

## GETTING AT THE DETAILS

Taking exploratory fieldnotes in a group, as we did in Box 5, allows us to see the differences in how individuals pay attention. But not everyone looks at—or sees—the same things. Rather, we develop our observational skills through practice and careful notetaking. In the following short essay, “Look at Your Fish,” Samuel Scudder, a student in the nineteenth century who aspired to study entomology (insects), first learns to observe from his professor Louis Agassiz (1807–1873) whose lessons in natural science are legendary.

### Look at Your Fish

#### Samuel H. Scudder

*Samuel H. Scudder (1837–1911), a naturalist who specialized in the study of insects, wrote this amusing account for a Boston literary journal in 1873. He tells of enrolling at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School and of his first lesson under the inspired teacher and popularizer of science, Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), then professor of natural history. After hours of detailed but unpatterned observation, Scudder let his problem incubate during an evening away from the laboratory.*

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the Scientific School as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and, finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that, while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself especially to insects.

“When do you wish to begin?” he asked.

“Now,” I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic “Very well!” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol. “Take this fish,” he said, “and look at it; we call it a haemulon; by and by I will ask what you have seen.”

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

“No man is fit to be a naturalist,” said he, “who does not know how to take care of specimens.”

I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly. Those were not the days of ground-glass stoppers and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax-beesmeared corks, half eaten by insects, and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the Professor, who had unhesitatingly plunged to the

bottom of the jar to produce the fish, was infectious; and though this alcohol had a “very ancient and fishlike smell,” I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed when they discovered that no amount of eau-de-Cologne would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the Professor—who had, however, left the Museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate the beast from a fainting fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of the normal sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but to return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed—an hour—another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. Half an hour over and around; looked it in the face—ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways at a three-quarters’ view—just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the Museum, but had gone, and would not return for several hours. My fellow-students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying-glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish: it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp the teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows, until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me—I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the Professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best of eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet, and your bottle corked.”

With these encouraging words, he added:

“Well, what is it like?”

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me: the fringed gill-arches and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fins and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment:

“You have not looked very carefully; why,” he continued more earnestly, “you haven’t even seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!”

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until

I saw how just the Professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly; and when, towards its close, the Professor inquired:

"Do you see it yet?"

"No," I replied, "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," said he, earnestly. "But I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was disconcerting. Not only must I think of my fish all night, studying without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also, without reviewing my discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by the Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the Professor the next morning was reassuring: here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

"Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?"

His thoroughly pleased "Of course! Of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically—as he always did—upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

"Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned, and heard my new catalogue.

"That is good, that is good!" he repeated; "but that is not all; go on"; and so for three long days he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had—a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study: a legacy the Professor had left to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterward, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking out-landish beasts on the Museum blackboard. We drew prancing starfishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydra-headed worms; stately crawfishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The Professor came in shortly after, and was as amused as any at our experiments. He looked at the fishes.

"Haemulons, every one of them," he said; "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ drew them."

True; and to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but haemulons. The fourth day, a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves: the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old, six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories.

The whole group of haemulons was thus brought in review; and, whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, the preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

"Facts are stupid things," he would say, "until brought into connection with some general law."

At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

Scudder's observational training comes from Agassiz, a natural scientist, but it is equally important for the social scientist. Both researchers learn to gaze beyond the obvious—to look and then to look again. Scudder used many of the same skills that ethnographic researchers rely on—drawing pictures, asking focused questions, and "sleeping on the data."

The fieldworker can model Scudder's experience by looking at something unfamiliar, too. With time, knowledge, and familiarity, the fieldworker's boredom will turn to interest. With constant practice and attention, almost any field site and the people in it become fascinating. Scudder faced one of the most humbling experiences a fieldworker can have—to discover how little he actually saw the first time. After looking long and hard, Scudder also realized that the mere recording of data—"facts are stupid things"—is not important unless you connect it with some larger idea. Before you undertake fieldwork in your chosen site, it is good practice to observe an everyday object or event to consider its significance.

Here's what we've imagined that Scudder might have written in his few hours with the fish:

<p><b>Record</b></p> <p>9-9:10 (first 10 minutes): jar—yellow alcohol called a "haemulon"</p> <p>"keep fish moistened?"</p> <p>9:30-12:00 (next 2 1/2 hours): dries after 10 minutes all views the same (5 views: under, over, side, 3/4, behind) throat-teeth sharp scales in rows (sketch)</p>	<p><b>Respond</b></p> <p>does yellow alcohol indicate old? is that its classification? phylum? kingdom? species? why keep it wet if it's dead? will it crumble? dry out? is it old?</p> <p>how much alcohol can a fish absorb? why does it look ghastly from all positions, perspectives? must eat hard things—shells, fish skin? possible symmetry? fish looks like a fish, but more complicated than at first</p>
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We wrote these notes above to demonstrate another way of keeping field-notes, one that we and our students have found most useful. We borrow this notetaking idea from composition theorist Ann Berthoff, who developed this form as a way to encourage her students to both look, reflect, and write about natural objects. In her book *The Making of Meaning* (1981), she shows how writers can audit their own thoughts as they create them, searching for patterns and bringing order to what may have seemed random observations:

