FieldWriting: Point of View and Rhetoric

Point of View

You may have encountered the term *point of view* in a literature course in which discussions focus on the angle of vision from which a story is told. Telling a story from inside a character's head, as you know, is significantly different from telling a story through an omniscient third-person narrator. As our colleague Jim Marshall says, "Where you stand is what you see." But as a fieldworker, your job is to stand in several places and see through multiple sets of eyes. We call this an ethnographic perspective.

Ethnographic writing needs to include many different points of view, and that means you'll need to find ways to signal to your reader when you're shifting from one to another. You need to include your own first-person point of view. You also need to include the points of view of your informants as you've gathered them through interviews, as well as a third-person outsider point of view to report on background information and to present events as readers might see them.

It's useful from the outset to take some of your exploratory writing or initial fieldnotes, turn them into short descriptions of people or places, and experiment—for example, try shifting points of view from first-person insider to third-person outsider. Changing point of view can help you locate missing or underdeveloped information about your fieldsite and the informants and, in turn, suggest another round of research you'd want to do.

Here is how Terra Savage moved from the exploratory writing she did about her conflicting feelings as she entered the tattoo parlor (Box 4) to more of a description of the tattoo parlor subculture as she listens to Chance, the tattooist, talk about the artistry of his work. We'll include a few key phrases from her first freewrite:

> Grunge. Class. No Stress. Responsibility. Lacking education. Overachiever. Artistic. Artistic? Family. Tattoo artisan. Me. At first glance, there seems to be no relationship between my life and this tattoo parlor. But take another look; the more I stare I am not so different.
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> Men with tattoos ride Harley Davidsons and are running from middle age.... Tattoos on teenage kids are a way for them to rebel. My mom would threaten me with my life.

Over several drafts, Terra moves from her early exploratory first-person freewriting to this point of view in her final field study in which she describes Chance and quotes from what he has to say. She is doing the delicate job of giving us both her perspective and Chance's, by using a third-person narrative point of view:

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Reading Self, Reading Cultures: Understanding Texts

Your ability to "read" involves texts, but also artifacts, cultures, and yourself. In this chapter you will:

- react and respond to readings
- explore your positions as they relate to a topic
- describe and interpret cultural artifacts
- integrate source material
- learn to work with online communities

We all read differently. Literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt suggests that a reader's main instrument for making meaning is one's self. And meaning is an intertwining of our past reading experiences, current tastes, attitudes about genres and forms, and history of teachers, mentors, friends, and relatives. No one reads exactly as you do because no one has exactly the same experiences.

> *The reader performs the poem or the novel, as the violinist performs the sonata. But the instrument on which the reader plays, and from which he evokes the work, is—himself.*
>
> —LOUISE ROSENBLATT

We also read differently because we have different needs as readers, and we read differently at different times in our lives. You may have a different reaction to a book like *Charlotte's Web*, for example, when you reread it as an adult. When Bonnie read *Little Women* to her daughter, she felt connected with the character of the mother "Marmee," although as a 10-year-old reading *Little Women*, she hadn't noticed the mother at all. We bring our current lives into the reading we do.

As a reader, you have formed tastes and predispositions from your many past experiences. What are your attitudes toward reading? Are you a reluctant reader? Do you like to whip through a book quickly, or do you luxuriate in how an author uses words? Do you read novels differently than textbooks? Poetry differently than magazines and newspapers? Online magazines and Web sites differently than print versions? Do you like to mark your own comments in the margins of a book? Do you respond to your reading in a journal? Do you like to talk with friends in a book club about what you read?

The kinds of questions that we list in Box 9 can be asked of any text you read. Reading any complex text can also involve reading a culture. In the excerpt from *Mama Day*, we see culture's ordinary life in dailiness that fieldworkers always try to penetrate—catching crawdaddies, chewing tobacco, truck farming. But we also see this culture's uniqueness through Naylor's specific characters and setting.

With the character of Reema's pear-headed nameless boy, Naylor offers us a parody of a field researcher. He is an insider, born on the island, but his college education had so shaped him that he was unable, even as an insider, to do what fieldworkers need to do: listen, observe, and participate in the life of the people he studied. Even the residents of Willow Springs knew more about how to do his fieldwork than he did: "If the boy wanted to know what 18 & 23 meant, why didn't he just ask?" The narrator concludes that a researcher who doesn't know how to form questions would never be in a position to understand answers.

You'll need to think about how your background can affect what you see in another culture just as it does when you read a written text. What you see is affected by who you are. Your education, geography, family history, personal experiences, race, gender, or nationality can influence the way you do research. Learning to read a culture like a text is similar to learning to read a text like a culture.

Positioning: Reading and Writing about Yourself

As we conduct our fieldwork, we must be conscious of ourselves as the key instruments of the research process. When you begin to research a site, you will need to "read" yourself in the same way that you have deciphered texts, and you will want to write that perspective into your study. Had Reema's boy thought or written about his insider status, education and field training, family history, and geography, he might have asked different questions and gotten different answers. Instead of leaving out personal, subjective information, fieldworkers should write it in.

