

## Assignment Guide: Taking Field Notes

Whatever you decide to do, to collect and remember the data, **you have to take notes**. How much you end up with depends largely on how much you write, but plan to **collect as much as you can in the moment** and then return to reflect on it later. Here are some guidelines to follow to ensure that you collect meaningful information and that you document it in a useable way.

- Separate “description” from “interpretation” - While doing field work, your first job is to take down descriptive field notes on what you see and hear. This is the raw data that you are collecting, which you will review, analyze and interpret later. Your second task, however, is to attend to the thoughts, ideas, questions and possible explanations are always jumping into your head. What you do with those is “bracket” them – this means you jot them down quickly and continue taking descriptive notes. You don’t want to get sidetracked too long writing down lots of interpretive ideas – that can come later. To help bracket your ideas and interpretations, so that you can easily notice them later, use one of these two strategies:
  1. One approach is to put your questions and ideas in brackets [literal brackets, like this comment here] in your notes as you observe;
  2. A second method is to divide your note-taking page as follows, and give yourself a 2/3 page column on the left to take your descriptive notes, and a 1/3 page column on the right, to jot comments to yourself - the ideas, thoughts, questions for later consideration.

<u>Description</u>	<u>Comments</u>

- Focus on people and interactions: Focus on what's happening between the actors in the problem setting you are observing? What do people actually say? Capture their words. What are they doing? Capture their behaviors, gestures, expressions. Reflect back on the guiding questions if helpful.
- Focus on observables: Try to capture actual statements and dialogue and actual behaviors or incidents. Don't worry about what people might be thinking or about what you think they are doing. Stay focused on what they are ACTUALLY doing and saying. Notes about concrete statements and behaviors will help you later when you want to illustrate points you make and "show" your reader what you saw and heard.
- Verbatim–paraphrase–summarize: **Be as detailed in your note taking as possible** – avoid general comments or short summaries of everything that's happening. The general rule of thumb is "verbatim, paraphrase, summarize" – that is, try to capture as much verbatim as possible, when you can't keep up noting things verbatim, shift to paraphrasing what's going on, and when you can't paraphrase you can resort to summarizing the action.