Critical awareness is consciousness of *consciousness* (a name for the active mind). Minding the mind, being conscious of consciousness, is not the same sort of thing as thinking about your elbows when you are about to pitch a baseball: nor is it *self-consciousness*. Consciousness, in meaning-making activity, always involves us in interpreting our interpretations. (11)

Like all exploratory writing, the **double-entry notes** are designed to make your mind spy on itself and generate further thinking and text. To write double-entry fieldnotes, divide the page vertically, using the left-hand side for direct observations—concrete, verifiable details. The right-hand side is the place to capture your personal reactions, opinions, feelings, and questions about the data on the left side. It's a good idea to number each observation (the left side) and response (the right side) to keep track of your data collection. Like Samuel Scudder, these closely honed notes allow you to "look at your fish." Our students have adapted this phrase as a research mantra. In reading one another's field-notes, exchanging early descriptions of fieldsites, we often hear them suggesting to one another, "LOOK AT YOUR FISH!"

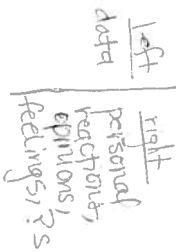


Figure 2.2. Fish Scales (Anthony Guyther)

## Double-Entry Notes

### Purpose

To practice the art of double-entry notetaking, it's useful at first to focus on something that's not at your fieldsite (where the actions and sensory details can be overwhelming and you know there's a whole project at stake). Instead, try this exercise. Select an ordinary object or event in nature to observe every day for a week. Our students have taken notes on such different things as snow forming and melting on a windshield, coffee grounds accumulating in a trash can, a finch's nesting activities, a cut on a finger as it develops into a scab, and dirt forming in an unattended bathtub.

### Action

Record your notes over the course of a week in double-entry format, using the left-hand side of the page to list specific details of the changes you observe and the right-hand side of the page to reflect on the meaning of these changes. Your subject must be one that alters in some way within a week's time. At the end of the week, look over the notes carefully, see what's changed and what hasn't, and write a short reflection on what you learned by keeping these field-notes. Discuss what surprised you most and what you would do differently if you were to continue with this observation. How might you connect what you have seen with an overall hunch or hypothesis?

### Response

Our student Grant Stanojev observed the bathtub he shares with his two room-mates and kept a double-entry notebook over the course of six days. These are his recorded notes and reflective responses:

#### OBSERVATION OF A BATHTUB IN NEED OF A SHOWER

Grant Stanojev

<p><b>Record</b></p> <p>2/12 White tub around edges with brown crust along the doors. Rings under each shampoo bottle. New bar of Dial soap. The drain drains slowly.</p>	<p><b>Respond</b></p> <p>Most of this observation is pretty typical of the apartment. Three guys shower in here once a day and it shows.</p>
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double-entry notes as BOX 5?

2/13 The visible soap has stray hairs plastered to it. One bottle of conditioner is placed upside down. Unused washcloth hangs stiffly on bar.

Not too much going on. The guys had a basketball game last night so the tub got an extra workout. Kind of gross that none of us uses the washcloth.

2/14 Soap is starting to have a slimy film surrounding it. The bottom of the tub is slippery and a little on the beige side. The crust around the edges is particularly dark today. Drain is backing up and is about halfway up the foot as shower proceeds.

The theme of today seems to be film (tub, soap, me). Starting to realize just how big of a slob we really are.

2/15 Bar of soap has dwindled considerably. Water actually covers the feet today and rests around the ankles. Cannot even see through the water.

This is getting disgusting. Went to a concert last night so the soap had to scrub off the layer of smoke and the "legal" stamp on each of our right hands.

2/16 Water is around the ankles again. Dishcloth is wet. There is a nasty clump of black hair wadded on top of the drain. More gone from the soap.

Another night out for the guys so same results. A little repulsed by the hair that has accumulated. More repulsed that no one has removed it yet.

2/17 Crust around the edges of everything is a nice golden bronze. Filth lines the bottom of the tub.

Roommates are getting restless at the sight of the bathroom. It even became the subject of conversation. Still no one does anything. I think the end is near though. Everyone is sick of the crust on the tub.

What really struck me was the lack of motivation in our apartment. It was important enough for the guys to play basketball for our health but not to bathe in a sanitary environment. Standing in my own filth is something I would never do if I still lived with my parents. I knew that we were pigs, but I never really documented the decay of our bathing facilities. Bacteria is probably everywhere in our bathroom, and to tell you the truth I am not sure exactly why that is bad. I know it is not sanitary though and it is disgusting to wash yourself in it. I told my roommates that I brought it up in class and Dave cleaned the tub the next day.

