

Ethnographies and Case Studies Workshop

This workshop has been designed for a 50-minute class, and should last no more than 45 minutes if run as efficiently as possible. In longer classes, this leaves extra time which can be used either for other (non-Writing-Studio-assisted) class activity or for extending the time allotted for the activities below.

Note to Consultant: While this script is full of content, it should not be seen as strict or constraining; rather, it is designed to provide guidelines upon which you can rely, but from which you can also depart. Your role in facilitating a workshop is to generate and guide conversation, so do what works for the class. Also keep in mind that if you have a way of talking with clients about, for instance, formulating research questions that you find more useful or that better suits your own style, then please feel free to make use of that, or even to rewrite any portion of the script for yourself—this can help to make you a more comfortable and effective facilitator. However, if you are nervous about being in front of a class and not knowing what to say, this script should provide a useful resource to which you can turn at any point.

For this workshop: Because the nature and purposes of case studies and ethnographies vary significantly from field to field, please draw the course instructor's attention to the questions in Part II.A. so that he or she can prepare answers ahead.

Materials Required

From Writing Studio:

Index cards for minute paper

Handouts and Worksheets: [“Tips for Writing Thick Descriptions for Ethnographies and Case Studies”](#) / [“Taking Good Notes in the Field”](#) (two sides of the same handout); [“Moving From Description to Analysis”](#)

From the Instructor:

Because the nature and purposes of case studies and ethnographies vary significantly from discipline to discipline, we will ask you to speak briefly about the practices expected for your class. Please **review the questions in part II.A.** to prepare for the workshop.

Note: This workshop can be done before or after the students conduct fieldwork. The script indicates this, but be sure the facilitator knows the stage at which your class is working.

If the workshop occurs **before fieldwork**, follow Option 1 in sections III & IV; select a video clip from among the options offered here or from sources related to your course material; and please be sure the projector and computer in your classroom is ready for use. If your room does not have a computer and projector please let us know well in advance.

If the workshop occurs **after fieldwork**, follow Option 2 in sections III and IV, and be sure the students bring their field notes to class.

Objectives

- Students will reflect on the means and purposes of social science fieldwork.
- Students will practice writing observations and analysis.
- Students will practice integrating findings with course concepts.

Plan

I. Concentrated Writing Studio Presentation (5 min.)

II. Understanding the assignment and discussion of fieldwork (10-12 min.)

(Note to Consultant: You should know whether the students have completed their fieldwork—adjust tense accordingly.)

A. Ask the students & **engage the professor** for the best answers:

- What sort(s) of fieldwork does this assignment require? (*Possibilities include: observation of a real or fictional setting, personal experience reflection, etc.*)
- What course concepts or theories are you bringing to the fieldwork?
Possibilities include theorists & theories (e.g. Piaget's theory of cognitive development or Bourdieu's theory of habitus, etc.) as well as concepts (e.g. gender roles, cooperation & conflict resolution, self-esteem, etc.).
- What role do you, and your assumptions or knowledge of the subject matter, play in the field?
 - a. What do you already know about the subject?
 - b. Are you observing with little in mind, open to what you see and hear; or, are you trying to see certain theories in effect in some context?
 - c. How will you remain open to finding something else, even something contradictory to what you expect?
- Ask the professor: To what end is this sort of fieldwork done?
 - a. To develop ethnographic methods, understand identity and power relations, increase intercultural competencies, inform responsible policy making decisions, improve educational curricula, develop effective leadership strategies, etc.? And how does knowing the ultimate ends help students formulate the right sorts of questions?
 - b. Does this assignment require students to move beyond description to analysis?

III. Thick Descriptions:

Thinking of writing about fieldwork as a four-step process can be helpful:

(Write on Board:) TOPIC → FIELDWORK QUESTION → OBSERVATION → THESIS

Everyone starts with a general topic that needs to be focused into something more manageable and meaningful (not too broad or too narrow and not too neutral or too objective). Formulating that focused topic as a question helps the researcher determine a manageable scope while staying open to details in the course of completing the fieldwork. Finally, only with all that data can the

researcher move to formulating a thesis in response to the fieldwork question. If you want more help with your question, the Writing Studio website has a link to a useful handout called *Formulating Your Research Question*. Today, though, we are going to focus on how to best gather and present your evidence, and then move into a discussion of how to use your evidence to support an overall argument.

If students HAVE DONE their fieldwork already, skip down to Option 2. Otherwise, continue with Option 1.

Option 1 (before fieldwork has been conducted) (20 minutes)

Activity B1: Professor will have chosen, or supplied, a short video clip to watch. Ask students to take notes in as much detail as possible. After the video is done, give students 2 minutes to finish their notes.

Then, distribute *Taking Good Notes in the Field – Thick Descriptions* handouts and discuss the differences between better and worse descriptions. Highlight that field notes should be informational and detailed, rather than biased and making conclusions.

