

Stepping In, Stepping Out of Cultures: Guide for Critically Self-Reflective Writing

UMB Center for Global Engagement and UMB Writing Center

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Before Leaving Home

- Read this guide.
- Find a blank notebook that you dedicate to field notes or create a dedicated file on your phone or laptop.
- Make sure entries include a date.
- Record how you are feeling about your upcoming travel and upcoming project in another country or setting that is new.

Overseas: Recording Observations

Once you arrive in your host community, you will observe

- a) your new surroundings and the members of communities with whom you will interact
- b) yourself—your reactions and assumptions—as you move within this new space, interacting with community members.

Your observations should be ongoing, from the time you rise to when you lie down to sleep. Record these observations in your notebook or device by

- vividly describing what you see, hear, taste, smell, and feel (textures, tactility)
- honestly articulating how you feel (emotional reaction).

In short, *intentionally* shift into observer mode as you move through your day in various other roles.

Observing Through Fieldnotes

One option for recording your observations is called “double-entry notes” (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). For this approach, divide pages of your notebook into two columns, describing your observations in the left column and writing your emotional reactions to what you observe in the right column. Below is an excerpt from notes taken by a professor completing a faculty development collaboration with faculty at a university in China:

Sample Fieldnotes

Dates	Descriptions	Reactions
July 3	Airport is super busy. Hot. Multiple announcements in Chinese. Mandarin, I guess?	I don't speak the language. What are they saying?
July 5	First day of class. Breakfast in the hotel at 7am. Buffet. Took me 10 minutes to find a coffee maker, after much gentle back-and-forth with the serving staff. My English and	Need coffee. No coffee no function. Jetlag is terrrrriibbbllleeee.

	<p>their Chinese. Not much understanding at first. Finally just repeated “coffee, coffee, coffee, please.” They looked doubtful but lead me to a machine with buttons labeled in Chinese. I just guessed. Thank all that is good in the world that coffee drizzled out into the cup I placed under the little spout.</p> <p>Buffet of fried noodles, black vegetables—mushrooms, maybe? A lot of gelatinous or clear thick sauces with meat. Fishy smells. Some stale danishes. A row of kettles with some kind of soups. Tasty little mini-eggrolls with some kind of sweet paste in them.</p>	<p>I don’t speak any Chinese. Why didn’t I learn at least a few phrases before arriving here? Am I being disrespectful by speaking at servers in English, as if I expect them to speak my language? Ugh!</p> <p>Yikes! What are these things? I’ve never seen this stuff in my life!</p> <p>I don’t like fish, and I’m a vegetarian. What am I going to do? I don’t know “vegetarian” in Chinese. What will the servers think if I use Google Translate to explain? Wait. Does my phone get reception here?</p> <p>I am exhausted and it’s only 7:30am. Head hurts. No wifi. Can’t eat much...</p>
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<p>July 7</p>	<p>Class is made of faculty from across the sciences, with some English teachers and few art teachers.</p> <p>When I ask them to share what they like or misunderstand about the article I assigned for today, nobody moves. They’re all sitting up straight and listening but...not a word for what seems like minutes. I ask again with a nervous smile. Body odor filling the room already at 9am. Air-conditioner can’t keep up with the searing heat outside. Sound of cicadas coming through the open classroom windows.</p> <p>Somebody mutters “Nothing.”</p> <p>“Nothing you like? Nothing you misunderstand,” I ask.</p> <p>“No,” someone else says. “It was very long with so many confusing ideas. How do I apply any of this to geothermal dynamics engineering, my specialty?”</p>	<p>How do we talk about teaching strategies with so many different disciplines represented here? The coordinator of the program didn’t tell me the group would be this diverse!</p> <p>I’m freaking out.</p> <p>Nobody likes the reading. I’ve already failed. We’ve got two more weeks of this class. Help!</p> <p>I’m not used to this heat. I feel really dizzy. Jetlag still a problem. Stomach hurts.</p> <p>I’m confused. What should I ask next? Should I just be straight with them and ask what they’d like to read or talk about?</p> <p>What is geothermal dynamics engineering? That is some serious science stuff. I’m lost...</p>
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		<p>Why didn't I think about what THEY would like to read? I'm afraid I only chose readings that I thought they need to read. Big mistake here. But aren't here to challenge them to think about these teaching strategies discussed in the reading?</p> <p>How do I help the group feel comfortable enough to speak up? Or should I try small-group work?</p>
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Observing: What to Focus On

When you interact with community members and take notes, pay close attention to the following features of observation:

Nonverbal language and behavior: Pay close attention to forms of body language that you can describe and then analyze, connecting them to the community(ies) you observe and explaining the significance of that connection to your readers. Some elements of body language to notice include kinesics (e.g., facial expression, eye contact, posture, and gesture), use of space (e.g., unfamiliar notions of personal and public space), and dress and adornment (e.g., what people wear and how they mark their bodies). When you observe nonverbal language, make sure to think and write critically about not just what bodies express but also why.

