

Guide to Writing Field Notes  
US/W 15, Fall 2010

There are several reasons for writing field notes to document your experience with your community organization. Not least importantly, this will be your best chance to remember to remember what happened on the visit. It will be your first chance to talk about your impressions and to form connections with the course literature, all of which should help with writing the final paper. Lastly, this will be your chance to share your experiences with the class. Your field notes will be a crucial resource for other groups who be able to compare and contrast your thoughts and impressions to the ones they formed on their experience, and you'll have the opportunity to do the same from their notes.

Below are some tips for writing up the notes and how to cover each of the important points. Because each group's writing style and sharing strategies will vary, and because there will be some variation in the type and length of field experiences, the length of these field notes will probably vary considerably---to contain enough information to help other groups (and to make sure you haven't forgotten anything from your own experience!) they'll probably need to be at least 4-5 pages long, and to make it feasible for your fellow students to read these they probably shouldn't be any longer than 10-12 pages.

Make sure that your writing is comprehensible to people who weren't there for the interview, but don't worry too much about prose style as these aren't meant to be your finished product---if a few pages of bullet points are the best style for you, that's fine, and if you prefer to write a little more long-winded so that you can pare it down later, that's fine too. Your field notes will be a part of your final grade on this project, but we're looking for thoughtfulness and comprehensibility---not style or formatting.

If you can touch on all of the points below, you'll have written an effective set of notes:

Describe the Organization: What is the purpose of the organization? What did you learn about them before you went, and what did you learn during the interview? Was there any difference between what you thought they did and the way they described their own work? Give us enough information to have a sense for the organization's mission and the work it does, so that other groups know the context in which your impressions were made.

Keep Notes: It will be really easy to forget interesting points that your contacts make, even within a few days after the interview. **The sooner you write up your notes, the better they will be, without exception.** You should plan on having your field notes written within 2 or 3 days of the experience, otherwise you will start to lose important details and there will be the risk that you forget (or even worse, misquote) important things that your contacts said. Use this to outline all of the arguments that they made, going into more detail about the things that you thought were more important but making sure not to lose smaller points in case you realize while writing

your paper that they were more important than you thought at the time. If there were really good quotes that you took down in your notes, copy them into this so you can use them in the final paper. Above all, use this as an opportunity to record for your own memory the outline of the entire conversation that you had.

Explain Impressions: What were your own reactions to the visit? Did you notice things going on at the organization that weren't talked about? Were your hosts talking more about their own personal experiences, experiences from their clients, or more abstractly about their work? It's not likely that any organization you're working with will be untruthful in any way, but they may emphasize things or refer to things in a way that is not what you expected or may not be obvious on the surface. Think about why they do so, and what that might say about their acquired perspective or your own outside vantage point.

Connections to the Literature: Use these field notes to begin to draw explicit comparisons to the topics in lectures and in the readings. While you'll do this more explicitly in the final paper, indicate which of the bigger questions you gained the most insight about. Which questions that Prof. Hochschild, course readings, TFs, or section discussions have raised matter for your contacts' work, and which are less relevant? Are there any authors or theories that your contacts clearly agree with – or disagree with? You should record answers in the field notes to more direct questions about these topics, but also think about using these notes to begin to piece together insights about these questions that didn't come from direct questioning. How do they refer to their clients, and how does that fit into the kind of racial or ethnic distinctions that we've seen? Are your contacts overall optimistic about their work or pessimistic? Do they tend to talk about working with individuals or with communities?

IRB issues: Be sure to note if you had any issues with regard to signing the consent form, concerns about confidentiality or anonymity, particularly sensitive questions or answers, etc. As you know, these notes will not be shared outside the class participants, so you can and should be fairly explicit here.

Share with the Class: You will be writing these for your own use as well as for others to read, so be sure to make these notes usable for others as well as making them the initial steps toward your own group's paper. If there is a term or an idea that is now obvious to your group from your visit but might not be clear to others, describe it briefly---this will be good practice for writing the final paper!