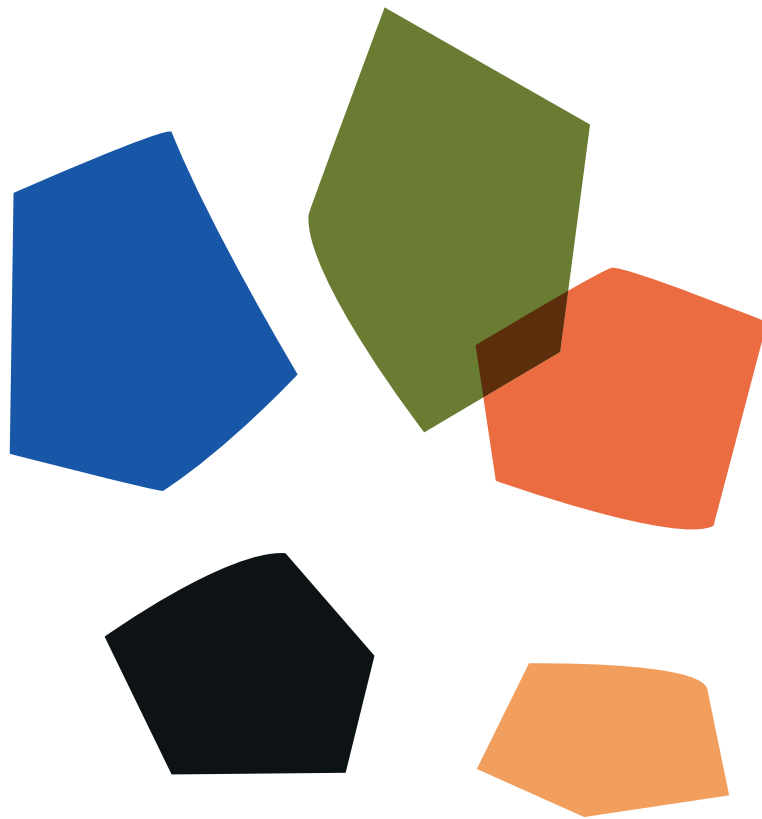


Sensory Research in the
Humanities:
An Introduction to
Five Methods



This resource was compiled by members of the Wellcome Trust network 'MedEnv: Intersections of the Medical and Environmental Humanities' in association with the University of Bristol 'Senses and Sensations' research cluster. We hope that you will find it a useful and exciting introduction to sensory research methods for humanities researchers. We expect that it will be particularly useful for postgraduate researchers, and for those whose work relates to the subjects of health and the environment. We have chosen five quite different, but complementary, methods as an introduction to the varied ways that humanities scholars can engage the senses: whether in a field or in an archive! Some of these you may already know, and others might be new to you. While you might opt to flick straight to the page that interests you, we encourage you to look at them all, as we hope you will find also something unexpected or inspirational in familiar and new methods alike.

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Sensory Ethnography

AUSTIN READ

WHAT IS (SENSORY) ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethnography is a group of methods historically used to study the habits and customs of people. There are several ethnographic methods, including participant observation, interviews and field-based reflections. This briefing focuses on the emergent practice of sensory ethnography, which is an approach that can be used across different ethnographic methods. In a nutshell, sensory ethnography encourages us to go beyond ethnographic observations based in language and to draw upon the range of bodily capacities that might be available to us, including sight, smell, sound, taste and touch.

WHY WOULD YOU USE IT?

Ethnography is important because it encourages researchers to participate in an in-depth observation of the everyday, emphasising the importance of mundane and small details that might be overlooked in theory and written narratives. However, within ethnography, there is still an implicit privileging of what can be seen and what is spoken. The problem here is that there are always things that go unspoken or unseen in an ethnographic encounter that could be important in understanding the dynamics of the site or group being researched. Sensory ethnography is one way of getting beyond a reliance on what is explicitly stated in an ethnographic encounter. Paying attention to what we can hear, smell, see, taste or touch encourages curiosity; in engaging our senses we might get taken off the path we thought we were following to encounter new sites and new actors.

WHEN WOULD YOU USE IT AND WHERE WOULD YOU DO IT?

Sensory ethnography can be used in a range of research projects, whether you are researching in an institution, a public space, or a private space. Whatever the context of your research, sensory ethnography would be used to give an empirical and embodied grounding that complements and extends insights gathered from texts, theories and conversations.

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP ACTIVITY?

Sensory ethnography usually, although not always, involves an encounter between one person and a group or site. One thing to be mindful of is whether your sensory ethnography involves observing other people. For example, participant observation, one of the classic ethnographic methodologies, usually involves a researcher observing the behaviours of individuals. If this is the case, it is important to be mindful of the dynamics of consent. If you are carrying out a sensory ethnography in an institution or a private space, it's crucial to have permission to be there and that your research participants have given consent to be observed. If you are carrying out a sensory ethnography in a public space, you must make sure that people are either kept anonymous, or, if they are identifiable, that you have their consent. However, it is possible to carry out a sensory ethnography without observing people, engaging with a landscape or animals.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

Traditionally, ethnography usually took the form of a researcher spending an extended period immersed in a place. Whilst it is true that the more time spent dwelling in a place, the more fine-grained your ethnographic knowledge of it will be, in practise sensory ethnographic methods are flexible and can be adapted to a more 'focused' ethnography. It is advisable to dedicate at least a few days to be in your chosen site: this allows you to see how the site changes and evolves from day-to-day. These days do not have to be continuous – they can be scattered across your research project.

WHAT MATERIALS DO YOU NEED?