Verbal language: Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) point out that “[l]anguage shapes the thoughts in your mind, can provide a subject for research, and communicates your ideas to others” (307). Of course, “language” can refer to distinct languages or even different varieties of the same language (e.g., slangs, creoles, dialects, etc.). Language forms a common medium of communication that distinguishes between those of us on the “inside” of a community, who speak the members’ language, and those of us who do not speak the language and are therefore on the “outside.” You may not speak the local language at your site. That presents both a frustration and an opportunity to observe quietly and learn how to maneuver without the ability to communicate well. How does it feel? How are community members reacting to someone who does not speak their language.

If you do speak the language or understand some of it, listen carefully to the spoken language of community members, translate the language of the community’s culture, “recording the meanings of key words, phrases, and ideas that might serve as clues to step in to your informant’s culture” (310). Then, consider these discoveries. Are the words a kind of jargon specific to the community? What do these words express about the community’s attitudes, beliefs, and customs? How are they significant to your understanding of the community?

Observing: Position, Power, and Transparency

As Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) say, “Read yourself” (130). Develop a habit of critically approaching your observations, admitting what you assume and what you don’t know about the

community(ies) before you begin your project and while your work with community members during the project. Recognizing that a purely objective point of view is *impossible* for this assignment, connect what you observe to research you conducted on the community(ies) prior to leaving the United States and your own lived experiences and learning at UMB (in class, clinic, etc.).

As you position yourself, keep in mind Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's (2012) advice:

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.** (128, emphasis added)

Remember that "entering the field [e.g., a community] is not about exerting oneself on others but about emerging into delicate relationships with those who guide us where they choose" (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). Before you interact with community members, make sure to explain that you're writing (notes/observations) and why (to critically reflect on yourself and your practice as a professional-in-training).

Interpreting, Analyzing, and Developing Fieldnotes

Find space and time conducive to sustained thought and then re-read your field notes, searching for patterns in your experiences and reactions. Forgot to record some details you're just now remembering? Add them to your notes. Underline important patterns you see emerging and ideas or reactions that you need to further critically explore.

The recurring themes, images, and metaphors you begin to uncover will help you gradually form interpretations and analyses of your time there in the community.

Finding ways to map and otherwise make sense of your notes takes many forms. One strategy is called freewriting. To freewrite, don't worry about punctuation, grammar, or other sentence-level concerns but make sure to represent names, language, quotations, etc. accurately. Your goal is to explore possible themes and patterns in your fieldnotes. **To help you, we have added some comments in yellow to help you go deeper and analyze your field notes into true critical self-reflection.**

Freewrite 1: The restaurant staff were responsive to my requests for coffee in the morning at breakfast. Clearly service-oriented, they both shifted uncomfortably as I repeated the word "coffee." Notice that the freewriting focuses at first on the servers, as subjects, not on the writer themself. The entry to reflection is observing first those around them. One went to another server, maybe the other server speaks English? Only nods but no reassurances or assistance. The new server joins her colleague in listening to me repeat the word. The servers demonstrate problem-solving here and the writer recognizes this behavior as an important observation. I found the coffee cups hidden by a curtain under the machine and held up a coffee cup in my right hand. They nodded and took it from me, placed it under the little spout, then looked at me with questioning faces: what did I want? "Coffee," I repeated. On the buttons, I think: 咖啡 (coffee) and 热水 (hot water) or 开始 (start)? The writer records their attempt to use material (the cup), gesture (nonverbal), and verbal communication to solve the problem. This revision to the fieldnotes includes addition of the possible Chinese words on the coffee machine buttons, showing closer attention to language in the situation and space. Why didn't I take time to use Google Translate? Oh, that's right. Doesn't work well or sometimes at all in this region of the country. Why didn't I learn some Chinese before arriving? Just repeated "coffee." So far, I've noticed how the teachers in the class rely on

each other in ways similar to the servers. The writer questions herself, considering opportunities they fumbled. Also, they recognize a pattern of collaborative strategy for cross-cultural communication displayed by the servers and the teachers in the classroom.

