

USING PRIMARY SOURCES (INFORMAL SKETCHES)

Using primary sources in your writing can be an excellent way to break the monotony of simply reporting information from using secondary sources. Instructors often like to see that students have taken the initiative to explore topics on their own. Sketches are an excellent way to collect information and learn about a topic. Besides, some people learn much better by exploring physical locations and doing “hands on” activities with others in order to learn about a topic.

Sketches (sometimes called cultural sketches, ethnographic sketches, non-fiction sketches, or simple field notes) are exactly what they sound like: a series of short specific notes about the environment and conditions around us.

In a sketch, which is much more brief than an elaborate study, such as an ethnography (a longer and more potent study of culture), a writer simply documents/records what kinds of things he/she finds in a particular area.

In a sense, every business, every shopping mall, every university, and every locality has its own conditions and characteristics. With a sketch, you simply document/record a few minutes what occurs and what is observed within such conditions.

EX:

While taking an anthropology course, I was asked to complete a sketch. The instructor asked us to find a location with its own individualized culture, so I chose a hospital. When I went to the hospital, I noticed different behaviors, customs, language, and even different clothing.

Here is an example of what might be documented in visiting a hospital:

-Monday, March 2, 2009. 9:45PM-
Mountain Valley Hospital
Provo, Utah
Sketch

When you walk into a hospital, you see many different types of workers: Doctors, nurses, technicians, aides, volunteers, and even maintenance workers. These people are distinctly different from the patients and their families who sit (somewhat impatiently) in the waiting rooms. The staff wears name badges and uniforms (mostly “hospital scrubs” for doctors, nurses, technicians, and aides). The scrubs on the first floor seem different from the scrubs on the second floor. The scrubs on the first floor are maroon colored. The scrubs used by the staff on the second floor are light blue.

The maintenance workers wear jeans and polo shirts in addition to name badges. They are generally wearing tool belts or carrying different instruments used to fix things. Patients are generally sitting with their families present. Most patients look as if they are in a general despair. Children are crying. Adults are very apprehensive or just have a general look of being uncomfortable. Family members seem generally supportive, where they are holding children or lightly “patting” the backs of their loved ones.

Another interesting feature of the area is the layout. There are many doors and windows which seem to “section off” the staff from the patients. In addition, there are plenty of security staff members walking around with their “Walkie Talkies” making

different sounds. Occasionally, there is a page for a visitor or doctor from above on the intercom system. You seem to be able to hear it in most areas.

As I sit, I notice an older young man (about 30-40 years old), wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and in some sort of distress. He presented himself to the registration staff who told him to sit for a moment and wait until a room was available. He seems to be cradling his arm, as if he might have broken it or damaged his muscles. Either way, he seems like he is in excruciating pain.

In addition, I notice a woman watching a hospital television set with her young child. The child appears to be male. He seems very fixed on the movie (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone I believe). He appears to be very happy and active and is talking quite loud when compared to the other patients. I am unsure if he is a patient or is "waiting" for someone. Since the mother is present, perhaps they are waiting for the husband. The child keeps yelling out for Harry Potter to be careful. I am fairly sure that the child is about 3-4 years old.

Besides the patients, the registration person, who works at a kiosk just outside the Emergency Room doors, seems to be very busy filling out paper work. For each patient, she greets them. She asks for their date of birth, their current address, and if they have insurance. Next, she asks them to sit and wait until their name is called.

-Ends 10:45PM-

Unlike a survey, which helps us to quantify the number and types of people participating in a culture, a sketch helps to illustrate the types of behaviors and nuances found within a particular time frame in a particular setting within a culture. In a sense, the sketch, like an interview, is more of a qualitative tool rather than a quantitative tool.

Some authors use sketches to understand the nature of a particular environment in order to account for particular behaviors, artifacts, patterns of movement, and other nuances found within the culture.

Oftentimes, private investigators, police, anthropologists, actors, screen writers, marketing specialists and others use sketches in order to understand what happens in a particular area. They use this information to determine the "norms" of the population in order to improve the surroundings, account for certain acts accomplished in the past, and to look for trends, which present business opportunities.

For example, a screen writer, who is writing a screenplay about hospitals, might use material from an informal sketch to inspire more realistic details in a film.

A criminal investigator might use the conditions observed in a particular area to understand how a crime committed in the past might have been able to happen.

A marketing specialist might look for creative and innovative ways to sell items based on societal norms and even the patterns of behaviors observed (such as how people move in one direction towards the front of a store or what they do while they wait in line, etc.).

Regardless of the purpose, an informal sketch helps to provide some primary source material which cannot necessarily be found through surveys, interviews, or other means.

GUIDELINES FOR SKETCHES

+Pick a particular place within a particular span of time (try to keep it short – less than an hour).

+Try to write down everything you observe (mundane, specific, even fantastic...).

+Make notes about anything that you see or observe. Look for patterns. Look for complexities. Look for action.

+Do not draw attention to yourself (try to be unseen – imagine yourself like a spy or a private detective who is learning from the environment, while observing others in their most natural state of being).

+If invited, you may interact with the group, as long as you are able to note characteristics or nuances of their behavior (during or after your interactions with the group).

+Try to be vivid with your description. Point out specifics.

+Try to use a chronological timeframe for describing things.

+Make note of the time, date, and location of the note