

Writing About Vegetable Auctions in Sociology 206 *(revised January 15, 2015)*

This is a three-part assignment that asks you to make three visits to “vegetable auctions” located in small towns around Lewisburg. **This is a demanding assignment that will take some time and some personal organization, so you’ll need to get going now!!** Vegetable Auctions usually are evening events, often held on Friday nights, where 20-50 people get together on a regular basis and an auctioneer sells off small items including a variety of food items. Attending one will be a “different” experience. Here are the three parts of the assignment and their due dates:

1. Attend an auction this week or next week, observe the event, write field notes about your experience. Complete the assignment and be prepared to talk about your experience in class and to hand in your work (both in a written version and by placing it on the class blog) on **January 29**.
2. Attend the auction again. Ahead of time think about aspects of the auction that are visually meaningful. Take five photographs of separate aspects of the setting, the event and the people. Place the photos on the class blog and be prepared to discuss your materials **February 5**.
3. Contact someone you encountered at the auction and arrange to interview that person on videotape. Post your video on Digital Commons. Be prepared to discuss your video **February 26**.

Although we will not discuss this assignment until January 29, you ought to do this writing assignment as soon after you visit your auction as possible. You may enter the paper on your blog whenever you finish it although it is due by the end of class on January 29. Please remember to hand in a paper version as well.

Assignment Goals

1. **To get active about entering the field**, accepting the challenge of feeling “strange” in a setting, being outgoing with people you encounter, and getting in the habit of noticing and seeing things in a setting that are worth talking about in detail.
2. **To learn about writing detailed, analytic field notes**. Field notes are the main material of ethnographic research. Observing in a strange setting will make it easy to notice things that you will want to talk about in some detail.
3. **To use visual data to inform sociological thinking**. Video is visual and sociologists usually are not visual in the ways they think about social structures and data. Doing so takes practice and discussion.

Finding Auctions

I normally ask students to locate and visit one of the many small town auctions that are held in summer and fall in Central Pennsylvania. You may want look at the "Finding Auctions" link on my website under the course SOCI 215 : <http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/milofsky/HumServSys/FieldWriting/Index.htm> since it provides you with a description of what auctions are and where to find them. This assignment has two objectives. Unfortunately since we now are in the middle of the winter, the only auctions available are ones held in auction houses at regular intervals and they are somewhat different from rural estate auctions. However, you still will find them fascinating and a bit uncomfortable to attend.

Schedule of Some Auction Opportunities

You will find more auctions to sample on the *Auctionzip* website and we have had students choose other auctions.

Dewart Livestock Auction, <http://dewartlivestock.com> (the Dewart auction meets bit infrequently but it's interesting and meetings are during the day.)

Middleburg Livestock Auction, meets weekly on Tuesday during the day and on the first Saturday of the month and is super interesting: <http://www.middleburglivestock.com>

We got the following auctions off the Auctionzip website, <http://www.auctionzip.com>. If you pick an auction it must be one that meets repeatedly (like every Tuesday or every Friday) and it must sell a variety of general purpose objects—so you can't pick an auto auction or a jewelry auction since their clientele is too narrow and specialized.

Brumbach's Auction, Sunbury, <http://www.auctionzip.com/cgi-bin/auctionview.cgi?lid=1968019&kwd=&zip=17837&category=0>

Chubb's Auction, Mifflinburg, <http://www.auctionzip.com/cgi-bin/auctionview.cgi?lid=1966688&kwd=&zip=17837&category=0>

MegaDealz Auction, Duncannon, <http://www.auctionzip.com/cgi-bin/auctionview.cgi?lid=1972740&kwd=&zip=17837&category=0>

Auction House at Beaver Springs, <http://www.auctionzip.com/cgi-bin/auctionview.cgi?lid=1978577&kwd=&zip=17837&category=0>

What to Do

It would be good for you to plan the times when you will observe to complete the three parts of this assignment. You may partner with others for transportation reasons but when you are in the setting split up.

Assignment #1. Your field notes paper for the first assignment ought to be short. Write the length you want to write, but you can do this assignment in 3 or 4 pages. As you get ready to write, think about specific things that you found most noticeable, interesting, and intriguing. **Keep in mind that the focus of sociology is people, so talk about them and their special qualities as much as you talk about the physical space.** Often these things involve contrasts to things you are used to from home or from the cultural groups you are part of. Concentrate your paper on these things. Avoid taking up all the space in your paper by describing the overall scene, how you got there, and how comfortable or uncomfortable you and your friends felt in the scene.

It would be good for you to read “Writing Interpretive Field Notes”, Ch. 9 in The Field Notes Manual, which you can find on Moodle.

Assignment #2. You don't need a fancy camera for this one, your cell phone will be fine since using it will be unobtrusive. The important thing is that as you write and go over your field notes, spend specific time thinking about what you found most visually striking. This might be the building, the people who attend, the food booth or the auctioneers (elements of the business service being offered), the objects being sold, or something else. **You need to think both about what is visually striking and what your shot tells you sociologically about the place, its meaning, and how it is structured.**

Assignment #3. Do this one with a partner.

- If you both want to do interviews at the same time, interview separate people so find a time and a setting when more than one person is around.
- Interviews should be short, no more than five minutes.
- Develop a “permission script” ahead of time and **on camera** read it to the subject. Tell them what the project is and ask them if they agree to be filmed so you get their permission on tape.
- Make the interview a conversation but plan some questions in advance. You don't want to read off a “questionnaire”.
- We will talk about camera and lighting technique ahead of time. One objective of this assignment is for you to learn to use the camera and for you to learn how to set up the interview context so you generate good sound and visually effective film.