Some Friendly Advice

Before we start giving detailed information about fieldnotes and other forms of qualitative data we offer a word of advice. Pledge to keep your data physically well-organized, develop a plan about how you are going to do it, and live up to your vow. When you are in the field and the data are coming at you from all sides, it is easy to be sloppy about storing it. Confusion about the location of files and about other aspects of your data gets upsetting later and hinders analysis. With the current state of computer technology and the advantages computers offer in entering and managing data, all fieldnotes and interview transcripts should be typed and stored using a state-of-the-art word processing program and filing system. Most qualitative computer data analysis software does not require special procedures or formatting for entering the data. You can type your notes and transcripts as you would any text in a good word processing program. If you decide to use a qualitative data analysis program and there are special formatting requirements, the text files you create can easily be transformed to meet these requirements when you are ready to do analysis. While it is advantageous to know what software you are going to use in analysis prior to starting a study, this is usually unrealistic for the novice. The decision can be put off. If you do know the program you are going to use, consult the manual about text entry.

As with any information stored in a computer, be sure you back up your files. We may be old-fashioned, but we always feel more comfortable also having a hard copy of what is in the computer for safe keeping. The specifics of your study will shape your filing system. But for general advice: Create a separate file for each set of fieldnotes you write and for each formal interview you transcribe. Name files in a way that you can easily ascertain what is in them. Put fieldnotes and interview transcriptions in separate files. Try to keep files arranged in the directory in the order they were collected.

Documents that you find in the setting also constitute data that need to be saved. Whether you enter them into the computer depends on the nature of the material, how much you have, and how you might use them. These considerations will help you to decide whether scanning them for computer use makes sense. Usually it does not. Such found data are often not uniform in size, or are of a type that makes scanning laborious and time-consuming. The same goes for pictures and photographs. Scanning is tedious, and takes a tremendous amount of storage if you want good images. Thus, in unfunded projects, most found material has to be managed using manila folders and other paper products and filing cabinets. If you keep a hard copy of your data, you can still keep the chronological order of your collection by inserting the documents between pages of fieldnotes.

Fieldnotes

After returning from each observation, interview, or other research session, the researcher typically writes out, preferably on a computer, what happened. He or she renders a description of people, objects, places, events, activities, and conversations. In addition, as part of such notes, the researcher will record ideas, strategies, reflections, and hunches, as well as note patterns that emerge. These are *fieldnotes*—the written account of what the researcher

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hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study.

The successful outcome of a participant observation study in particular, but other forms of qualitative research as well, relies on detailed, accurate, and extensive fieldnotes. In participant observation studies all the data are considered to be fieldnotes; this term refers collectively to all the data collected in the course of such a study, including the fieldnotes, interview transcripts, official, documents, official statistics, pictures, and other materials. We are using the term here in a narrower sense.

While researchers know that fieldnotes are central to participant observation, some forget that they can be an important supplement to other data collecting methods. In conducting taped interviews, for example, the meaning and context of the interview can be captured more completely if, as a supplement to each interview, the researcher writes out fieldnotes. The tape recorder misses the sights, smells, impressions, and extra remarks said before and after the interview. Fieldnotes can provide any study with a personal log that helps the researcher to keep track of the development of the project, to visualize how the research plan has been affected by the data collected, and to remain aware of how he or she has been influenced by the data.

In our discussion of other forms of data (later in this chapter), we will briefly discuss specific aspects of fieldnotes that are unique to these techniques. Here we concentrate on the fieldnotes taken in conjunction with a participant observation study. While we pick the fieldnotes from participant observation to discuss, much of what is said here is directly relevant to fieldnotes written in conjunction with other approaches, such as interviewing.

A set of fieldnotes collected as part of a study of a program that includes students with disabilities in an urban high school is reproduced as in Appendix B. These notes were taken after the sixth observation at the school. They have been slightly rewritten and edited for the purposes of this book. We include these notes to provide an example of rich data and to illustrate the discussion that follows. We suggest that you read through Appendix B quickly before you go on, and then refer to it as you read. As our discussion indicates, there are many styles of fieldnotes. The notes in Appendix B are offered as an example of one approach.

