

## Tips for Writing Thick Descriptions for Ethnographies and Case Studies

Ethnographies and case studies are often components of assignments in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and human and organizational development, among others. They pose unique challenges, because they involve a combination of fieldwork (observation, interview, survey) and critical analysis through the application of core disciplinary or course concepts. Sometimes, writing ethnographies requires us to have a research question or hypothesis before doing research. Other times, we might develop a hypothesis out of the research we have done. Balancing these different modes of investigation and writing can be tricky.

When conducting the observation or interview portion of your research, try to **close read** the situation by carefully parsing out details as you might do with a text. Your **thick description** of behaviors in their context should try to paint a clear picture of the event, situation, environment, or culture in question. If possible, bring a notepad and/or tape recorder in order to capture small details. If you cannot take notes while observing, be sure to write your thoughts down as soon after the experience as possible. It is also extremely important to be self-reflective; notice how your presence might alter the environment, as well as how your own assumptions and reactions to the situation might affect what you notice and how you write about it.

Remember, too, that part of fulfilling assignments like these involves proving that you have spent adequate time observing and that you are a skillful observer.

Consider questions like the following:

- + What is the layout of the space or room?
- + What are the specific objects or physical elements in the space?
- + Who are the people involved?
- + What clues signify people's statuses and roles?
- + What are the people you are observing doing in general or attempting to accomplish?
- + What explicit structures, rules, or norms govern the situation?
- + What are people wearing?
- + What is their affect like?
- + How do people interact with one another?
- + What are individuals' specific behaviors, both verbal and non-verbal?

When composing your **thick description** of events, try to **show rather than tell** by using evocative language. Put another way, select words that help the reader see what is being described. Try to be as specific as possible by avoiding general or abstract words. Instead, use anecdotes, examples, descriptions, and quotations to make your experience concrete for the reader.

## Taking Good Notes in the Field

Before beginning your observation, interview, survey, or other fieldwork, be sure to identify the theories, concepts, and themes that you are investigating. Formulating a fieldwork hypothesis is akin to developing a research question. Identify your own ideas and expectations about the situation. Being aware of these will help you as you observe, allowing you to collect data more neutrally, instead of fitting the data to match your expectations.

On the left side are sentences that could be in an essay; however, they are not good formulations for your observation notes because they move too quickly from observation to conclusion. Before you make judgments, give analysis, and draw conclusions, you need careful details. Notes of your observations or direct quotes from surveys and interviews make up the evidence needed for the final analysis.

### Too Vague

“Coach Rodriguez was my favorite.”

“The chair of the meeting was ineffective.”

### Too Conclusive

“The teacher likes the students.”

“The interviewee was uncomfortable with this line of questioning.”

### Stating what COULD be

“Students will learn math better with hands-on examples than numbers on a chalkboard.”

### Descriptive

“Coach Rodriguez was the only coach who spent 30 minutes working one-on-one with each athlete every week.”

“The chair addressed only 3 of 5 points on the agenda in the 60 minutes allotted for the meeting.”

### Detailed

“The teacher smiles when the students enter the room, greets them attentively and warmly, and hugs those that run to her.”

“During questions 5 thru 7 the interviewee started fidgeting in his seat, touching his hand to his mouth, and speaking more slowly while clearing his throat repeatedly. He displayed none of those behaviors in the first 4 questions.”

### Explaining what IS happening

“Yesterday, when the teacher wrote problems on the board 3 students answered all problems correctly. Today, when the teacher used blocks and bottle caps, 8 students answered most problems correctly in under 30 seconds.”