Professional Writing Real-Time:

A Field Guide to Analysis

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This field guide is in its pilot version, being tested in selected classrooms around the country. Users are asked not to photocopy or otherwise reproduce or distribute this draft beyond classroom or internship uses. Suggestions for revision from instructors and students are greatly welcomed!
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Introduction

What this book is. This book leads you step-by-step through the process of studying professional writing on-site. By “professional writing” I mean virtually all writing done in organizational settings, whether businesses, non-profits, scientific and technical research firms, or others. Most other writing textbooks provide imagined scenarios or examples taken from distant workplaces, discussing writing in the generic terms of formats. *Professional Writing Real-Time* teaches you, the user, how to encounter actual writing in a chosen workplace and to interpret that writing for many layers of meaning. While using it, you will observe specific writers in existing organizations with established (and evolving) writing practices, some of which are unique to this organizational culture and others of which are similar to writing practices elsewhere.

Who it’s for. The book is designed for writers at all levels—from graduate students completing specialized advanced degrees down to undergraduates embarking on initial studies of organizations and writing in them. The knowledge that you and your classmates bring to the field analysis (in the context of your local curriculum and coursework) heightens and enriches the knowledge you will develop through this analysis. The book may also be used by independent writers on the job who seek a guide to help them interpret writing below the surface level and then to draw upon those interpretations in their own writing.

Where you can use it. The field analysis can be conducted at your own place of work or at some organization that interests you. The work can be combined with internships. Though best used as part of an undergraduate or graduate course, the book can be used as well by individuals studying writing practices independently in their own organizational settings.

Why you should use it. You will use the field analysis to enhance your knowledge of day-to-day organizational practices and hone your writing skills. You’ll improve your note taking based on direct observation. You’ll develop expertise in conducting spot interviews and more extended interviews on a focused issue or topic. You’ll learn how (and when) to shadow employees at various positions in the organizational hierarchy, and when (and how) to conduct think-aloud protocols over writing. Finally, and as the main goal of the book, you will hone your ability to interpret and analyze samples of organizational writing.

As you are enhancing these aspects of your writing prowess, you will also be gaining experience in the very workplace genres you are studying; you will write a proposal memo to your instructor outlining your intentions for field analysis; you’ll address a business letter of understanding to your point of contact at the business; you’ll write a memo to file and a progress report at the mid-term of your work, and you’ll write a final, extended analytical report at the end of your fieldwork, complete with executive summary or abstract. This book includes samples and models for all of these genres, drawn from actual student work.
You will also hone your skills in reading workplace writing in two ways: (1) at the surface level—for format, style, usage, and grammar, and (2) at a deeper level that inspects the writing you collect for the ways in which this writing reflects (and shapes) the local culture. Most of all, you will use your writing at all stages of the process not just to communicate your ideas and findings but also to actively shape your learning.

To help you understand organizational writing in its full complexity as you conduct your field analysis, this book draws on diverse academic disciplines: ethnography, organizational psychology, folklore, rhetoric & composition, and business. References throughout the book to key research in each of these fields enable you to conduct further background study as you deem fit. You’ll also find URLs for many valuable web sites, enabling you to build a virtual folder of references during the course that can serve you in later organizational writing.

Each chapter includes learning activities for enhancing your understanding of the chapter principles and their applications. These activities are geared for users from the novice to the advanced writer. Each chapter also includes focused attention on a specific genre of organizational writing, along with a module called “Got Style?” These modules nurture your development in techniques likely to come into play while you are working with specific data or writing in specific genres. The concluding chapter guides you through building an e-portfolio to demonstrate your performance during the course.

This book is compact, aimed at helping you conceptualize and conduct field analysis to the ends of enhancing your knowledge of organizational writing and your prowess in composing it. Absent are the extended discussions found in many textbooks; in their stead will be the material that you and your classmates generate for inquiry, using the knowledge and techniques presented in the following chapters.
Chapter 1. Developing Your Conceptual Base

Writing is one of the most complex cognitive activities in which we engage. To write, we must summon our prior knowledge on a topic and do the mental work to supplement this knowledge for the current occasion. We employ our creative skills in conceptualizing a document and our organizational skills in planning it. We tap long-term memory of writing rules and conventions, and we build each new sentence and paragraph against our short-term memory of what has preceded. We might brainstorm, nutshell, or freewrite to help us glean connections; then we compose and revise to make these connections fit into our evolving draft, often re-organizing the draft and revising sentences to do so.

In today’s organizational settings, writing is also one of the most complex social activities in which we engage. We write many documents that someone else has originated and that we are obliged to compose. Often we compose as part of a team, supplying our expected expertise at crucial points in sequential review or even at times composing collaboratively with other colleagues real-time, clustered around a terminal or watching a projection screen while one person keyboards. We depend on colleagues for input during the writing process, and we interpret this input against our knowledge and understanding of those colleagues’ expertise, intentions, and roles. We must discern the often mitigating (and at times contradictory) purposes for a given document, the reasons behind its genesis, and the agendas of those requesting or requiring it, all the while pondering the eventual audiences, how they most likely will receive it, and how they are positioned with respect to the topic, our department, or our organization. At the same time, we must consider any eventual ramifications of our document beyond the immediate originators and eventual audiences—its potential effects on a broader public—all the while attending to our self-representation as authors responsible for knowledge and for writing skills. In short, we compose in a complex organizational culture, and we cannot do so successfully without honing skills and knowledge in the ways that organizational cultures shape, and are shaped by, writing.

This book takes as initial premises the facts just stated. It extrapolates from these premises to propose a framework for studying writing in organizations, based on fundamental principles built one upon the other, as follows:

All professional writing takes place in a specific context. Understanding that context is paramount to fully understanding the writing that gets accomplished in it. It is true that certain principles of writing are almost universal—you’ll be learning to apply many of them in this book—and a good command of standard edited English is an imperative ingredient in workplace writing. Yet surrounding and influencing a given document in a professional setting are numerous traditions and practices that shape author and reader expectations as that document is composed to serve a purpose. These traditions and practices as carried out by the people in the organization—along with the knowledge that they need to do so—make up a great deal of the organizational culture.
A study of culture is indispensable to a complete understanding of professional writing on site and in real time. Definitions of culture are legion. As one of the most intriguing and at the same time polemical concepts driving much work in the social sciences and humanities in recent years, “culture” is quite expectedly a contested term. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines culture in metaphorical terms: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs . . .”(5). Organizational psychologist Edgar Schein is much more stipulative: “Culture can now be defined as (a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems”(111). In between these two definitions lie scores of others, quite literally, each representing a different take on culture that carries with it overt and covert agendas, beliefs, disciplinary conventions, and bodies of knowledge. (In the 1950s, anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn compiled an entire book of definitions of culture, and definitions have multiplied extraordinarily since!) Our goal in this text is not to assess the validity of one definition or the other, but rather to note aspects of definitions (and their related theories and methodologies) along the way that can help you perceive contours of writing in organizational settings that you might not otherwise see. Your course instructor may well want you to spend time, all the same, pondering some specific definitions of culture, the intellectual traditions in which they fit, and the nature of insights they are likely to yield.

Studying writing onsite as part of a workplace culture can produce smart and at times nearly irrefutable knowledge that likely would not have been mustered otherwise. One of my graduate students composed his M.A. thesis on document writing, review, and dissemination at a military headquarters organization. A longstanding member of this local culture and an analytical report writer himself, he was frustrated with the occasional in-house writing workshops that he and his colleagues were obliged to attend and which rehashed writing principles such as active voice and nominalization that he and his colleagues had thoroughly mastered. The workshops, he realized, were well intentioned, because many of the reports that went out under senior officers’ signatures were rife with nominalizations and passive voice. By collecting successive drafts, interviewing contributors, reviewers and recipients, and then interpreting his findings against the theory of cultural theorist Michel Foucault, he was able to explain the flawed reports as a product of cultural practices bent on disciplining inferiors rather than simply attributing them to failed writers. In other words, he was able to identify not just individual influences in writing, but cultural influences, with much larger implications for the organization’s writers than implementing simple workshops. (For more details, see Henry and “George,” “Workplace Ghostwriting.”)

From this short synopsis you can already see that studying writing in its organizational settings involves inspection of the “larger cultures” that englobe
and naturally influence the “local cultures” of any organizational settings. Though your study of professional writing will no doubt entail at least some work at this broader level of cultural analysis, the terms of that analysis will depend upon your course, your instructor, your discipline, and your overall curriculum. This field guide will support you primarily in the study of the local organizational culture by imparting knowledge and techniques for local field analysis of writing.

Studying writing onsite “real-time” means conducting fieldwork. Conducting fieldwork is a *sine qua non* for analyzing organizational writing. To grasp workplace writing in its full dimensions, you will need to find an organization to which you’ll have easy access and in which you can spend a few hours each week. If you have never conducted field analysis of any kind, you’ll find it both challenging and rewarding. Over the past several decades, those disciplines that employ fieldwork have refined the ways that we can think about methodology and theory. Insights from those disciplines will be integrated into chapters as we go, and some key concepts from each will be discussed in the next section.

Field analysis includes among other procedures collecting written artifacts and interpreting them. By “artifact” I mean virtually any words put to the page or screen—from reports, to e-mail, to sticky notes, to annual reports. If you are using another textbook as part of your course work, chances are it lists many genres of workplace writing, perhaps supplying you with samples of each and discussions of them. Even if you aren’t using such a text, terms such as “mission statement,” “progress report,” and “grant proposal” designating such genres float freely about our larger culture. It will be your job during field analysis to collect samples of these reports, preferably not only in their finished form but also in successive drafts—thus bolstering a deeper reading of them. Yet as you attend to such generic documents, don’t overlook the more incidental writing that counts as an artifact to be collected, too. I tell the story later in this text of a former student who started photocopying reviewers’ sticky notes to submissions circulating about a publications office, and who later used these notes for incisive analysis. Be on the lookout for any written artifact, no matter how fleeting, how mundane, or how seemingly trivial.

