

Reference Guide: Ethnographic Fieldwork Preparation*

**Disclaimer: This guide is intended as a starting point for your preparations for the field, and is not comprehensive! Like the fieldwork experience itself, what you do to plan for the field will be unique.*

Quick Tips

1 Year to 6 Months before Departure

- Funding: for help, visit the anthropology webpage on [Funding Your Graduate Studies](#).
- Visa and permits: get in touch with the appropriate consulate early! Bring copies of all official documents with you to the field.
- Consider visiting your field site in advance.
- If you don't have them, make yourself some business cards. McGill will make them for you at a decent price; visit [Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](#).

0 to 3 Months before Departure

- Research Ethics Board (REB) Review: Must be completed in advance of your departure. Visit the [REB website](#) for more information.
- Travel insurance: Make sure you have health insurance coverage for your time abroad. [PGSS](#) offers coverage, but be aware of the limitations (e.g., you must check with the insurer before receiving care). If you already have McGill's international student health insurance through PGSS, you're covered but you must notify International Student Services of your travel plans in order to activate your travel insurance.
- Attend McGill's requisite pre-travel meeting (held at the beginning of the term in which you depart) and fill out a Travel Registry on Minerva (under the Student Records Menu).
- Clothing: divide what you think you need in half and double the number of band aids! A good general rule is to bring less clothes than you think you will need; chances are you will acquire some local garb, as well.
- Bring digital, non-anthropology books and music; this can help you recenter, focus or just escape from the intensity of your living situation in the field.
- Journal: Keep a journal if you can! It's great for venting, and could be interesting reading later.
- Maps: If you're doing site visits without GPS, it could be helpful to put maps on your computer in advance, then use them to sketch out where you go in the field.
- Download and test any software you hope to use in the field.
- Buy (or borrow from the anthro department) and test any equipment you will be using (digital recorder, laptop, camera, external hard drive, pens and notebooks, etc.). The sturdier, the better!
- Data protection: Download encryption software and make sure you know how it works. Figure out how you will protect your data on an everyday basis with passwords, etc.

Mental Preparations

- Practice describing your research in less than two sentences, clearly, in the local language.
- Be ready to explain: your research, what a doctorate is, etc.
- Be ready to answer questions about what you plan to do with the information you're collecting, and what your plans are for the future.

- Consent form: Know it! Be ready to explain both the reasons for it, and different parts of the form itself.
- Prepare and visit with loved ones.
- Set up a point person at home who can help handle unexpected issues if they arise while you are away.

In the Field

- Set up schedules for back-ups and data processing.
- Establish patterns for how you take and organize notes and other media (e.g., attaching keywords to photos or tags to notes).
- Figure out the things you will want with you 24/7: For example, notebook, camera, consent forms, recorder, business cards, etc.
- Be flexible and remain open to change as much as possible. Seize opportunities as they arise! Take breaks.

Software and Equipment Suggestions*

***Please note:** These have worked for some students in our program, but there are many options out there! Also: A smart phone can simplify some things, here...)

- Fieldnotes software: OneNote (comes free on any computer with Microsoft Office); Evernote (download free for online version, or pay a small per month fee for offline version)
- Encryption software: Truecrypt
- Laptop: A small, very portable laptop is great for the field. Also consider buying a USB Internet Key, in case it works in your field site.
- Notebooks: Small is good, since this may be something you want with you all the time.
- Pens: bring your favorites, and bring extras!

Related Reading

- Emilio Dirlikov's [blog post about field research](#).
- Book chapter by Gabriella Djerrahian: "Competing Holocausts, Imposed Whiteness, and the Seemingly Jewish Non-Jew Researcher in Israel", in *Ethnographic Encounters in Israel: Poetics and Ethics of Fieldwork*, ed. by Fran Markowitz, 2013
- *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, by Kathleen Dewalt and Billie Dewalt, 2002
- *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research*, by Charles Briggs, 1986
- *The Art of Fieldwork*, by Harry Wolcott, 2001
- *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*, ed. by Roger Sanjek, 1990