A word of encouragement before we go on. Looking at the fieldnote example in Appendix B, you might be thinking that it is impossible to write so much from one short observation—that your memory, your writing ability, and/or your energy are not enough to meet the challenge. Take heart; do not quit before you give it a try. Some of you will only go out once and never complete a set of notes; for others, however, the discipline and skill that taking fieldnotes promote will be stimulating. Some people actually get hooked on observing and note-taking. Your ability to record notes will increase; the apparently impossible nature of the task will seem quite manageable if you can get through a few sets.

We have already recommended that all fieldnotes be typed into a computer using a common, up-to-date word-processing program. Sometimes we meet people starting a study who tell us that they cannot type or that they are computer illiterate. It is difficult for us to imagine being able to do qualitative research without these skills. Take a crash course or choose another calling. In Chapter 5 we will discuss the other benefits of using the computer in data sorting and analysis.

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There is at least one important fringe benefit in doing fieldnotes. It can improve the quality and speed of your writing. Any writer will tell you that a most effective way to learn to write is by writing often. People seldom have the opportunity to write page after page of concrete description. Even the amount of writing required in the most demanding college courses is small compared to what you are asked to do here. The nice thing is that fieldnotes are not like most required writing. It is expected that the fieldnotes will flow, that they will come from the top of your head and represent your particular style. In addition, you are encouraged to write in the first person. No one will scrutinize them for poor sentence construction or spelling; they should simply be thorough and clear. In addition, you will not have the problem of having nothing to write about. What you have seen in the field will become the source of endless sentences and paragraphs. Some people have been liberated from their fear of writing and of the one-half-page-per-hour speed limit they operate under by being given the writing opportunity that doing fieldnotes provides.

The Content of Fieldnotes

As our definition suggests, fieldnotes consist of two kinds of materials. The first is *descriptive*—the concern is to provide a word-picture of the setting, people, actions, and conversations as observed. The other is reflective—the part that captures more of the observer's frame of mind, ideas, and concerns. We discuss these two aspects of fieldnotes separately.

Descriptive Fieldnotes. The descriptive part of the fieldnotes, by far the longest part, represents the researcher's best effort to objectively record the details of what has occurred in the field. The goal is to capture the slice of life. Aware that all description represents choices and judgments to some degree—decisions about what to put down, the exact use of words—the qualitative researcher strives for accuracy under these limitations. Knowing that the setting can never be completely captured, he or she is dedicated to transmitting as much as possible on paper, within the parameters of the project's research goals.

When we say that the researcher attempts to be as descriptive as possible, we mean that whatever he or she observes should be presented in detail rather than summarized or evaluated. For example, rather than saying, "The child looked a mess," you might choose something like, "The child, who was seven or eight years old, wore faded, muddy dungarees with both knees ripped. His nose was running in a half-inch stream down to his mouth, and his face was streaked clean where he had rubbed it with his wet fingers." Rather than saying, "The class was festive," describe what was hanging on the walls and ceilings, what was on the bulletin board, what sounds and movements were there. Whenever you can, quote people rather than summarizing what they say.

It is particularly important in working on description not to use abstract words (unless, of course, you are quoting a subject). Do not, for example, say that the teacher was in front of the room "teaching." What was he or she actually doing and saying? Be specific. If the teacher was talking, quote and describe it. You might be interested in when and under what conditions teachers use the word *teaching* to describe their own behavior, but you should avoid using such a term yourself. Generally, replace words and phrases like *disciplining, playing, tutoring, practicing, nice person, good student,* and *doing nothing* with detailed renderings of exactly what people are doing and saying and what they look like.

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You want to cut into the world you are observing, and abstract words will lead you to gloss over rather than to dissect.

It may be difficult to abandon superficial or overly evaluative description. We have provided questions in the Appendix at the end of this book that may be helpful in bringing you to a deeper level of inquiry. We provide them to sensitize you to some aspects of schools you might study, but not as a set of questions to carry with you and to which you seek answers. The questions serve to increase curiosity and to broaden your range of vision.