The most important material needed for this research method is somewhere to write down your field-based reflections. As you'll be wanting to note down observations and reflections throughout the day, a notebook and pen are essential. These can then be typed up on a computer if desired. It might also be helpful to record your experience in the field using creative materials, for example a portable audio-recorder or a camera. You then also need to think about materials or kit needed to access your chosen research site: for example, walking shoes and weather-appropriate clothing are essential if you're researching outdoors.

INSTRUCTIONS STEP BY STEP

1. Identify the site that you would like to research and think about what sensory ethnography might allow you to understand about this site. Think about access: is it easy to get to this place? Do you need permission to be there? Do you need to go there at a specific time?

2. Plan an initial scoping visit in your site. This will give you a sense of the feasibility of your research plan and help you figure out the materials you need for your research.

3. Using information gathered in scoping visit, plan a proper research trip where you will be carrying out your sensory ethnography. You need to think about time needed and how you will balance this against constraints like budget and accessibility.

4. Now it's time to carry out your research! Sensory ethnography is unpredictable and can take you in many different directions. Be open to the ethnographic surprise. However, here are some anchoring exercises that can help you to practise sensory ethnography:

- **Go beyond vision.** Vision can often be the first sense that we turn to when trying to navigate a new or unfamiliar setting. Why not try challenging this? Close your eyes and try and notice if you can hear or smell or touch anything new.

- **See if there is one sense that resonates with you.** Is there one sense that feels particularly important for you? If so, create more space to follow this sense.

- **Ask others about their sensory experience.** If your ethnography involves interviews, ask questions that are specifically tailored to the senses.

- **Write fieldnotes.** At the end of every research day, make sure you budget some time (around 30 minutes) to write up what you have experienced. When writing, you should pay particular attention to your senses: what did you hear, see, smell, touch, or taste in your research that stands out to you?

- **Record your experience in creative ways.** Fieldnotes are not the only record that we can create. You might also want to record the soundscape of your research site, take pictures or videos, or even paint or draw your sensory experience.

CASE STUDY: SENSING ATLANTIC SALMON

My PhD research examines the political ecologies of Atlantic salmon in the Severn Estuary. In my research, salmon are not simply research objects, but subjects that I endeavour to study ethnographically. But there are some serious barriers here: I can't talk to salmon in an interview, and, for the most part, I can't even observe them. When these gulfs of language and communication open, the senses can become a vital research tool for ethnography, a way of stretching our usual 'arts of noticing' (Tsing, 2015). The following is an excerpt from my field diary during a research trip to Shrewsbury Weir on the River Severn.

It's November. I'm stood on the edge of a riverbank looking at water thunder over a large, concrete weir. I'm not alone: next to me a small throng of people has gathered, cameras at the ready. I notice that I'm by far the youngest person here, the group next to me seems to be exclusively couples of retirement age. But we're all here for the same thing: to see salmon jumping. They do it every year in the Autumn, as they head back upriver to their ancestral spawning grounds. These salmon will have come from the deep Atlantic Ocean, some as far as the waters off the coast of Greenland, where they will have been feeding for at least two years. They navigate this journey through a memory that is etched into their cells and their genes, passed on by their parents and the generations before them who undertook the exact same voyage. It's awe inspiring to think of the patience and perseverance of these creatures who must struggle against so many obstacles to get home.

My patience, on the other hand, is less inspiring. After 20 minutes stood in the light November drizzle, I'm getting restless. I want to see these salmon! But after an hour and thirty minutes, there have been none. The crowd next to me has long dispersed, replaced by different walking couples who now stand craning their necks, waiting. Only the hardiest, those who have brought camping chairs and supplies, stick around for longer. It took me two and half hours to drive to this spot, which has the reputation for being the best place to see salmon leaping, and soon I'm going to have to go home. The failure of the salmon to leap is a humbling reminder: these animals have their own agency, their own plans, and their own designs. It was arrogant of me to turn up at this spot and expect to see them immediately. After two and a half hours, I return to my car not having glimpsed even a single flash of silver salmon skin.



Image: The iconic Shrewsbury Weir scene I had hoped to see... (Kevin Wells Photography, Shutterstock).

This vignette might read like a failure. But in fact, it was a deeply generative ethnographic experience. I learnt a lot about salmon just through the embodied, sensory experience of being stood at the edge of their world. After two hours stood shivering in the November cold, I understood more viscerally the cold that salmon need when they are swimming back upstream to spawn. The sound of every splash sent my head spinning and reminded me that Atlantic salmon, who are known for being a shy species, may have been leaping when I wasn't looking. Hearing wafts of conversation from the other watchers who greeted each other with a warm familiarity that suggested they are regulars here and smelling the coffee steaming from their thermoses drove home for me that seeing salmon is an orientation of attention, one that takes hours of preparation, practice and faithful waiting. Sensory ethnography has allowed me to notice little details that make a big difference in understanding salmon, and it's enabled me to not think about salmon as a research object, but to think with salmon as agentive, creative research subjects that push back against my own plans and assumptions.

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Walking Methods

SARAH BELL

WHAT ARE WALKING METHODS?

Walking methods can take many forms. This brief introduction focuses on one particular approach, called the 'go-along' interview; emplaced interviews conducted on the move with one or more research participants. These may involve walking-along, but also potentially wheeling, cycling, driving, swimming, surfing, kayaking-along, depending on the focus of your study and the mobility priorities of your participants.

WHY WOULD YOU USE THEM?

Go-alongs can offer nuanced insights into the relational dynamics of people's place encounters, including the human and non-human relations that shape such experiences and the embodied, dynamic and multisensory ways in which people tune into and navigate different settings at particular moments in time. By experiencing a setting with participants, asking questions and observing, researchers can explore practices and interpretations in situ, moving through and being moved by a setting together. This approach can serve to put some participants at ease when discussing more challenging topics, by removing the pressure to speak and bringing place rather than participant into focus.