In fieldwork, **positioning** includes all the subjective responses that affect how the researcher sees data. Readers of ethnography sometimes wonder how this kind of research could be considered social "science" if the researcher is not offering "objective" data. In fact, fieldworkers achieve a type of objectivity through **intersubjectivity**, the method of connecting as many different perspectives on the same data as possible. These multiple sources encourage the fieldworker to interpret patterns and interrelationships among various accounts alongside the researcher's own account and to leave other interpretations open as well.

Being the researcher so influences your fieldwork that it would be deceptive *not* to include relevant background information about yourself in your study. From our own experiences as fieldworkers, we believe that as a researcher you position or situate yourself in relationship to your study in at least three ways: fixed, subjective, and textual.

Fixed Positions

Fixed positions are the personal facts that might influence how you see your data—your age, gender, class, nationality, race—factors that do not change during the course of the study but are often taken for granted and unexamined in the research process. Does it matter that you are middle-aged and studying adolescents? Or that you grew up on a kibbutz in Israel? Does being a middle-class African American affect the way you interpret the lives of homeless African Americans?

Our word *fixed* is problematic; nothing is truly "fixed." Sometimes fixed factors are subjected to change during the research process, and then that, too, demands the researcher's attention. If, for example, a male researcher looking at the play behaviors of preschool children becomes the father of a girl during his study, he may find himself looking at his fieldsite data through a different lens. If what originally seemed a fixed influence in the researcher's position becomes more fluid, then that process of changed perspectives would become part of the researcher's data.

Subjective Positions

Subjective positions such as life history and personal experiences may also affect your research. Someone who grew up in a large extended or blended family will see the eating, sleeping, and conversation patterns of groups differently than someone from a small nuclear family. Many people who grew up in large families confess that they learned to eat quickly at family meals because they wanted to get their fair share before the food disappeared.

Textual Positions

Textual positions—the language choices you make to represent what you see—affect the writing of both fieldnotes and the final ethnographic report. The way that you position yourself in the field with respect to the people you study—how close or how far away you focus your research lens—determines the kind of data you'll gather, the voice you'll create in your finished text, and to some extent your credibility as a researcher.

I worry that they are presumptuous or paternalistic. For this reason, I feel a little queasy about speaking Spanish with my subjects, especially bad Spanish. If speaking is a way of culturally identifying oneself, it seems to say, "I am able to mimic your way of talking and being but haven't made the effort to actually become or embrace it." If I were asked why I chose to speak Spanish when my subjects speak perfect English, I don't know how I would answer. If I'm doing it to be a part of his or her culture, was I invited? My concern that I would be seen as an impostor was mostly shattered. The kids readily accepted me as a friend. However, I felt that the other Latino volunteers my age were less accepting of me and were very guarded and distrusting throughout the study.

Understanding Positioning: Checking In on Yourself

Throughout the process of conducting your fieldstudy, you'll need to continue to ask how who you are affects how you understand yourself and your fieldwork. In Chapter 2, we offered you three questions to help you monitor your assumptions, stances, and blind spots:

- What surprised me?
- What intrigued me?
- What disturbed me?

These questions help provide ways of "checking in" on yourself as well as ways of interrogating the different features of your positions as you bring them to your study. This kind of monitoring will eventually help you see how your fixed and subjective positions contribute to the textual voice you'll develop as you write about your topic. Even more important, checking in will heighten your awareness of the extent to which the instrument of your data gathering is not statistical information or a computer program or an experiment but *you*—with all of your assumptions, preconceptions, past experiences, and complex feelings.

A humorous essay by Laura Bohannan about her fieldwork experience in West Africa, "Shakespeare in the Bush," illustrates the importance of checking in on yourself—on your assumptions, expectations, and feelings—throughout your research experiences. In "Shakespeare in the Bush," Bohannan, an anthropologist, exposes how she tried to import the "universal" message of *Hamlet* to the Tiv tribe she was studying in Africa.

At one point in the essay, Bohannan decides to skip summarizing the famous "To be or not to be" speech because she feels her listeners would misinterpret it. They have already approved of Claudius quickly marrying Hamlet's mother soon after her husband's murder—something Western audiences usually condemn. Bohannan then proceeds to try to explain Hamlet's father's "ghost" to her audience. She finds herself interrupted at every turn in the telling of what she had previously thought to be a "universal" and "transcultural" story:

> I decided to skip the soliloquy. Even if Claudius was here thought quite right to marry his brother's widow, there remained the poison motif, and I knew they would disapprove of fratricide. More hopefully I resumed, "That night Hamlet kept watch with the three who had seen his dead father. The dead chief again appeared, and although the others were afraid, Hamlet followed his dead father off to one side. When they were alone, Hamlet's dead father spoke."
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> "Omens can't talk!" The old man was emphatic.
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> "Hamlet's dead father wasn't an omen. Seeing him might have been an omen, but he was not." My audience looked as confused as I sounded. "It *was* Hamlet's dead father. It was a thing we call a 'ghost.'" I had to use the English word, for unlike many of the neighboring tribes, these people didn't believe in the survival after death of any individuating part of the personality.
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> "What is a 'ghost'? An omen?"
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> "No, a 'ghost' is someone who is dead but who walks around and can talk, and people can hear him and see him but not touch him."
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> They objected. "One can touch zombis."
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> "No, no! It was not a dead body the witches had animated to sacrifice and eat. No one else made Hamlet's dead father walk. He did it himself."
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> "Dead men can't walk," protested my audience as one man.
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> I was quite willing to compromise. "A 'ghost' is a dead man's shadow."
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> But again they objected. "Dead men cast no shadows."
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> "They do in my country," I snapped.