As you can see by examining the fieldnotes in Appendix B, the descriptive aspects of the fieldnotes encompass the following areas:

1. *Portraits of the subjects.* This includes their physical appearance, dress, mannerisms, and style of talking and acting. You should look for particular aspects of people that might set them apart from others or tell you about their affiliations. Because the set of notes included in Appendix B is the sixth in a study, the descriptions of people are not as extensive as they would be in an earlier set of notes. This is because the people in the setting have been described earlier. After the first full description, only changes are noted in subsequent fieldnotes.

2. *Reconstruction of dialogue.* The conversations that go on between subjects are recorded as well as what the subjects say to you in private. The notes will contain paraphrases and summaries of conversations, but, as we have suggested before, you should strive to make the subject's own words bountiful. Quote your subjects. You should be particularly concerned with writing down words and phrases that are unique to the setting or have a special use in it. Gestures, accents, and facial expressions also should be noted. Novice researchers are often troubled because they do not know exactly when to put quotation marks around dialogue in the fieldnotes. It is understood that you will not capture exactly, word for word, what the subjects have said. Rather than indicating an exact, literal, word-for-word rendering, quotation marks mean that the conversation is a close approximation of what was said. If you think you have captured the words fairly accurately, put quotation marks around them. If you are not sure of what the subject has said, before the quotation indicate that you are not sure that it is accurate. Use a phrase such as, "Joe said something like" and then write your transcription. If you really are unsure, note this and then summarize what you remember.

3. *Description of physical setting.* Pencil drawings of the space and furniture arrangements are useful in notes. Verbal sketches of such things as the blackboard, the contents of bulletin boards, the furniture, and the floors and walls also may be included. You also should try to capture the sense of the building or location where you are observing. What image, for example, does the school you are studying project as you approach it?

4. *Accounts of particular events.* The notes include a listing of who was involved in the event, in what manner, and the nature of the action.

5. *Depiction of activities.* For this category you include detailed descriptions of behavior, trying to reproduce the sequence of both behaviors and particular acts.

6. *The observer's behavior.* In qualitative research, the subjects are the people interviewed and found in the research setting, but you should treat yourself as an object of scrutiny

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as well. Because you are the instrument of data collection, it is very important to take stock of your own behavior, assumptions, and whatever else might affect the data that are gathered and analyzed. Much of the material that is discussed in the section on reflective fieldnotes is directed at this concern, but the descriptive part of the notes also should contain materials on such things as your dress, actions, and conversations with subjects. Although you attempt to minimize your effect on the setting, always expect some impact. Keeping a careful record of your behavior can help assess untoward influences.

"Rich data" or "rich fieldnotes" are phrases used by experienced fieldworkers to refer to fieldnotes that are well-endowed with good description and dialogue relevant to what occurs at the setting and its meaning for the participants. Rich data are filled with pieces of evidence, with the clues that you begin to put together to make analytical sense out of what you study.

Reflective Fieldnotes. In addition to the descriptive material, fieldnotes contain sentences and paragraphs that reflect a more personal account of the course of the inquiry. Here you record the more subjective side of your journey. The emphasis is on speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices. Also included is material in which you lay out plans for future research as well as clarify and correct mistakes or misunderstandings in your fieldnotes. The expectation is that you let it all hang out: Confess your mistakes, your inadequacies, your prejudices, your likes and dislikes. Speculate about what you think you are learning, what you are going to do next, and what the outcome of the study is going to be. The purpose of reflection here is not therapy. Although some people indicate that fieldwork has therapeutic benefits, the purpose of all this reflection is to improve the notes. Because you are so central to the collection of the data and its analysis, and because neither instruments nor machines nor carefully codified procedures exist, you must be extremely aware of your own relationship to the setting and of the evolution of the design and analysis. In order to do a good study, you must be self-reflective and keep an accurate record of methods, procedures, and evolving analysis. It is difficult to get the right balance between reflective and descriptive material. Some researchers go overboard on the reflective side and end up writing autobiographies. It is important to remember that the reflections are a means to a better study, not an end in themselves.