WHEN WOULD YOU USE THEM AND WHERE WOULD YOU DO THEM?

Go-alongs can be used in varied research contexts; from exploring and co-interpreting how different people navigate, sense, embody and respond to different places (indoor or outdoor), to reflecting on individual and collective place meanings and memories. They can also help to understand social contexts of place encounter, be it through joining existing walking groups or activities and/or examining how people respond to different social situations and atmospheres in place. That said, there are times when go-alongs are not the most appropriate approach to use, for example if people feel unsafe in an area or if they are concerned about being seen with a researcher for any reason. It is essential to respect participant skills, comfort zones and boundaries when conducting these interviews, and to know your own limits and boundaries as a researcher. Offering a range of interview formats may help to ensure people can participate and express themselves in ways that are most appropriate for them.

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP ACTIVITY?

Go-alongs can be done with individuals or with groups; participants guide the researcher through their place experiences, which may involve individual interactions, or joining a routine place visit with their family or friends, or a regular walking/activity group. Regardless of the context, care will be needed in how consent is negotiated with everyone who is taking part.

HOW LONG DO THEY TAKE?

Go-alongs can range from 10 minutes to several hours, depending on participant and researcher preference and the aims of the research itself. It may be a one-off encounter as part of a wider research study, or you might organise several to explore how someone's place relations perhaps vary

at different times of year or in different social/cultural/material contexts. Flexibility with scheduling is needed as interviews can be postponed by participants at short notice, particularly in inclement weather when being conducted outside.

WHAT MATERIALS DO YOU NEED?

It can be difficult to capture discussion during go-alongs, particularly if outside on windy days or in loud locations with intrusive background noise. At the very least, it is worth ensuring that the participant(s) and the researcher are each wearing lapel microphones (with wind mufflers if outside) and an audio recorder. The placing of the recorder is important; movements associated with participants' dogs and/or children, for example, can stall the recording, and the lapel microphone wire can get tangled up, which may compromise the flow of the interview. Do test out your recording devices in advance to check how effective they are and to identify any quirks they may have when used on the move. As a back-up (and to capture your own reflections about non-audible aspects of the interview), it is helpful to write up an account of each interview immediately afterwards, and in some cases to send a copy of this back to participants to check, encouraging them to make changes as they feel appropriate. Some researchers bring go-pro/video recorders into the interview encounter, but this does have additional ethical implications that need to be thought through carefully beforehand.

Other items will depend on the location and duration of the interview. It can be helpful to bring along a basic first aid kit and, when conducted outside, spare 'all-weather' items to enhance participant comfort in the moment e.g. a water bottle, snacks (being mindful of potential intolerances/allergies), sun-cream, a spare waterproof, fleece, sun hat etc. Some researchers capture the route taken with a GPS recorder to help contextualise spatial references made during the go-along interviews when later analysing the interview transcripts. However, this can be challenging for indoor go-alongs due to limited GPS signal.

INSTRUCTIONS STEP BY STEP

There are many ways of conducting go-alongs, depending on the aims of the research. Ideally, the researcher will join participants in their chosen location as they would normally visit (provided this is safe for both researcher and participant). The participant can then guide the researcher through their experiences in situ. Prior to conducting a go-along interview, it is helpful to prepare a few open thematic questions relevant to your research topic in case participants are not forthcoming in leading the discussion. These lines of enquiry can be coupled with key observations which will, again, de-

pend on the research question. Active listening throughout is essential; place distractions can offer valuable prompts for discussion or detract from relevant conversation threads that you might need to steer back to later.

It is helpful to develop mutually acceptable strategies with participants prior to setting off in case either researcher or participant should get injured or fall ill while out, or in case anyone meets someone they know while out, which has potential anonymity implications. Care should be taken to identify adaptations and

appropriate strategies to ensure people can take part safely and with dignity, both in advance of and while conducting the fieldwork.

Finally, it can be challenging to capture and convey the dynamic, multisensory qualities of go-alongs in the analysis process, particularly as written transcripts tend to 'flatten' or omit the more lively, non-verbal, embodied aspects of encounter. This is partly why it is so important to keep field notes throughout the fieldwork phases, but also to think carefully about your analytical approaches.

