

Tried and True Advice from the Field

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Technology and Equipment

Renaming issues -- be careful that you don't upload and replace the same unnamed file from your SD card. Name files right away when you upload them to your computer! (SC)

Something to note for taking fieldnotes during an event: using a cell phone can be discreet and allow your note-taking in the moment to blend in, but it can also look like inattention. A notebook cues increased attention and that you're processing or recording something. Both modes have their occasions, in my experience. (SC)

If driving a long distance after an event, you might find it easy to voice record your mental fieldnotes. (JL)

Make use of the librarians from afar! I found OSU's library staff to be really helpful when I needed access to a few ebooks that weren't immediately available. (SC)

If you're doing fieldwork in the US, the OSU librarians will also ship physical copies of books to you through the 'distance user' option. (JL)

Try to come up with a photo and sound file logging system before you begin taking photos and doing interviews. Be mindful of how you will keep track of everything you're collecting in a way that will be easy for you to quickly access later. (JL)

Upload your collected materials to several places; buy an external hard drive. (JL)

-- I second the multiple places rule! (SC)

-- Absolutely! If you can swing it, an external hard drive is a great option. The cloud (like GoogleDrive, etc.) is also a handy place to keep files. Keeping files in multiple places can put your mind at ease! (SV)

Keep extra batteries for your camera or recorder in your field bag. Have a designated field bag that holds your notebook, pens, recorder, camera (whatever equipment you might need), and keep it organized. (JL)

-- I second this, especially the spare batteries! This might be overkill, but I put new batteries in my recorder for each interview. I recommend purchasing rechargeable batteries or keeping the lightly used batteries to use around the house. If you're in a situation where your recorder or camera dies, use your cell phone to continue recording, documenting, etc. It's not ideal, but it gets the job done! (SV)

-- I have even recorded on my phone and recorder at the same time... and good thing I did so, because a couple times the recorder died or I didn't push the record button twice! (SC)

Perhaps this goes without saying, but be sure you know your way around your equipment. You could have the fanciest recorder or camera, but not knowing how to use it can negatively affect

the quality of what you capture. Spend some time before heading into the field to familiarize yourself with your equipment (and never underestimate the power of your cell phone!). The Vermont Folklife Center has some useful videos and [guides](#) regarding field equipment. (SV)

We tend to focus on high-tech field equipment, but sometimes I find a sketchbook to be one of my most valuable tools. I recommend stashing one in your pocket or bag to keep track of everything from sketches of people and places to dates, mileage, and quick hand-drawn maps. (SV)

Arrange a regular “data dump” schedule that you stick to -- end of each day, every Saturday morning, after each field site visit, etc. (SC)

Energy, pace, and planning

Pace your days and pay attention to your energy levels early-on. Because my fieldwork was multi-sited, I often traveled by early train to one of my sites for a long weekend and tried to start my work day as soon as I hopped off the train. Inevitably, I would need a nap around midday, and I regret not planning my travels for an evening arrival so I'd wake up fresh for fieldwork. (SC)

If working in a foreign language, expect a special kind of mental fatigue by the end of the day (and plan accordingly). I missed out on some important conversations because the day was just too packed for my brain to process everything. Incidentally, one of these times was also the instance where I lost recordings. Lesson learned: overburdening myself set me up for failure. (SC)

Have grace for yourself! This is likely your first or second long-term independent fieldwork project, and there will be mistakes, “wasted” time (don't confuse with time taken for living and self-care!), and situations you could not have planned for. (SC)

Plan for at least an extra hour during each interview. I found myself having long conversations before and after each interview. I also like to chat for a bit with people before interviewing so we create a more relaxed environment with each other. (JL)

--Seconded! Fieldwork is organic, and you cannot plan for everything. I sometimes had people ask to take me to a certain site following an interview, or they'd ask if I wanted to look through photos, scrapbooks, etc. Giving yourself extra time will open up space to engage in these other activities and extended interactions. (SV)

-- Related to this, give yourself some extra time to arrive at your interviews and events. Sometimes you'll run into traffic, inclement weather, a downed street sign, no GPS signal, etc. (SV)

-- related to this, I regret (looking back) that I didn't leave the recorder running longer or just normalize doing all the intro and “post interview” talk as part of the recorded process. The

informal talk was often the most fruitful! Consider reframing the interview as a conversation if it works for you. (SC)

Plan out your basic interview questions, and try to know them before the interview. I always bring a physical copy/checklist of the topics I want to touch upon that I double-check at the end of interviews. Be open to your basic questions changing or evolving over the course of your fieldwork time. (JL)