The reflective parts of fieldnotes are designated by a notational convention. The set of notes in Appendix B uses parentheses and the notation of "O.C.," which stands for **observer's comment.** As you can see in our example, observer's comments are scattered throughout the notes. At the end of a set of fieldnotes, the author also will take time to contemplate the day's experience, speculate about what he or she is theorizing, jot down additional information, and plan the next observation. From time to time, not as part of any particular set of notes, the researcher will write additional "think pieces" about the progress of the research. These longer pieces, added to or placed at the end of a set of notes, are called *memos* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It should be noted that some researchers, particularly those trained in some anthropological traditions of qualitative research, prefer to keep descriptive and reflective parts of the notes completely separate (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987a, 1987b, p. 32). They keep two sets of notes, entering their personal reflections in a field diary.

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We have already given you some idea about what the reflective part of fieldnotes includes, but we categorize the materials to elaborate and clarify. Observer's comments, memos, and other such materials contain:

1. *Reflections on analysis.* At this time, speculate about what you are learning, the themes that are emerging, patterns that may be present, connections between pieces of data, additional ideas, and thoughts that pop up. Long reflections that focus on analysis are referred to as *analytic memos* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The importance and role of your comments and memos are more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 5. Illustrations of these types of reflections can be found in that chapter as well as in Appendix B.
2. *Reflections on method.* Fieldnotes contain material about procedures and strategies employed in the study and decisions made about the study's design. It is also the place to include comments on your rapport with particular subjects as well as the joys and problems encountered in the study. Particular problems you are having with a subject or some other dilemma may be a topic of such reflection. Include your ideas about how to deal with the problem. Assess what you have accomplished and what you have yet to do. Your reflections on method will help you think through the methodological problems you face and make decisions about them. When you are finished with your research experience, these methodological discussions will enable you to write an account of what you did.
3. *Reflections on ethical dilemmas and conflicts.* Because fieldwork involves you in the lives of your subjects, relational concerns between your own values and responsibilities to your subjects as well as to your profession continually arise. We discussed some of the ethical dilemmas in Chapter 1. Observer's comments and memos not only help you to keep a record of these concerns, but also aid you in working them out.
4. *Reflections on the observer's frame of mind.* Although they work to be open to the perspectives of the people they study, qualitative researchers generally enter their projects with certain assumptions about the subjects and the setting they are studying. Some of these preconceptions relate to religious beliefs, political ideology, cultural background, position in society, experience in the schools, race, or gender. The list could go on. Like everyone else, qualitative researchers have opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices, and they try to reveal these in their notes by reflecting on their own way of thinking. Of particular interest are encounters you have while collecting data that provide breakthroughs to new ways of thinking about prior assumptions. Early in the research these can come fast and furiously. What you thought just does not hold up to the empirical world you are studying (Geer, 1964). Subjects with mental retardation are not as dumb as you thought, adolescents are not as crazy as you knew they were, schools you thought you would hate you like, schools you thought were terrific tarnish, and programs you thought did certain things do not.

   The first reflections usually are entered into the notes prior to entering the field. Here, you depict, as fully as possible, assumptions about what is out there and expectations for the outcome of the study. When they are put up front in your notes, they can be confronted and compared with what emerges in the course of the study.

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As an observer, you should be concerned with your own presumptions. We think your fieldnotes will reveal, however, that some of these initial thoughts and assumptions become fragile as they confront the empirical evidence you encounter in the field. Qualitative research requires long-term contact with people and places. The evidence that continually amasses can overwhelm groundless assumptions. Reflections facilitate and document this process.

5. *Points of clarification.* In addition to all the heavy pondering we suggest you do, as an observer you also add sentences in the notes that are simply asides, or that point out or clarify something that might have been confusing. You correct informational errors that were recorded at other times. You might note, for example, that you do not know how this happened, but in the previous observation session you confused the names of two teachers. Then you go on to correct that error.