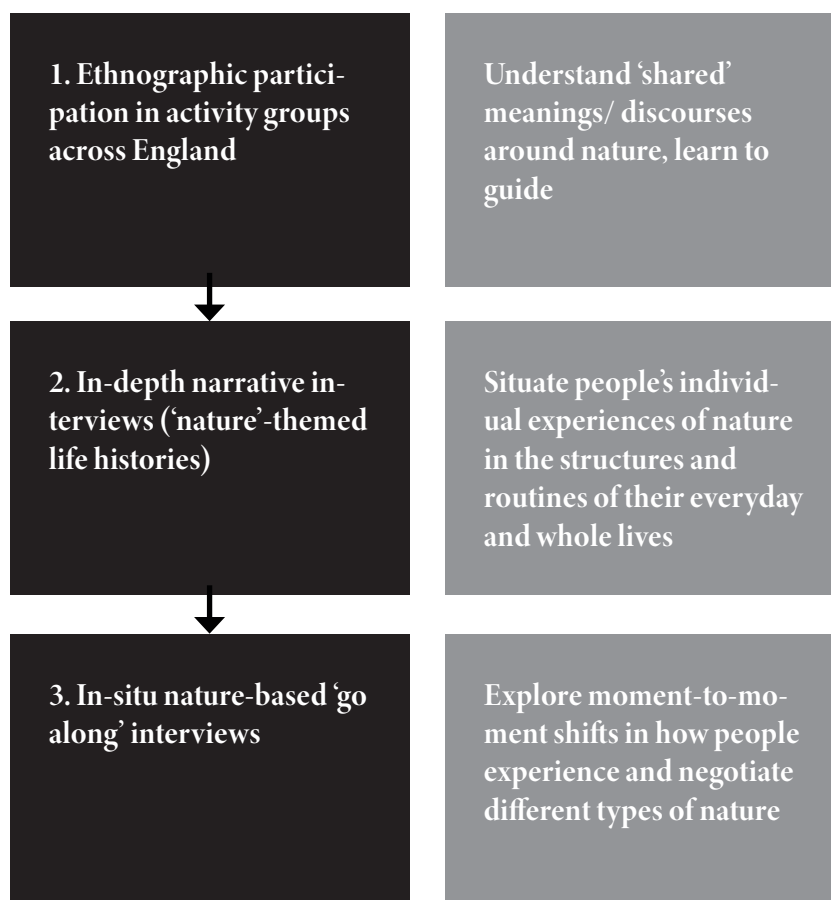
CASE STUDY – SENSING NATURE

The Sensing Nature project explored how people with sight impairment (across England) described and experienced a sense of wellbeing (or otherwise) with diverse types of nature through their lives. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council from 2016-2018, it aimed to inform and create new opportunities for inclusive multisensory nature experiences in collaboration with people with sight impairment.

After training as a sighted guide, go-alongs were conducted with participants as the third phase of the study (as illustrated below) to explore moment-to-moment shifts in how people were experiencing and negotiating different types of nearby nature.

Participants chose their go-along location, and if they wished to, were encouraged to guide the discussion, highlighting any aspects of the setting of importance to them (practically, emotionally, socially etc). Settings included participant gardens, local residential road/path networks, urban parks, woodland, coastal and countryside areas. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes to four hours according to participant preference.

SENSING NATURE: KEY RESEARCH PHASES



Beforehand, a 'crib-sheet' was developed to inform possible themes and observations to reflect on during each go-along, whilst recognising that unanticipated topics would likely develop in discussion with each participant in response to their accounts of personally resonant or meaningful aspects of the setting. Particular attention was given to:

- Where particular stories, comments or feelings were volunteered by participants during the interview and what (if anything) seemed to trigger them;
- Changes in participant posture, pace, mood, emotion, tone and attention in response to specific aspects of the surroundings;
- How different sensory stimuli captured participant attention;
- Participant responses (verbal or otherwise) to human and non-human parts of the setting;
- Embodied techniques (and technologies) used to navigate, and decisions made about the route taken;
- Place associations (past and current) shared by participants;
- Memorable moments (individual or shared) shared by participants;
- Changes in place meanings and modes of engagement over time discussed by participants.

The 'role' of the researcher varied in these interviews in line with participant preferences, priorities, and shifting environmental and social conditions through each interview; from sighted guide and navigator for some, to listener and walking companion for others (e.g. for participants who were used to walking their familiar routes with a long cane or guide dog rather than a human sighted assistant).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, as well as detailing full reflections immediately after each interview in the form of field diary notes. Data were subject to both inductive reflexive thematic analysis and creative analytical practice, informing a range of practical project outputs, which are available online: (www.sensing-nature.com). Further information about the study and go-alongs is also available via:

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Text-Based Methods

LENA FERRIDAY

AT A GLANCE

This resource outlines the value of using textual sources in scholarship, outlining the practicalities that surround the research process, and providing prompts to aid students' exploration of the sensory dimensions of these materials.

WHAT ARE TEXT-BASED METHODS?

Text-based methods refer to the examination of a written source to learn more about people's sensory experiences. The most obvious starting point might be self-reflective first-person narrative sources: examples might include diaries, letters, autobiographies, and travel writings. We might also look to sources that were created to inform on other matters, but nonetheless tell us about how sensory experience was conceived in the past: some examples include newspaper accounts, medical and scientific reports, official civic documents, and marginalia.

WHY WOULD YOU USE THEM?

Textual sources can be valuable in allowing us to uncover understandings and experiences of the senses across history. By looking at ways different senses have been written about, we can trace attitudes towards certain types of smells, sounds, textures and tastes that give us insight into cultural norms. By attending to the ways in which people have expressed their sensory lives, we can comprehend to a greater extent how people experienced the past.

WHEN WOULD YOU USE THEM AND IN WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES?

Textual analysis can be used at any point in the research process, either as the key method or to supplement analysis of oral, visual or material sources. Different types of texts help us to examine the senses in different ways. Sometimes texts explicitly refer to sensory experience, and in others it must be read into the analysis (see Case Study).

WHERE WOULD YOU DO THEM?

Historical texts can be accessed in a range of places, whether in physical archives, online repositories, or edited compilations of written extracts. Collections often have different focuses, whether that's geographical, subject based or by time period. It is important to think critically about where we find textual material and who controls what we can access – these spaces are not neutral. In the case of an edited book which gathers extracts from manuscripts on a particular topic, the editor has chosen the excerpts for a reason, and we must be aware that others would have been omitted in the process. This is similarly the case for archives, where what is preserved is determined by what the curator deems interesting, important, and worthy of study. Think about the voices that might be missing from the material you are interrogating. This might also be because they are those of groups that may not have had the

ability to write (due to levels of literacy, traditions of writing, or the resources needed), and therefore unable to represent their experiences in text.

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP ACTIVITY?

The reading and initial analysis of text is often undertaken individually, although working collaboratively to compare interpretations can bring interesting new ideas into your analysis.

HOW LONG DO THEY TAKE?

