

**Observation Assignment\***  
**Sociology 377**  
**Spring 2009**

**Purpose and Description**

This assignment requires you to observe and describe a religious gathering. Although the final section calls for you to give your reaction to the gathering, the assignment focuses on description, not explanation or evaluation. Observing and recording what people do, without judging them or jumping to a premature interpretation, is not an easy task nor a skill that can be perfected on your first trial. Work to develop this invaluable tool. It will serve you well the rest of your life whatever your occupation.

You should observe a gathering from a different faith tradition than any you regularly attend or grew up in.

Although your paper must address the questions listed in each section, it should not read like a laundry list. Instead, it should fit together to form one coherent whole with smooth, logical transitions from one paragraph to the next.

**Group and Setting**

1. What is the name of the religious group you are observing? What religion and what larger religious organization (e.g., denomination) are they affiliated with? What name do the participants use to refer to the gathering (e.g., worship service, mass)?
2. When and where did this gathering take place? What were the starting and ending times? Approximately how many people were present?
3. Describe the space in which the gathering took place. Give its shape and approximate dimensions (e.g., length, height, width). If the space was in a larger structure (e.g., a building) describe it and indicate where within the gathering space was located and how the participants got to that space. A map or sketch would be an effective aid.
4. Describe the interior arrangement of the space. Was it divided? If so, describe the divisions and the items used to make them. Were some areas higher than others? If so, describe them. Describe access to the divided spaces, e.g., what persons were allowed in different spaces?
5. Describe all furnishings and where they are located in the space, e.g., chairs, pews, alters, pulpits. Describe all other equipment and where it is located, e.g., candles, hymnals and other books, offering plates. Describe all decorations and symbols and their locations, e.g., tapestries, stained glass windows, crosses, stars.

**Organizers & Organizing**

1. Identify those persons who were in charge of the gathering, who offered more suggestions and gave more directions than others.
2. Give precise indications of their location(s) in the gathering.
3. Give descriptions of any aspect of their appearance that set them apart from others in the gathering, including their clothing, postures, bearings, ways of moving and attitudes.
4. Describe the entrances they made into the gathering: When, where and how? Also describe their exits.
5. Did they have access to any special equipment? If so, what was it and how did they use it?
6. By what names or titles did they identify themselves? What did others in the gathering call these leaders?
7. Describe those who moved into and out of the gathering with the leaders. Indicate where they were positioned in relation to the leaders and the followers. What were the distinctive features of the appearance of these categories of persons? Did they carry or have access to any special equipment?

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\* This assignment is based on one devised by Robert Stewart and modified by Clark McPhail.

## **Actors & Activities**

1. In addition to the organizers discussed in the previous section, what other different groups of people participated in the service, e.g., readers, singers, dancers, musicians, lay people? How were each group of people dressed and where was their regular locations during the service?
2. Give a chronological account of the gathering, which should include the following:
  - a. How did people get to their starting positions? Did some people assist other people in getting there? What did people do while waiting for the service to begin? What signals were used to communicate that the service was beginning?
  - b. As best as you are able give a chronological account of the gathering, describing each set of actions. Specify actions the most everyone in the gathering does in common and actions that only one or some people do. Note people's body positions, the direction they are facing, their voicing (speaking, singing, chanting and so on), and their gestures. You may use a bulleted list for this section. (It would be helpful to attach an order of worship if one is available.)
  - c. What signals were used to communicate that the service was ending? Describe how people exited the space.

## **Meanings**

In this section, you will discuss the key meanings of the words, gestures, and so on used in the service.

1. Was there a sermon or homily in the service? If so, briefly summarize it.
2. Based only on the communications made during the service, what are the key teachings of the group putting on the gathering. Support your claims with specific examples from the service.
3. Based only on the communications made during the service, what rules for living does this group direct its members to follow? Support your claims with specific examples from the service.
4. What communications during the service were directed toward the supernatural? What was the nature of these communications, e.g., praise, thanks, requests? Support your claims with specific examples from the service.

## **Personal Reaction/Analysis**

Give a brief description of your own reaction (e.g., intellectual, emotional, esthetic), to the service. You may incorporate any material from class as appropriate.

## **General Considerations for Writing Papers**

[These are guidelines I provide in all my upper-level courses.]

1. When writing your paper, keep in mind Erving Goffman's concept of "impression management." The content and presentation of your paper send messages about who you are. The message you want to send is, "I am an excellent student who cares about this course and this assignment." Bad writing, spelling and punctuation send the message: "I don't care about this assignment so I didn't put any effort into it."
2. There is no minimum or maximum length for your papers. The guiding principle should be the overall quality of your paper. Conciseness is good; padding is bad.
3. The instructor will be happy to meet with you about your paper and/or to read a draft of your paper. However, this draft should already be fairly complete and proofread. Also, your draft should be submitted no later than two class days before the due date so the instructor will have time to read it.
4. The most difficult part of writing a paper is re-writing. You cannot write a quality paper on the first draft, especially if it is written the night before the assignment is due. After you have outlined, organized and written a first draft, review and edit what you have written.
5. Double-check the spelling, grammar, and punctuation of your paper. You do not want to annoy the reader or detract from the overall quality of your paper.
6. Use quotation marks and citations to indicate words and ideas which belong to someone besides yourself. Plagiarism is one of the most serious offenses against academic integrity. It is grounds for failing this course and could result in more serious penalties as well.
7. After you are satisfied with your paper, you should have a trusted friend (perhaps a member of the class) read your paper. Your friend should proofread your paper for clarity, coherence and style. After reading your paper, your friend should be able to tell you its main points. If your friend doesn't understand your paper, chances are the instructor won't be able to either.
8. Your paper must be printed on a laser-quality printer, double-spaced and stapled in the upper left-hand corner. Do not use a title page or binder. Full justify text.
9. Be sure to keep an electronic copy of your paper, in case something happens to the copy you submit before it is graded.
10. Your grade will be based on two factors: 1) whether your paper meets the specific requirements of the assignment, and 2) the overall impact of your paper, including its organization, style, coherence and insight. Take note of the grading standards described the syllabus.