



Tips for Describing the Inquiry Setting

When describing the inquiry setting,¹ provide a picture of the environment, the activities, and people's actions related to your inquiry question. Developing a description requires making judgments about what to include and what to leave out. Provide information that will help others understand the context of your inquiry and discoveries. Maintain a focus on your inquiry question so that the descriptive information is purposeful and relevant. For example, if your inquiry question is focused on a math course, your description might include where and when the course is held, who teaches it, who and how many are enrolled, and where the course is positioned in the sequence of math courses, etc. It is not necessary to give a similar description of all other math courses unless there is some direct connection of another course to your inquiry question.

Include what is observable and factual and what has actually happened. Do not include your explanation or inferences about why any of the activities or actions occurred or what perspectives you think influenced participants' actions. For example, if your inquiry question focuses on a specific course or classroom, describe who teaches it, where it is held, how many students are enrolled, when it meets, and so forth. Do not include your inferences about why the faculty member teaches the course or teaches it in the way that he/she does, and do not include inferences about why students take the course.

Use language that is descriptive rather than interpretive. For example, when describing a classroom do not say that it is set up in a *traditional* classroom arrangement but specify that there are five rows of desks with six desks in each row. Or do not describe the faculty lounge as *comfortable* but specify that it includes a sofa, reclining chair, table with seating for four, refrigerator, and a computer station.

Specify the sources of your information. Information for your description may come from various sources including records (e.g., course enrollment), interviews and observations.

Audio and video recordings of interviews and observations increase the accuracy and detail of your descriptions. In those situations where it is not possible or appropriate to do a recording, take as detailed notes as possible and review those notes as soon as possible following the event.

As appropriate, include in your description what is not happening in relation to your inquiry question. For example, if your inquiry question focuses on faculty discussions of a particular issue or course, it is important to know that only one of five scheduled meetings actually took place.

¹ See reference list at the end of this document for sources of the tips presented here.