Historically, in-person archival research has been laborious and extensive, with months spent in repositories scouring through material. Some researchers still prefer to examine their sources whilst in a physical archive, but with the growing accessibility of camera footage historians often visit an archive to take photographs of material and examine them later. The timeframe of the process is entirely dependent on your own reading preferences: you may want to read the source in its entirety to get a sense of it before examining it for its sensory details; you might consult a range of source alongside one another, or instead focus in on one in depth at a time.

WHAT MATERIALS DO YOU NEED?

Accessibility is often a challenge when research in physical archives, and visits require careful preparation. Urban archives are often accessible by public transport, but more rural repositories may not be. Archival work can also be expensive, with accommodation and travel costs incurred where the repository is not local. Many online archives also require subscriptions – check your institution's library website to see which archives you have access to. Since the pandemic, some archives require you to book a slot or register for a readers' card in advance of your visit, so check the archive's guidelines in advance.

When you arrive at the archive, you are usually required you to store all belongings in a locker. Food and drink are generally not allowed into the reading rooms, and only pencils can be used. Many archives allow you request materials before visiting so they are ready for your arrival. You can also order materials from the storeroom while there – this might be via an online system, with paper slips, or just by speaking to the archivist. If you want to take photographs of the material, you will often also have to purchase a photography license, so bring cash.

The materials you might need to carry out text-based sensory research also include knowledge you want to procure. Palaeography training will equip you with the skills required to read older handwritings, if your subject of study is medieval or early modern. Even with modern script it can take time to get to know the individual handwritings of authors, but they will become familiar and easier to read as you persist. With printed material you might also use smartphone features which are able to convert images into written text.

INSTRUCTIONS STEP BY STEP

1. Finding

Sensory archival work can often be particularly frustrating, as the sensory is often implicit and identified by reading texts against the grain. As a result, this work can be hit and miss – some archival trips may become scoping activities, where a wide range of texts are consulted to assess what material is out there. Conducting keyword searches on archival websites is usually the most effective way to find material. In the U.K. context, the National Archive catalogue allows you to identify sources in all British physical repositories.

These searches require careful attention to be paid to language. Think about historical synonyms for the concepts you are interested in examining and keep a note of the keywords you have searched for. If you were researching the histories of smell, you might also search ‘aroma’, ‘scent’, ‘stench’, or for sensory histories of walking, you might look for ‘rambling’, ‘pedestrian’, ‘perambulate’. Reference resources such as the Oxford English Dictionary trace the etymology and use of words and can be useful for finding historically appropriate words.

2. Reading

Reference texts are also valuable for the interpretation of textual material, allowing the reader to establish how meanings have changed, as well as reading certain words in the context of the broader source. In the process of interpretation, it is important to understand the cultural uses of words that relate to the senses. Words such as ‘noise’ and ‘odour’, for example, have held multiple definitions that have changed over time. Beyond language, there might also be material features of the texts, such as the binding and paper, that influence their interpretation.

There are several questions that historians might already have in their toolkit for approaching textual sources. These might be around the authorship of the source, the intended readership, and key concepts that are portrayed. Whilst these are a useful starting point, it might be helpful to tweak them to ensure a more direct focus on the senses. Thinking about whose experiences are being presented in a source, and why, will allow you to conduct analysis that considers the ways in which sensory experience is not universal, and importantly the ways in which people relay these experiences are often bound up with the cultural context from which the narration emerges.

CASE STUDY - SENSING THE MINES OF NINETEENTH CENTURY CORNWALL

Conditions in Cornwall’s tin and copper mines were intensely multisensory in the nineteenth century. The underground spaces were composed of little light, stifling temperatures, sulphuric fumes, damp and cramped tunnels, and noisy, dangerous machinery. Examining a range of textual sources allows us to gain a greater understanding of what life was like for those who spent time in this landscape, atmospherically very distant from the inkless, crumbless room of the archive where these histories are researched.