### FIELDNOTES: THE KEY TO YOUR PROJECT

Taking double-entry fieldnotes as you did in Box 6 provides a clear way to separate your observations from your responses to them. As a beginning fieldworker, you may be trying so hard to get everything down that your record of details can blur into your feelings about these impressions and vice versa. The reason to develop such an organized system is that when you first enter your fieldsite, sensory impressions surround you. You feel as if you'll never get them all down. One of our students tried to describe a band's outdoor concert in a New England harbor town and was initially overwhelmed by how much there was to notice. Should she listen to the sounds of the band she came to hear? Try to eavesdrop on people's conversations about the band as they sat on their blankets? Describe the foghorn in the background? The flowers in the formal gardens surrounding the park? Or should she focus on the outdoor smells? Hot dogs? Popcorn? Gyros? Calzones? Or the fishy harbor air? Her "gaze" expanded as she took more notes. The more she looked, the more she saw. She noted everything in order to capture the feeling of being at the harbor concert, even though she knew her research focus was the band itself, which had been playing together for 20 years.

To become a good fieldworker, you must observe closely and participate intimately, returning to your fieldsite and informants again and again—and still again. As you take fieldnotes, you become better at appreciating what you initially took for granted. You start to gather a thick collection of notes, which will serve as a body of data. Later, you'll turn these notes into descriptions of your fieldsite and your informants. You will take far more fieldnotes than you will ever use in your final description. Professional writers publish perhaps a fifth of the writing they do, and movie directors use only about a tenth of the footage they shoot. A few focused hours with a notebook, a pencil, and receptive senses will help you practice capturing good descriptive details. But for your final project, you'll need to plan many visits at different times to gather details, data, and materials before your writing begins.

### Discovering a System for Notetaking

No matter how you decide to collect your fieldnotes, it is important to find a system that works for you and the project you've chosen. As you create a notetaking system for your particular study, you organize your data to see what's important. There is no one single accepted format for taking fieldnotes. Each fieldstudy demands a different design for notetaking; each fieldworker needs to adapt notetaking strategies a different way. Because the essence of field research is not to duplicate what someone else saw and thought but to describe and interpret data in its particulars, it's not surprising that each study and each researcher's notes are unique.

Your fieldnote system needs to be more organized than the freewrite or the exploratory writing and notetaking we've considered so far. Our experience as

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directors

researchers has shown us that any fieldnote format that you borrow or design needs to be organized enough so that you can retrieve specific pieces of data easily, even months later. To retrieve the note about red scarves from the poetry mentioned in Box 5, for instance, you'd need to have recorded the time, date, and place at the very least. Or if you wanted to work with the question about crossed legs as body language, you'd need to be able to find it in your pile of research data.

Fieldnotes actually provide a rhetorical construct: they help a fieldworker begin the movement from self to audience. While your personal observations, opinions, and questions can help form your writerly voice (ethos), the informantal notes add to your collection of data (logos), and this combination starts to provide you with the authority to write about your fieldwork for different audiences (pathos). As you shuttle back and forth between your personal reflective observations and your increasing piles of data from fieldnotes and other sources, you'll begin to form theories, see connections, follow hunches, and confirm understandings of the culture you're investigating.

### Professionals' Fieldnotes

Professional fieldworkers take their notes in a variety of ways, using codes and systems they've developed themselves. Here, we show two different samples of anthropologists' fieldnotes to give you further ideas about formats. The first example comes from Roger Sanjek's 1988 study in Queens, New York, which he composed using a word-processing program. He uses his informant's names—Milagros, Carmela, Phil, Jenny, and Mareya. The second study is from Margery Wolf's 1966 notes taken in a village in Taiwan. She assigns numbers and letters—such as 48 (F 30) and 481 (F 12)—to her informants. Although their coding systems are different and their informants are from different times and places, both excerpts are thick with descriptive detail.

#### Roger Sanjek's Fieldnotes

7 May 1988—*Carmela George's Cleanup Day*\*

Milagros and I arrived at 10 am, as Carmela told me, but 97th Street, the deadend, was already cleaned out, and the large garbage pickup truck, with rotating blades that crushed everything, was in the middle of 97th Place. I found Carmela, and met Phil Pirozzi of Sanitation, who had three men working on the cleanup, plus the sweeper that arrived a little later. The men and boys on 97th Place helping to load their garbage into the truck included several Guyanese Indians in their 20s, whom Carmela said have been here 2–3 years ["They're good"]; several families of Hispanics, and Korean and Chinese. They were loading TV sets, shopping carts, wood, old

furniture, tree branches and pruning, and bags and boxes of garbage. Most houses had large piles of stuff in front, waiting for the truck. The little boys hanging on and helping were Hispanic, except for one Chinese. They spoke a mixture of Spanish and English together, when painting the LIRR walls. Carmela had put flyers at every house on Wednesday, and Police "No Parking Saturday" signs [D] were up on the telephone poles. A few cars were parked at the curb, but most of the curbside on the three blocks was empty so the sweeper could clean the gutters.

