

Field Notes for Preliminary Observations

Introduce yourself to the people you wish to observe. Give an honest explanation for your motives and how you will use the information gained from your observation. Obtain verbal permission from all involved parties and record their names. If specific parties do not wish to be recorded or wish to remain anonymous, you must honor those wishes. Above all else, practice honesty and transparency so your study treats all parties ethically, humanely, and with respect.

During your initial observation, try to let the subjects of your observation forget about you, as though you are observing from the perspective of a fly on the wall. It's your choice if you wish to type or write your notes; typing is faster but more conspicuous, making it more difficult to obtain accurate observations. Writing also makes it easier if you need to draw diagrams, etc. for your own reference. If you write, type up all of your notes as soon as possible after this observation so you can capture everything as accurately and thoroughly as possible.

Remember that your observations need to be concrete and specific. Use quotations or even diagrams when necessary.

You can organize your notes for your reference in whatever way works best for you: by topic or concept or just chronologically. Ultimately, you want these notes to be an easy reference for you to look back on. Consider writing everything out and then re-organizing things conceptually when you type it all up.

Remember to write down:

- Date, time, and place of observation (YOU MUST GET THIS.)
- Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the site
- Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, tastes
- Personal responses to the fact of recording fieldnotes (How do the members of this site respond to your presence as an observer?)
- Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language (Write down direct quotes whenever possible but try not to interrupt so you can “catch up.”)
- Body language or other non-verbal cues
- Concrete examples regarding other markers of identity (clothing, behavior, reactions toward members within the group and outside the group)
- Questions about people or behaviors at the site you'll want to ask when you return
- Page numbers to help keep observations in order

Type up all of your notes as soon as possible to capture all of it as vividly and accurately as possible.

Again, organize your notes in whatever way will serve you best, but make sure they are organized in a logical fashion and that the final version of your notes is understandable to other potential audiences.