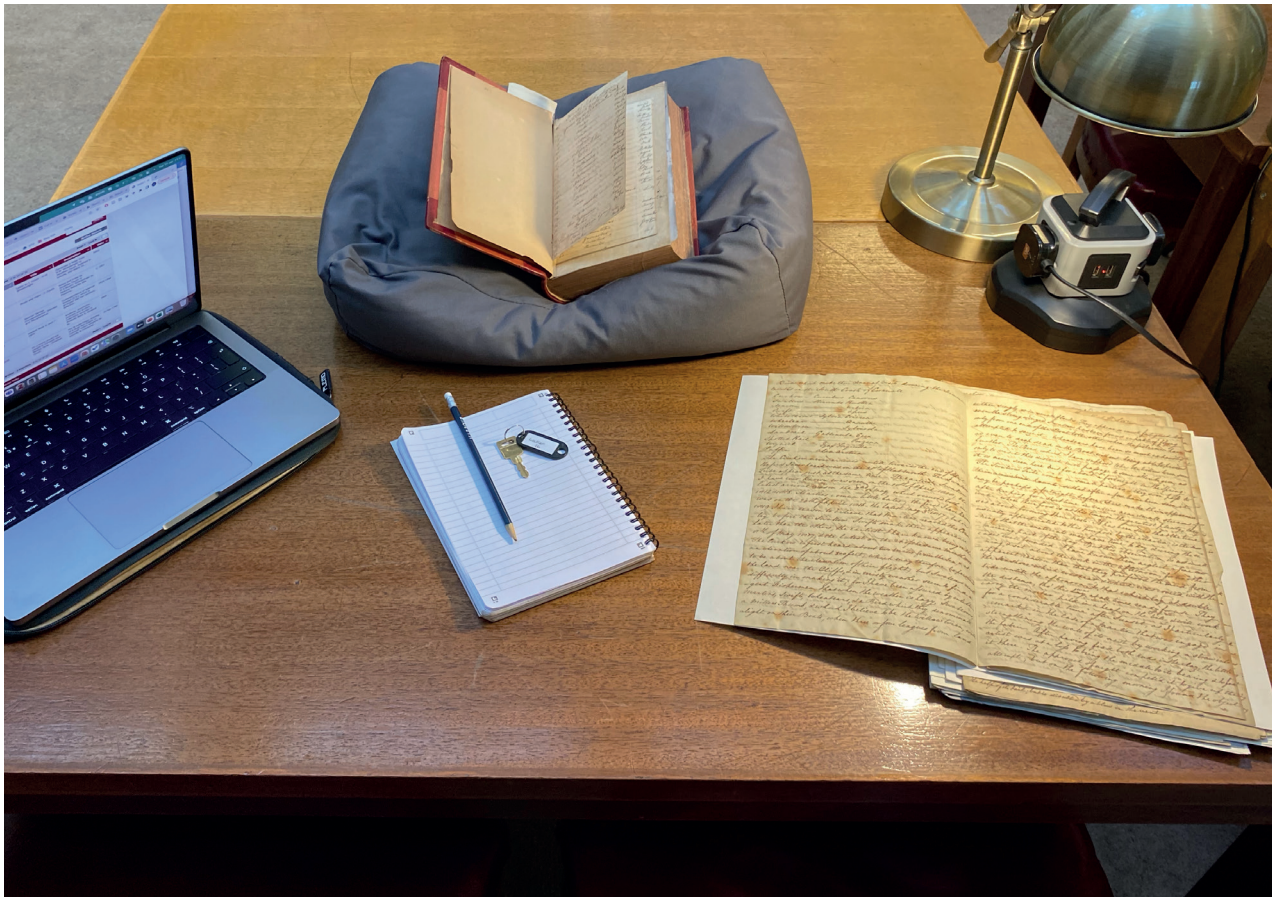


Image: Undertaking research at the Linnean Society of London archives, January 2023, author's photo.

Visits into these mines were popular among tourists in the area, who recounted their experience in travel writing pieces published as books and in periodical magazines. These texts give insight into middle-class views on loud noises, strong smells, and miners' bodies, and the difficulties they faced moving through the underground tunnels: their sensory dimensions in particular reveal much about Victorian class relations and attitudes towards Cornwall. There are few written traces like this from the perspective of miners themselves, the majority having been illiterate in this period.

To ensure that the history of sensation in the Cornish mine is not written exclusively from an elite perspective, however, there are other written sources we might use. Local newspapers reported on accidents that frequently occurred inside the mines – reading these against the grain reveals much about the embodied expectations miners faced in this period. Reports on the health of Cornish miners also tell of the long-term impacts of certain sensory exposure on the bodies of miners. Looking primary texts adjacent to the topic also uncovered writing that relays the experiences of miners more directly: a report on the treatment of children in Cornish mines, for example, included transcribed interview testimony from mine workers.

- This example is excerpted from my AHRC SWWDTP funded doctoral research project, examining the sensory experiences of Cornish environments.

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Using poetic transcription to explore sensory material in archival texts

ABBI FLINT

*red admiral, resting
on bright patches of purple ling
the drab moor beyond*

A haiku-like poem created using colour-related details from archival material about the Cown Edge Way.

WHAT IS IT?

Poetic transcription within research is akin to found poetry. Found poetry is an approach to create collage-like poems through reworking snippets from existing texts, poetic transcription uses research texts as the source for these found poems. It is a research method which has been applied across a wide range of disciplines and can be used to work with a variety of research texts including, interview or focus-group transcripts, researcher's journals and fieldnotes, published literature, and archival material. This short introduction focuses on how poetic transcription could be used as both a method and output to explore sensory details when working with archival texts. I have found poetic transcriptions a valuable part of analysis as well as a way of engaging audiences with research.

WHY WOULD YOU USE IT?

This approach may be useful when you wish to explore phenomenological and more-than-representational aspects of environments. The anthropologist Barbara Bender has described landscapes as being polyvalent and multitemporal, fragmentary and sometimes contradictory; they hold plural meanings and plural timescales in non-linear ways. Poetry, as a form, can hold this plurality, complexity, and ambiguity in different ways to traditional narrative prose. Poetry can also accommodate sensorial, affective, and embodied engagement with its subject(s). In creative writing, people are often encouraged to 'show, don't tell', with the idea that through reading a poem the reader may connect with the narrator's experiences, and emotions. Sensory details play a big role in evoking these affective and experiential connections with environments.

WHEN WOULD YOU USE IT?

Poetic transcription of archival sources may be applied throughout the research process, for example, to crystallise, analyse and/or synthesise material from archival sources, and to engage others with research findings.

Research can be seen as a kind of dialogue; between researcher, subject/material, and the audience for the research. Poetic transcription offers a structured yet creative way of engaging in dialogue with archival material and facilitating these conversations. It allows the researcher to bring together and juxtapose contrasting themes and details from archival texts in a single form, or to bring different archival texts into conversation with one another. It can also provide another way into the analysis of archival texts, by encouraging close attention to language, voice and expression of sensory details. Poetic transcription offers a way to honour, and foreground, the voice(s) of archival material in research writing.

The outputs of poetic transcription – the poems produced – offer creative ways of sharing academic research with diverse audiences, and engaging in conversations about that research, to complement or as an alternative to traditional academic publication.

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP ACTIVITY?