The sweeper this year was smaller than the one in 1986, and there was no spraying of the streets, only sweeping the gutters. As before, people swept their curbs, and in some cases driveways, into the gutter. Carmela was a whirlwind. She asked her elderly Italian neighbor Jenny, who did not come out, if she could sweep the sand pile near Jenny's house in their common driveway. Jenny said don't bother, but Carmela did it anyway. She was running all around with plastic garbage bags, getting kids to help paint off the graffiti on the LIRR panels she had painted in the past, and commanding women to clean out the grassy area near the LIRR bridge at 45th Ave and National Street. She got a Colombian woman from 97th Place, and gave her a rake and plastic bag. She then rang the door bell across from the grassy area, behind the bodega, and an Indian-looking Hispanic woman came down, and later did the work with the Colombian woman.

Mareya Banks was out, in smock, helping organize and supervising the kids doing the LIRR wall painting. Milagros helped with this, and set up an interview appointment with Mareya. She also met a Bolivian woman, talking with Mareya, and sweeping her sidewalk on 45th Avenue.

Carmela also had potato chips and Pepsi for the kids, which the Colombian woman gave out to them, and OTB-T-shirts.

Phil said this was the only such clean up in CB4. A man in Elmhurst does something like this, but just for his one block. The Dept. likes this, and hopes the spirit will be contagious. We like anything that gets the community involved. He said it began here because the new people didn't understand how to keep the area a nice place to live. Carmela went to them, and now they are involved.

#### Margery Wolf's Fieldnotes

March 5, 1960\*

Present: 153 (F 54), 154 (F 31), 254 (F 53), 189 (F 50), 230 (F 17)

Yesterday 48 (F 30) was taken by her husband to a mental hospital in Tapu. 481 (F 12) told Wu Chieh that the woman ran out into the field, and her husband had to come to pick her up and take her to the hospital. The women were talking about this today and said that she was sent to a big

\*A page from Roger Sanjek's 1988 Elmhurst-Corona, Queens, New York, fieldnotes, printed from a computer word-processing program. (Size: 8.5 by 11 inches.)

\*A page from Margery Wolf's fieldnotes taken in Taiwan. Wu Chieh is her informant/assistant, and Wolf assigns numbers to other informants.

mental hospital, and that her husband went there to see her but was not allowed to see her because she was tied up. The doctor said there was nothing else he could do with her. Someone told Wu Chieh that something like this had happened to 48 once before, but she was not hospitalized then. The women say that her illness this time came about as the result of her worrying about losing NTS90. She couldn't find the money and asked 49 (her seven-year-old son) about it, and he told her that his father took it to gamble. Her husband said that this was not true. They said that she may have known that she was going to get sick, because the day before she took her baby (3 months) over to her sister's house and asked her to take care of the baby. They said that 47 (her 32-year-old husband) was very dumb. If he knows that his wife has this kind of illness, he should not let her worry. He should have said that he had taken the money even if he didn't. Instead, when she started to get sick, he stood there and told everyone, "She is going to go crazy, she is going to go crazy." The women said that this is the reason 47 is called "Dumb Tien-lai." 154: "When 492's (F28) children and 48's children got into a fight and 48 went to talk with 492 about it, 492 scolded 48. She said: 'If children fight and kill each other it serves them right. If your children get killed, then you come and take your children home and bury them. You don't need to come and talk to me about it.' But once when 48's child hit 492's child, 492 went out and said something to 48, and she just said this back to her and then she had nothing to say." (All of the women agreed that 492 had said this to 48.)

Wu Chieh heard that 47 is going to go ask T'ai Tzu Yeh [a god] to help his wife get well. The women also said that when 48 fell into the field, she lay there saying: "Just because of children's things other people bully me, other people bully me just because of children's things. I won't forget this. I won't forget this." The women said that when a person is like this, you shouldn't let them worry and should encourage them to sleep a lot.

Entire books and scholarly articles are devoted to writing and analyzing fieldnotes and explaining researchers' attitudes about their fieldnotes. Anthropologist Jean Jackson, who interviewed field researchers, discovered that many have nightmares about losing their fieldnotes to fires or thieves: "Anxiety about loss of fieldnotes has come up so many times and so dramatically—Images of burning appear quite often.... The many legends, apocryphal or not, about lost fieldnotes probably fits into this category of horrific and yet delicious, forbidden fantasy." Since fieldnotes become the backbone of any fieldstudy, it's no wonder that professional fieldworkers attribute such power and fear to this kind of writing.

Fieldnotes can range from scraps taken furtively on small bits of paper when a researcher wants to be unobtrusive to complex computer programs designed specifically for organizing large amounts of data. The first time you enter your chosen fieldsite, your biggest challenge is figuring out *what* to record. Like

deciding what to record is a tough (early) choice ✓

freewriting and exploratory notes, fieldnotes include sensory impressions, nascent thoughts, and snippets of conversation. Our own students often feel so overwhelmed by the sheer amount of possible data to record that at first they write very little. As beginning researchers, we both had the same problem.