Before we move on to other aspects of the fieldnotes, it is important to understand that qualitative researchers are not naive. They know that they can never reach a level of understanding and reflection that would result in pure notes, that is, notes that do not reflect the influence of the observer. Their goal is to purposefully take into account who they are and how they think, what actually went on in the course of the study, and where their ideas came from. They are dedicated to putting this on the record in order to accomplish a better study.

All research methods have their strengths and limitations. Some say that the weakness of the qualitative approach is that it relies too heavily on the researcher as the instrument. On the other hand, others say that this is its strength. In no other form of research are the processes of doing the study and the people who do it so consciously considered and studied as part of the project. The reflective part of fieldnotes is one way of attempting to acknowledge and control observer's effect. The reflective part of fieldnotes insists that research, like all human behavior, is a subjective process.

The Form of Fieldnotes

Before we move on from the content of fieldnotes to the process by which fieldnotes are collected, we want to offer some suggestions with regard to the form of the notes and then answer some questions you might have at this point.

The First Page. While the exact form and content may vary, we suggest that the first page of each set of notes (by set we mean those notes written for a particular observation session) contain a heading with such information as when the observation was done (date and time), who did it, where the observation took place, and the number of this set of notes in the total study. As we will discuss, you should strive to record fieldnotes the same day as the observation, but if that is impossible, the date the observation was recorded should also be given. We also like to give a title to each set of notes (like "Second Interview with the Principal," or "Observing the University Senate Meeting," or "The First Class of The Semester"). The title is a quick reminder of the session—a handle to grasp what the set is about. The headings help you keep the notes in order and maintain a record of the conditions under which the notes were taken; they also make retrieval of information easier.

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Paragraphs and Margins. Most methods of analyzing qualitative data require a procedure called *coding*. (See Chapter 5 on Data Analysis.) Coding and other aspects of data analysis are more easily accomplished if the fieldnotes consist of many paragraphs. When writing notes, every time a change occurs—in the topic of a conversation, when a new person enters the setting, or whatever—start a new paragraph. When in doubt, start a new paragraph. Another way to make your notes useful for analysis is to leave large margins on the left-hand side of the page. This provides room for notations and coding. Some methods of coding require pages in which the lines down one side are numbered. Before you start taking fieldnotes you should read through Chapter 5 to see the analytical options that might affect the form of your notes.

Thinking about these issues, and with an eye to the fieldnotes in Appendix B, you might be wondering: How long should a typical set of fieldnotes be? How much detail should I include? How long will the fieldnotes of a total study run?

The many different styles of fieldwork and the different goals of particular studies affect the answers. If you have a more specific focus, your notes may be shorter and there may be fewer of them. Also, as you become more experienced, you will tend to do ongoing analysis in the field and less copious, random note-taking than at first.

Researchers usually take more extensive notes during the first few visits to a new site. It is during this period that the research focus is usually most unclear, and so the observer has not decided what is important in the setting. As a researcher, you cast the net widely, taking copious notes, and often spending many more hours writing than observing. As the focus narrows to particular themes, or you do more directed observations to fill in the picture, you may reverse your earlier practice and spend many more hours observing than writing.

What you observe often affects the quantity of the fieldnotes you take after a particular session. When studying a college class, for example, you would probably not take notes on the content of the lectures (exactly what is being said in anatomy class, for instance). Rather, you would note the questions asked, the comments students made to each other, the general form of the lecture, key phrases or words the professor used to describe the assignments, and other such materials. Thus an hour lecture may not yield as many pages of notes as an observation of a twenty-minute bull session after class in the student lounge.

We offer two examples to show what researchers thought was relevant. In one study we conducted we were interested in how residents and interns learned to talk to parents as they went about their training in a pediatric department of a teaching hospital. We would attend long case conferences in which a single patient was discussed, but take only a few pages of notes after such a session. Not only was the discussion too technical to follow in its medical dimensions, but what was of importance to us—the fact that the parents were seldom brought up—could be ascertained without hours of note taking on tracheotomy, Turner's syndrome, and other such matters.

