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## **Writing@CSU Writing Guide**

# **Conducting Field Research**

Some of the most valuable information in the world isn't located in a library or online. Field research is a way of unearthing that information. If you enjoy meeting and talking with people and don't mind what reporters call "legwork," you will relish the fun and satisfaction of obtaining ideas and information first hand.

Field research can be an extraordinarily exciting and rewarding experience leading to important discoveries and breakthrough ideas. Its goal is the same as research done in the library or on the Internet: to gather information that contributes to your understanding of an issue or question and to organize those findings in a cohesive and persuasive document that proposes a new insight, answer or solution.

Far from being at odds with one another-philosophically or practically-these three research techniques actually complement each other. Library and Internet research provides critical background information that prepares the researcher for making observations, and conducting interviews and surveys in the field.

The results will verify or refute, inform and help shape the answer to your research question.

## **Observing in the Field**

First-hand observations will often be a key component in your research project. Your task is to take it all in, recording what you observe while being as unobtrusive as possible. You will want to take notes for future reference: interesting facts, telling

details and sensory impressions (sights, sounds and smells), all help when it comes time to reconstruct your observations on paper.

Before you begin, it's important to do a little "legwork". Library and Internet research will help you build a list of possible sites from which to conduct your observation. Depending on the type of site you wish to observe, you may or may not need permission. It's important to find out.

A few phone calls or email inquiries will identify the contact person from whom you can get that information and the procedures you will be expected to follow. You may need to schedule an appointment, for instance.

A private business or a school will likely require identification when you arrive, so be prepared. You might ask your instructor for a statement on college or department letterhead declaring that you are a bona fide student and some specifics about your project and what you intend to do with the results.

In addition to note-taking, you may want to take some photographs or video-tape while observing. Permission for this will also likely be required, as well as waivers or releases signed by the human subjects involved.

Finally, before leaving the observation site, it's a good idea to schedule or request permission for a follow-up visit. When evaluating your initial observations it is highly likely that you will find gaps in your information that can only be filled by further observation. It is also quite possible that your evaluation will produce new ideas or expose areas of interest, previously unthought-of, that you may like to pursue. If not, you can always cancel the follow-up.

## **Interviewing Experts**

Sometimes, the best information comes "straight from the horse's mouth". An interview is a conversation with a purpose; that being, to gather information from a person with first-hand knowledge—a primary source. Whenever possible, arrange a meeting with an expert in the field of your inquiry. Or, if you are investigating a particular group of people, interview a typical member, someone who represents the whole group and can speak for all of them.

You'll be surprised just how many people, from all walks of life, are willing to be interviewed-some even flattered by your attention. Choose them carefully. Regardless of who they are, prepare to interview them thoroughly. Chapter 4 "Writing from Conversation," in the Bedford Guide to Writing, offers some good advice:

1. Make an appointment and schedule enough time-at least an hour.
2. Be prompt and be prepared. Bring a list of carefully thought-out questions.
3. Make sure your subject is willing to be quoted in writing.
4. Really listen. This is the art of the interview. Let the person open up.
5. Be flexible and allow the interview to go in unexpected directions.
6. If a question goes unanswered, go on to the next question. You may be able to come back to it later.
7. At the end of the interview, be sure to confirm any direct quotations you may use in your document.
8. Make additional notes immediately after the interview, while the conversation is still fresh in your mind.

Be sure to take notes during the interview. These will come in handy later, when you reconstruct the interview on paper. Even when audio-recording, you should do this: In addition to recording important points and accurate quotations, notes allow you to record details that do not lend themselves to audio-recording. Your subject's mood, appearance and behavior, for instance, as well as your sensory impressions of the interview setting will come in handy when you begin constructing your document.

If an expert isn't readily available-perhaps the nearest one is too far away-you may be able to arrange a telephone interview. Make an appointment for a time convenient for both you and your subject. A busy person may not be able to give you even ten minutes on the spur of a moment, but all the time in the world if arranged for in advance. A further word of advice, don't try to wing-it; have written questions in hand before you dial. Take notes and follow all the other rules just as if you were doing the interview in person.

**Note:** Federal regulations forbid recording an interview over the phone without notifying the person being interviewed. When recording over the phone, you must

also use a recorder connector with a warning device that emits a beeping signal at fifteen second intervals.

## **Corresponding with Experts**

Is there a person whose knowledge or opinions you'd like to include in your research gathering but who lives too far away for a personal interview? A letter or e-mail message may do the trick. Be sure to make it short and polite. If you're sending a letter, it's a real good idea to enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope along with your questions. And, if you're using e-mail, place your questions directly into the text of your email message so that the recipient can respond using the reply button.

Large corporations and organizations, branches of the military and the federal government as well as elected officials are all accustomed to being solicited in this manner. In fact, many of them employ public relations officers whose duties include responding to such solicitation. They will often supply you with free brochures, press releases and other source materials geared toward your inquiry.

## **Conducting Surveys**

Surveys and questionnaires are as much a part of contemporary life as iPods and cell phones. In fact, many people enjoy having their knowledge tapped or their opinion solicited. Filling out a questionnaire can even have a game-like appeal: self-quiz features appear in popular magazines and tabloid newspapers all the time. "How Ambitious Are You?" will headline a thirty-question quiz that you can score yourself. Used judiciously, and with the following points in mind, you may find it useful to conduct a small survey yourself, as part of a research project.

### **Survey Basics**

As a rule, professional pollsters, opinion testers, and survey takers solicit thousands of individuals when exploring the answers to a question. They are chosen to represent either a certain segment of society or a broad range of the populace diversified in geography, income, ethnic background, and education.

