

Seeing the Strange: An Ethnography of Campus Life

The greatest challenge for a sociologist isn't finding exotic customs to study - it's seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. We pass through our daily routines blind to the complex social choreography around us, following unwritten rules we've internalized so deeply that we no longer notice them. This assignment asks you to develop what some call a “beginner's mind,” approaching familiar spaces and practices as if encountering them for the first time. Just as Ariel puzzled over humans using a “dinglehopper” and Buddy the Elf marveled at revolving doors, you will strip away your accumulated knowledge of campus life. Your task is to observe common campus spaces and practices with fresh eyes as if you've never seen anything like them before.

This exercise trains three essential sociological skills:

1. Seeing the strange in the familiar
2. Documenting social patterns systematically
3. Analyzing how everyday practices create and maintain social order

Assignment Overview

In this ethnographic field assignment, you will select a common campus location or practice (such as a dining hall during peak hours, library study spaces, or informal gathering spots) and examine it through the lens of an outsider. Through careful observation sessions, document the physical layout, behavioral patterns, and social dynamics that shape this space. Take detailed field notes describing how people claim territory, establish hierarchies, and navigate unwritten rules. Photograph key aspects of the environment. Your analysis should uncover the invisible social choreography that guides daily campus life, from seating arrangements and group formations to temporal patterns and status signals. Present your findings in a research report that includes your field notes, photographs with analytical captions, and a theoretical analysis connecting your observations to broader sociological concepts.

Important note: This assignment is *not* about evaluating or judging individuals, but about identifying patterns in shared social practices. You are observing how social rules work, not assessing whether people follow them “correctly.” (Interviews are optional and not required at any level.)

The specific requirements for what you need to do vary depending on what grade you would like to earn: Basic (75), Proficient (87), or Advanced (100). Students who come close but do not satisfactorily complete the requirements for a level will be allowed to revise and resubmit their application.

In your submission, clearly state which level you are attempting:

“Basic,” “Proficient,” or “Advanced.” You must complete all components of that level to earn the grade.

Rubric: Assignment Components by Level

Note: Each level builds upon the requirements of the previous level(s). To achieve a higher level, all requirements from lower levels must be met.

Basic (300+ words, not including appendix)

- Observation Sessions: One 30-minute observation
- Visual Evidence: 2+ photographs with analytical captions

A successful Basic submission will clearly include: - A detailed description of the physical setting - At least one unwritten rule clearly identified (e.g., “People never sit at the ‘wrong’ table”) - At least one behavioral pattern observed more than once during your session - At least one connection to a sociological concept (bolded)

Documentation Focus (address at least three of the following): - Physical space description - Behavioral patterns - Unspoken rules observed - Process of “unseeing” prior knowledge - How the space shapes who belongs and who doesn’t

Proficient (400+ words, not including appendix)

Includes all Basic requirements plus:

- Observation Sessions: Two 30-minute observations at different times
- Visual Evidence: 4+ photographs with detailed analysis

Documentation Focus (address at least two of the following): - How newcomers learn rules (who gets corrected, who doesn’t?) - Social hierarchy patterns (who has access to what spaces?) - Teaching/learning of customs (how are unspoken rules enforced?) - What happens when someone violates an unspoken rule?

Analysis Requirements: - Pattern analysis: Show how behaviors repeat across your two observation sessions - Social hierarchy observations: Who has status or power in this space, and how do you know? - Analysis of how customs are taught/learned: Provide at least 2 specific examples

Advanced (600+ words, not including appendix)

Includes all Proficient requirements plus:

- Observation Sessions: Three 30-minute observations across varying contexts
- Visual Evidence: 6+ photographs with comprehensive analysis

Comparative Analysis (choose one): - **Different times of day:** How do social norms, hierarchies, and use of space differ during lunch vs. afternoon

vs. evening? - **Different groups using the same space:** How do undergraduates vs. graduate students (or other groups) navigate the same space differently? - **The same practice across two locations:** How are similar activities (claiming seats, marking territory, entering) done differently in two different campus spaces?

Your analysis should explicitly show what changes and why it matters sociologically.

Additional Requirements: - Complex pattern analysis showing how multiple social forces operate together - Theory development: Does your observation support, challenge, or complicate any concept from class? - Critical reflection: What are the limitations of your three observation sessions? What couldn't you see? - At least 3 course concepts explicitly connected to your findings

A note on grading: Grades are based on the clarity of observation, strength of evidence, and quality of sociological analysis—not on how “interesting” or exotic your location is. A dining hall or library is just as valuable as any other space. We're grading your *thinking*, not your choice of subject.