Interviews and Fieldnotes

Take notes *after* your interviews. To each their own, but I opted not to take notes while people were talking (following Galey Modan's advice). Sometimes, I took notes afterward, sometimes not. The times where I took post-recording notes turned out to be some of my most fruitful fieldnotes. First, I have a record of why I thought an interview was important or interesting from the exact moment in time that it occurred and second, these notes serve as another form of data back-up -- even if you lose the recording, you will have notes on why a conversation mattered that you can reference in your writing. (SC)

I agree with Sarah's advice above about taking the bulk of your notes after an interview. Excessive note-taking can be a distraction for you and the collaborator. I do like to keep a little notebook open during an interview and will occasionally write down a word or a timestamp as a reminder of something important. If you have a remote attached to your recorder, you can also push the mark button to note the time of something significant. (JL)

Consider using a story to elicit a story in your interviews, or interpretation to elicit interpretation. I found that when I shared examples or stories of my own, I received my interesting and nuanced replies in return. Sometimes, I worried that this method was a form of guided questioning but actually, my examples seemed to create opportunities for someone to disagree with me, affirm something I shared, or correct and deepen my examples. I didn't always use this, but sometimes in my more conversational interviews it felt like the right move. (SC)

At the beginning of my interviews (which were place-based), I often found it helpful to ask people to tell me a story about growing up there before we started talking about other things. This reflection moment was intended to create a more comfortable environment and to ease any nervousness. If you're looking to elicit a storytelling moment or narrative from your collaborator, you might try to come up with a question that creates a stimulus response and establishes personal interest from the narrator; sociolinguists Labov and Waletzky, in "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience," found that asking the question, "Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of getting killed?" created a moment where the narrator was more likely to tell an effective and vivid narrative to demonstrate the seriousness of the danger. In general, though, think about how you will begin each interview, and my advice is to not jump right into questioning when you turn on the recorder. (JL)

Related: I also found that people wanted to know what I'd observed or learned so far in my work, and having a few carefully chosen examples ready helped me fill gaps that I felt were missing in my data so far. (SC)

Something you probably already know if your work involves using social media or virtual spaces, but that was new for me: for any screenshots or online conversations you want to take note of, create accurate records the moment you see it. Bookmarking isn't always useful and a page or post can be taken down by the time you get around to processing your data. (SC)

-----This point is especially useful in the writing up of your work or if you're planning to publish something that involves social media. You will need to think about how you're going to cite anything from social media, so you'll need to keep a record of access, URLs, etc. (JL)

Organizing

On days where you're bored or tired or plans fall through, take the opportunity to tag and code fieldnotes. This helps down the road when you need a reference really quickly or aren't quite sure how to begin processing. (SC)

When in doubt: Think like a folklorist (or whatever disciplinary home you ground yourself in)! Most likely, your fieldwork will inspire times of deep existential questioning and self-doubt. I always found it helpful or grounding in these moments to go back to basic readings, fieldwork guides, and methods blogs for folklorists. I had to remind myself to look for pattern, pay attention to things like everyday practice, listen for forms of speech and genre that pop up in my fieldwork sites, to take note of how people marked themselves as part of a group (or others as outsiders), and just generally to pay attention to how folklore or tradition is articulated or consciously marked. I could calm myself down in moments of panic by using myself and my senses as a tool for observation and taking myself back to some of the foundational stuff. I was told at some point that you should start writing from a place of excitement -- I feel the same about conducting fieldwork! Go back to what gives you a thrill or catches your attention. You can work out the why or bigger questions later. (SC)

You will know some basic ideas or questions you want to ask before you enter the field, but--as Sarah mentioned above--listen to what people are most interested/excited about. Patterns will emerge, and you'll want to adjust your ideas and questions to reflect what people are telling you they want to talk about. (JL)

Typing up your fieldnotes a few days after you've written them can be very helpful for organizing what you're noticing. I like to write my notes in a journal and let them sit for a while before I type them on a computer. The time away allows me to add any helpful reflections to my notes and also serves as a reminder about what I learned once I'm calmed down from the intensity/anxiety/adrenaline and subsequent crash after conducting a long interview. (JL)

Working abroad

If you conduct fieldwork abroad, pay for a reliable VPN service. It comes in handy. (SC)

Working in rural areas

Keep in mind that either you or your collaborators may have unreliable internet and/or cell phone service. Texting, emailing, or video chatting may not work as ways to stay in touch or schedule interviews. Prepare yourself to talk on the phone or be outside of cell service for long periods of time. (JL)

You may have to travel long distances and to unfamiliar places without physical addresses to reach your collaborators. Digital GPS mapping services may not be reliable in these moments, so you may want to ask for physical descriptions of the location you're traveling to. (JL)
-- Seconded! Asking someone to draw a quick map can also be useful. (SV)