Interpretation has become a central concern for many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities in the past few decades. The full quote from Clifford Geertz cited above reads as follows: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (5). Writing in 1973, Geertz was at the vanguard of what has since developed into the interpretive school of anthropological thought. (A number of scholarly works in this tradition are listed in the chapter bibliography.) In the thirty years since the publication of *The Interpretation of Cultures*, other disciplines occupied with interpretation have intersected with the theoretical and practical work of anthropology and sociology in provocative ways.
In English studies, interpretation has of course been the central endeavor since the emergence of the discipline. But it was only through the alliance with rhetoric and the recent rise of composition as a field that English has embraced field analysis of writing. (Fieldwork has been central to Folklore’s discipline since its emergence, too, but folklore is not always located in English departments.) As a field focused on writing processes and practices, composition has an intriguing history of studying writers as they write—first in English classrooms, then in writing intensive courses of various ilk, and more lately in nonacademic settings. We’ll look at some valuable concepts produced by this field below, too, and you can find full references in the chapter bibliography.

Key Fields Informing Real-Time Professional Writing Analysis

Your analysis of writing in an organizational setting will draw on principles taken from five academic fields, located variously by discipline. Our goal here is not to judge them against one another but rather to note key concepts in field analysis from each.

Ethnography (Anthropology and Sociology)

If you are already familiar with ethnography, chances are you encountered it in a survey course in anthropology or sociology. You may associate ethnography primarily with the early studies in the field of anthropology in which Europeans (and later, Americans) journeyed to “exotic” cultures (many of them former colonies) to spend time in these cultures and depict their customs and habits. From these roots has emerged a field that now considers just about any setting a viable site for fieldwork. Various workplaces have served as subject for ethnographies, from cocktail lounges (Spradley and Mann) to high-tech engineering businesses (Kunda) to Disneyland (VanMaanen), and many, many others. Several of these studies appear in the chapter bibliography.

Key to ethnographic inquiry is participant observation, aimed at getting past the outsider (or etic) perspective and attaining the insider (or emic) perspective. Ethnographers often spend years in a given culture they have entered from the outside in order to capture a written representation of that culture that faithfully presents this emic view. You won’t have years to accomplish your study, but you won’t have to write a Ph.D. dissertation on it, either. An academic term should suffice to grant you at least a limited insider perspective sufficient to compose your analysis of writing.

Ethnographers often seek not only the overt, public, systematized knowledge used in a culture but also the tacit, implicit knowledge. In fact, such knowledge is usually taken as one of the hallmarks that one has adequately conducted one’s fieldwork. Getting at this knowledge often entails getting below the smooth surface of social life through discourses such as gossip. If you think gossip is just
hearsay, consider these comments from ethnographer Roger Lancaster on fieldwork in Nicaragua:

Gossip, as semi-private, semipublic talk, is the most sensitive, most accurate, and least easily monitored index of public opinion; indeed, it is the very dialogical structure of public opinion, which never quite becomes public because it belongs to the community of speakers. (71)

“What?” you may say. “We’re supposed to be studying gossip as a part of scientific inquiry?!” Well, yes, perhaps—to the degree that gossip affords you insight into tacit or insider knowledge. But don’t think that such data opens the door for ramblings on hearsay. Ethnographers guard against such digression through the principle of triangulation. As a part of their efforts to represent cultural practices from multiple perspectives, ethnographers use triangulation in three ways:

- Comparing fieldnotes from several sources or dates on a common topic, so as to validate those phenomena that do indeed appear due to cultural forces and identify those that seem more idiosyncratic.

- Comparing fieldnotes among more than one researcher, when possible, to validate observations and representations of them.

- Subjecting the same fieldnotes to interpretation through more than one theoretical lens, to see if the implications drawn remain coherent (or understandably divergent) from lens to lens.

Moreover, this focus on multiple perspectives constantly reminds fieldworkers that whether or not the content of any bit of gossip is true is really secondary—what they seek primarily are the ways in which gossip figures into cultural practices, tradition, knowledge, and behavior.

Novice field analysts often worry about “objectivity.” Their desire, quite understandably, is not to stray from an objective account into one that is too “subjective,” too grounded in opinion alone or too reflective of their own opinions. These misgivings are good ones to harbor, yet slightly anachronistic. Researchers in the social sciences have abandoned the notion of “objectivity” for the simple reason that, because they are the collectors and interpreters of data, some degree of “subjectivity” is inevitable. This stance does not permit lack of rigor, though; on the contrary, it entails a heightened “self-awareness” as one conducts field analysis and then represents it to an audience. We’ll talk more about these concepts in Chapters 7 and 8, in our discussion of “positioned subjectivity” and “reflexivity,” two principles central to ethnographic writing.

Another convention that has gained widespread popularity in ethnographic writing is that of “thick description.” Originally used as an expression by Gilbert Ryle to denote writing that managed to distinguish between a wink and a tic, the term was popularized by Clifford Geertz as key to interpretive anthropology: good ethnographic writing, contends Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, provides enough analytically-informed description of a culture that an observer of that culture would be able to distinguish between those behaviors that are
culturally shaped (winks) and those that are not (tics). In your depiction of the cultures in which you are studying writing practices, you’ll strive to compose good, “thick” description that achieves this goal. We’ll look at some exercises to support such writing in Chapter 3.

It could be that you have chosen to study your own workplace. In this case, you are engaging in a form of “auto-ethnography.” You won’t face the same challenges as your classmates when it comes to gaining the emic perspective, but you will face another challenge: rendering the familiar strange. You will have to make an effort to consciously recall how this culture struck you when you first entered it. (If you haven’t read Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,” you should do so!) People conducting auto-ethnographies are often positioned advantageously to use their fieldwork to identify and intervene in problematic writing practices or to otherwise imagine direct applications based on their studies. We will discuss these possible outcomes of your fieldwork and analysis in Chapters 7 and 8, too.

Folklore

Closely allied with ethnography in its theories and methodologies, the field of folklore provides us with a valuable focus to keep in mind when conducting workplace-writing field analysis: the “lore of folk.” Here is an invaluable entrée into the tacit knowledge discussed earlier, particularly since such knowledge often is never formally encoded anywhere. Folklorists are well known for their valuable work on oral histories and story telling. They have amassed a wealth of studies of stories, rituals, traditions, legends, and myths—any or all of which might figure among your data as you conduct your field analysis.

Even as you solicit the simplest of information about a workplace writing practice, that information will likely come in the form of a story, so ubiquitous is this mode of discourse. Not only the content of a story, but also the way in which it is told constitutes data—as do the circumstances of the telling such as setting, time, interlocutors, and the like. Folklorists are vigilant in considering all these factors, and you should be, too. We’ll look at them as we go.

You may think of “ritual” as closely allied with “rites,” and thus akin to secular initiation or religious practice. Yet if you ponder your current workplace or some former job, you can probably come up with some ritualistic practices. For example, do employees congregate regularly at 10 a.m. at the coffee machine for ten minutes? Is there a line at the shredding machine at 4 p.m.? In addition to these informally motivated rituals, more formal “rites of passage” may occur at various points in employment, along with covert rites, too. You might ponder the relationship between the “rights” of certain classes of employees and the rites they undergo to enjoy them. And while we are considering etymology, note that “to write” often entails practicing some rites. Be on the lookout for them.
Traditions are phenomena that by definition carry some history, and historical events can help you shape your interpretation of writing by providing a larger framework for that “slice of time” during which you conduct your field analysis. Like a good folklorist, strive to see tradition not only along a conservative definition—old, unavering, and somehow “authentic”—but also as it is in the making and remaking, thus identifying some of the dynamism of any tradition. Also attend to the interests that are being served within the culture by traditions.

Legends and myths usually relate the tales of gods and goddesses, but in many workplace cultures or organizational niches, players attain legendary status. Consider Henry Ford, for example, and the ways in which assembly-line production was popularized through selective representations of his work by mass media, creating of his personage a legend. Or think of the more local legends—e.g., the employee who shattered a sales record or the company founder who slept only three hours a night in a sleeping bag in her office. Legends such as these sometimes attain that mythical status that undergirds basic assumptions and values in the organization. During your fieldwork, you may hear a story or two that remind you of “urban legends,” and with the latter, your goal shouldn’t be to assess their veracity but rather to attend to why they are being told, what are the mechanisms that enable them to endure, and what all of this might mean for organizational culture and writing practices therein.

Organizational Psychology

The field of organizational psychology emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century in tandem with management studies and often allied with management interests. Accordingly, organizational psychologists are often hired to study and monitor the connections between business practices and their effects on workers—and vice versa. This field has heavily embraced the notion of organizational culture along the lines defined by Edgar Schein as cited above. Studies in this field frequently focus at least to some degree on the “leaders” in a workplace culture and how those leaders’ actions shape the culture. From the earliest studies of “corporate culture” (Deal and Kennedy; Graves), they have provided us with the valuable contrast between an organization’s climate—its culture as experienced by employees—and its image—the way this culture is projected to the exterior. Contrasting these phenomena and accounting for their parallels or divergences as interwoven with writing practices can be an eye-opening endeavor.