In a study of a class where women were getting certified to become nurses' aides, the researcher found that in addition to the subject matter of taking care of bodies, the women were also taught a particular view of professionalism. Her notes reflect the necessary details to show this:

> Mrs. R. [the teacher] then goes on to discuss "primary nursing." "Primary nursing," she tells them, "is patient oriented. Usually, 1 RN, 1 LPN, 1 NA and 8–10 patients.... Using

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> this type of care, the RN can go with the doctor, listen to what he says—there are a lot of doctors around who will ask the nurse what she thinks; another thing, she can remember what he says and ask at the end, 'Now, did you want to order that?,' kind of to remind him. This is the ideal way to do it." (Solomon, 1996)

Here, the teacher's actual comments were important.

You would probably take account of the content of an elementary school faculty meeting if you were studying teachers. While you might not be interested in the exact characteristics that differentiate Houghton Mifflin from Open Court basal reading series, you will be interested in who leads the discussion and what information is presented and in what ways. You may find it important to understand what about the content of these contrasting basal series attracts different teachers. Additionally, the content of the principal's remarks to the teachers, while perhaps intrinsically interesting, can be important because you learn from it something about the principal and his or her relationship to the school staff.

The Process of Writing Fieldnotes

You have been in the first-grade classroom for close to an hour. There has been a lot going on. Twice, while the children were working, the teacher came over to you and explained her worries about what will happen to these children next year. She was very explicit about some of the children. The children seem much less conscious of your presence and you believe you are watching them play as they normally do. You have taken a lot in and you know you must leave in order to have time to write out your fieldnotes before your evening plans. You feel tense from concentrating so hard on remembering. Anxiety wells up as you wonder if you are up to the laborious task ahead. You say your goodbyes, walk out the door, and head for your car. You would rather do other things than take notes. You think of stopping at a friend's or going to a store, but you put those thoughts aside. Sitting in the car, you quickly jot down a topical outline of what you have observed. You include key phrases and important topics and you list the sequence of events that occurred. You fight the urge to give in to the idea that, "Now that I have an outline of my observation, I could do the complete fieldnotes any time."

You return to your apartment. You sit alone in a quiet room with your computer. You resist the temptation to call a friend who is working on a similar study to tell her what happened today. You stay at your computer and, working from your outline, you start to reconstruct with words the hour-long observation. You do it chronologically, trying to actually relive the events and the conversations. Thoughts of mistakes or missed opportunities break the line of your reconstruction. These reflections are written down as observer's comments.

You started your writing at one o'clock in the afternoon and by three o'clock you look up, not knowing where the time has gone. You forgot to eat. While it was difficult forcing yourself to sit down and get started, now it is difficult to leave your chair. The sentences run from your fingers in a way they never do when you are working on something else. You have lost your self consciousness about your writing and the words flow. You are sorry now that you made the date for dinner. You would hate to leave this without finishing, and yet you wish you were done with it so the burden of having to finish would be lifted. You work harder and you finish by five o'clock, leaving just enough time to get ready.

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While in the shower you keep going over in your mind what you learned today and how it connects with other things. You remember having left the conversation you had with John, the teacher's aide, out of the notes. As soon as you get out of the shower you return to your computer and record the conversation along with some other ideas you had. You get up for the last time, resolving that enough is enough. You stick to it with the exception of jotting down a note or two on your napkin over dinner. The next morning you enter those scribbles with the set you completed the day before.

While we do not know how typical this account of writing up a set of fieldnotes is, it rings true to us. It highlights many of the struggles and practices involved in completing the job.

One problem everyone worries about is memory. Memories can be disciplined. More important and more immediately helpful in making the most of the ability you presently have, however, are some helpful hints to employ while writing up fieldnotes. The person in our story illustrates some of them.