Elizabeth remembers her first visit to a classroom as a fieldworker. Although she'd spent many years in many classrooms as a teacher, she felt helpless. Should she write down everything or nothing? What was important? Was it the words on the teacher's handouts, the configuration of the furniture, the banging of a jackhammer outside, the heat of the late afternoon, the stickers on the students' notebooks, the patterns of conversation, the flyers pinned to the walls, the flickering of the fluorescent lights? Forty-five minutes later, she had scribbled very little in her research notebook: "Why did the teacher waste so much time explaining her handout when the students could have read it? I wish that wiggly kid would quit talking under his breath when I can't hear what he has to say. I wonder how long it's been since this room has been painted." She wanted to change her topic and find another fieldsite. But she didn't.

The next day, Elizabeth entered the classroom, turned to a fresh page in her notebook, and began to make lists. First, she wrote down important identifying information: the time, the date, the name of the building, the number on the classroom door. She sketched a small map showing where everyone was sitting, noting windows, doors, and placement of furniture. She developed a code for noting genders, assigning M's and F's, and gave a number to each student. She then made lots of lists—kinds of shoes, colors and sayings on T-shirts, types of backpacks and backpacks. Then she counted things—how many windows were open and how many were closed, who wore nose rings and who wore engagement rings, how many students brought their textbooks to class and how many didn't. She noted specific underlife behaviors—who was taking notes and who was asleep, who was whispering and who was putting on makeup. She concentrated on writing down as much dialogue as possible—both the topics and the patterns of what the teacher and students were saying—who spoke and for how long. Although she was not sure what was important or what information would make it into her final study, she trained herself to record more systematically, and over time her fieldnotes became more and more focused. By the end of a month, she knew her study would be about gender and conversation in a college writing classroom.

### A Student's Fieldnotes

One way to practice gathering fieldnotes is to choose a site that feels comfortable and that you can visit easily. Our colleague, Michael Hoberman, a professor and professional anthropologist at Fitchburg State College in Massachusetts, gives an assignment to his beginning fieldworkers that allows them to become more analytic as they proceed with each exercise. Michael asks them to visit a classroom that is not their own, perhaps the class of a roommate or a friend who

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majors in a very different discipline. He suggests that his students spend a day or two in the unfamiliar class taking fieldnotes. Of course, they must check ahead to see what permission they might need to attend the class.

Michael's student Amy Lambert visited a sociology class with her friend Jenna. Amy is a graphic design major who loves art, music, and English. "I guess I am left-brained challenged, which explains my inability to do math and science.... My friends are going for a bachelor of science as opposed to a bachelor of arts." When she attends Jenna's class for the first time, she tries to take double-entry notes. As she records her observations on the left side (which she labels "Record"), she notes her personal reactions on the right-hand ("Respond") side of her notes. She notices doodling, sleeping behaviors, noises from notebooks and backpacks, pencils and pens, zippers and shoes, notes on the board from the previous class, and scientific charts on the wall. As an observer—someone who is not a registered student in this class—Amy becomes highly conscious of the underlife of this class.

<b>Record</b>	<b>Respond</b>
Middle of classroom	Feeling nervous...pensive...is everyone wondering who I am?
Observing seating arrangements...males females equally dispensed. I am sitting near my friend Jenna.	Am I in someone's seat?
Someone mumbles from the back of the room. I see people looking at me.	Stop looking at me!
Some students are taking notes. Someone walks out of the classroom...a male with a 'do-rag.	Where's he going? The bathroom? Water fountain?
There are scientific charts in this room.	It must double as a science room as well.
Teacher speaks, "Police suffer from job-related stress."	I think to myself, "Who doesn't?"

The teacher paces while talking and uses hand gestures.

Multicultural class—blacks, whites, Hispanics.

Pages being flipped.

My throat hurts. Obviously, students are not paying attention because pages are being flipped and the teacher isn't referring to the book.

Pen scratching.

Teacher glances at me.

She's curious about what I am writing. I wonder if she'll ask to see my notes before I leave.

Many guys have shaved heads in this class.

Is that like a "criminal justice" thing?

Teacher brings up topic of "evaluation." "Evaluation of any job is difficult—but especially in bureaucracy."

Does she think I'm evaluating her?

Many people are doodling shapes and geometric figures.

People who doodle geometric figures are more likely to be left-brained, thus, more logical—more logical than me? Probably.

Someone's watch beeps loudly.

Ahh...wake up call!

Many students carry water bottles.

I'm thirsty. I need a drink. Soda. Yes. Soda.

More questions...no answers.

I know these answers! I want to answer so badly!

There are notes on the board from a previous class. I think these are for forensics!

I hear people talking down the hallway. A sign of life!

Students begin to pack while the teacher is still talking. Zippers zip and people are stretching. The teacher must be annoyed with the class when they get ready to leave before she is done speaking. She must feel they are not paying attention to her. I'd be pretty mad if I were in her shoes. But I think students do it unconsciously.