Unlike ethnographers, who often enter a setting with no specific topic of study but rather intend to let that topic emerge, organizational psychologists are armed with batteries of psychometrics that enable them to predetermine specific elements of a culture—psychological profiles, for example—that will figure in their data. This field also provides some predetermined models of organizational culture and prompts for fieldworkers.
In studying organizational culture, for example, organizational psychologists look for the implicit and overt values and assumptions that undergird cultural practices. They frequently focus on socialization processes and consequences of those processes, and are often involved in recruitment and measures for retention. If an organizational psychologist is on staff at the workplace you are studying, he or she can be an invaluable source of information (among others!). Even if no organizational psychologist is to be found, try consulting an article such as Schein’s “Organizational Culture” to glean valuable prompts. To discern some underlying dimensions of organizational culture, for example, he offers prompts on the following: the organization’s relationship to the environment, the nature of human activity, the nature of reality and truth, the nature of time, the nature of human nature, the nature of human relationships, and homogeneity vs. diversity. (114)

Business

Of course, scholarship in business has also heavily embraced the notion of “corporate culture.” Whether overtly articulated or not, the notion of culture has been implicit in the measures taken by businesses in the past decades to improve quality and quantity of production through appeasement of the workforce, whether through Total Quality Management (TQM), Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), or some other measure. Books such as The Experience Economy, which draws on performance theory to forecast consumerism in terms that invite businesses to shape their “products” for maximum and focused consumer experience, rely heavily on implicit notions of corporate culture.

Composition and Rhetoric

Composition emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s with a focus on writing processes and products in theory, practice, and research. Its alliance with rhetoric—a “field” predating it by twenty-five centuries—resulted partly from composition’s neglect within English departments, partly from rhetoric’s neglect within colleges and universities, and partly from the undeniable premise that the focal point for each, writers and their audiences in given contexts, was a powerful binding force. Composition and rhetoric is one of the most provocative fields in the academy today, in part because of its focus on actual writers in real situations and because of its relentless accent on means of tying practice to research and theory.

From Composition we can take the following premises:

Writing is a mode of learning. In 1977 Janet Emig used writing exercises, interviews, and observations along with philosophical and theoretical considerations of knowledge production to point out that writing not only conveys knowledge previously mustered, it also actively shapes learning processes in ways that perhaps no other processes can. As we write, when focused properly, we also learn. We also discern insights and connections that
we might not perceive otherwise. During your field analysis, keep this in mind—when jotting fieldnotes, when coding them, and when piecing them together with other bits of data as you shape your analytical report.

The composing process is recursive. With their pioneering research in the 1970s, researchers Linda Flower and Dick Hayes monitored students completing writing assignments and demonstrated that writing, for most people, is not some straightforward, lockstep, linear process from ideas to outline to composition to editing. Most good writers write recursively—drafting a bit of prose, returning to look over what they have done, revising, adjusting, moving forward, and then returning again. Keep this in mind when observing writers in organizational settings and when drafting your own writing.

Writing conventions vary dramatically from discipline to discipline, setting to setting. Two movements also emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s—writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines. These movements each held as central tenet the fact that what is considered “good writing” is not some universal postulate, as earlier formalist theories of languages presumed. Reader expectations and modes of meaning making change significantly when one moves from one academic discipline to another, and “learning to write” must take account of these changes. Writing skills, moreover, are honed through continuous practice and are not a capacity learned definitively at any one time, once and forever.

Writing (and language) processes not only reflect reality, they shape them. This principle is part of the larger principle of social constructionism—the movement that acknowledges the role of language in indelibly shaping our understandings of the world around us by virtue of the categories for comprehension supplied by language and the conventions for interpretation in which we circulate. The principle was demonstrated convincingly in Stephen Doheny-Farina’s “Writing in an Emerging Organization,” grounded in his dissertation fieldwork, in which he showed collaborative composing processes for the writing of a business plan fundamentally shaping the organizational realities for collaborators (and investors).

Writing and technology are bound together in complex ways. Christina Haas reminds us that writing and technology have always been inextricable—it was the early stylus followed by pen and ink that enabled writing. Yet with the emergence of the computer as writing’s “other half,” the complexity of writing processes has transmogrified. Scholarship in computers and composition has signaled the necessity for anyone studying writing to consider the influence of programs, applications, networks, and interfaces as they simultaneously open up and constrict possibilities in writing. The machines that humans have created now shape the ways in which they compose as never before, and as human-technological interfaces evolve, so well may what we mean when we refer to “composition.” For further readings that can provide numerous theoretical frames for interpreting your fieldwork, see the section of the chapter bibliography on composition and rhetoric.
One’s “self” takes form in part in relation to one’s written composition. Connecting with scholarship on “subjectivity” in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, philosophy, and in critical theory, composition studies has demonstrated ways in which the languages and language processes in which we dwell shape our selfhood. For elaboration on this phenomenon with respect to the discourses encountered in workplace settings, see my book Writing Workplace Cultures: An Archaeology of Professional Writing.

Every document carries with it an implied author and an implied reader. Defined by narratologist Gerald Prince as “the implicit image of an author in the text, taken to be standing behind the scenes and to be responsible for its design and for the values and cultural norms it adheres to” (42), this principle opens up whole avenues for interpreting workplace documents in light of collaborative composing and organizational agendas. The implied reader, for Prince, is the “audience presupposed by a text” (43), that reader constructed by a document through its structure, conventions, and the like. Both of these principles have far-ranging implications for the interpretation of writing artifacts as discussed in Chapter 4. They are concepts linked to fundamental principles in rhetoric.

The most fundamental principle we can take from rhetoric is illustrated in the “rhetorical triangle,” which reminds us that any spoken or written communication takes form from considerations of purpose, audience, and authorship. This triangle has been represented in various forms over the years—from the communications model popularized by the Prague Linguistics School and positing a sender, receiver, message and code for communications to more recent guidelines in textbooks on topics from technical writing to essays. It merits such attention as you conduct your field analysis and as you compose the report based on it, that I offer a version here:

![Figure 1. The Rhetorical Triangle](http://departments.bloomu.edu/english/111rhettri.htm)

Schematically stated, an author with a subject and purpose composes a message for a reader in some context. As observed in the introductory paragraphs to this chapter, however, the terms of authorship in an organizational setting are quite complex, the purposes for specific documents might be both overt and covert, overlapping and contradicting, and the readers might be sequential or
simultaneous, all with their own interpretive lenses and stances. The culture of the organization influences all of these elements quite heavily, as do larger cultures, too. Repeatedly, you will want to reflect on all the elements of the rhetorical triangle as you analyze the writing you collect, and with a related concept from classical rhetoric: ethos.

Based on the works of Aristotle and Cicero primarily, rhetoricians have defined ethos variously to indicate the credibility, trustworthiness, and knowledge of the narrator of a given text. You can easily see the link both conceptually and etymologically to “ethics,” and you should carry this notion with you as you conduct your fieldwork, as you analyze the workplace texts you encounter, and as you compose your own writing. You can consider this concept to be equivalent to that of the implied author, above, and you should strive to see the many cultural values that are both implied and overtly stated through organizational documents.

Also use this rhetorical triangle as you compose your writing for your instructor and peers in this course—and in all of your other courses, for that matter. A few minutes reflecting on rhetorical elements of your paper as you plan it, as you draft and revise, and even as you prepare it for printing can alert you to considerations you might have overlooked and can abet you in summoning that “meta-thinking” that is so vital to all good writing.

**What Will You Gain through Such Inquiry?**

You will develop your writing skills in a number of ways during this term. You’ll hone your ability to take notes accurately, swiftly, and comprehensively. Most of us have taken notes with varying assiduousness throughout our academic careers, but the notes you take in this course, unlike those you take in anticipation of performing on an exam, will figure in your evolving writing processes. You will return to your notes regularly, from the beginning, and add to them, making of them a more active part of your learning process. Hence you will probably improve your writing of them in content and form over the semester, as you recognize what you could be doing better.

You’ll develop skills in engaging busy professionals swiftly and pointedly in spot interviews about intriguing facets of their writing practices—a skill that is certain to help you in your future (or current) professional life. You’ll also learn to conduct extended focused interviews on a topic or topics, an ability that many people entering the workplace do not have. You might try your hand at shadowing employees, perhaps even your peers or mentors, to gain a glimpse into their perspective on a typical workday. You could also attempt a “write-aloud protocol” with a writer to see how he or she approaches writing tasks and composes, thus expanding your own repertoire of strategies and processes. As mentioned in the Introduction, you’ll also develop your skills and knowledge in many common genres of workplace writing.
As you develop your writing skills and experiences in these workplace genres, you’ll also develop professional skills and knowledge. You’ll naturally be prompted to reflect on the ways in which the organizational culture you are observing structures work life for its employees and thus what kinds of behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions these employees need to conduct daily business. By considering the organization’s writing as it furthers organizational goals, you’ll gain insight into how organizations set goals and then attempt to reach them. Pondering the external audiences for this workplace’s writing will prompt you to examine (or at least muse upon) the ways in which these audiences interface with the organization—why they are in this relationship and what keeps them there. You may also consider the effects of an organization’s work, accomplished through writing, on broader populations that are only vaguely aware (if at all) of its existence. Imagine, if you will, encountering in your fieldwork a memo similar to that of Sherron Watkins to William Lay—before it became public.

The End Results of Your Fieldwork

In addition to the enhanced knowledge of organizational settings and practices to apply in your future professional writing, you will complete this course with your analytical report. Depending upon course requirements, you may compose several ancillary documents to accompany this report such as memo of transmittal, title sheet, table of contents, attachments and glossary, each of which serve distinct rhetorical functions and thus represent expanded writing prowess. For many if not most of you, writing from fieldwork will be a new writing experience, presenting the challenge of using real people and their writing as the basis of your own analysis. The report you write will be every bit as challenging and provocative as composing an engaging fictional account and a scientific research report—simultaneously.

