

Academic Writing

Observation Papers

Writing a qualitative observation paper entails three processes. First, you record your observations of a particular setting or situation—that is, take field notes. Next, you interpret those notes according to relevant criteria. Finally, you write a well organized paper that presents your observations and interpretations, usually with the aim of answering a research question.

GENERAL TIPS FOR TAKING FIELD NOTES

- **Entries:** Begin the observation period by entering the date, locality, time, general weather conditions, and anything else that may be important.
- **Dates:** A good method is to use a 3-letter designation for the month and always put the time units from smallest to largest: day month year (e.g. 10 JAN 89).
- **Times:** Always use the 24-hour clock. i.e. 0530 rather than 5:30 since the latter is ambiguous if AM or PM does not follow. It is a good idea to make your last entry 'Observations ended at (and insert time)'.
- **Notes:** Write down what you see, not your interpretation of it. Avoid general descriptions: 'the men fought' should be 'man A (black hair with yellow T-shirt) punched man B (yellow hair with black T-shirt) with his left arm.' Take quantitative notes when possible. It is better to write 'the women were 1 m apart' than to write nothing about distance between them.

Notes should be descriptive and tell what you did not see as well as what you did. You may have been watching a particular action and did not notice something about the people involved. Note what you did not notice.

(Adapted from [Field Notebooks & Recommendations for Taking Field Notes](#))

RECORDING QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS

Setting: Be specific about date, time, conditions, and physical arrangements. Don't say "It's hard to see in the club"; rather, "The club is lit by about half a dozen dim red bulbs, making it impossible to see the far side of the room clearly."

Time-keeping: Record the time you begin and end your observations.

People: If the setting is crowded, choose a particular group (or groups) or focus on random participants. Describe actions and reactions as *precisely and literally* as possible *without* mixing in your own interpretation.

Interpretation: Your goal isn't just to record observations in a public space but also to interpret them with respect to communication patterns and processes. However, you need to differentiate between your "literal" description of actions/behaviours and your *interpretation* of them—i.e. first describe, then interpret.

Dialogue: If the setting is more intimate, you may be able to capture some key dialogue. Do so only if you can hear it clearly, it's simple or memorable, and you don't have to guess what was said. Don't try to write everything you hear verbatim. If you can't hear something properly, don't try to guess what was said.

WRITING YOUR OBSERVATION PAPER

Organize your paper around a research question: For example, you may be interested in power relations, interactions between interpersonal communication processes and other media, or other social phenomena...or your assignment may steer you toward particular themes. A good strategy is to create a research question around one of your interests or assignment themes. The question will not only guide your observations but help you to interpret and organize them for your paper.

Structure your paper clearly:

1. The introduction includes an overview of the public space you observed and poses the research question.
2. The body uses paragraph divisions to signal logical shifts in time, place, behaviours, or attention to different aspects of your research question. Ensure that one central concept or “thread” governs each paragraph, and don’t end with a sentence that belongs to the next paragraph. Informative headings and sub-headings can also help cue the reader.
3. The conclusion should come back to the research question. Did your observations answer it? Why or why not? Then go a step further and suggest a sense of significance: i.e. what we learn about communication processes or about people’s interactions with (in) public spaces.

Write self-reflectively: You are part of the scene; indeed, your presence may even affect the scene to some extent. That, plus the fact you must also record and to some extent reflect on your own observation process, means using the first person. However, there’s a difference between using it redundantly, as in—“I observed four young women at one table all laughing together”—and as an integral part of your process/experience, as in—“I felt uncomfortable standing so close to the men at the bar.”

Adopt a clear, “plain” style:

- Keep nouns and verbs close together—“who’s doing what?”
- Watch your use of the all-purpose linking verb “to be.” Would a concrete verb paint a more accurate picture?
- Use the active voice when possible and appropriate—for ex, “I heard a sudden burst of laughter” rather than “A sudden burst of laughter was heard.”
- Be consistent with verb tense. The observations you include in your paper may use the present or past tense as long as it’s the same throughout. However, your interpretations—and for that matter any kind of critical analysis—should be in the present tense.

Always check with your professor or TA for other specific assignment requirements.