Later, Amy freewrites four different times about her visit. Each time, she writes a short paragraph that focuses on a different feature of the class. Here are some excerpts from them:

**Freewrite 1.** "With heads resting in their hands as a prop to keep them from falling dead asleep right then and there, was one main observation I made. Others just had their arms crossed and looked as if in a daze. Some fiddled with pens—I heard the incessant sound of pens scratching throughout the period. I am tired. I am thirsty. I wouldn't want to die of dehydration. That would be sick."

**Freewrite 2.** "I remember students doing some intense doodling in class. I glanced at a few people's doodles who were sitting around me and noticed many geometrical figures. I read once that people who draw more geometric figures are more logical than those who doodle freely and organically. 'Organically' would be the art term. I tend to doodle hearts and flowers and squiggles, which I have come to believe represents my artistic personality as well as my free spirit and right-brained mind."

**Freewrite 3.** "Are you a brown-noser or are you a slacker? Or perhaps you vary between both extremes. While sitting in on a sociology class, I noticed that many of the students seated in the back of the room were out of it. The students in the front row, although half asleep (as were those in the back row), were more attentive.... I think it's not only the fact that when you're seated in the front row, the teacher is right there but also because the more adventurous and scholastic students want to be closer, symbolically speaking, to knowledge. If you are sitting straight up with your stomach muscles tightened and a pen in your hand ready to write, you are more alert and ready to learn."

**Freewrite 4.** "The classroom needed some spunk, some fun charts and posters. I think classrooms need more beauty. They need cute curtains and colorful chalk and bright paint on the walls. I think it would be fun to take notes from colorful chalk. I think even colored blinds if they didn't want to do the curtain thing. That would be very feng-shui."

## ORGANIZING YOUR FIELDNOTES

Like Amy, most of us need to train ourselves to become better observers of our surroundings by exercising our vision along with expanding other senses. In her book *Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman writes that "seventy percent of the body's sense receptors cluster in the eyes, and it is mainly through seeing the world that we appraise and understand it" (230). Of course, seeing can also be deceptive; we can become overreliant on what we think we see, screening the world through predetermined filters.

Anthropologist Paul Stoller suggests that personal experiences affect what people see and how they think. We experienced this ourselves when we rented a house in Maine together to write this book, and searched for the mailbox that the owner said was attached to the garage. Elizabeth returned for the mail from her first mail run and reported to Bonnie that the only nearby box read "169." When we complained to the owner, she laughed and said, "Oh, that really means 199. The nine turned upside-down into a six, and we never fixed it." "How very Maine," we both thought, as we reprimanded ourselves for not reading these numbers with the same "gaze" that the postal carrier, the owner, and perhaps all Downeasterners do. Ethnographic fieldworkers teach themselves to see in new ways. They test what they think they see against their preconceptions and assumptions.

As art historian John Berger writes, "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice" (8). In your first trip to the field, details might seem so familiar that you do not lift your pencil to record a single thing. You don't record sounds or smells or textures; you passively wait. You're frustrated. You decide to change field sites. You have not yet learned to look. Seeing—establishing a gaze—requires receptivity, patience, and a willingness to penetrate the outer layer of things.

Our student Karen Downing studied a glamour photography business called Photo Phantasies (which you'll read more about later in this book). Karen took seven pages of fieldnotes on what she saw when she gained entry to Photo Phantasies for the first time. Figure 2.3 shows two excerpts from her notes (two visits on the same day). Notice that her fieldnotes come from descriptions of the site and interviews with staff and customers.

Like Karen and Amy, you should develop a personal, systematic way of taking fieldnotes. Your system should allow enough room to record details at the site, but it should also allow space to expand your initial impressions away from



fluffy boss-blue, pink	the model no men's clothes very feminine		
peppermint candies	widow		
photos on eiders			
break lighting round	Friday, April 6, 11:30 in the store		they look pretty darn good - are these
dressing room bills	women } girl was of "wall of fame"		was taken in this store?
cutting irons, bio di	couples } separate room		chicest clothes! who takes these pics?
mousse, stink gart	fancy jewelry - gold, silver & silver		where do they get it?
dressing rooms w/la	seams, beaded corner things - stuffy old		people probably don't
	never buy, hats, wardrobe racks		no why dress up
when I'm an old	two video screens photos images		very steady for women
getting goals & ten	sit on stool observation		age range 16-20ish
240 CD studios -	Glamour, Elle, vintages on rack		looks like a normal salon
always in walls	pop music fairly low, but the radio though		
main goals - retail	grey carpet w/muted pink		! I need to read these.
product: good work	like walls		you can be sure?
people told on web	black modern furniture		"wall of fame"
David self-esteem	sign "professional make-up artists"		attractive, big eyes, dark hair, Italian
rean. manager	large photos that look like movie red		probably about 20.
Coach, cheerleader,	get comes in to help, about modeling		
training camp - real	special, do you do it now?		
do make up, have 3	Not really		
business, personal d	You have a really nice forehead		
wall	the competition - people are really		
	excited about it. You could be a		
	photo model, runway model		
	later part at 7:00		
	external corn smells		
	small noise - footstaps on tile, children		
	copying of baby in wall		