You will complete the term invaluable experience in managing an information-gathering activity in an organizational experience, which includes negotiating your organizational identity, and thus provides a glimpse into an endeavor you’ll pursue throughout your career. Your first step in this endeavor lies in choosing a site for study and establishing a point of contact, the subject of the next chapter.

Learning Activities

Understanding Culture. As a class, brainstorm the concept of “culture.” Choose a “secretary” (not your instructor) who will write down ideas on the board or keyboard them in for projection while people voice ideas on what culture is and how it takes form. Spend 7 or 8 minutes voicing your opinions, without censorship, then stop. Now develop a scheme for cataloguing your different ideas about culture, how these ideas could yield definitions, and what the ideas
(and/or definitions) allow you to see or keep you from seeing. Take notes on this whole experience.

You may want to supplement this in-class experience with outside reading using selections from the list at the end of the chapter or provided by your instructor.

**Framing Your Thoughts as an Auto-Ethnographer.** If you plan to study your own workplace, read Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual among The Nacirema” (http://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/miner.html) and discuss it with other auto-ethnographers.

**Pondering Representations.** Recall some instance or instances of writing that made a difference in your life. (You can count everything from report cards to Girl Scout awards to telegrams.) Freewrite on how it made a difference and why. Link that piece of writing to some specific cultural practices. For example, suppose a letter of commendation was written about you in some institutional setting. How do the letters get composed? By whom? Reviewed? How did you receive it? Who else saw it? How public was it? How private? Draw a whimsical diagram of the way this piece of writing situated you in the universe at that time.

**Identifying Rituals, Myths, and Legends in the Workplace.** Take five minutes and brainstorm on any practices in your current or previous jobs that you would characterize as a “ritual.” Share your stories as a class, then discuss ways in which they point to deeper or enduring practices, values, and assumptions in the workplace culture. If you can think of them, discuss any stories you have heard in a job that seemed “mythical” to you, particularly those about workplace actors whose actions somehow approached the “legendary.” Relate these myths and legends, too, to enduring practices, values or assumptions at work in those settings.

**Scrutinizing Your Notes.** In groups of three, exchange your notes from class for any (or all) of the above exercises. (Keep one blank sheet of paper . . . for more notes!) Write down the differences and similarities you see in note-taking style. Identify one technique or system that someone else is using that you want to emulate. Then discuss your note-taking predilections as a group, telling your peers how you’ve developed specific techniques (or avoided technique altogether?) over the years.

**Genre**

**Notes**

Seldom given much attention in courses on writing, notes are in a way the mainstay of writing in so many situations. As perhaps the last genre of handwriting, notes are personal in ways that other genres cannot be. Ponder your personal note taking: how do you usually format the page? Do you leave ample margins for notes upon notes as you build upon them? What shortcut
symbols or codes do you employ? Is every page on a new day clearly dated and are subsequent pages numbered? Do you have a system for coding notes that are not just about capturing content but perhaps reminding yourself to follow up or musing on other connections? If not, use this course to hone some expertise in this genre.

**Got Style?**

**Concision**

Good writing in any genre is concise. Using writing generated in the above learning activities, or drawing on your writing from other contexts, reread it with red pen poised. Try to reduce the number of words in each sentence, if only by one word.

In particular, focus on “nominalizations.” Nominalizations are verbs that have been turned into nouns, which then in turn require another verb to make their point. For example, we often hear that someone has “made a decision.” In this case “decision” is a noun that has been formed from the verb “decide.” We could just as easily say that someone has “decided.” Already, we’ve lopped off two needless words (“made a”) and in the process opened the possibility for combining sentences and telling the reader exactly what was decided, and by whom.

The trick: look for words that end in –ion and –ence. Frequently, these words are verbs that were nominalized. Try setting your “Find” or “Search” function under your “Edit” menu for these endings in a document you’ve recently written, and odds are you will turn up one or more nominalizations. See if you can transform these sentences and cut out some needless verbiage.
Sources for Further Reading

General Ethnographies, Ethnographic Theory, Folklore, and Fieldwork Methodology


Firth, Raymond. We, the Tikopia. London: Allen and Unwin, 1936.


Miner, Horace. "Body Ritual among the Nacirema." American Anthropologist 58:
503-07.


**Organizational Psychology and Management**


**Composition and Rhetoric, including Workplace Ethnographies and Studies, Writing Guidance, and Textual Analysis**


Flower, Linda, and Richard Hayes. xxxx


Selber, Stuart A., Dan McGavin, William Klein, and Johndan Johnson-Eilola. "Issues in Hypertext-Supported Collaborative Writing." Nonacademic Writing:


Helpful Websites

American Anthropological Association

- [http://www.aaanet.org/resinet.htm](http://www.aaanet.org/resinet.htm)

American Folklore Society:

- [http://afsnet.org/](http://afsnet.org/)

Association for Business Communication:

- [http://www.businesscommunication.org/](http://www.businesscommunication.org/)

Center for Effective Organizations:

- [http://www.marshall.usc.edu/web/CEO.cfm?doc_id=564](http://www.marshall.usc.edu/web/CEO.cfm?doc_id=564)

Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life:

- [http://www.ethno.isr.umich.edu/](http://www.ethno.isr.umich.edu/)
George Mason University’s Nonfiction Universe:
- [http://nonfiction.gmu.edu](http://nonfiction.gmu.edu)

Associations and Professional Societies for Writers:
- [http://mason.gmu.edu/~jhenry/nu/associations.html](http://mason.gmu.edu/~jhenry/nu/associations.html)

Kipnotes (“Dedicated to Business History and Management Literacy”):
- [http://www.kipnotes.com](http://www.kipnotes.com)

Library of Congress:
- [http://www.loc.gov/](http://www.loc.gov/)

*New York Times* Cybertimes Navigator:

Professional Communication Society:
- [http://www.ieeepcs.org/](http://www.ieeepcs.org/)

Society for Applied Anthropology:
- [http://www.sfaa.net/](http://www.sfaa.net/)

Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology:
- [http://siop.org/](http://siop.org/)

Society for Technical Communication
- [http://www.stc.org/](http://www.stc.org/)

U.S. Department of Labor:

Writing Workplace Cultures Greater D.C. Dig:
Chapter 2. Initiating Your Field Analysis

By now you have pondered the notion of “culture” in various dimensions, considered the concept of an “organizational culture” and perhaps even begun exploring the dynamics between you sense of “self” and the cultural practices that shape it. Hopefully, you have completed at least some of the learning activities in Chapter 1 to prepare yourself conceptually for undertaking your field analysis. Make it a point to review the principles laid out in that chapter and to explore some of the related readings during your on-site work. As you compile notes, glancing back through the precepts presented there can spark new ideas.

At this point, you might want to glance briefly through Chapter 3, Establishing Your Field Analyst Identity. There you will find some methodology that you’ll be following even from your initial contact with the organizational culture you’ve chosen to study. We’ll explore these methodologies in detail there, but because a key item in your fieldwork portfolio will be your fieldwork journal, read the section that treats fieldnotes now. Take a fieldwork journal (many fieldworkers like spiral-bound of a handy size) with you on your initial trip, and take the quality of notes we discussed in the previous chapter.

Choosing a Site for Your Business Culture Field Analysis

Field analysis requires time. It takes time to really get to know a workplace culture and the people who are a part of it. It requires much observation, careful (and sometimes frantic) note taking, incidental and in-depth interviewing, and collecting samples of writing. All of this work means that you have to spend at least 3-5 hours a week at the business you are studying, preferably at varying hours of the day. So choose a site that you can get to without too much hassle.

Also choose a site where you are welcome. You will need at least one contact person who is adept at introducing you to other members of the organization, and you will need culture members who are open to being observed. If you can be introduced into the culture by a friend or relative, all the better—but keep in mind that you will always be associated at least to some degree with the person who introduced you into the culture. If it turns out that that person isn’t too popular, other culture members might not be too forthcoming with information about their writing.

Seek an organizational culture that appeals to you. Perhaps you have always wondered about writing grant proposals, or maybe you’re fascinated by high-tech business. If so, find an organization that will give you glimpses into these kinds of cultures. Remember that as you will be studying organizational writing you will also be learning facts and practices in a specific professional niche. If you have no friends or contacts in a professional niche, use the yellow pages or the Internet and make contact yourself. As long as you are professional in your demeanor and remain unobtrusive while on-site, many organizations will
welcome you. (You might have to assure them that you are not engaged in investigative journalism, but more on this later.)

From the organization's perspective, they are teaming with your college or university in community building. Depending on the job-market, they may even groom you as a potential employee—all the more reason to show them your skills as a writing analyst. Even if the organization is not hiring, they might be interested in the kind of knowledge a ten-week fieldwork study can produce on their writing practices. As an outsider, you bring a fresh perspective to writing that can perhaps help culture members renew their own perspectives.

You might feel a bit hesitant about vaunting yourself as someone who can be imparting knowledge on writing, particularly if you are still fairly early in your career or studies, or if writing has been a personal challenge for you in the past. These qualms are healthy ones to harbor, but don’t fret: through class discussions and workshops you will develop some expertise that will lead to insights on this organization’s writing. The focus you will give to writing exercises throughout the term will help you improve your own writing, too, so that you’ll feel more confident giving advice to others.