Find out how local people share news and information. In my fieldsite, for example, Facebook is the main venue for sharing information from residents, businesses, and organizations about news, events, emergencies, etc. (JL)

Be prepared for all your tech to fail at the same time when you need it most, without fast access to a store or repair center, and be ready to pull out pen and paper or just engage fully with all your senses. Might not happen, but if it does it's not the end of the world. You can just enjoy being with people. (SC)

Ethics

Start your IRB application early -- probably earlier than you think is necessary. (SC)

If you're planning to work with anyone under 18, know that the IRB process will take longer, and you'll need to consider assent and consent forms. Verbal consent usually works for adults, but the IRB is more cautious about working with adolescents--even if you're only doing interviews. (JL)

The IRB process can be very overwhelming and frustrating with lots of revisions. Don't be discouraged. Most of the time, they will tell you exactly what they want you to do (in several different revision rounds). This process can take months, so it's best to start before you enter the field. If you're a graduate student, your advisor will be the PI and will likely receive IRB emails before (or instead of) you, so it's essential that you're in close contact with your advisor. You will also want to submit a continuing/annual review of your IRB study each year so it doesn't expire. (JL)

The IRB process is necessary, but be aware that often our responsibilities extend far beyond it. Again, this probably goes without saying, but keep in mind that informed consent might not always be sufficient (especially in this pandemic era!). (SV)

Real life tends to blend into social media in murky ways that I did not expect -- try to make a plan for how your research and social media presence will interact. (SC)

Find a way to give some of your time in service, if you can. (SC)

-- Seconded! It's a great idea to give back to your collaborators and community in whatever ways you're able-- sometimes you can even find opportunities related to your interests or topic. This is a good way to show gratitude for the time, energy, and knowledge that people share with you. (SV)

Consider writing thank you notes to your collaborators and others who help you out. A little show of gratitude can go a long way! This can also be a good way to follow up after an interview. It can also be nice to share copies of pictures you take, etc. It can be tricky to keep up with in the thick of it, but even as you process your files at the close of your fieldwork, I recommend sharing your digital image and audio files with your collaborators. (SV)

Personal life

Fieldwork can be very overwhelming and exhausting at times. Give yourself breaks. Take a week to decompress. You do not have to do an interview or attend an event every single day or every week. (JL)

Being in the field can also feel isolating and affect your mental health. Try to plan moments to talk with or visit your friends/family. Try to build some kind of routine. (JL)

Fieldwork is not your entire life. There is limited time to complete everything you want to complete, but your life also exists outside of your work. Don't feel guilty about having a personal life when you're in the field. (JL)

And on the flip side of Jordan's comment, the things that you make a part of your life outside of fieldwork (but in your fieldsite) can help stretch your understanding in new ways. I attended lace making classes, played on a sports team, and spent time visiting friends while in Bulgaria. All of these "distractions" contributed to my fieldwork in really rich and utterly unexpected ways. Things like perusing jewelry shops turned into interviews, and train trips turned into surprise conversations that became fieldnotes. Fieldwork isn't your entire life, but your entire life becomes a part of the fieldwork experience at that moment. When you introduce yourself as a folklorist studying X, you almost always elicit a response. Use that moment wisely and see where it takes you! (SC)

---Yes! I completely agree! Even the volunteering gigs I did while in the field presented moments to meet new people who provided me with materials I wouldn't have been able to access otherwise. (JL)

--- Absolutely! I learned a lot by attending potlucks, taking a weaving class, and working with a food pantry. Often these "peripheral" events, sites, or moments can lead you to new people, places, and ideas. (SV)

A note on dating in the field -- can be just fine but can also land you in some awkward pickles! If you become interested in someone in the networks of people you're working with, just give the

ramifications a second thought and weigh your priorities (and those priorities are unique to you and your networks, they're not prescribed!). (SC)

--- Sometimes the people you work with and live with in the field will have their own ideas, expectations, or questions about your social life. It can be a challenge to navigate those moments (especially if someone tries to set you up with their grandson!). Get to know people and let them get to know you, but know that politely declining matchmaking efforts is a-okay! (SV)

I think it was Galey Modan who explained to me that one of the differences between simply conducting interviews and conducting ethnographic research is that the vulnerability goes two ways, over time. In an interview, the interviewer gets to know a lot about the speaker, but they typically don't reveal as much about themselves and so the relationship is unbalanced. In an ethnographic study, the communities you work with will likely see you develop over a period of time, at your worst and best, in the same way that you watch them grow and develop over time. You're bound to go through ebbs and flows of vulnerability. When you approach an interview with a community that's gotten to know you, they see you as more human and the relationship translates to the conversation. This is all to say, having a bad day or being vulnerable in front of the people you're working with doesn't set you up for failure. It's part of growth and part of the process. (SC)