

# Description and Note-taking Strategies

There's nothing worse than being in the middle of writing and realizing you don't have enough notes on the example you are writing about to describe it thoroughly. Here are some tips to help make sure this doesn't happen to you that were developed for a graduate writing workshop on writing about visual and ephemeral evidence.

## 1) Compile and maintain a personal dictionary of terms

- Collect glossaries relevant to your work
- Put together your own glossary of terms that you frequently encounter
- Maintain a list of adjectives and adverbs related to your analysis
- Note examples compelling descriptions you find elsewhere

## 2) Create and *consistently* use a structured form for note-taking

- Include areas most relevant to your method
- Make room for separate types of parallel descriptions to co-exist in one place
- Use the forms to structure and direct your written observations, and later to make decisions about organization

## 3) Focus on adjectives and adverbs

- Focus on terms that describe a quality, an action, a relationship
- Take active mental notes even when not writing

## 4) Consider incorporating other media into your note-taking

- Photographs or still images
- Sound recording devices
- Hand-drawn motion-sketches, compositional sketches, spatial layouts, etc.
- Organizing software (Scribner, Evernote, etc.)

## 5) Always leave room for forming questions

- At the end of every session or round of observations, always leave room for questions that you would like to pose *to* the object and *about* the object. Return to those questions at the beginning of your next session, to help guide your note taking.
- Pressing or recurring questions often indicate opportunities to describe or interpret how an object unfolds over time

## 6) Keep a journal/log of notes as they develop

- Date all notes or find a way to track notes over time. Do not replace older observations with "better" observations or mix notes that were taken over a long period of time into one document.



### **7) Decide when to incorporate outside readings or descriptions**

- In your note-taking journal, always indicate when you have started to incorporate outside material. Be consistent with your choices across your investigation.
- If appropriate, collect external descriptions, such as event programs, museum catalogs, or reports from friends or colleagues outside of your field (for instance, asking someone else to write down a basic description of what they saw and heard).

### **8) Reflect on your note-taking process**

- Take a few minutes after each session to form a written description or reflection about the setting of the analysis (an archive, a gallery, a public space, etc.).
- Note anything that supported or challenged your expectations or your note-taking approach.

Click here for a printable version of this handout. For more resources related to writing about visual and ephemeral objects, see our handouts on Balancing Description & Analysis, Diagnosing Description Problems, & Types of Evidence.