You might also engage in some writing work for the organization. One of the benchmarks of ethnographic study is participant observation (more on this in Chapter 3), and what better way to collect data than to engage in the kinds of writing you are studying as a writer yourself? Just make sure that your point of contact understands that your primary work is that of field analyst, so that you don’t get loaded with writing tasks to the degree that they prevent you from conducting your analysis.

If your major or program of studies offers an internship, you can easily combine this internship with your field analysis as part of this course work. Check with your instructor and administrators of the internship programs for the protocol.

Are you currently employed by an organization that engages in some writing? If so, you may choose to study your own place of employment. (It could be that your own job duties don’t entail much writing, but that the organization does in fact conduct a fair amount of writing outside of your job duties; your supervisor or manager might be willing to let you see this "other side" of the business as part of your studies.) Doing so is a bit different from entering a new workplace culture and learning its writing practices. As discussed in Chapter 1, such studies are referred to in the field of anthropology as “auto-ethnographic,” and present particular opportunities and challenges, discussed below. If you do choose to study your own workplace, make sure that your supervisor knows that you will be studying the organization.

Whatever the case, devote some time right now to pondering your professional future and the kinds of writing you might be required to do. Keep in mind that "professional" writing is conducted routinely by organizations that are not "for-profit": organizations from educational institutions to museums to public-sector
services do lots of professional writing every day to keep their organizations viable. If you have always wanted to work for such an organization, all the more reason to approach one now and see if they would be willing to host a student field analyst for a term.

Whatever kind of workplace culture you decide to study, take some time to collect your thoughts and make some notes before you approach the culture and make a request. First impressions are lasting, and you want to present yourself as professional and serious at your very first contact. As you reflect on your notes in preparation for making contact, also plan your self-presentation: Choose attire that is professional, which might mean anything from suits to casual, depending upon the organization. Query your point of contact briefly before your first visit so that you will arrive dressed similarly to employees. (Ethnographers Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson refer to attending to details such as attire as “impression management” [83], and it’s a good skill to be learning as part of your growing knowledge of organizational writing practices.)

As you prepare your self-presentation, also keep in mind that you represent your course, your instructor, and your college or university, too, to some degree. When professors and other social scientists conduct field analysis involving human subjects that will lead to publication, they are regularly required by their university to submit their research protocol to a human subjects review board and to obtain signed consent forms from those they will be studying. For the purposes of your course work, which is conducted solely for educational purposes, a business “letter of understanding” from you to your point of contact and your instructor, stipulating the terms of your research, probably suffices. All the same, find out specifically what your instructor deems appropriate within the context of your course and institutional requirements. If you think you might envision publication from this work, you might want to devise a simple form to provide to anyone whom you’ll cite, asking their permission and assuring them of the chance to review your writing before it is published. You will also be assigning a pseudonym to the site you study, and to all the people in it—a standard social science practice. (We return to this practice below.)

Making Contact

In a way, the study you are undertaking could be enormous. After all, when we consider the endeavor of “writing” and how our understandings of it have grown and diversified dramatically in recent years, field analysis could begin from any number of approaches and spin off in many, many directions. Because you have only one academic term (or part of it) to conduct your inquiry, one timesaving approach is to begin with looking at the kinds of writing this organization produces. (If you glance ahead at Chapters 3 and 4, once again, you’ll see that you will soon be compiling a whole inventory of writing artifacts discovered on site.)

Thus, one of your first, easy, ice-breaking questions to your p.o.c. could address the various kinds of writing that get generated at this place of work. How much
writing gets done on a daily basis, and in what forms? If your p.o.c. hesitates on this question, it could be that this particular organization just doesn’t produce much writing. Or, it could be that it produces only limited writing in a very specific genre. If the organization produces only orders and bills of sale—or if those are the only writing to which you would have easy access—then consider another site. Although it is quite probable that the organization does indeed produce other kinds of writing—at the very least in the form of business correspondence—if you won’t be granted access to any of that writing then it won’t do you any good in your analysis.

It could turn out that this particular business simply won’t be able to furnish samples of writing that can serve as the anchor for your inquiry. Try to determine if this is so early on, because you might have to seek out another organizational setting to study. Alternatively, you might have to frame your study to include larger processes of “communication” and “discourse” more generally. You’ll have to check with your instructor to see how he or she wants to delimit the study.

As you sketch a list of the kinds of writing, try to query your p.o.c. on the particular uses of each of these kinds of writing. For example, if “memos” are on your list, what kind of memos are they? Memos of information? Action memos? Memos to file? You will be making an inventory of kinds of writing in the next chapter in which you state the nuances of generation and use for each kind of writing you collect, so it doesn’t hurt to anticipate an analysis of those nuances already.

During your initial visit, or the one that follows, you might combine queries about writing with what ethnographers Spradley and McCurdy termed a “grand tour” question: ask your p.o.c. to take you on both a physical tour and a conceptual tour of the organization, noting what gets done, by whom, when, how, and other what circumstances. Jot down the answers to these questions in your fieldnote journal: these notes will serve as initial anchors for what will be many, many follow-ups.

Establishing a Field Analysis Persona

Chapter 3 provides some initial methodology and practical tips you will use for your research and certain protocol you should follow as a field analyst. Ethnographers Hammersley and Atkinson demystify terms such as “methodology” and “protocol” by observing that “all research is a practical activity requiring the exercise of judgment in context; it is not a matter of simply following methodological rules”(23). As you begin your encounter with such methodology and prepare to exercise good judgment, think about establishing a specific relationship with your p.o.c.: that of an analyst employing established fieldwork methods to build a body of data permitting insight into writing products and processes. If your p.o.c. happens to be your boss or manager, you
will need to emphasize that for the purpose of this study you will at times take on another “identity” that is somewhat independent of your role as an employee.

From your initial contact (or your initial decision to use your own workplace as the site for your field analysis), endeavor to protect the anonymity of the people you are studying and the organization that employs them. Assign pseudonyms to everyone you observe and to the organization you study. If necessary, compile a chart (which will remain confidential) of the correlations between pseudonyms and real names to assure that your analysis doesn’t confuse them. Most fieldworkers choose pseudonyms that reflect the gender and ethnicity or national background of the people they are studying so as to convey a realistic picture of demographics that may indeed affect writing. Avoid using only initials; readers don’t retain them as well. Also avoid assigning pseudonyms taken from fiction; you don’t want characteristics associated with the fictional characters to color interpretations—yours and your readers’—of these real people as they write.

While you are in the preliminary period of your fieldwork, establish a working schedule to which both you and the organization will adhere. You can probably adjust this schedule as you go if extenuating circumstances arise, but for starters it’s good to establish a schedule in writing, print it out, and make it a part of your research portfolio. Also print out a copy for your point of contact so that he or she won’t be taken by surprise when you arrive to observe, interview, and request occasional copies of writing.

It’s also a good idea to keep in touch with your p.o.c. with brief e-mail or memos stating what you did on each site visit. You’ll be able to compose these memos based on your fieldnotes and evolving field analysis portfolio (more on these in the next chapter), and you’ll probably find it helpful for your own analysis to write these brief recapitulations. As long as they are brief, your p.o.c. isn’t likely to see them as a burden; on the contrary, he or she will quite likely appreciate your business-like manner of keeping the organization apprised of your work. (One caveat: a culture member may provide you with information under the tacit assumption [or explicit request] that it remain confidential. If so, under no circumstances should you repeat it such that it can be traced to that person. This important ethical issue, too, is discussed in the next chapter.)

**Conducting Auto-ethnographic Analysis**

If you have chosen to study your own workplace, then you are embarking on what ethnographers call “auto-ethnography,” described in Chapter 1. Hopefully, you have had time to read Miner’s “Body Ritual among the Nacirema” and to ponder, alone or with classmates, the ways in which we can “re-frame” our interpretations of familiar surroundings to glean new interpretations. As an auto-ethnographer, you have some advantages over those fieldworkers entering a new site: you already have the insider’s—or *emic*—perspective that field analysts must obtain in order to genuinely represent
the complexities of the local culture. You can draw on the local lore, organizational history, and personal knowledge you already possess to undergird your analysis of writing practices. You probably have extensive contacts throughout the organization that can make obtaining information about writing easier. (If you don’t have these contacts, this research project is a perfect reason for nurturing them!) And you may have some ideas about existing problems in your organization’s writing that can serve as springboard for your inquiry.

Unfortunately, you’ll also face some obstacles as an auto-ethnographer that outside ethnographers do not face. Your very familiarity with this culture will inevitably color your understanding of it. To attain and investigate the multiple perspectives that shape understandings of writing in any context, you’ll have to suspend some of the conclusions you may have mustered over time from your perspective alone. Doing this can be a real challenge, because it sometimes requires relinquishing heartfelt beliefs about the local culture. But even if you end up confirming your own beliefs in the long run, you owe it to your research to suspend them at least temporarily as you pursue other culture members’ meanings. You might just develop a more complex perspective than you had before, one that can aid you significantly in your own writing and reading in this workplace.

Learning Activities

Prepping Your First Contact Meeting. Divide the class into two groups—those anticipating field analysis at their own place of work and those intending to study an organization that is new to them. If you are in the first group, make notes for a meeting with your boss or supervisor to request permission to conduct your study here at work. Be sure to be explicit about what kinds of information you’ll be seeking and how your “workplace identity” will sometimes be supplanted by your “researcher identity.” After you have made notes, draw straws to see who will formally perform before the class. One of you will have to take on the role of boss or supervisor, so take a few minutes to brainstorm opinions, expectations, and misgivings that this boss or supervisor might harbor.