The purpose of a survey may be to inform a manufacturer when test-marketing a new product or identifying a new market. Politicians use them to plan their campaigns and judge the mood of their constituents. Regardless, they are widely used because they deliver large stores of useful information quickly and efficiently.

Few student research-writers conduct such extensive surveys as the time, money and effort required is prohibitive. For smaller, less prohibitive surveys then, it is best to report the results of your survey in non-statistical terms.

It's one thing to say that "many of the students" who filled out a questionnaire on reading habits hadn't read a newspaper in the past month; it's another to claim such is true of "seventy-two percent" of the student population when you were only able to give questionnaires to the twenty-two percent who were in the dining hall the day you were there and half of those threw them in the trash on the way out.

A far more useful and reliable way to use a questionnaire is to think of it as a group interview. Use it when you want to collect the same information from a large number of people or when you're more interested in what a group thinks as a whole than what a particular individual thinks. Treat the information you collect as representative and use your findings to build an overall knowledge of the subject or to cull them for interesting or persuasive details and quotations.

## Define Your Purpose

If you think you want to use a survey to gather information, you need have a clearly defined purpose. You need to ask yourself:

- What am I trying to discover with this questionnaire?

You will want to build questions that are well thought out and which fulfill your purpose. If, for instance, you want to know how effective a day-care center is in the eyes of working mothers who entrust their children to it's care, you might ask questions like:

- Do your children report that they are happy there?
- Have you ever had reason to complain?

- If so, about what?

## Keep it Simple

Any questionnaire you design has to be one that people are willing to answer. The main point is to make participation easy and inviting. If it's too complex or time-consuming, the recipient may throw it away.

Ask questions that call for a check mark in a list of alternative answers, a simple yes or no, or one word (at the most, just a few). As you write each question, check carefully for how well it fits your stated purpose. Check for ambiguity and whether they will elicit the kind of responses for which you are looking. It's a good idea to ask for just one piece of information per question.

## Ask Open-Ended Questions

In addition to simple yes/no and multiple-choice questions, you might find it worth while to ask a few "open-ended questions". These call for short written responses. Although they are typically difficult to tally and are likely to draw a smaller number of responses, those you do get might supply a memorable quote or suggest some new ideas when you assess and analyze the results.

## Avoid Slanted Questions

Be careful to build unbiased questions that will solicit factual responses. Don't ask:

- How religious are you?

You want to be able to report actual numbers or draw logical inferences about the respondents. Better questions might be:

- What is your religious affiliation?

-and-

- How often do you attend religious services?

## Make it Easy for People to Respond

Whenever possible, distribute questionnaire at the end of a meeting or discussion. If that's not possible, assemble a group and have them fill out your questionnaire on the spot-at an evening coffee for parents with children in day-care, for instance. Facing them, you can explain the purpose of your research and invite questions, the answers to which will instill confidence and build interest.

If you must mail your questionnaire, include a concise letter explaining your purpose and what use you will make of the replies along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. You might also indicate how much time will be required: no more than ten minutes, for instance, or some estimate identifying the task as reasonable and easy.

Professional pollsters often offer a small inducement, a morsel of bait to increase the rate of response: a small check or a coupon good for a free jar of pickles. You might promise a copy of your finished document, a brief report of the results, or a listing of each respondent's name in an acknowledgment.

Even with such inducements, professionals find a response rate of fifty percent or higher difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. That is why they often conduct surveys by telephone, with the caller filling in the questionnaire for the respondent. You might also use this technique, but better results will come if you distribute your questionnaire in person.

## Tally the Results

When all the responses that you can reasonably expect to collect have been received, sit down and tally up the results. It's easy to count the short answers: the yes's and no's and the one word answers-like Republican or Democrat-but the longer ones are more difficult.

- What is your goal in life?

The answers to open-ended questions need to be summed up or paraphrased and then sorted into rough categories.

- To grow rich
- To serve humanity
- To travel
- To save my soul

Similar responses can be lumped together and counted, accurately measuring the extent of, or pattern to, the available responses.

## **Media Genres: Television, Radio, Film, etc.**

Intriguing possibilities for field research lie in the media. For a research paper about television and radio, movies, theater or music, you may find the materials close at hand. In the case of television, it's as close as the remote.

Our only advice is to review plenty: watch (or listen) to a large amount before drawing conclusions. Use a VCR, DVD, or other audio-video recording device to keep track of your research and to preserve a record for future reference.

Transcripts, broadcast tapes or telecasts may be available on request, or for a small fee, from network or cable stations. Call, write or email your inquiries.

## **Lectures, Conferences, Online Forums, and Other Public Discussions**

Field research often involves attending a lecture, conference or other public discussion. College organizations frequently bring interesting speakers to campus: the science club might sponsor a nationally known marine biologist, for instance, or the film club might bring in the producer of a successful television program.

Likewise, bound by mutual affiliation, professionals and members of special-interest groups are brought together at regularly scheduled regional and national conferences across this country every day. Regardless of cost, you may want to attend one that addresses your particular research interests.

Health-care providers, legal experts, engineers, scientists and teachers attend them frequently in the course of their professional duties and to further they're careers.

You can do the same. They can be a fertile source of fresh ideas and are often open to the public: sometimes admission is free or student discounts are available.

Regardless of cost, attending a professional conference affords an opportunity for taking notes at lectures given by experts and the chance to meet and talk with speakers and fellow attendees as well as to learn and practice the language of a discipline. In addition, you may be able to obtain a copy of the proceedings-usually a set of all the lectures delivered, sometimes with accompanying commentary.

Be on the lookout as well for online discussions such as Chat Room sessions sponsored by Yahoo or CNN Online-that are relevant to your research topic. You can participate in the discussion as an observer, or participate by posting questions. Remember to use your Chat Room program to record the session for later review. You can learn how to record a transcript by consulting the program's online help.

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