about their activities, descriptions of the events they experience provide helpful insight to the inquirer about the value and nature of those events in participants' lives.

Description of the **inquirer's behavior, actions, and experience** in relation to the experiences of others. As an active participant in the social settings you explore, your own behavior, words, relationships with others, assumptions, and physical presence in relation to all else you are describing should be made apparent in your notes to help you and others understand how you have helped create the information you collected and conclusions you reached. In a very real sense, you are the inquiry instrument through which all other information will be filtered through your recordings and into your sharing about your experience. So it is critical for others to understand the nature of your presence in the settings you describe. These notes form an **audit trail of details about how you are doing the inquiry**. These notes may include descriptions of adjustments to the design of the study (could include the design itself here), sampling decisions, problems to be dealt with in conducting the study, etc. They also include comments on how well you are developing relationships with other people in the social situation, reminders of things you need to do to continue the study, ideas you are having about how to solve problems and the eventual decisions you make. If these method notes are recorded regularly, they provide an excellent account of how you conducted the inquiry and may form an audit trail that would allow you or anyone to audit or review your study. Marn' included an audit trail in her study as well as a critique of how well she met certain standards for doing qualitative inquiry (these are discussed in detail in Chapter Five).

**Reflective field notes** build on the descriptive field notes to reflect your personal account of what you are learning. These notes go beyond the descriptions presented above, to include your speculations, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, prejudices, analyses, plans for future

inquiry, clarifications, syntheses, connections, and other ideas about what you are learning in the inquiry.

Recording your reflections may be therapeutic for you and should also help you clarify what you are thinking and experiencing during the inquiry experience, as Marn' said the keeping of a journal was for her. This written record of your reflections also provides a contextual framework for interpreting your descriptive field notes. Understanding you as the learner through your reflective notes will help readers (including yourself) better understand the descriptions, analyses and conclusions of your study. All field notes must necessarily reflect the influence of the inquirer who created them. Reflective notes provide a way to take into account that influence by clarifying who you are, how you think, where your ideas came from, etc.

Reflective notes may be set apart from the descriptive notes in your record through the use of notations such as 'OC' meaning 'observer comment', through the creation of separate sections of your field notes for more extensive analyses (such as memos, essays or draft reports), or they may even be kept in a separate 'field diary.' Though you would rarely include all these kinds of notes in any one day's entries, some of the different types of reflective notes include:

**Analyses and syntheses** that include your speculations about what you are learning, the themes that are emerging, patterns that you may be seeing in participants' experiences, connections between experiences, your new ideas, your interpretations of the meanings of events and people's comments, etc. These may be short notes written during participation in an event, or afterward while reading through a particular descriptive field notes; or they may be longer 'analytic memos' which incorporate information from many descriptive and reflective field notes. They may be reports or articles developed to communicate to others what you are learning (such as the reports in Appendices A and B). Analyses and syntheses constitute the ongoing process of clarifying meaning and interpreting the information being gathered in light of the relationships being developed between the inquirer and other participants, in light of questions being asked, and in light of stories the inquirer wants to share with others about the inquiry. Marn' used a particular approach to analysis and synthesis that Spradley (1980) recommends. She could have used several other approaches (some will be discussed in Chapter Eight of this book); but whatever approach is used, the record of how the inquirer interprets his or her experiences and those of other participants in the study should be kept in the field notes.

Reflections on your **frame of mind and feelings**. Everyone has a point of view and a fairly unique way of seeing what is going on around them. You should record your preconceptions, prior experiences, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, changes in perspective, moods while conducting the study, etc. as they relate to the people and situations you are studying. These reflections should be initiated before you even begin the data collection activities and should continue throughout the study to help you clarify how you are reacting to the experiences and people involved. This type of reflection will not only help others understand your perspective but will also help you sort out how your views differ from those of other people. Marn's poem about Crowther tells the reader much about her emotional involvement and frame of mind at that point in her study. She revealed her personal involvement through many other entries as well, facilitating her interpretation of her experience in the paper she wrote and in other settings in which she has shared her inquiry with others.

Selections from the two kinds of reflective notes described here can be combined with the descriptions of the observer to form an audit trail, which will be discussed in greater detail in

Chapter Five. The intent of the audit trail is to document how the study was conducted, methodological decisions the inquirer made along the way and the involvement of the inquirer as he or she shaped the study.

It isn't likely that any educator-inquirer could take all of these kinds of field notes during a single session of qualitative inquiry. There is just so much going on when you are participating in a social situation that you will have to focus your attention on certain parts of the experience. But over time, you should look at what you are writing and ask yourself if you are including all these types of field notes or if you are systematically ignoring some of them. Gathering information in all categories during subsequent visits will strengthen your field notes and make them richer, more insightful, and useful to you in your learning activities.



Williams, D. D. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life (1st ed.)*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry>



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