Hints for Writing Fieldnotes

1. Get right to the task. Do not procrastinate. The more time that passes between observing and recording the notes, the poorer your recall will be and the less likely you will ever get to record your data.
2. Do not talk about your observation before you record it. Talking about it diffuses its importance. In addition, it is confusing because you begin to question what you put down on paper and what you said to your colleague.
3. Find a quiet place away from distractions and with adequate equipment to record and get to work.
4. Set aside an adequate amount of time to complete the notes. It takes practice to accurately judge how long completing a set of notes will take. Especially for your first few times out, give yourself at least three times as long to write as to observe.
5. Start by jotting down some notes. Sketch out an outline with key phrases and events that happened. Some people draw a diagram of the setting and use it to walk through the day's experience. Like our friend, some people write down notes immediately after leaving the field and then work from them. Others write fuller outlines when they get to their computer.
6. Try to go through the course of the observation session chronologically. While some people do their notes topically, the natural flow of a chronology can be the best organizing outline.
7. Let the conversations and events flow from your mind onto the paper. Some people actually talk through the conversations as they write.
8. If, after you have finished a section of the notes, you realize that you have forgotten something, add it. Similarly, if you finish your set of notes and then remember something that was not included, add it to the end. Don't be concerned about getting everything the first time through. There is always time later to add.
9. Understand that note-taking is laborious and burdensome, but, as the Vermont farmer said when talking about winter on a warm day in spring, "It's a sweet suffering. It's like you paid for spring."

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We have discussed writing up fieldnotes as though researchers always did them on the computer. Although rare, some people still use a typewriter, but in addition, it is common for experienced fieldworkers to speak their notes into a Dictaphone or tape recorder. This can be an effective way to record notes quickly, but observers often forget that in order for the material to be coded and analyzed, it has to be transcribed. If you must type your own tapes, the process of getting material down on paper will take more time than typing them out in the first place. Transcribing tapes is laborious, which is a good explanation for the high fees freelance typists charge per page for this job.

If you do have secretarial services, the recording method can work quite well. Unless the project you are working on is heavily funded, however, you will rarely have such secretarial support. Even if you are lucky enough to have the money to pay someone to transcribe the notes, it is usually very difficult to find an experienced typist who will do the job as you want. Typists are not as accurate in transcribing tapes as the person who took the notes. Researchers often like to read over sets of notes soon after the observation session in which they were taken. Seldom can professional typists keep up with the pace of an ongoing study. The computer software currently available for transforming the spoken word into text is not sophisticated enough yet to handle the different voices of an interviewer and informant on tape. Some people have success with dictating their fieldnotes after they have trained the software to recognize their speech patterns. There will be advances in this software in the next few years.

As you can see, we advise that you type or write out your own notes. Although time consuming, the typing and writing of notes has advantages. It can improve your writing, and when you do your own notes you get to know your data better. When you are collecting data in the setting, the knowledge that you must write up notes after you leave forces you to concentrate while gathering evidence. Reliving the experience line by line as you write out the notes intensifies concentration further. The note taking thus encourages the observer to replay the events: seeing and hearing things a second time should improve recall. The process also helps the observer to internalize, to commit to memory, what has been observed. The computer preserves the data, but the researcher's mind stores the thought process used to recall the data. This is like an extra source of data.

The fieldnotes in Appendix B were written after a formal observation session. But fieldnotes also are written after more casual encounters. If you go to a party, for example, and have a conversation with a teacher about what school means to him or her, you might go home and write notes on the conversation. Phone conversations you have with the subjects during the course of the study should go in the notes. Very often the first set of fieldnotes reports the initial telephone call you make to inquire about access.

Fieldnotes should be detailed and descriptive but should not rest on assumptions that the researcher makes about the setting. A student realized, for example, that he did not know if the sentence he wrote in his first set of fieldnotes of his emergency room observations reflected a relationship or his assumptions. He had written, "Her husband stood up." He changed it to read, "The man who was with her stood up." He also learned how to capture detail. He revised this sentence, "I turned to the girl on my right," to read, "The girl on my right who was dressed in a brown flannel shirt and blue jeans, looked to be about eleven years old. She sat with her hands clasped on her lap, her head tilted back, and her eyes closed. I turned to speak to her." His notes reflected greater observation but fewer assumptions.

Bogdan, R. C & Biklen, S. K. (2003). Qualitative Research for Education: An introduction to Theories and Methods (4th ed.). New York: Pearson Education group. (pp. 110-120).