Figure 2.3. Karen's fieldnotes

the site. Fieldnotes are your evidence for confirming theories you make about the observations you record. They are the permanent record of your fieldworking process, and they become part of your research portfolio. Without accurate fieldnotes, you have no project. Although each fieldworker develops his or her own system, any set of fieldnotes needs to include all of the following details in an organized way:

- Date, time, and place of observation ("Friday, April 6, 11:45 in the store")
- Specific facts, numbers, details ("last appointment at 7 p.m.," "3 customers present," "sign: 'professional makeup artist'")
- Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, tastes ("caramel corn smells, footsteps on tile, children crying, pop music playing fairly loud, gray carpet with muted pink, white walls, black modern furniture, notebook of thank-you notes")
- Personal responses to the act of recording fieldnotes and how others watch you as you watch them ("Giant pictures of Phantasy Places. They look pretty darn good. Are these pics taken in this store?")
- Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language ("Girl inquires about modeling special. Asks, 'Do you do it now?' Response: 'Not really, but you really have a nice forehead. You could be a runway model.'")
- Questions about people or behaviors at the site for future investigation ("dressing rooms are small—they don't want you there for long")
- Continuous page-numbering system for future reference ("4/4 studio visit, page 5")

### Sharing Your Initial Fieldnotes

#### Purpose

It's a good idea to spend some time at your possible fieldsite making yourself feel at ease there, before you start taking fieldnotes. Once you do begin writing, it's also a good idea to get feedback from one or more colleagues who can help you identify strengths and weaknesses in your initial notes.

#### Action

Take a set of fieldnotes at a site you are considering or at which you have decided on becoming a participant-observer. Note important information like

time, location, date, weather, and your vantage point. You may also draw a sketch or a map of the space, indicating shapes, objects, focal points, and movement patterns. Listen and look at the people there, and record as much information about them as possible. Create a consistent shorthand or code that you understand to develop a notetaking scheme that you will be able to follow throughout your project. Practice ways to differentiate between verifiable information (12 spotted cows) and your own subjective responses to or reflections on the data ("Yuck. It stinks. It reminds me of my great-uncle's outhouse"). Once you have 10 pages of notes or so, review them, and try to write a short summary of the fieldsite using your best details, so that a research partner will understand them. While you may develop a personal code (as Margery Wolf's or Roger Sanjek's fieldnotes show), at this point, your notes should be clear enough to share with someone else. This is your first step toward shaping your work for an audience.

Bring your fieldnotes and your summary to a research partner for sharing. Here are some questions you and your partner should consider as you read and respond to one another's fieldnotes:

1. Are the notes readable? Are the pages numbered and dated?
2. What background material does someone need to understand the history and location of this place?
3. Does the researcher include information about her subjective feelings as she observes?
4. What other details should she include so that another person could see, hear, and become immersed in the daily routines of this place?
5. What details are most interesting? What would you like the researcher to write more about?
6. What other data do you need to confirm some of the researcher's initial observations about this place?

#### Response

In one of our classes, Simone Henkel read Tara Tissue's fieldnotes on the morale captains at an annual university event, the dance marathon. The dance marathon is a charity fundraiser, held in a large auditorium. Students volunteer to dance for hours; the more hours they dance, the more money they raise. The morale captains, whom Tara observes, are the leaders who keep students' spirits up. After reading Tara's study, Simone responded to the above questions as follows:

1. The notes are neatly printed and numbered and dated. The location of the site is also noted.
2. The background material regarding the history of the dance marathon included where it started, how long it's been happening here at our uni-

versity. Tara might include the details of what happens at various other sites, since every university will shape this event a bit differently depending on the time of year and the students who choose to participate.

3. I am not sure what feelings Tara brings to her site. This is interesting that she excludes her feelings since Tara has been involved prior to this year. Tara might include how she thought the first year she was a morale captain herself.

4. Tara offers a good picture of what the people are doing, the feeling of being there (smells, sounds, sights, etc.). I can picture the auditorium because I know what it looks like. I think a more detailed description would be helpful, specifically, an expanded description of the auditorium.

5. The most interesting description was of all the water bottles, the soaked red T-shirts, the pony tails flying, the scuffling sounds on the floor, and the specific songs they played over the speakers.

6. I think I'd like to hear more about how the morale captains meet regularly, how long before the event itself, and who trained them. It would also be interesting to know what other students think about the dance marathon through a series of interviews. What about students who won't go? I'd also like to know what they think about the event!

