Kinds of Field Notes

This list consists of different kinds of notes that anthropologists make while in the field. On the one hand, each of the following can be recorded in a different place. On the other hand, as Dewalt and Dewalt point out, computers allow one to merge these different types of fieldnotes into one document and then later you can easily sort, separate, add, purge, and code information.

Indicates the kinds of notes that must be included when I review your data.

Jog Notes

Brief, often cryptic, jottings that you make *during* participation (on slips or in a small pad) as an aid to memory. Later in the day you should create expanded notes by entering information into your field log. Make especially sure to jot down details that are easy to forget such as numbers, lists of names (of those present), verbatim comments by individuals, and local vocabulary and phrases.

Expanded NotesField Notes Proper

The most important kind of writing, in which you offer detailed, fleshed-out accounts of your observations. Expanded fieldnotes are a real grab-bag of information: they should include a detailed descriptions of people, events, places, words, and daily actions. See below for a fuller account of the kinds of writing to be included in expanded field notes.

Methodological Notes

Documentation of and commentary on the methods used in the project. Discusses why particular methods were chosen, what the outcome of or problems with the methods were, and new ways to do things discovered by the researcher. Should include memos of things one should do.

Diary or Journal

Highly personal accounts in which the anthropologist expresses personal concerns, frustrations, impressions, and plans. Serves mainly as an emotional outlet, but can provide a rich reflexive account of interactions with people in the field that may prove useful in future academic accounts to be published.

Calendar

A calendar of what was done every day in the field. Notes where the anthropologist went, what event he or she participated in, who he or she interviewed, etc.. [You can keep an adequate log by penciling in such information on a monthly or weekly calendar printed up from your word processing program.]

Meta Notes

Notes that represent some level of inference or analysis. Includes both

a) asides and commentaries (brief, reflective bits of analytic writing that succinctly clarify, explain, interpret, or raise questions about some specific happening, dialogue, or person)

b) higher-level analyses including theoretical insight that struck during the course of fieldwork (or while in the act of writing); preliminary interpretations of events and dialogue, and commentary on social patterns that you see emerging

c) notation of themes and questions that you would like to explore further, and memos of things you should do

There is no reason to separate out Meta Notes / Analytic Notes from your expanded notes/fieldnotes proper; simply use special codes to indicate when you are switching from recording objective facts to recording subjective impressions or commentary. See below for info and suggestions on meta-notes notes..

Head Notes

material that is never written down (often includes banal, basic, but relevant information)

Coding, along with a key that explains your code words

In addition to the meta notes discussed above, you should generate a list of code words and insert them into your expanded notes/fieldnotes proper. As Dewalt & Dewalt (2002:166) explain it, coding refers to the development of categories that emerge from the data (emic) as a result of reviewing the data for inherent concepts and patterns. You need to generate your own code words, which correspond to themes that emerge throughout your fieldwork, which you begin to recognize as you read through your fieldnotes (see Dewalt & Dewalt 2002:172-176 for an example). Note that these code words are ***in addition*** to the codes for meta notes described below.

The procedure is as follows: first you type out a running log of expanded notes/field notes proper each day that conduct participant observation. Then you generate a list of code words as you read and reread your fieldnotes. You insert these codes into your Expanded NotesField Notes Proper to tag sections of your fieldnotes that are particularly relevant to your research objectives. This gives order to the random hodge-podge of notes that you generate, and will be of great assistance when you attempt to synthesize your notes to construct your Final Ethnography.

**Expanded Notes/Fieldnotes proper**

**Things to include**

(from the chapter Writing Up Fieldnotes II: Creating Scenes on the Page, *in Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, by Emerson et al.)

Depiction of Scenes:

**Description**

**Dialogue**

**Characterization**

Also:

**Sketches** still life: vivid sensory impression, detailed imagery; provide overall sense of places and people. Sketches are good background for other fieldnote descriptions

**Episodes**  recounts action, moves in time compared to sketches

**Fieldnote Tales** Can be like writing a dramatic storysuspense is built in and there is a sense that something will happen. But beware since life is not like a novel. It therefore is advised to avoid creating texts that possess the coherence and unity of fictional writing.

Helpful codes for meta notes

These are suggestions for how you can set off meta notes from your straightforward observations when writing or typing out notes. Feel free to make up your own codes that can easily be searched for in your word-processing program.2

**{ }** or **[ ]**  are good for setting asides off from your descriptive writing.

Another option is to begin a paragraph with:

**#me#** signifies my own comment on something I just finished describing. What did ***I*** think was going on? What were ***my*** impressions of a particular individual? This is an example of an aside, which is usually just one or a few sentences.

Additional codes that might be useful are:

**#?#** signifies a question that has arisen that I want to ask about or explore in future interviews or participant observation.

**#I#**  signifies an interpretation, theoretical insight, or free-written brainstorm that synthesizes data I have been collecting (it comments on a broader social pattern rather than simply giving the anthropologists personal perspective on a particular event or person). Usually at least a paragraph

#**memo**# signifies a practical consideration that has arisen with regard to methods or in-progress fieldwork, such as where should I observe next? What should I remember to focus on?

*In addition, make up code words that correspond to emerging themes in your research. Set these off with infrequently used symbols (#, ^, <,>) so that you can easily search for nuggets of text that pertain to a particular theme. Make sure to keep a list of your code words, along with an explanation of each one.*