Report Structure

You can use the [Research Report template](#).

Introduction: Project Overview

- Description of background knowledge and biases about the space
- Process of developing a "beginner's mind" perspective
- Research questions and areas of focus
- Initial assumptions needed to challenge

Methods: Analytical Roadmap

- Selected observation times and locations
- Note-taking and documentation approach
- Photography and visual recording plan
- One photograph for each setting with context descriptions.

Ethical Note on Photography: Do not photograph identifiable faces or private interactions. Focus on spaces, objects, arrangements, or anonymized crowd scenes. If a photo could reasonably identify someone, do not use it.

Example: A crowded dining hall is fine; a close-up of a specific person's meal is not.

Findings: Trends and Significance

- Detailed description of the physical environment
- Identification and explanation of discovered invisible rules
- How these rules are taught and enforced
- When explaining your findings, connect them to specific course concepts and **bold them** (e.g., **social norms**, **socialization**, **habitus**, **symbolic interaction**, **civil inattention**)
- Optional advanced elements for Proficient/Advanced:
 - Social hierarchy patterns
 - How newcomers learn customs
 - Comparative analysis across times/contexts
 - Theory development
 - Discussion of observational limitations
- Visual Documentation:
 - Each photograph must include:
 - * Context description
 - * Analysis of what the image reveals
 - * Connection to field notes observations

Conclusion: Sociological Synthesis

- Reflect on challenges in maintaining a beginner's perspective: What prior knowledge kept creeping back in?
- Provide methodological reflections: What were the limitations of your observation? Could you have missed certain patterns? How might your own social position have shaped what you noticed?
- Discuss implications for understanding campus social order: What does your analysis reveal about how social order is maintained?
- Connect your findings to broader sociological themes about how norms, socialization, and everyday interactions create and sustain society

Appendix: Field Notes

- Time-stamped observations from each session
- Detailed space descriptions
- Observed behavior patterns
- Personal reflections on maintaining objectivity
- Can be scanned handwritten notes or typed transcriptions

Potential Focus Areas

1. **Learning Spaces** "Notice how classroom dynamics unfold: The arrangement of seating shapes interaction patterns, unspoken rules govern participation, and informal territories emerge through repeated use. Who sits where, and why?"
2. **Claimed Spaces** "Study how people mark and defend their territory: A jacket draped over a library chair becomes a temporary deed, headphones signal a desire for privacy, and friend groups consistently gather at 'their' spot in the quad."
3. **Social Signaling** "Examine the subtle ways status and belonging are displayed: Choice of study spots, preferred entrance routes, even walking patterns can indicate social position and group membership. Watch how different social circles navigate shared spaces."
4. **Time Patterns** "Consider how space use changes throughout the day: The ebb and flow between classes, prime study hours in the library, and the transformation of social spaces from morning to night. What unspoken schedules govern campus life?"
5. **Gathering Spots** "Observe the informal rules of social spaces: How do people choose where to sit in the dining hall? What behaviors mark someone as an insider versus a newcomer? Which spaces serve as social hubs at different times?"

What Beginner's Mind Observation Looks Like

Here's a brief example of the kind of writing we're looking for:

An outsider might be confused by why empty chairs remain untouched while backpacks occupy them. The bag appears to function as a proxy body, signaling ownership in the absence of a person. This is not written in any handbook, yet students enforce it consistently: when someone without a bag tries to take a "claimed" seat, nearby students often gesture to the bag, sometimes even picking it up and handing

*it to the backpack's owner. The spatial rule—"a person can reserve a seat with their belongings"—is taught and enforced through silent correction, revealing how **social norms** function without explicit instruction.*

Notice how this brief example: - Describes a behavior (empty chairs with backpacks) - Treats it as strange/puzzling (beginner's mind) - Identifies the rule (seat-claiming through belongings) - Shows evidence of enforcement (what happens when the rule is broken) - Connects to a concept (**social norms**)

This is the level of specificity and analytical depth we're aiming for.

Tips for Maintaining a Beginner's Mind

1. Question Everything

- Why do people sit where they do?
- What unspoken rules govern interaction?
- How do people learn these patterns?

2. Notice Details

- Watch for subtle social cues
- Observe how space shapes behavior
- Look for patterns in movement

3. Stay Curious

- What would puzzle someone who's never seen this before?
- What assumptions are you making?
- What seems "natural" but isn't?