

Field Notes

Field notes are a description of what you observed while at your site. Your goal is to re-create the scene so that your reader can imagine what happened while you were there. In a sense, you are telling a story about what you observed.

There are many aspects of writing field notes that depend on your personal style and the situation you are in. For example, you may try to take **jottings** (little notes that will help you remember what you saw later). But your decision to take jottings will depend on how comfortably and inconspicuously you can take such notes. Or, for another example, you can make different choices about what to write. You could do a moment-by-moment re-cap or focus on capturing the many details of most significant moments that you observed.

NOTE: YOU CANNOT AUDIO OR VIDEO RECORD ANYONE FOR THIS PROJECT

There are a few keys to writing good field notes.

- The process of observing means using your 5 senses. Tell me not only what you see and hear but also other things that strike you (smells, textures, tastes). Give me as much detail as possible.
- Write your notes as soon as possible after you leave the field (so that your memory will be fresh). Write up your field notes *before* you talk to others about what you observed.
- Use a narrative structure – use complete sentences to convey whole ideas.
- Clearly separate your observations from your interpretations and reactions. I advise erring on the side of caution.
- Most importantly, be honest. If you forget a detail (and you will), say so or leave it out.

When you type up your field notes, it is fine to leave them single-spaced.

A sample set of field notes from one of my first research projects follows.

Oak County Drug Court
Field Observation
5/17/2005 (Monday), 6 PM

I received an email from SL telling me that court begins at 6 pm and that I should plan to arrive around 6:15. In the email, she didn't tell me why there was a time difference in when I should arrive compared to the start time. I went ahead and went to the court close to 6 pm. I couldn't remember exactly which floor the court was on, so I was hoping someone would arrive around the same time as me and I could just follow them like I knew what I was. I was wearing a black, v-neck sweater, grey slacks and black shoes. I knew that this time I did not want to walk in with a bag, but I decided to go ahead and carry in a legal pad and pen (also, I wanted an inconspicuous way to carry the consent forms I needed to pass off to the clerk). I walked into the courthouse and up to the metal detectors. I placed my notepad, pen and key on the conveyor belt and the guard asked me where I was going. I told her "to County Court #4." A young Latino—I'd guess early 20s, wearing long shorts and an over-sized white t-shirt—walked up behind me and stated that he was there for Drug Court. The guard quit looking at me and turned to the male behind me. We both passed through the detector. I walked slowly to the elevator and he was behind me (I was relieved because I wanted to follow him up since I knew he was going to drug court). I pressed the up button, but I let him walk on the elevator first and press the floor button. When we arrived on the 6th floor, I stepped off the elevator first and then just followed the noise to the courtroom on my left. About 10 people were standing along the wall outside the court (they weren't in a formal line, just staggered around—several were having conversations and I remember laughter). I walked into the courtroom, trying to look like I knew exactly what I was doing (although I was nervous that I was wrong and might get in trouble—there were signs on both sets of doors announcing that court was in session and that people should not enter).

Court started about 6:15 PM (although I didn't have a watch, so I'm just guessing. In any case, I didn't wait long.). I did notice that there were several children in the gallery. I saw at least two and heard another one crying.

We all rose as the judge entered and then the proceedings began pretty quickly. The first three people were called up to the bench and dismissed almost immediately. The judge talked very softly with these individuals (there was also quite a bit of soft conversation going on around me also—I couldn't hear anything in these early conversations between judge and client). After the judge was finished talking with each one, he would ask everyone to offer a round of applause because the person is doing very well.

The fourth person to walk up was a youngish looking male (perhaps even around 16 to 18) who had been sitting in front of me (next to a man with a girl who was around 3 years old; I had wondered if this group was one family and the two youths were with the older man—30s-ish—but it appears the young man was there as a client). At the bench, it looked like the judge was asking him a lot of questions. The young male kept shaking his head and there was soft laughter. The judge then said, "let's give him a hand to encourage him" and everyone clapped. The next person called up to the bench was the

man who sat next to the young man who just left the bench. The man walked up to the bench carrying the 3 year old girl. The judge looked up from his paperwork and saw the little girl and then said “awww” (in a cooing kind of way). The judge then asked the woman next to him if they had anything for the girl. There was a little scrambling among the staff next to the judge and finally a plastic grocery bag was produced that had small stuffed animals in it (I was surprised at the toys—I had expected to see lollypops or some other small treat). The judge then offered a toy to the little girl and engaged her a little—trying to get her to take the toy. Then the judge talked with the man, but I don’t really remember what was said (I have no idea if he was doing well or not). In any case, we clapped and the man and little girl left the bench. [I don’t think I’ve said so far, but after an individual leaves the bench they usually leave the court. I haven’t noticed anyone sticking around. Also, I’m not clear on the order in which people are called up to the bench. Definitely not alphabetical order.]

I don’t remember anything distinctive about the next couple of people called up. No one seemed to have any major issues although not everyone was doing great. The conversations with the judge were so soft, I couldn’t hear very much. We clapped when each person left.

A man was called up to the bench and he carried an infant. The judge sighed over the infant and said something about how it is noticeable when people start to trust the client more (I’m assuming that the judge is saying that these individuals must be becoming more trustworthy because they’re being given the care of children). This man was said to be doing well and dismissed with a round of applause. [I tried to write down a bit of the statement made by the judge to this man. I reached for my notepad and both people sitting next to me started looking at my notepad. I flipped to back page and scribbled a few words and both had their eyes on me the whole time. I decided at this point that I would write anything else as long as people were sitting next to me. I didn’t want to freak anybody out and worry them that I was writing about them.]

I think a couple more people may have passed between the man with the infant and a woman with a toddler. She too took her toddler perched on her hip up to the bench. The judge took a few minutes to give this child a toy from the bag. The judge then said, loud enough for everyone to hear although he appeared to be talking to the staff sitting to his right, “When parents start doing their job, then they...well, really the whole family ...” He trailed off in what ever point he was making and the court staff to his right just smiled. [I noticed a lot that the judge is given to very vague statements and doesn’t always finish his point. I found it was frequent that I was not clear on what he was trying to say.] The woman was dismissed with applause and she left the court. Another person was being called up when the woman returned to the courtroom with a different child (I’d guess 4 or 5) walking at her side. She addressed the judge directly and told him that her son was upset he didn’t receive a toy (although the time between her exit and re-entrance was so short it seems implausible that there was time for much drama to pass—also the kid did not look at all distressed). The judge gave the boy toy also and then returned to the next person on the list.