

Field notes: a rapid guide

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Field notes: a rapid guide

"The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm's reach."

John Berger (1972) Ways of Seeing

What are field notes and why write them?

Field notes are written quickly in order to capture essence of a situation and to help refresh memory later. They help you to understand and reflect on your research (and the data you collect). There is usually not much time to write notes while working in the field but rapid field notes can help you remember details when you write more detailed desk notes later (ideally the same day). It is these detailed desk notes that you can then analyse as part of your data.

When should you write field notes?

Field notes should (ideally) be written for any and every field activity. If someone was doing an audit of your research, you should be able to show a record of the comments and observations you took on a particular day of field work. This might be harder if fieldworkers are using smartphones/apps, but still possible with (for example) quick audio recordings.

How detailed should rapid field notes be?

- Depends on the focus of research and research question
- Depends on the detail necessary for your research
- Depends on how good your memory is!

What do field notes contain?

Each individual develops their own style of note taking. But all notes (whether rapid or detailed) need to contain descriptive information and reflexive information.

Descriptive information:

- Date, time and context (e.g. village meeting).
- Physical environment (e.g. high plateau visiting farms above 4000m).
- Social environment: who participated (and who did not), behaviours/interactions (frequency, type), dynamics between genders, ages, ethnic groups and people with more or less 'power'/authority.
- Events, activities, main themes, conversations.

- Direct quotes (use quotation marks) or paraphrases of relevance/importance.
- Your own participation and possible impact of this.

Reflexive information includes:

- Thoughts, impressions, questions that have arisen.
- Specific analysis about something that happened and why.
- Clarifications and new ideas (e.g. for future observations or analysis).

Each researcher decides how long or short to make their quick notes and how much detail to add later. In general, the more time you can spend adding details to notes, the more useful these data will be in the long term.

Difference between rapid notes and detailed notes

Rapid notes can be notes, bullet points, quick drawings, photos, short videos, audio recordings. Whatever you have time to write down, and whatever helps you expand on important details later (ideally the same day).

Detailed notes are where you can expand your quick notes with fuller descriptions of observations, more details about conversations, meetings, people and situations you found yourself in. These detailed notes should be written as soon as possible after the end of the observation period.

The most common strategy for organizing and writing detailed notes is chronologically: from the beginning of the day (or observation period) to the end. Sometimes, however, it may be easier to focus first on the highlights, observations that were most interesting or shocking or relevant to your work.

To record or not to record (audio)?

There are advantages (more accurate transcription, less dependence on note-taking during interviews) and disadvantages (technology can fail, interviewees may feel uncomfortable, researchers can become careless or lazy and lose important details, transcribing costs time and money) to making audio recordings of interviews. You can also consider making audio recordings of your own field notes (for ease and time saving). A good rule of thumb is to match the method with the requirement on a case-by-case basis, and make sure to keep the focus on creating a good relationship with the interviewee.

Use a checklist/field note template:

1. Place, date, time (where, when)
2. People, activities, actions (what, who)
3. Subtleties*
4. Quotes from conversations
5. Follow-up questions

* Subtleties may include: the use of space, gender balance, who speaks and who doesn't, how people interact with each other, etc. Don't get too distracted by non-essential details. Remember to keep your research questions in focus at all times, and/or make use of an observation framework or protocol such as the [FRN observation Protocol](#) to direct your observations and questions.

Constantly review your notes

Read your notes regularly. This helps you to see how your observations and knowledge of problems is changing, and to identify new themes you might have missed. Remember to always ask:

- What surprised me?
- What interested me?
- What disturbed me?
- If I did the observation again, what would I pay attention to?

Other tips

- Make sure you have obtained prior informed consent to take notes. Generally, more confidential information requires more protection (consent, anonymity).
- Keep your notes anonymous, unless you have a good reason (and consent) not to.
- Hardcover notebooks are a good option, and should be small enough to store in a pocket or small bag (A5 or A6).
- Always have a spare pen.
- Develop your own shortcuts / signs / codes for speed and privacy.
- Always remember that even a few short notes tend to be more useful than notes which never leave your head.