How to Write Field Notes*

Field notes are a great way to record your observations during an event so that you don’t forget details later on. Even though we may not think so when we are participating and observing, we are all very likely to forget important details unless we write them down very quickly. Most people don’t know how to write field notes, but it is easy to learn.

Fieldnotes should be written as soon as possible after leaving the event—immediately if possible. Since this may be very time-consuming, you should plan to leave a block of time for writing just after leaving your meeting, interview or event.

Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997) have developed a list of what should be included in all field notes:
1. Date, time, and place of meeting
2. Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the meeting.
3. Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, etc.
4. Personal responses to what happened or was said at the meeting.
5. Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations and language.
6. Questions about people or behaviors at the meeting for future investigation.
7. Page numbers to help keep observations in order.

There are 3 major parts of field notes, which should be kept separate from one another in some way when we are writing them:
1. **Jottings** are the brief words or phrases written down while at the meeting. You can use jottings to write more complete notes later. Jottings are usually recorded in a small notebook, and are intended to help us remember things we want to include when we write the full-fledged notes. While not all situations are appropriate for writing jottings all the time, they do help us remember a great deal when sitting down to write afterwards.

2. **Description of everything we can remember** about the meeting you are writing about. While it is useful to focus mostly on things you did or observed which relate to the guiding question, some amount of general information is also helpful. This information might help in writing a general description of the meeting later, but it may also help to link things to one another or to point out useful directions later.

3. **Reflection on what you learned** of a personal nature. What was it like for you to be doing this? What felt comfortable for you about being in this meeting and what felt uncomfortable? In what ways did you connect with participants, and in what ways didn't you?

* Adapted by Tracey Prentice and Charlotte Loppie from http://www.gpgrieve.org/PDF/How_to_write_Field_Notes.pdf
Field Notes Guide*

Participant Code:
Interviewer Name:
Date:
Location of Interview:
Time of Interview:

Observational notes:
(Anything you observe about the participant, other people, the place or the environment in which the interview takes place. Any information that might influence the information you gather)

Examples
- Description / sketch of the interview location
  Was it hot? Cold? Noisy? Not very private?
- Whether or not other people are present during the interview
- Observations about the participant:
  Are they nervous? Comfortable? Shy? Anxious?
  Do they seem to understand the questions?

Methodological notes:
(Comments on the process of the actual interview)

Examples
- Comments about the research protocol
  Did participant understand the information and informed consent?
  Are you satisfied that the participant’s privacy is respected?
- Comments about the interview guide:
  Changes in the order of the questions
  Topics or themes that were particularly important in the interview
  Difficulties with certain questions
  Length of interview
  Interruptions in the interview

Theoretical notes:
(Refer to the objectives of the interview)

**Examples**

- Comments on how this interview begins to answer the research questions
- Common themes or experiences across interviews
- New questions that are raised by the interview
- Specific words or phrases that may be meaningful (insider language)
- Summaries of conversations

**Personal notes:**
(How you felt during the interview – reflections)

**Examples**

- “I love this stuff! I’m getting quite comfortable with interviewing people and find that the interviews are more of a guided conversation than the ‘question and answer’ they were when I started this.”
- “I’m still getting used to the interview guide. I lost track of the conversation a few times and I think I missed a few opportunities to follow-up on important things the participant said. For example, …”
- “I think the interview went very well. The participant seemed comfortable with me and with the questions. I think it helped when I told her that…… That seemed to establish a common ground, and everything went well after that.”
- “This was a difficult interview. I got the feeling that the participant was holding back. S/he was hesitant from the beginning and I don’t think we ever really established a good rapport.”
- “I was tired today and had a difficult time keeping the interview on track. The participant got ‘off-topic’ several times and it took me a while to bring the conversation back to the topic at hand.”


**Contact Us!**

Online: [www.caan.ca](http://www.caan.ca); [patrickb@caan.ca](mailto:patrickb@caan.ca)

Facebook: Renée at CAAN, Patrick CAAN ERA, CAAN CBR Managers

Twitter: [CAANCBRM](https://twitter.com/CAANCBRM)