If you are in the group entering a new workplace, follow a similar procedure. In this case you are not only setting forth the scope and terms of your project, you are actually meeting the person and making that first impression. As a group, spend some time discussing how to do this most effectively, then draw straws to see who will be the researcher and who will be the point of contact.

As a spectator to these performances, take notes! Spend some time as a class after the performances to appraise them and to make further notes to yourself as you prepare for the meeting.
Obtaining and Interpreting an Organizational Chart. On your initial visit or at some site visit soon thereafter, ask your p.o.c. or another employee to supply you with an Organizational Chart. Depending upon the size of the organization, this chart might depict everyone in the organization, or only departments and divisions with their heads or chiefs. Many organizations now include org charts on their websites, so you may be able to download one from there. If you do, print it out and take it with you to your next meeting with your p.o.c or others. Ask them to talk about the chart, describing which departments are in charge of what activities and explaining how different departments relate to one another. Keep prompting them for commentary on any specific writing that one or another division (or employee) is in charge of, and make notes to follow up. If the organization includes no org chart on its web site or somewhere on its intranet, ask your p.o.c. or another employee to sketch one for you, with whatever job titles she or he can assign, along with any commentary that comes to mind on job duties and writing. Bring this org chart and your notes on it to class for discussion.

Writing a Proposal Memo and a Business Letter. Two kinds of writing common to just about all organizations are the business letter and the proposal memo. Though you may associate the term “proposal” with the longer, more complex documents composed by organizations to obtains jobs and contracts, an equally common form of proposal is the “internal proposal,” used to get work accomplished within organizations. These internal proposals at times aren’t even titled as such but rather convey the work they are proposing simply in the memo subject line. It’s a great genre to master, so that you’ll be adept at proposing projects for yourself to future supervisors. You’ll be composing in each of these genres as part of your course work, as described below.

Genres

Internal Proposal Memo

Compose a formal memo to your instructor in which you propose the site for study for your fieldwork project. Be specific about the nature of the business, its location, size, and any other details you can provide. If you have already made contact with the organization, state who your point of contact will be. (If you already know this person, state how.) Based on your readings and class discussions to date, muse upon what kinds of writing practices you think you will encounter. If you have already made contact and queried your p.o.c. as to the kinds of writing at this business, include a brief, annotated list based on this discussion. As in the full-fledged formal proposal referred to above, include commentary on the essential who, what, where, why, and how of your study.

As you compose this memo, consult reference sources on the “internal proposal” and on memos more generally. Be sure to review the rhetorical triangle discussed in Chapter 1 and make notes about any particular elements you want.
to emphasize in terms of your authorship, your purpose, or your audience—your instructor. Strive to anticipate and articulate what you hope to achieve in this fieldwork against the backdrop of Chapter 1 and class discussions, and be as specific as possible. At the same time, don’t make any hasty promises that you certainly won’t be able to keep. You and your instructor will be returning to this proposal when you file your progress report a few weeks from now.

With your own rhetorical triangle in mind, study the sample proposal memos at the URL listed below. How will yours compare, and why?

http://mason.gmu.edu/~whunke/eportfolio/proposal_memo.html

Business Letter

If you’ve never written a business letter before, welcome to Earth. I jest because it’s almost impossible that you haven’t written some formal letter to some organization at some point in your life, whether an inquiry for information or a complaint about products and services. Whereas the business letter has been supplanted somewhat by e-mail (and in this medium, too, you may have nurtured business writing skills unconsciously), it remains a valuable genre in which to hone expertise if only by its physical form--and thus the similarities with written contracts. In some cases, business letters do indeed establish contractual relationships, so they aren’t to be taken lightly in their claims or promises.

For this course, your instructor might require you to write a formal business “letter of understanding” from you to your instructor and your point of contact. The purpose of this letter is to stipulate the nature of your research as explicitly as possible. Inform you p.o.c. of the nature of your course, perhaps attaching a syllabus or including a url that points to an online version of it. State for your instructor the name and nature of the business you will study, the name of your point of contact, and that person’s job title, phone number, and e-mail address. Include signature lines for yourself, your instructor, and your point of contact, so that each person knows that the others have read this letter and agree to it.

Your instructor may want you to address specific issues in this letter, and your college or university may require you to address specific issues. So might the business you are studying, so do your homework on these requirements and expectations before you write this letter. As you compose, review the rhetorical triangle presented in Chapter 1, then consider the sample letter of understanding from George Mason University’s Service Learning Center below. How will yours compare, and why?

http://www.gmu.edu/student/csl/letter.PDF
Got Style?

Active Voice and Passive Voice

In my teaching and consulting with writers of all ages and experience, in classroom settings and in the workplace, no term gets bandied about more freely than “passive voice.” Most people will tell me that they know that they shouldn’t use it (this isn’t entirely true), but when pressed, a surprising number of people can neither define passive voice nor find examples of it in writing confidently. If you finish this course having mastered just this principle alone, you will have done yourself a huge favor: your writing will gain more force almost invisibly.

When a verbal construction shows the doer of an action and occurs in a sentence in standard subject-verb-object (SVO) order, it is in active voice. Example: Iva submitted her proposal memo to her professor. “Iva” is the subject, “submitted” is the verb (in the past tense) and “proposal memo” is the receiver of the action.

When a verbal construction inverts this order and puts the main verb in past participle form with a form of the verb “to be” as a helping verb, it is in passive voice. Example: The proposal memo was submitted by Iva to her professor. In this case the receiver of the action, “proposal memo” comes first in the sentence, followed by the helping verb “was” connected to the past participle “submitted.” The “doer” of the action—Iva—ends up in a prepositional phrase. Not only is this second version longer, it many cases the doer of the action is entirely omitted, since this person isn’t grammatically necessary to the sentence. Moreover, it is often used as a device to shun responsibility or to hide agency, as in “Mistakes were made.”

Before submitting either your business letter of understanding or your memo, comb them for instances of passive voice. If necessary, consult a handbook or perform some exercises online to help you master identifying it. Then scrutinize your writing carefully to find infractions. To ease your task, use your “Find” function under your “Edit” menu for the words, “is” “are” “was,” and “were.” The latter two are the ones you will find most often serving as helping verbs in a passive voice construction. Nine times out of ten, you can convert passive voice to active voice, and often come up with a more precise and vivid verb that will render your writing more engaging.

One caveat: sometimes you do indeed want to use the passive voice. If the doer of the action is actually irrelevant, or if you want to focus particular attention on the receiver of the action, choose the passive voice.
Chapter 3. Establishing Your Field Analyst Identity: Initial Methodology and Practical Tips

In Chapter 2 you decided on a site, made initial contact, composed your research proposal for your instructor and your formal letter of understanding for your instructor and point of contact. You may have also obtained an organizational chart to give you a global overview of the “players” in this setting. It probably feels as if you have already accomplished quite a bit—and you have. Yet from a field analysis perspective, you have only just begun. Now it is time to firmly establish your research identity and begin systematically collecting and cataloguing data. Your first step is setting up a research portfolio.

Setting Up Your Field Analysis Portfolio

In field analysis, organization is vital! During the next couple of months, you will collect a variety of data to help you understand writing in its full complexity. Your first step is to buy a portfolio that will hold your data. Choose one with several pockets; an accordion portfolio is ideal. You will label each pocket for different kinds of data: fieldnotes, interviews, maps, org chart(s), flow charts, shadowing notes, write-aloud protocols, writing artifacts, and copies of published or archived documents.

Fieldnotes include all the notes you take while onsite—scribbled jottings, more extended entries—as well as the more reflective notes that you make after leaving the site. Many field analysts find it useful to jot their onsite notes in a spiral notebook or small loose-leaf notebook, then use these notes for composing the more reflective notes in a word-processing program. Doing so greatly facilitates writing your final report, since you will be able to copy and paste certain passages from your notes. You might want to devote two pockets of your portfolio to fieldnotes—one for the notes taken onsite in a fieldwork journal and another for the longer notes in a word processor.

Interviews may be brief and incidental, a quick conversation you have with a culture member on some aspect of writing. Or they may be extended, pointed interviews that you conduct later in your fieldwork once you have discerned an issue or theme that an interview can help you explore. If possible, tape record any interviews (especially of the latter kind), then transcribe them selectively. (Chapter 6 provides some guidelines and tips for interviewing and transcribing.) Keep these interviews in a separate pocket and in separate files in your computer. Quoting verbatim is an invaluable boon to writing a good field report.

Maps can reveal more about writing that you might think. The arrangement of offices and cubicles influences information sharing, to some degree. And information sharing sometimes influences writing. You should make at least one map of the business you are studying, preferably in your initial visits to help you orient yourself. Even if you are studying your own place of work, drawing a map can prompt you to reconsider the organization and your place in it—particularly when compared to organizational charts and document routing.
flowcharts. You might draw maps that show not only the physical layout of the workplace but also the “networks” that workers establish formally and informally and which might shape writing and reading practices.

Organizational charts, or "org" charts, can be found on many business web sites. They typically depict the organization's departments and employees in terms of hierarchy and responsibilities. If you have not already done so, see if your business has an org chart posted on its website, and if so, make a printout. If not, inquire as to whether they exist in print form already. As a last resort, ask your point of contact or another culture member to sketch one for you. (As you get to know the culture, you might sketch one yourself and show it to culture members for feedback. You can generate great discussions this way.) In a way, this org chart is something akin to the cast of characters in a playbill—it will help you keep track of who is who and what their (official) roles are in business writing practices.