## ANALYZING YOUR FIELDNOTES

Most fieldworkers write their notes while they're in the field, but some find themselves in situations where they can take only minimal notes on site. They must return to their desk to flesh out and expand the scanty notes they took while they were in the field. Bonnie and Elizabeth have both worked in teacher-preparation programs in which students are often required to observe classrooms. In such sites, observers see so much activity and evoke so many emotions and memories that they find it impossible at the time to write it all down. When we do fieldwork in schools, we follow the advice we give our students. Before you go back to your busy life with all its distractions, take some time to sit quietly and write in your notebook. Expand your fieldnotes by reading them, by adding details of conversations, sensory impressions, and contextual information, by noting your observations and reflections, and by jotting down possible questions and hunches. Analysis begins with reviewing your notes.

Just as fieldworkers develop many systems for notetaking, they invent, develop, and devise systems for organizing, coding, and retrieving data. Colored folders, highlighters, stick-on (or "sticky") notes, hanging folder boxes, and three-ring binders can be a researcher's best friends. Computers, too, have organizing features that can help you label and find pieces of your fieldnotes when you need them. Accumulating a solid set of fieldnotes is only one step in the process of creating a fieldwork project. You probably know that taking notes in a

lecture class does you little good if you try to review them all for the first time the night before a test. Just as periodic review of your lecture notes helps you understand complicated material, your fieldnotes will speak to you if you read them regularly. In reviewing your fieldnotes, you will begin to find recurring themes, images, metaphors that will form patterns. These patterns will help you form your beginning interpretations. Some fieldworkers write weekly memos culled from their fieldnotes, pulling together pieces of data around an emerging idea.

We have developed a helpful kind of analysis memo that involves three key questions to ask and write about regularly as you review your data. These questions will guide the work we discuss throughout this entire book. While we haven't yet introduced you to some of these concepts in detail, we feel that these questions are worth considering even at the beginning of your fieldwork project:

1. **What surprised me? (tracking assumptions)** This question helps you keep track of your assumptions throughout the fieldwork process. When you ask yourself this question regularly, you'll articulate your preconceived notions about this project and also record how they change.
2. **What intrigued me? (tracking positions)** Asking this question makes you aware of your personal stances in relationship to your research topic. As we've already suggested, you as the fieldworker are the instrument (recorder and presenter) of the research process. So what interests and attracts you about your project will always influence what you record and how you write about it. This question helps you understand the complex idea of positioning, which we discuss in Chapter 3.
3. **What disturbed me? (tracking tensions)** This question exposes yourself to yourself. It requires honesty about your blind spots, stereotypes, prejudices, and the things you find upsetting, no matter how small. Focusing on what bothers you about a field project is not always comfortable, but it often leads to important insights.

In time, these three questions should become a kind of mantra for your fieldstudy.

Fieldnotes enhance your ability to step in and step out of the culture you've chosen. From your earliest freewriting as you think about a topic, through the notes you take as you enter your fieldsite, to the reflections you write for yourself as you look back and question what you wrote, fieldnotes offer you the details, language, perspectives, and perceptions that will eventually become your final written product. We hope you'll take fieldnotes with care and patience and treat them as you would any other kind of source material. Although you may not realize it, your fieldnotes create an original source, a primary source that no one else has recorded in the same way you have, at the site you've chosen, and with the people you've studied.

do as part of journal reflections on observations

## Questioning Your Fieldnotes

### Purpose

During the course of your research, your assumptions, positions, and tensions will probably change a lot, and looking over your notes will help you see how you learn about your site and your informants as your research progresses. Continually asking the three key questions introduced on p. 106 will help you check in on your research and become aware of your own changing attitudes, stances, and even blind spots as you gather new data. You will actually see your knowledge deepen in your researcher's journal.

### Action

Look over the notes you've taken in your researcher's journal so far. Try for the first time to ask these three key questions:

- What surprised me?
- What intrigued me?
- What disturbed me?

### Response

Holly Richardson is a high school teacher in Alaska who grew up in western New York and worked with us in Massachusetts. To prepare to teach her Alaskan students how to do fieldwork, she practiced by doing a field study of her own. Holly decided to study a bingo game at an American Legion hall:

Ever since I was a young girl, I have accompanied my mother and a slew of her friends to bingo games at various Veterans of Foreign War posts, Indian reservations, Catholic churches, and volunteer fire stations in Western New York. In my adult life, I have attended bingo games in central Alaska—sometimes just for fun and sometimes to raffle off items or do 50/50 drawings for my student government group. I've always been intrigued by the superstitions and rituals that surface at these games. Although I am not particularly superstitious, I find myself rubbing my neighbor's winnings or coding a particular game by marking an edge with the dabber, hoping that the game will bring me luck. There are mostly women at the games, and usually there is a mix of ages, although the majority are probably over 50. The men seem to accompany the women, not vice versa. Until now, I never actually took notes on what people around me were doing at these games.

*What surprised me?* I went outside before the game started and during the 10-minute break to smoke a cigarette and talk to some of my fellow addicts. As usual, the chitchat was of gas prices, cigarette

connect as follow-up to observations

primary vs. secondary sources - do students understand?