To appreciate the full scope of Bohannan's mistaken assumptions, read her complete essay online. As you read, you'll want to notice the ways the author monitors herself as she relates the story of Hamlet to the audience of informants she is trying to win over through her storytelling.

Bohannan's essay also raises the many ethical issues she faced in the field. Should she drink beer in the morning with her informants? Should she try to change parts of *Hamlet* to make the story more culturally relevant to her audience? Should she defend the way her own culture thinks of family relationships when clearly her audience thinks differently? Although Bohannan constructs herself textually as a bewildered fieldworker in "Shakespeare

Getting Permission

When you enter a fieldsite and make yourself known, you must follow many courtesies to make yourself and the people you're observing feel comfortable. All places in which you are a participant-observer involve an official process for "negotiating entry." As a beginning researcher, don't enter a site where you feel at risk in the subculture. For the kinds of projects this book suggests, you will not have adequate time to gain entry or insider status in an intimidating group. One of our students, for example, wanted to research a group of campus skinheads. They permitted Jake to hang out on the edges of their subculture, even allowing him to read their "code of honor," which included these statements:

- Be discreet about new recruits; check them out thoroughly.
- For prospects, we must have at least a 90-day contact period in which we can attest to your character. A probationary period and productivity report will be given.
- Outsiders need no knowledge of what goes on or is said in our meetings.
- No racial exceptions whatsoever! All members must be 100 percent white!

Early on, Jake began to realize that his research position was unworkable, that he was stuck. While the skinheads had let him into their subculture as a potential recruit, he could never fully enter their subculture or worldview. Their code of honor, which excluded minority groups, stood against his personal ethics. In an early portfolio reflection, Jake wrote, "I never hung out with them in public. I never went to an organizational meeting. I realized I was an outsider to this subculture."

Jake's negotiation experience was so dramatic that he was unable to gain full access, and so he was unable to collect the data he wanted. No matter how interested in and enthusiastic we are about a possible fieldsite, we must be conscious of our own comfort levels and even potential dangers in investigating certain groups or places.

Harvey DuMarce, another of our students, experienced difficulty negotiating entry into a fieldsite owing mainly to his own assumption that it would be easy for him to do so. He is a Native American, a Sioux, who wanted to research a gambling casino on another tribe's reservation. Because of his heritage, he assumed that he would be welcomed. But he wasn't. He had enormous difficulty finding people who were willing to talk to him, and he never really knew whether it was because of his Sioux background or because he was perceived as a student. Eventually, he had a conversation with the woman who ran the gift shop at the casino, and she introduced him to others. As his informant, she helped him gain an insider status in a place where he had assumed he already had it.

Any fieldsite you enter requires that you be conscious of your own personal assumptions and how they reflect your ethics, but you must also be respectful of the people whose lives you are watching. It is common courtesy for researchers to acknowledge time spent with informants with gestures as small as writing thank-you notes or as large as exchanging time (tutoring or babysitting, for example) or obtaining grant-funded stipends to pay them. As you work your way through the process of getting permission or "negotiating entry," be sure to follow the guidelines in the box below.

Guidelines for Negotiating Entry

- Explain your project clearly to the people you will study, and obtain the requisite permission from those in charge.
- Let your informants understand what part of the study you'll share with them.
- Think about what you can give back to the fieldsite in exchange for your time there.

Some sites may require official documentation, as in the case of two of our students who collaborated on a study of a day-care center. The center required them to have an interview, submit a proposal describing their project, and sign a document attesting that they had reviewed all of the center's rules and procedures. Entry might be simple, laborious, or even impossible. For this reason, don't wait too long to make yourself visible to the insiders you study. One student we worked with spent over a month in the field observing a Disney store. When she attempted to get official permission to write about this store, however, she was denied entry and could not continue her project.

Once you finalize your site, you might want to check with your instructor to find out your university's policy with respect to research on human subjects. For long-term projects, the university's **human subjects review board** usually requires that you file a proposal and submit permission forms from your informants. They are called "**informed consent** forms," and on the facing page we present a sample of one of our own forms as a model. Universities usually have less formal procedures for the kind of short-term fieldwork that you might do for a one-semester course, and often have no requirements for filing permissions. Fieldworkers, no matter what size their projects, are ethically responsible for accurately showing the voices of their informants on the page. We feel strongly that you should receive permission from all the informants whose work you audio or video record as well as from any official person at your fieldsite.