My experience is of using poetic transcription in individual research, but there is nothing to stop it being used as a group exercise to co-construct poems from archival texts. It's also worth noting that, even when undertaken by individual researchers, poetic transcriptions are always a collaboration between the researcher (who curates and reworks texts into poem-like structures) and the original author of the archival material (whose ideas, words and syntax form the content of the poem). Being open about the curatorial choices one makes in selecting which text to include in poetic transcriptions is part of acknowledging, and being reflexive about, one's positionality as a researcher.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

Like many methods, it depends how long you wish to spend on it. However, it can be integrated within the exploration and analysis of archival texts as opposed to an additional activity. Time needs to be allowed for locating and accessing the archival text, reading and identifying extracts, then constructing and crafting the poem.

WHERE WOULD YOU DO IT?

Anywhere, it is not location dependent.

WHAT MATERIALS DO YOU NEED?

Materials required to create poetic transcriptions include access to archival texts to work with and equipment for writing with; pen and paper, laptop, scissors etc. If you plan to publish or share the poems created from this process you will need to check with the archive/copyright holder what permissions are required to re-use/rework that text.

INSTRUCTIONS – STEP BY STEP

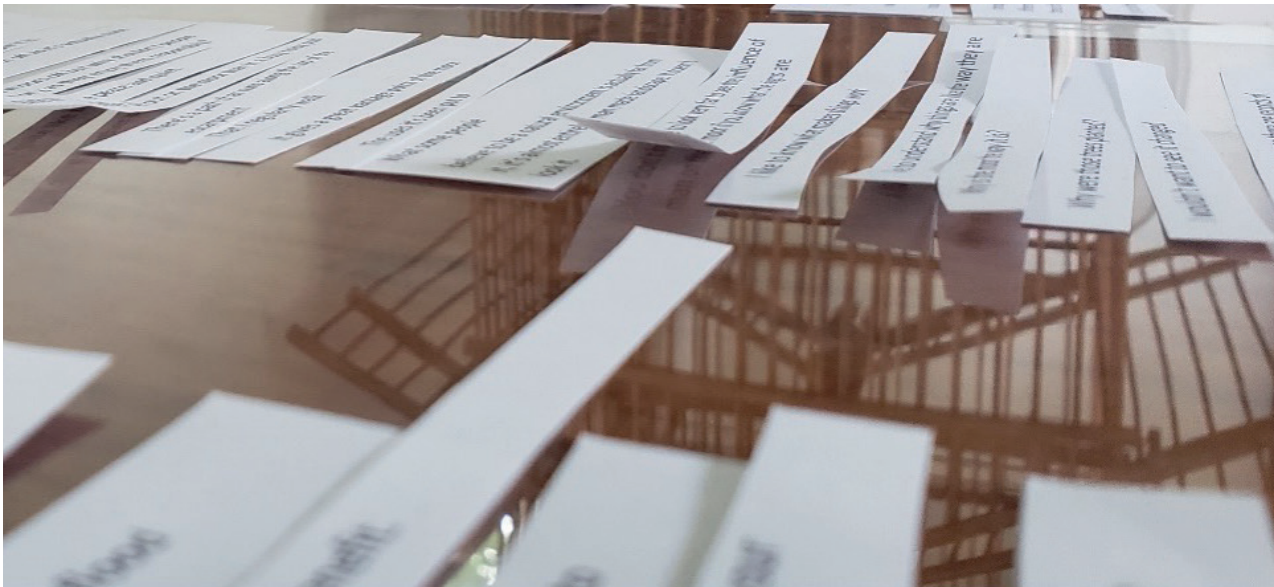
Lena Ferriday's guide to using text-based sources, provides good advice on how to locate, access and work with archival material. Once you have identified your sources there are different ways you can work with these to create poetic transcriptions. One approach is to read through the entire source, or a section you are particularly interested in, identifying sentences or phrases which describe or allude to sensory details and experiences. You may want to write these phrases out in a new document (or underline them if you have your own copy of the text). If source-texts are available digitally, you can also use keyword searches to locate relevant sections within them. However, given that the language used to describe sensory details is so rich, this may miss some details.

Once you have the cut phrases and sentences, you can begin to re-order and move them around to create a poem. I find printing out and cutting out these phrases means I can move them around physically, but you might want to move them around within a Word document, or write them out multiple times. You may want to juxtapose contrasting phrases and sensory details, or you may want to group these thematically within the poem.

It is unlikely you will use all the extracts and you may want to edit some of them to help the rhythm and flow of the poem. Be clear and open about any editing decisions you make and try to keep the authentic voice and language of the archive intact. You may find it useful to give yourself rules to work with when creating your poetic transcriptions. For example, I may cut words and shorten phrases, but I do not add any words of my own. I also aim to make the poems reasonably short and accessible if I intend to use them in research engagement activities.

Once you have the first draft of the poetic transcription, set aside time for fine-tuning after letting it sit a while. Reading the poem aloud helps to identify what is working well, and less well, in terms of rhythm and line-breaks.

Finished poems could be included in research dissemination activities and events, as stand-alone research outputs (e.g. a short pamphlet of research poems), alongside other creative approaches (e.g. film or visual art), and/or incorporated into more traditional academic publications.



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There are also many examples of poets working with sensory details from archival texts. For example, Polly Atkin's work with the diaries of Dorothy Wordsworth e.g., the poem 'Dorothy's Rain' in her collection *Much with Body* (2021).

EXAMPLES OF POETIC TRANSCRIPTION IN USE

Creating poems from a single text source

In the University of Manchester's Stories of Discovery Project¹, the archaeologist Dr Melanie Giles created a poetic transcription that captures the sense of wonder in encountering well-preserved archaeological material, using words from the writings of the nineteenth century antiquarian Thomas Bateman. This poem was included in the project anthology (Giles 2022) and displayed within an exhibition on the life and collections of Bateman, Brought to Light, at Sheffield's Weston Park Museum (2022-23).