Flow charts for document cycling are less common on web sites, but do occasionally exist in print form in an organization’s in-house documents. Ask your point of contact or other culture members for document cycling charts once you are somewhat familiar with the documents. As with org charts, it can be quite revealing and at times enormously provocative to ask a culture member to sketch a document flow chart for you, or to sketch one yourself based on your observations and then request feedback. Some of the best data you can garner for business writing analysis comes in the form of document flow charts and questions keyed to them.

Shadowing notes are sometimes used by field analysts to gather detailed data on specific culture members (with their permission!). By following a worker for a select period of time, you might discover something about the writing environment that you wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. Executives sometimes request shadowing from consultants with the goal of honing their management skills; other culture members might welcome shadowing to capture the complexity of their multi-tasking throughout the day. Chapter 6 presents tips for shadowing writers as they write and manage writing projects.

Write-aloud protocols are a special kind of data on writing processes as compared with finished documents, whether in print or electronic form. To conduct them, you ask a culture member to verbalize his or her thoughts while in the throes of drafting or revising a document. Ideally, you tape-record the thoughts and capture the evolving document. (Ask your culture member to "save as" successive drafts or use screen captures as he or she composes.) You might discover new ways to approach writing tasks, or you might be able to share some ideas with your culture member about her or his approach to writing and ideas about writing. You’ll find tips for conducting write-alouds in Chapter 6, too.

Writing artifacts are in many ways the bread and butter of fieldwork research on professional writing. By "artifact" I mean virtually any written document or any
virtual document—from formal annual reports published by the organization to scribbled notes composed by any of its employees. With the permission of culture members, photocopy written documents or request that the electronic files be downloaded to a portable hard drive or disk. You might also request that they be e-mailed to you as attachments, but it’s a good idea to provide your e-mail address immediately so that the writer loses no time (and so that she or he doesn’t forget after the fact). The key to interpreting these artifacts is to read them not only for their immediate informational content but also for their use in the workplace culture—a topic addressed in the next chapter.

Published and archived accounts may be available in some cases. The organization you are studying may maintain its own archive representing its history, in some cases including histories written by on-staff writers or compiled from public sources, along with documents that illustrate this history. You can also check archives in libraries for stories on the organization you are studying, which might include anything from newspapers stories prompted by the organization’s own press releases to investigative journalism occasioned by the organization’s industry or actions. As with all data you collect, you will want to interpret published and archived accounts with an eye to who was motivated to publish them, and why.

Class notes do not normally figure in a field analysis portfolio, but you might want to consider creating a pocket for them. Your notes from class will help you mine the data in the other pockets for insight, and the data from the other pockets will most likely serve as the basis for some of your in-class activities during the term. Unless your instructor requests otherwise, it’s probably a good idea to keep your class notes in the same portfolio as your fieldnotes.

Your First Visit: Practical Tips

Arrival Scenes: Capturing First Impressions

You know the adage “You only get one chance to make a first impression?” Consider the field analyst’s corollary: You only get one chance to capture your initial impressions. No matter what the fieldwork site, the more time you spend in it, the more everything looks “normal.” Ultimately you do want to achieve this sense that “all is normal” because such a sensation reflects an insider’s view, or emic view.

Yet part of your objective in this field analysis is to muster insight into the business and its writing that challenge the “normal”—that draw upon your on-site observations, analysis of written artifacts, and reflections after you have left the site to imagine some productive alternatives. For this reason, it is vital to capture your initial impressions of the culture you will be studying.

Early twentieth-century ethnographers recognized the value of tracing first impressions. In fact, in many of their ethnographies, the “arrival scene” was nearly de rigueur. We would often see the ethnographer in her or his first
encounter with the “natives,” thus establishing the “I was there” authority and at the same time providing a glimpse of the local culture as perceived at first encounter. Here is Raymond Firth’s first page of *We, the Tikopia*, published in 1936:

> In the cool of the early morning, just before sunrise, the bow of the Southern Cross headed towards the eastern horizon, on which a tiny dark blue outline was faintly visible. Slowly it grew into a rugged mountain mass, standing up sheer from the ocean . . . . In an hour or so we were close inshore, and could see canoes coming round from the south, outside the reef, on which the tide was low. The outrigger-fitted craft drew near, the men in them bare to the waist, girdled with bark cloth, large fans stuck in the backs of their belts, tortoise-shell rings or rolls of leaf in their earlobes and nose, bearded, and with long hair flowing loosely over their shoulders. (1)

Not only does Firth provide good concrete details, he also establishes first-hand authority. (His account also raises questions of the politics of representing other people—how you depict them and your relationships to them—which we will address at various moments throughout this book.)

Keep the “arrival scene” in mind during your first or second visit with your point of contact onsite. Try to capture your initial impressions as closely as possible. Scribble even hasty notes to yourself on the *climate* that you perceive—how the place (and people in it) look, how they act, what the pace of work seems to be and how people interact, etc. Capture as many specific, concrete details on the setting as you can.

When you have time, convert your notes and jottings to an extended description that captures your initial impressions. Compose a couple of pages that take a visitor on a guided slide slow of this environment, complete with sound track (and possibly even “smellavision”), attempting to sketch scenes as vividly as possible. You’ll come back to this initial impression and begin adding to it later in this chapter and again in Chapter 5.

If you are conducting this fieldwork at your own place of work, you may have a hard time recapturing your initial impressions, but make an attempt, all the same. Find a quiet moment away from the hustle and bustle and think back to your arrival. How did the place impress you, as a newcomer? Once you have recorded these memories, take a walk through the office, with a notebook in hand, jotting down specific details and forcing yourself to focus on these details as if you were encountering them for the first time. (You might try taking a series of snapshots and then describing these snapshots with them next to you or on the screen.)

Absolutely vital at this stage of your work is to be *descriptive* and not *evaluative*. You are not trying to assess “good” or “bad” aspects of what you see, but rather to capture these aspects as fully as possible. Evaluation will come much later in the process, so don’t let your evaluative lenses cloud your more impartial view.
Keep editorializing out of your mental slide show, for the moment.

**Developing Perspective: Anticipating “Thick” Description**

Remember the discussion of “thick description” in Chapter 1? This writing convention in ethnographic writing is one that you can explore in your depiction of this workplace. The convention holds that good description will be both visually vivid and analytically informative, so that readers of your account will be able to interpret the scenes and behaviors you convey based on the information you supply on cultural knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, values, and the like. As you strive even at this early stage of your fieldwork to muster description that is concrete, vivid, and precise, anticipate rendering this description “thicker” as you progress in your cultural knowledge.

One way to anticipate this thicker description is to reflect at a “meta” level on the description that you are writing now. A common metaphor in writing is to speak of an author’s “perspective,” and it might help to ponder your perspective as you write. On the one hand is your literal perspective—where you are standing or walking as your eye scans the space before you to take in details. How might the environment look different if you were seated in Ali’s cubicle or poised at Benny’s workstation? What’s the perspective from Gina’s corner office? (Even at this purely physical level, note that the issue of access to spaces enters into play. You can build on this phenomenon: who in the culture has access to what kinds of spaces—and when, and how? What part does access play in cultural practices that influence writing, particularly as concerns access to information and knowledge?)

As you can glean, asking questions sparked by reflections on physical perspective supports your quest for data that will enable thick description. As you ask yourself (and culture members) such questions and begin to mount this description, reflect as well on the intellectual, philosophical, and ideological perspectives you are developing. How do you see yourself “positioned” with respect to culture members, cultural practices, and cultural artifacts? In chapters 7 and 8 we will look at these aspects of your authorship in some detail and link them to the concept of “reflexivity” mentioned in Chapter 1; if you consider your “perspective” in these terms even at this early stage, you’ll get more out of your writing.

For example, I’ve prompted you in your initial description of the workplace to be as specific and concrete as possible. Doing so might mean that instead of noting on an employee’s desk a “laptop computer” you drop down a level of concreteness and mention the “Apple powerbook complete with firewire storage device and videocam.” You’ve not only provided more concrete detail, you’ve supplied your reader with extra knowledge that, when combined with other knowledge, will bolster cultural interpretation.

And you’ve also begun building your perspective. “Why a Mac rather than a PC?” your readers may wonder, and perhaps more cultural knowledge will be
forthcoming to make this detail significant. But even if it doesn’t, you are composing a more detailed depiction that can lead to all kinds of follow-up questions: Is the user of this laptop a graphics specialist? A usability expert? A salesperson who takes slide shows on the road? Why, indeed, a Mac rather than a PC, and how does being a minority in the computing world affect writing and writing practices in this environment?

Of course, you can’t possibly record every detail of the environment at such a level of concreteness—there simply isn’t enough time. Yet it is invaluable in learning to write to ponder why you will dwell on certain details and elide others—your perspective is shaped as much by what you omit as by what you include.

Pondering Your Role(s) in Field Analysis

When Ph.D. researchers began studying writing in nonacademic settings in the mid-eighties, Lee Odell and Stephen Doheny-Farina sketched some valuable guidelines for this research. Among these guidelines were those for reflecting on the roles that researchers should adopt in conducting fieldwork on site.

Using R. Gold’s taxonomy for research roles in sociological field observations, Odell and Doheny-Farina cited a range of research roles—from “complete observer” to “participant-as-observer” to “complete participant” to “observer-as-participant” (512-514). If you are studying a workplace that is not your own, your initial role will be that of “complete observer.” Depending upon the evolution of your research, you might be able to try your hand at some of the writing in this culture, thus partaking in the “observer-as-participant” role and drawing on your experience to enhance your analysis of writing. See if you can eventually assist in some of the tasks—even if it’s helping your p.o.c or others conduct some “menial” tasks such as photocopying or distributing documents in the heat of production. The more you can genuinely perceive activities from the “insider’s” perspective, the more you will be able to appreciate (and evaluate) the writing processes and products on which you focus.

