

RLG101H FIELD RESEARCH ADVICE

This document contains advice for doing the actual field research for this assignment, as well as for writing about (and analyzing) your research.

The Religious Ritual

Ritual: It's important that you observe an actual ritual. Do not simply take a tour, or talk to people at the site. This assignment is NOT about what people *say* about their tradition, it's about what they actually *do*. And you can't really know what happens at a ritual if you do not observe one!

Language: Try to ensure that at least one person in the group understands the main language of the service. For instance, if you go to a Korean Baptist church, someone in the group should be able to speak Korean. However you do not need to understand the language of the *entire* service. Depending on the tradition, for example, some English-speaking services may be conducted partly in Latin or Sanskrit. Very few people belonging to such traditions will understand these languages, and so you too need not worry about them.

Making contact: I strongly recommend that **one person contact the religious site ahead of time** to:

- Learn when ceremonies/ritual services take place;
- Ask if it is okay for your group to attend a ceremony/ritual;
- Find out if there are any requirements or restrictions regarding clothing, footwear, etc.;
- Ask if you can electronically record all or part of the ritual (i.e., take video, photos, etc.). In some cases (such as many Indigenous ceremonies) it may not be acceptable to take any notes at all during the ritual, and you will have to do your best to remember as much as possible and then write down your observations immediately afterwards.

Observations

What to look for: Observe *everything* and use all of your senses to do so, noting shapes, colours, smells, tastes, sounds, etc. Think about elements you might normally overlook, such as lighting, seating, food, clothing, furniture, parking, bulletin boards, etc. That is to say, consider anything and everything you are exposed to as part of the ritual activity: **Do not make assumptions about what does and does not “count,” or what is and is not “religious.”** Note: if given permission by the people at the ritual, you may want to record some aspects of the ritual or site.

Aspects: Here are some aspects of the religious service that you might focus on. You can include consideration of several of these in your analysis, or you may choose to focus on just one. There is no inherently “better” approach; you should select the approach that you personally find the most interesting and engaging.

- **Architecture:** Consider the entire structure, inside and out. Examine materials, textures, shapes, and colours. Notice how the space is arranged, how furniture is placed, how high the ceilings are, how many floors and rooms you see (or hear about/cannot enter), etc.
- **Art:** Aside from the obvious elements that would be considered “art” (drawing, painting, stained glass, sculpture, calligraphy, tapestry, etc.), you can also think about design and decoration in broad terms. Consider the appearance of the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the furniture, etc. Also pay attention to what people are wearing. Also pay attention to symbols: what do they look like, where do they appear, how are they used?

- **Actions:** This category can include *everything* that *everyone* does, from the time you arrive until the time you leave. Make note of the timing of these actions: When do they begin, and how long do they last? How and where do people stand, sit, etc.? Do different people do different things? Do any people appear to be in charge of the ritual? How do you know they are in charge?
- **Text:** This includes anything involving words, both written and oral. Pay attention to what is said as part of the service, and to what the people around you talk about before, during, and after the service. Look for written words such as signs, books, pamphlets, posters, markings or symbols on the building, furniture, bulletin boards, parking lot, etc. Note if any books appear to be treated in a special way.

Compare notes: After the ceremony/ritual is over, I recommend that you sit down with the other members of your group and talk about your observations. For example, did they notice anything interesting that you missed, or that differs from what you observed (and vice versa)?

Analysis

Themes/Patterns: Do not attempt to analyze all of your observations (which would be impossible; you will observe far too much to analyze in an assignment of this small length). The point is to identify just **TWO THEMES OR PATTERNS** in the data that seem interesting to you, and write about those. For example, one theme or pattern could involve aspects of the service only related to hats (people in hats, statues with hats, songs about hats, hats sold in the gift store, etc.). Another theme or pattern might involve blue things (blue walls, shoes, signs, faces, etc.).

Assumptions: Do not *assume* the meaning of what you see. Different actions mean different things in different contexts to different people. For example, if you see people taking their hats off to enter the building, do not assume this action means “respect.” It might in fact represent “anger” to that community, or it might just mean that people’s heads are hot.

Conflicts: It is perfectly fine if your observations don’t agree with the theories that you want to use in your analysis. As with the film analysis, the point is not to “prove” that a given theory is “right” or “wrong”; the point is to use theories as a way of thinking about your data. If you are using a theorist who argues that all religions oppress people who wear hats, but at the service you attend you notice several hat-wearing people in positions of authority (i.e., there is evidence they are not oppressed), then you would simply point out that your observations do not fit the theory.

Complexity: It is also fine if you see (and write about) a degree of complexity at the ritual. Human beings are often contradictory, and our religious traditions may at times reflect this. For example, if you are writing your analysis about power you might notice that people at the site who wear hats appear to have a lower status than non-hat-wearing people in some ways. However you might also notice that *other* people who wear hats are given certain elite roles or positions of authority. The whole hat-power situation may be complex! If that’s what you see, then you should definitely discuss this complexity.

Theories: Make sure to use relevant, specific theories from Nye’s text, and not ones that are overly simplistic or vague. For example, Geertz’s notion that religion is a “system of symbols” (Nye 2008, 47) is very general, and so it is not helpful for this assignment. However, you may be able to use Geertz’s more detailed theory that these symbols of religion help to formulate “conceptions of a general order of existence” (Nye 2008, 47). For more information on which theories are (and are not) useful, please refer to the document “RLG101H Field Research Theories,” which will be posted on Blackboard.

No Further Research

All about you: It is critical that you do this assignment using *only your observations* from the religious service. Do not use any additional readings or research about the tradition. This assignment is not about finding out the “correct” answers regarding the service you attend. **We want you to engage the data directly, and tell us what you think.** Your assignment will be evaluated on the extent to which you have reasonably supported your arguments using *only* the evidence from your site visit.

Less is more: The less you know about the tradition you are investigating, the better. Knowing too much will limit your ability to both **see** and **interpret** everything you observe during the ritual with an open mind. If you already think you know what certain parts of the religion “mean,” you may well make assumptions that are not supported by what you actually observe.

You may find it helpful to pretend that you are an explorer, or an alien, who has no other information about this religious community (or religion in general) beyond what you have learned from your visit, and from reading Malory Nye’s *Religion: The Basics*.

Insider information: If someone at the site you visit provides you with information or explanations about the religion, you may use this material as data. However, take care not to simply accept what you are told at face value.

Wrong: “People in this religion believe that wearing hats is evil.”

Right: “A man at the service said that people in this religion believe that wearing hats is evil.”