

# Practical Strategies for Productive Fieldwork

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Are you doing qualitative or fieldwork-based research for your master's or PhD? Here are practical strategies for managing the information that you will collect on purpose or encounter by happenstance.

While in the field, you are confronted with massive amounts of information (interviews, impressions, news, random observations). During fieldwork, there might not be enough time for making decisions about what data to keep and follow-up on. You might not have enough clarity on how to make sense of various pieces of data. As a rule of thumb, document and store whatever you can. The key goal is to make all this information easy to analyze, cite and reference when you are writing. It is therefore useful to pre-plan your fieldwork and to have systems of data management and retrieval that you follow consistently and carefully. Below are some practical strategies for productive fieldwork.

1. **Documenting and recording every scrap (of paper, of talk, of your own thoughts):** During fieldwork, the main goal is data collection. Decision-making about what to include, how to interpret and analyze, that comes later. While in the field, take photographs of all documentary information that you come across. Even if you are not sure whether you will need it, document it anyway. The time stamps and other identifying information should be recorded to enable easy citation. Write down the random conversations you have in cafes or cabs or snippets of the news or jokes or slogans. If you find an interesting news article in the local news, take a photograph of the article for later use. Remember to write the date and newspaper name on the article so you can easily cite it later. Alternatively you can check for the article online and download a pdf. All of this material could be useful at a later date.
2. **Keeping track of your interview as it happens:** In-depth interviews work best if there is a smooth conversational flow. The aim is to pose your questions naturally, in the order that they suggest themselves during the conversation (rather than a rigid pre-determined order). One way to make an easy-to-reference interview guide is to create two columns: on the left you have broad categories, on the right you have detailed questions that correspond to those categories. For example, during my interviews with those who live in informal housing in Mumbai, the left side included such broad categories as 'family history' and 'neighborhood history', while the right side had the detailed questions or points I wanted to cover under those broad categories. This allows you to quickly scan the left side and the broad categories during the interview, without breaking the flow of the conversation - in order to confirm that you have covered all the main parts of the interview guide. An interview guide with broad categories helps you to keep the interview on track while allowing for flexibility and preventing the in-depth qualitative interview to become a structured survey-like interview.

3. **Keeping track of your interviewees:** Create an excel file to store information about your interviews including a serial number that you can use for ease of citation and anonymization during writing. The column heads of this file could be: serial number, name of interviewee, information on interviewee, contact information, date of interview, notes. Use this serial number when you transcribe your interviews. In this way for all subsequent writing, your interviewee's name is linked to a unique serial number that you can use consistently whenever you want to anonymize them and cite the interview.
4. **Having a backup plan** for days where you can't interview or do fieldwork: To ensure that you can use your time effectively, have backup work for those days where you couldn't find anyone to speak with you, when you want a break from interviewing, or when there is some other reason that makes interviewing difficult. This could include going to local libraries or archives or doing a site visit.
5. **Transcribing field-notes and interviews immediately:** Many researchers fail to transcribe all their interviews prior to writing, missing vital information when they are writing up their findings. If you are recording interviews or making voice memos to yourself, keep up to date with transcriptions. If you are writing notes up in a notebook, transcribe (that is, type it up) immediately while filling in the missing information that you did not have time to write down in the field. The reason this should be done immediately, every day, is because we forget the nuances of the conversation and various other bits of information quite quickly. The aim is to create the most detailed daily record that you can.
6. **Rereading and immersing:** As fieldwork goes on or starts to wind down, it is time to start rereading all your interview transcripts and fieldwork notes. This process of immersion into your own field-notes is an unmissable step of analysis of qualitative and fieldwork data. It is to remind yourself of all you have seen and heard and help you to build connections between your findings, find themes, identify patterns and regularities, find contrasts and differences and start posing hypotheses and explanations. This immersion is similar to the process of computing descriptive statistics for quantitative data - it is a step to help you see the span and scope of your own data and to keep it active in your mind.
7. **Adding notes and comments:** While you reread and immerse, start adding notes and comments into your fieldwork. This could be whatever thought strikes you as you read your transcripts, perhaps a link to the literature, perhaps just categorizing interview quotes, perhaps something you remember from the interview which helps you interpret the quote for its plausibility or contextualize it with other information. In this way you are starting to transform raw data into analyzed transcripts and research memos.
8. **Coding and categorizing:** As you immerse yourself in your field-notes, you can start thinking of how you will code and categorize this qualitative information. This step moves you into the analysis phase and closer to writing your findings.