You might compare thick descriptions to close readings. Encourage students to use all their senses. Point students to some of the categories on the “*Tips*” side of the handout. Read through some of the examples on the “*Taking Good Notes*” page. *Have them read the examples – one from the left, then its revised version – engaging them in noticing the differences and why the ones on the right are better. (You do not have to read all of them, depending on time).*

Ask students to return to the notes they just took. Are they satisfied with what they wrote? Did they already do too much concluding? Are they missing important details or categories from the “*Tips*” handout? Could they give better descriptions? Do they have questions for their course instructor about how to take better field notes?

Activity C1. Tell students that they will have the opportunity to revisit their observation site.

Play the video again and give them a few minutes to revise their observation notes.

Discuss: What sort of things were you looking for this time in order to give your fieldwork the quality of thickness or richness? Did you notice new aspects of the video? How did you work to avoid bias?

Option 2 (after fieldwork has been conducted) (8-10 minutes)

Discuss: What sort of things were you looking for as you observed in order to give your field notes a quality of thickness or richness? Ask them about what they wrote down, guiding them into a discussion of “thick descriptions.” Then, distribute *Taking Good Notes in the Field – Thick Descriptions* handouts and discuss the differences between better and worse descriptions.

Focus on some of the examples on the second page as you did with the first handout. Read through some of the examples on the “*Taking Good Notes*” page. *Have them read the examples – one from the left, then its revised version – engaging them in noticing the differences and why the ones on the right are better. (You do not have to read all of them, depending on time).*

Activity C2. Ask students to compare their own fieldwork notes to the examples on the handout.

Give students 2 minutes to reflect on their own notes: What are their biases/premature conclusions? What absent details led them to these conclusions? Are there details they omitted because they did not confirm their hypotheses? Are they satisfied with what they wrote? Did they already do too much concluding? Are they missing important details? Could they give better descriptions?

Have a brief discussion about what the students noticed

Give them a few minutes to revise their observation notes to reflect absent details and to increase objectivity: Explain that although they can’t go back to redo their observation, they can think about the absent details that led them to their conclusions, details that didn’t seem important at the time, or anything else they may have omitted. Encourage students to use all their senses. Reflect: what changes did they make and why?

IV. From Description to Analysis: If they HAVE DONE their fieldwork already, skip down to Option 2. Otherwise, continue with Option 1.

Option 1 (before fieldwork has been conducted) (8 minutes)

Activity D1: If they have NOT done their fieldwork, using the *Moving From Description to Analysis* handout, give students 5 minutes to write three sentences – one from each section of the handout. Explain to the group that the top choices help student make general claims about their work, overall impressions or observations; the middle sentences encourage them to play out the implications of what they observed; and the bottom sentences help them to situate their observations in a larger context. In other words, the sentences move from providing observational evidence to making inferential claims (perhaps through the application of a theory or class concepts).

Reflection: Discuss what the class noticed and how they expressed it. Maybe some will even be willing to read aloud. But just asking process questions can get them talking: did you find those templates helpful? Which one(s) did you choose? Why? Make connections back to current course assignment – asking them and the professor if these formulations match what is expected in their papers.

Option 2 (after fieldwork has been conducted) (15-18 minutes)

Activity D2: If they have completed their fieldwork, using the *Moving From Description to Analysis* handout, give them 8-10 minutes to write a *paragraph* that contains at least one sentence from each section of the handout. Explain to the group that the top choices help student make general claims about their work, overall impressions or observations; the middle sentences encourage them to play out the

implications of what they observed; and the bottom sentences help them to situate their observations in a larger context. In other words, the sentences move from providing observational evidence to making inferential claims (perhaps through the application of a theory or class concepts).

Reflection: Discuss what the class noticed and how they expressed it. Maybe some will even be willing to read aloud. But just asking process questions can get them talking: did you find those templates helpful? Which one(s) did you choose? Why? Make connections back to current course assignment – asking them and the professor if these formulations match what is expected in their papers.

V. Minute Papers

Distribute the index cards and ask the students to answer (anonymously) one question on each side.

Question 1: What is the most important thing you've learned today about writing on fieldwork?

Question 2: What questions or concerns do you still have regarding writing this kind of social science paper?

Collect these responses. If time permits, it might be worthwhile to read some or all, especially of Question 1, aloud. And possibly also to invite brief answers to the concerns raised in Question 2, if you decide to read any of those.

“Remember that a writing studio consultant can work with you on this and any other aspect of writing your research paper, from initial brainstorming through revision of a full draft.”

Video Selection

Balinese Tooth Filing 5:13

(Start at minute 2:42, consider muting or ask students to try to be even better observers of the culture than Andrew Zimmern)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvp8bhawJHo&feature=relmfu>

Clueless (trailer) 2:37

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHDcD_xhwAo&feature=related

Wauwatosa, WI Town Hall Meeting 4:52

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFfINLSKorw>

Japanese Tea Ceremony 3:47

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=harj9EWUmnY&feature=related>

Ainsworth Strange Situation 3:15 (CHECK FOR AUDIO)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTsewNrHUHU>

At home daycare 4:08

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfHgkj8fBQ0&feature=related>

SNL business meeting 1:54

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIVy0-GvmHY>