

SYNTHESIS / ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

02 AEIOU

AEIOU is an organizational framework reminding the researcher to attend to, document, and code information under a guiding taxonomy of Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects, and Users.¹

Even when observations are only casually or semi-structured, it pays to have an organizational framework in mind, such that the researcher attends to key details. AEIOU is an easy mnemonic for guiding and coding observations. As a heuristic, or rule of thumb, the taxonomy defines each feature of the observation set as follows:

- **Activities** are goal-directed sets of actions. What are the pathways that people take toward the things they want to accomplish, including specific actions and processes?
- **Environments** include the entire arena in which activities take place. For example, what describes the atmosphere and function of the context, including individual and shared spaces?
- **Interactions** are between a person and someone or something else, and are the building blocks of activities. What is the nature of routine and special interactions between people, between people and objects in their environment, and across distances?
- **Objects** are the building blocks of the environment, key elements sometimes put to complex or even unintended uses, possibly changing their function, meaning, and context. For example, what are the objects and devices people have in their environments, and how do these relate to their activities?
- **Users** are the people whose behaviors, preferences, and needs are being observed. Who is present? What are their roles and relationships? What are their values and biases?

The elements of the framework are not independent, but are interrelated parts with critical interactions between each part. The AEIOU framework can be applied in any ethnographic or observational method, guiding familiar collection techniques including notes, photos, and interviews. AEIOU can be used to develop a worksheet for categorizing or coding observational notes as they occur, or as a set of broad categories under which several more specific subcategories or codes can be created. Although AEIOU offers preset categories for observation and coding, further analysis can be conducted.

1. The AEIOU framework is credited to Rick Robinson, Ilya Prokopoff, John Cain, and Julie Pokorny, then at the Doblin Group in Chicago, in 1991. Rick Robinson carried the framework to E-Lab LLC, where it appeared in company publicity materials in the late 1990s.

For a short description of the framework based on the work of Robinson et al. and the former E-Lab publicity materials, see <http://www.ethnohub.com/faq/what-aeiou-framework>

Further Reading

Wasson, Christina. "Ethnography in the Field of Design." *Human Organization* 59, no. 4 (2000): 377-388.

Behavioral Attitudinal	Quantitative Qualitative	Innovative Adapted Traditional	Exploratory Generative Evaluative	Participatory Observational Self reporting Expert review Design process
10 Universal Methods of Design				



The AEIOU framework was used in a design thinking workshop to guide field observations and visualization techniques. Individual worksheets (above) for Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects, and Users, were used to document research, and then converged onto a large team worksheet (left and below) for synthesis and design ideation.