If you are studying your own workplace, you are already a “complete participant.” During your field analysis, you will enlarge this role to include the observational component: practice “watching yourself” as you move through your writing tasks, taking time to jot notes in your fieldnote journal about details surrounding the who, what, where, why, and how of each writing effort. Adopt this observational role at times with your colleagues and coworkers, too. Jot down notes on the details of their writing just as you have on your own. And remember, your goal in taking these notes is to gain as complete a representation as possible of the complexity of writing tasks—even tasks as seemingly mundane as e-mail. Avoid evaluating the writing at this stage and focus instead on being descriptive.

For example, rather than characterize a memo as “way too long” or “lacking organization,” focus on the describing the length and how the content or author’s
persona results in this length or particular organization. By forcing yourself to be descriptive rather than evaluative at this stage, you might perceive insights about the writing that your evaluative filters hide from sight. (You’ll focus on this skill in the next chapter’s learning activities.)

Odell and Doheny-Farina also offer some guidelines for one’s actions while in these research roles. They emphasize that researchers should always minimize the disruptiveness of their presence, a key guideline for all fieldworkers. On the one hand you would never want to disrupt professional activities in a setting into which you have been invited; on the other, such disruption would most likely call attention to yourself, and your job in this field analysis is to focus attention not on yourself but on the workplace and its writing practices. Practice unobtrusiveness.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw offer a strategy to nurture this unobtrusiveness in their comprehensive guide to composing ethnographic fieldnotes. They urge fieldworkers to adopt a “note-taker’s role” early on in their fieldwork experience (22). This advice is invaluable. Once you have established the parameters for your field analysis with your point of contact, demonstrate your note-taking self as often as possible. You will need these notes as you elaborate your analysis, and the more often culture members see you taking notes, the more it will become part of your identity—and the more “normal” it will seem to them. Once this note-taker’s role has become routinized for all concerned, it will be anything but obtrusive, and culture members (or co-workers) will be less likely to view the activity with circumspection. In addition, once you have routinized this role for yourself, you will start to feel uneasy when you are not taking notes—a great prompt to yourself to collect as much data as possible!

At this point, you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed by the enormity of the task that lies ahead. After all, if “everything” is potentially part of your analysis, where do you begin? And how do you, perhaps a total stranger to everyone in this workplace, go about approaching others and asking them to answer a question or two? The easiest solution is to start with simple questions, ponder the answers to them against your growing body of data, then ask more questions as they occur to you. A great way to initiate this process is by building an inventory of writing artifacts.

Learning Activities

Building an Inventory of Writing Artifacts. As stated above, by “writing artifact” I mean any print or electronic document. This category includes such lofty documents as the organization’s mission statement and annual report, to formal products such as proposals and reports, to the many, many “lesser” documents that are generated from day to day, including everything from e-mail to sticky notes. (One of my former students interned at an association where the publications department conducted its entire review process by way of sticky notes! She began photocopying them and amassed a wealth of data that enabled her to perceive the subtle shaping of reviewers’ roles through these notes. She
also vowed to formalize the process in her future employment, which she has successfully achieved as editor-in-chief at a national publication.)

As a starting point, copy the table in the appendix to this chapter and begin completing it, first by hand-written entries on a big blank version of the table, then by your own computer-generated version of this table. You may want to modify the one I’ve included as you go. The most important cell in this table is perhaps the last one, “comments.” Here you should include any comments on artifacts that you have been able to elicit from culture members. You should also include all of your own questions as you proceed. Above all, do not deem any questions “dumb.” Part of your role as a field analyst is to dismiss misgivings about how little you might know about writing in this context and to learn by inquiry. An added bonus to including these questions is that they will serve as a written record of your own learning trajectory during this field analysis, a topic to which we will return in later chapters.

**Tracking One Document’s Flow.** Select one writing artifact from your initial inventory and document its life. That is, talk to people in the organization to add some commentary to each of the categories in your inventory. If Jason in Marketing initially asked for this report, what motivated him? Was he acting on someone else’s instructions, or on his own? Who decided who the “authors” for the report would be, and based on what information? How did the list of addressees get determined? Were there conflicting or overlapping purposes? Topics that seemed as if they were initially relevant but then discarded for one reason or another? (What were the reasons?) What became of this document when it reached its readers? Were they expected to provide feedback, and did they? In what form? What did the document “accomplish” through reaching these readers—perhaps even beyond their scope of action? Create a flow chart that tracks this artifact’s life, with notes along the chart of what happened when, how, and why.

Obviously, for this exercise, you will want to choose a document of some complexity—one lone sticky note simply won’t do! You’ll also find that different categories of the inventory will prove more salient than others depending upon the document type. Use some imagination as you probe the categories and as you collect information—if you really delve into this assignment, you’ll find yourself quite naturally applying fieldwork techniques and garnering valuable insights that we’ll be emphasizing as the term progresses.

**Composing Your Arrival Scene.** Using the tips on writing good description offered in “Got Style?,” compose and revise an “arrival scene” for your fieldwork. Include reflections on your “perspective” as it has taken form, and consider how re-vision might alter this perspective (and vice versa). Share your work with other class members who have recently “arrived” in a new culture.
Memo to File

If you have never composed a memo of record or a memo to file, now is the time to learn. Such memos have become routine across a wide range of professions, in part because of the increasing complexity of services those professions provide (which often includes many contributors to any one service) and in part of the evolution of our larger culture, alas, towards an increasingly litigious one.

In the context of this course, think of the memo to file as a formal track record of where you stand in your field analysis. Unlike the fieldnotes that might be hastily scribbled or the open-ended (and as yet unanswered) questions that you put to yourself on documents such as your Inventory of Writing Artifacts, the memo to file is more formal. In it you take time to review your work to date (or since the last memo to file) with comments on the who, what, where, when, why, and how.

If you compose a carefully-considered memorandum, in which you track your emerging understandings of writing practices in this workplace, you’ll also be able to use this memorandum (and similar ones composed at intervals) to help you refine your inquiry. Consider ethnographers Hammersley and Atkinson’s comments:

Equally important are the regular review and development of analytic ideas in the form of analytic memos. These are not fully developed working papers but occasional written notes whereby progress is assessed, emergent ideas are identified, research strategy is sketched out, and so on. 191

You might even choose to share such memoranda with the people you are studying at your chosen field site to see how your emerging ideas and mini-analyses gibe with their notions of the culture. Whether or not you do, make a practice of composing memos to file at regular intervals—to help you track your thinking and to provoke new ideas for avenues of pursuit. Your first memo to file should include the Inventory of Writing Artifacts you have begun compiling, complete with commentary on it.

Got Style?

Contextualizing Figures

Writers sometimes make the mistake of thinking that because a picture is worth a thousand words, a figure in a text requires no commentary. (I am using the term “figure” here in its broadest sense, to include images, photos, graphs, charts, tables, and the like.) While it is true that readers can glean quite a bit from a well-designed or well-placed figure, it is imperative that you, the author, contextualize the figure for your reader. Besides, you have gone to all the work to choose or assemble the figure, so why pass up the golden opportunity to guide your readers’ interpretations of it?
As part of your memo to file, integrate your Inventory of Writing Artifacts. You can insert this table directly into your text, if you like, or include it as an appendix on a separate sheet at the end of your memorandum. Below the table, identify it by number and name, as I have done in the appendix to this chapter. As you guide your reader through its interpretation, first explain briefly its rationale. Then pick and choose the most salient columns, rows, or cells for commenting on what this table has helped you realize. Above all, refer your reader directly to the table and its individual parts as you compile this commentary.

Writing Good Description

Did you capture your first impressions in your fieldnotes, as suggested in the chapter? If not, do so now. Once you have captured these impressions, take some time to revise them for greater descriptive precision, detail, and vividness, using the guidelines below.

- Good description conveys *concrete sensory impressions*. A table isn’t simply “gray metal” but rather “shiny gunpowder brushed steel.” You wouldn’t say that an old photocopier on its last legs merely “makes noise” but rather “chugs and grinds in fits and starts, squealing at a high pitch with each printed page.” As you are describing this workplace, strive for such nouns and verbs that precisely depict the décor, the machinery, the people, the building.

- Strong description invokes all five senses, if possible. Too often, we relate only the visual, when the other four senses might be invoked to create a fuller picture. Your revised depictions of the setting and people will gain more life on the page, and you’ll also find that you force yourself to pay closer attention to details as you observe, the better to shape the narrator who will tell your story and the better to establish solid ground for the more analytical writing that will follow.

- Strong description is not evaluative. As mentioned in the chapter, at this point in your writing, excise evaluative statements. Don’t say that the décor is “garish”; rather, depict it carefully and precisely so that your readers may draw these conclusions on their own. By writing this way, you are obliging yourself to suspend judgment at even the simplest levels of observation and depiction, which is an invaluable field analysis skill. Moreover, you are building a body of data so that when you move to the more analytical writing later in the term, you’ll have plenty of non-evaluative observations upon which to base this analysis.

- Good cultural description is “thick.” Anticipate the “thick description” that will come later. When you have completed your revision of your “arrival scene,” step back and analyze your narrator. Write a short paragraph on this narrator’s “perspectives,” both literal and metaphorical. Are there any objects in the scene you’ve created that merit more concrete
description as explained in the chapter? If so, make a procedural note to yourself to take another look and supply these details. You might be sowing the seeds for a line of questions that will open up avenues for talk with culture members that will yield valuable insights into local practices.