

Observation Workshop

Comm 156I
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This Workshop

This is the online research skill workshop. This workshop provides an overview and information references that supply critical knowledge to help you succeed in this course.

This workshop covers tips on how conduct observations for your course research projects.

Observation

Lindloff goes into considerable detail on the different types of observation, so I will not repeat that information here.

This workshop will focus on technical issues of observing and recording data as well as strategies you may employ that will improve your experience and the quality of your data.

Observation

We spend a lot of time insulated from our surroundings, wrapped in earbuds, eyes on smart phones, and driving around in insulated metal boxes (cars).

We are mostly interested in ourselves, but to observe we need to focus on others.

To observe behavior, you need to train yourself to concentrate and systematically analyze your surroundings.

Observation

Observation is not simply paying attention. Observation, like research in general, must be **organized** and **systematic**.

To be a keen observer, you need to notice what is normally invisible.

If you have seen the latest Sherlock Holmes movie, you can see how the main character finely examines his environment for clues to understand people, their motivations, and how they interact with their environment.

Preparation

In order to observe people in a particular context, you need to spend some time getting used to the scene so you have idea of what is going on.

Consider the example we've been using: *"What is the impact of student technology use on classroom participation?"*

You already have an advantage here, since you are familiar with the norms (traditional and accepted roles/behaviors) of the college classroom.

Preparation

However, it is important to realize that even though you have been in the same environment many times, you may not actually be “seeing” what is going on.

In fact, because our brains are lazy, and there is so much input from our senses, we often fill in the blanks based on memory. Think of this like typing in a url. Your browser will try and guess your intent based on past behavior. Sometimes it is correct, other times not.

In this sense, sometimes we notice more about new places and people than those we see everyday.

Preparation

Another challenge is that we tend to focus on the abnormal or the disruptive. For example, we are often unaware of what the norms are for behavior until someone violates them.

Finally, observing is about being in the “now.” This may sound a little zen-like, but we do tend to live in the future (what am I going to say, what am I doing next) or in the past (what just happened, why did that happen?).

Preparation

Your **first step** should be to review the literature so you have some idea of the things you should be looking for and how to describe/define them.

The next step is do some preliminary observations. How is the space organized? Where do people congregate? How do they interact? What are they doing?

Depending on what you find, you may need to go back to the lit for more information.

Preparation

A good first step is to draw a map of the environment. For example, in a classroom, how are desks and other furniture arranged? Where are the doors and windows?

Second, where is a good vantage point to observe the behavior you are interested in? You want to be unobtrusive. Realize that if you change your behavior (move to the back from the front) others will notice and it will change the scene you are trying to observe.

This cannot be avoided and impacts your research.

Preparation

Do your homework!

You must beware of any limitations that will impact your ability to gather data. In our classroom example you would need to know what days the class may not meet, are there special activities (video, guest speakers, exams) that may complicate data gathering or interfere with your ability to take notes.

Preparation

Next, experiment with taking scratch notes. You will want to create a system that will require as little writing as possible, because when you write you will miss something.

In the context of a classroom (or any scene) where you are also a participant, you need to take into account your own responsibilities as a member of that scene.

Thus, it is often best to set-up a note-taking form based on what behaviors you are looking for.

Pragmatics

Simplicity is key. While many of us use computers to take notes, this is often not the best way to take scratch notes.

A pencil and paper do not need power and do not crash. This also allows you to illustrate, outline, draw connecting arrows and other methods of notation.

NEVER ERASE SCRATCH NOTES! If there is something you feel is irrelevant, draw a thin line through it. You never know if what at first seems irrelevant may turn out to be important later.

Creating your System

Since you are the one that has to work with it, it is important that you create a note-taking system that works for you. The only requirements are that it allows you to be consistent and you can interpret what you write later on. Some researchers use maps, tables, or outlines.

Let's say one behavior you want to note is "active listening." You do not want to write down "active listening" every time or note a description that you may not remember is active listening. One solution is to create a form.

You create an area for notes on this behavior and a space to write in. You can do a table.

Active Listening	<i>notes here</i>	
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Or use columns, or a map, whatever works.

Active Listening_____.

Notes here

Creating your System

How specific or general you make your form is up to you. You could create cells for different individuals or for locations as well as behaviors.

It is best to use a different form for each observation session. ALWAYS note date, time, and location for each observation.

Piloting your study is a way to try out different strategies so you know what works best.

Taking Notes

It is impossible to try and observe everything at all times. You may wish to limit your observations to a selected sub-group of people or a particular area of a scene.

It is easy to get distracted, especially if you are a participant. A good strategy is to organize your notes so you observe behaviors at specific intervals (maybe every 5 minutes). This will help keep you focused.

The key is to be consistent and organized!

Notes on Notes

Taking notes as a student and notes as an observer often have the same pitfalls - not being able to interpret them later!

It is **CRITICAL** that you annotate your scratch notes immediately after an observation! Your notation of “haha red hat guy, kook” will still make sense directly after the event but you won’t know what the heck you were talking about later that day.

Annotations of scratch notes should be made in such a way (different colors, etc.) so you can tell what was written while observing versus afterward.

This is also a chance to expand on any descriptions or note personal thoughts on what transpired.

Notes on Notes

Once you have your scratch notes, you will need to convert these to field notes. This is a chance to clarify and organize what you have written earlier.

It is from your field notes that you will code your data and later on add in examples and the thick description that is so important to qualitative research.

So - scratch notes, clarification/annotation, field notes, coding, and finally the write up.

Observation

Observations should be done over a period of time, the more observation sessions you can arrange, the better off you will be.

Please see the observation section on the course assignment page for more details on the basic requirements and how to use this method for your project.

Tasks

To earn credit you need to post a substantive 100+ word comment on this workshop's wiki page and complete the following tasks.

Since you will (likely) be conducting a participant observation in a class at SJSU, think about how you might go about your study.

1. Create a note taking scheme or template that you intend to use.
2. Create a schedule (4 days per student minimum) for observing and note what the scheduled activities are in your classes for those days.
3. Create a map of your scene.
4. Since there is no practical way to submit this, do the work for your own benefit - it will make for an easier/better assignment if you start working on this now.