

# Mechanics of Fieldnotes

The form your field notes take will vary as you choose. Each person should organize their own inquiry journal in a format that suits his or her personality, interests, resources, and needs. For example, I write most of my field notes on a laptop computer, which allows me to insert later reflections directly into files that contain the original descriptions and reflections I took while participating in particular events. However, I have also used note cards, small notebooks, video and audio tape, paper napkins, and even the back of my hand. Marn' keeps her journal with her at all times and writes in it during class breaks, while students are writing or reading, right after school, at home in the evenings, etc. She occasionally expands her notes onto computer files but usually sticks with paper and pen. Sid and Cheryl are beginning to use a laptop computer and have also used a written journal but the majority of their record is kept in their heads! Whatever the means of recording you choose, a few suggestions on mechanics should help you keep track of and improve the quality of your notes:

- While you are actually observing, interviewing, participating, etc. take brief notes that may consist of a few hastily jotted key words and longer notes if the situation is such that you can take them during collection without disturbing the people you are with. Video or audio taping is also a way to hold information for later analysis. It may be that you are unable to take any notes during a given session, but make sure your descriptions and reflections on the experience are recorded in your brain so you can recall them onto paper as soon as possible.
- No matter how the field notes may have been initially recorded during data collection times, they need to be formally expanded and recorded in your field notes. This is where the key words jotted down during the earlier experiences may be expanded into full sentences, reflective notes may be added, electronic recordings may be partially (usually recommended unless you have access to a secretary) or fully transcribed, etc. New insights may emerge during this expansion phase and these should be recorded along with the information which stimulated the new insights. Some ideas about how to organize these notes are adapted from Bogdan and Biklen (1982):
  - Begin each day's notes with a header stating where and when these notes were originally taken and the date they were expanded into the field notes (hopefully on the same day they were taken).
  - Write a series of paragraphs containing all the different types of field notes (descriptive and reflective) described earlier. Whenever a change occurs during a session (due to changes in the event being observed, in the topic being discussed, in the person talking, in the reflections of the inquirer, etc.), a new paragraph should be begun. Occasionally writing the time at the beginning of a paragraph will help you fit the entire experience into a time context.
  - Margins and spaces could be left in the field notes pages to allow later addition of detail as you review your notes many times throughout the study. This step may not be necessary if using a word processor to record the field notes<sup>3</sup> but it is probably a good idea anyway because eventually the notes will be printed out, and even then additions may be needed.
  - Do not procrastinate between having an experience during which you initially record field notes and the formal expansion of those notes. The sooner you expand, the better. If you do not take the time for full expansion of your initial recordings, give precedence to descriptive notes. If you have those observations written down, the reflections will come when you read those notes later; but the reverse is not always true. Nevertheless, don't worry about recording everything during any one session; you can always add things when you remember them later.
  - It is often better not to talk about your collection session before you record it because most people tend to think that if they have told someone about what they saw or heard or experienced, it isn't so important to write it down. Thus, though they get it off their chests, it never gets repeated into their notes. On the other hand, sometimes talking your experience out can be a great way to initially make a record, especially if you were unable to take written notes during the experience. If you do this, be sure to make a tape recording of your conversation so you can either transcribe it or take field notes on the recording. Also, this is often a good practice after you have recorded your field notes' to talk about the experience with someone else and record the new insights you obtain through that discussion on tape or in new field notes entries.
  - Once initial recordings are expanded into a formal data record, they constitute a working field record of your experiences. However, as the research proceeds, new experiences will shed new light on these earlier experiences. Therefore, you should regularly review your inquiry journal already created and as you do, new insights will come, details may be recalled, analytical categories may come to mind. These should all be added to your field notes too. Rather than create new field notes that are physically separated from the original expanded notes, which inspired the new insights, most inquirers write their new insights into the margins of the field record, with dates to show when they had the new ideas. This process could be modified if the expanded record were made using a word processor; however, the association of new ideas with original records should be maintained.
  - You should plan to take at least three times as long to expand your field notes as you took to initially record them during a data collection activity. Included in this expansion time is the addition of analytic hunches and insights you will have as you are writing up a session. This is the time you are interpreting the experience and even sharing it through writing or talking to someone about it.

Taking all these notes probably sounds impossible or at least like very hard work for people who are already busy teaching or administering a school. In fact, it is hard work; but so is thinking. And taking field notes is really just a way to help educator-inquirers be more thoughtful about what they are doing and learning. Take heart in knowing that the more you work at keeping a good record of your inquiry experiences, the better you will get at doing so and the more rewarding it will be so you will eventually get hooked, like Marn' did, and not want to stop.



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