Freewrite 2: Am I angry? Just confused? Am I bad at teaching this stuff? A mixture, maybe. The teachers I'm here to teach have been sitting straight and awake in their chairs but aren't speaking out in class much. The writer starts with internal questions that honestly suggest her fears and concerns about the situation with the teachers. Also, the writer notices the nonverbal posture of the teachers in the class, especially noting the silence. When one muttered "nothing", I couldn't understand the context. The writer admits, again, their confusion and frustration with their own lack of understanding. Note that the writer doesn't attempt to invalidate the teachers' experiences and expressions of frustration. Did they mean we're not studying what they like or did they mean they don't understand anything we're studying? All the desks are arranged in small clusters in a spacious "modern" room—you know, with pipes visible above and plenty of whiteboard space. At one of the cluster of desks, the English teachers. I asked them if they can help me further understand what the class is saying about "nothing." The writer describes the arrangement of the desks and the space in which they're arranged. Important observation suggesting that such a space and arrangement might be (or might not be) conducive to teamwork. Importantly, the writer records that she reached out to the English teachers in the room, bilingual colleagues who can help bridge communication. The pattern is getting clearer here: cross-cultural communication involves translation, asking for help from bilingual colleagues, and teamwork. One jumps up immediately to kindly say that the reading for that night was too long and complicated. They had difficulty even finishing the piece. Great, I've totally mis-prepared for this group. The writer records interaction with the teachers as they try to identify the specific problem with communication. The writer also records the visceral response she feels to the frustration. These details enhance the urgency of the situation and explain the high stakes of the attempt to communicate. I'm so thirsty and the room smells of frustration and nervous sweat. I can relate to their hesitation. Thinking back to the coffee conundrum with the servers. We were all so stumped and I'm sure I was grouchy. No coffee no function.

Freewrite 3: "What can we do?" I asked the English teachers and they ask the rest of the class in Chinese. Everyone starts talking in mixtures of Chinese and English. Heads are nodding. I'm not sure I fully understanding. I hear in English: "more time," "group work," and "grammar." Looks like we're coming to consensus. Another English teacher reports back to me: Let's take more time to read short sections over each night and then address specific questions in groups over each section in class. Oh, figuring out what the situation and context means getting help from colleagues. Translating together. Like the servers tried to do for my coffee request. The writer allows herself to respond to the situation humbly and competently, requesting help from the English teachers and making time and space for deliberation and translation across the room. The writer makes a connection to the servers' competencies observed at breakfast. The teachers have started crisscrossing the room to different clusters of desks, working across professions (they all teach different subjects/disciplines), asking one another about the assigned texts (in English) we're discussing. The writer records what they observe as a next step: the collaboration in action. Details about the mixing of languages and the physical fluidity of the collaborative groups are important to explain how this process works. Such details will work well in the first draft of the reflective essay/piece that comes later. They're using English phrasing from the readings and mixing it with Chinese. I've been giving them more time each day for these negotiations. It's a group effort across languages and unfamiliar content. They're teaching me about using cross-cultural strategies for reading and understanding. The writer admits what they're specifically learning from the community they serve as a visiting professor. This pattern of collaboration and cross-cultural communication will become the heart of the writer's later reflective essay/piece.

Continuing the Process

As you continue reviewing your fieldnotes and freewriting for patterns and themes, challenge yourself to answer three questions:

1. *What surprised me?* This question helps you keep track of your assumptions about the community, your project's progress, and your own position in the process. By answering this question, you articulate your preconceived notions about what you're doing there and what your work means.
2. *What intrigued me?* By asking this question, you address your personal stances in relationship to your work there in the community. What interests and attracts you about the work and community always influences what you describe and how you write about it.
3. *What disturbed me?* This question exposes yourself to yourself. It requires honesty about your stereotypes, prejudices, and biases. Focusing on what bothers you about your descriptions and reactions is not always comfortable, but it often leads to crucial insights. (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012)

In your freewriting, answer these questions but don't worry too much about whether the thoughts make coherent sense yet. Just get your answers down. You're only just beginning to critically interpret and analyze what you've observed. Add a layer as you write. Ask yourself an addendum, "**Why?**" Explain the *reasons* for your answers.

Returning Home: What to do now to finalize your reflections . . .

You will return home to Baltimore with a notebook full of double-entry notes and freewriting, initiating the critical interpretation and analysis of your experience in the community. From these insights, you can build a more formal reflective essay/piece that you can submit for peer review and/or to your faculty member for review (see **Reflective Essay Review Guide**).

Now you have an essay that you can use for many purposes – even publication.