

2f – A Guide to Data Collection Techniques

Observations, Photographs and Field Sketches

Not all forms of data collection have to involve other people or the direct collection of numerical statistics. Spending time in the area under study and making notes on any **observations** you see can be a useful way of adding value to your Independent Investigation. Observing the study area should always be done alongside any more formal quantitative data collection and may provide explanations for anomalies or unusual patterns within the data once analysed.



For example, pure numerical data on the flow rate of a river course may show that the river slows its velocity considerably at a certain point. This may be unhelpfully recorded as an anomaly in the investigation write-up. However, the use of observation notes would show that this decrease in velocity actually happened just after a natural or human-made obstruction in the riverbed which had impeded the flow of the river.

Observations can also be more open, especially when the study area might be a place that is not well known to the researcher. Investigating rebranding in a town centre might be enhanced, for example, by sitting for an hour in a town square over a number of days to see how different types of people use the space and how it transforms itself to different purposes over the week as well as how it may be misused.



Taking **photographs** or recording short **videos** of an area can also be good ways of obtaining qualitative data. These observations can be used, albeit subjectively, on the part of the researcher to show how one might feel about a particular issue, new development or natural area. **Mental maps** can be another good way of recording this information. These maps are drawn as the researcher tours an area, and record how the researcher feels about a central issue in different locations. For example, in a rebranding investigation, the researcher may record how safe or unsafe they feel in certain locations around a town, either through

symbols, or by emphasising a certain feature they see and drawing it in the form of a map. The researcher can equally ask local members of the public to also create their own mental maps for comparisons with the researcher's.



Annotated Field Sketches are simplified drawings of a fieldwork site, produced in the field. The term 'sketch' can be a little misleading as it suggests that a high level of artistic ability is needed to produce a field sketch. In fact, a field sketch is a line drawing that only highlights the key features of the view that the researcher finds important geographically. They are neat, black and white drawings that do not usually require sophisticated shading or any form of 'artistic detail'.



Selecting the view to be drawn may be the most important stage of a field sketch – some geographers find a cardboard frame held up to the view useful for this exercise. Dividing the sketch into the foreground, middle-ground and background, and drawing each section separately, can help researchers who are nervous of drawing a complicated scene, as well as focus the sketcher on each part of the scene for details.

Once drawn, the field sketch can then be annotated with notes that describe and explain the most important features. Processes, and their effects, can be highlighted and relationships between people and the environment can be made. Features that are not easily identified from the field sketch, such as slope angle, rock type or percentage vegetation cover can also be noted on the drawing, allowing the viewer to create a stronger understanding of the scene. If a series of field sketches are to be used, it is a good idea to note next to each one the date, grid reference and direction of view so that comparisons can be made between them.

Field sketches and photographs can also easily be used alongside GIS. Both can be situated on a map at their respective locations and used, alongside other data, to show how a landscape may change over a geospatial area.