Marvellous to say

A conspicuous object:
a mass of solid earth,
somewhere along the road
from Ashbourne to Buxton.
Made of layers of moss and grass
both of which retained
their colour and texture.

The number of these alternations
was twelve, and upon the lowest one
(the undisturbed surface of the ground)
lay many pieces of wood:
hazelsticks retaining their glossy bark;
fungi; made instruments of flint;
charcoal; one coarse sherd of urn;

and – *mirabile dictu* – beetles,
whose elytra still shone
with metallic lustre.
The imperishability of antiquities
rivalled by substances
of the most fragile
and evanescent nature.

Melanie Giles

Creating poems from multiple text sources

I am using poetry as a research method within the ARHC funded project *In all our footsteps*², which explores the twentieth century history, development, mapping and experience of public rights of way in England and Wales. The Cown Edge Way is a medium distance walking route, using public rights of way, which starts and finishes on the eastern

outskirts of Greater Manchester. The short extract from poetic transcription in progress below is drawn from multiple archival texts relating to this route³. These texts were mined for sensory details which are woven together to create the poems. This extract focuses on the physicality of movement and prompts questions around the link between senses and mobility.

a path climbs
we begin climbing
climbing steeply the gentle climb
climbing
 up Strawberry Hill, Idle Hill
 through lovely Back Wood
 up the steps
climbing
 toward
 the other side

the track drops

finally, eventually, soon
dropping
 down

 dropping
 down

 dropping

gently, gently
to a little glen, to a dell, to the Goyt
to Charlesworth Recreation Ground

This work in progress will be further developed with auto-ethnographic sensory observations when two members of the project walk the Way in 2023.

¹<https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/salc-making-a-difference/2022/09/16/vestiges-crafting-connections-through-the-heritage-of-the-peak-district/>

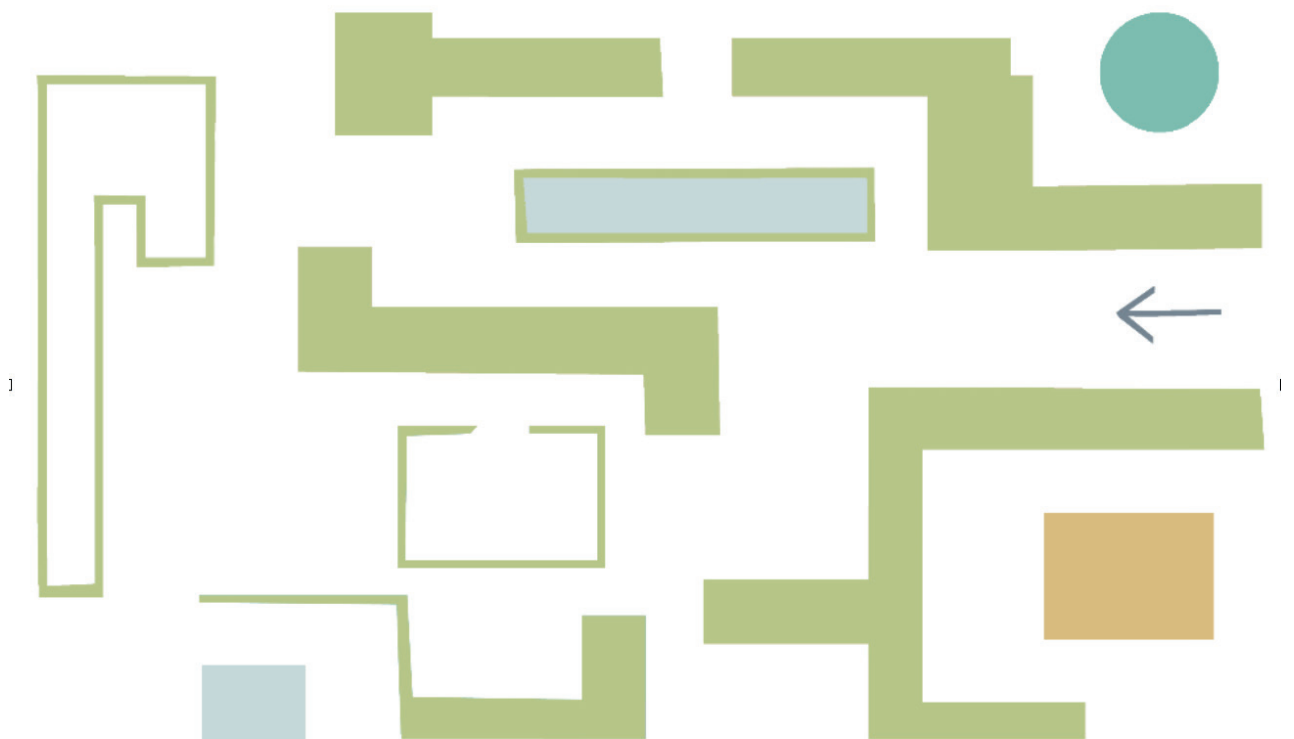
²<https://www.allourfootsteps.uk/>

³...1985. *The Cown Edge Way: A guide to the 16 mile walk from Hazel Grove to Gee Cross*. Ramblers' Association; article in the *North Cheshire Herald*, 2 October 1970, p.4 (both in Local Heritage Collection, Stockport Library); and, recording of a radio interview (GB124.PNFS/24, Manchester Central Library)

Speculative Mapping Activity

REBECCA FLEETWOOD-SMITH

Speculative mapping involves inviting people to respond to (or create) an imagined map or floor plan. The scale used will be dependent on the project. For example, you may use a floor plan of a building, or you may use an archival map (or create an imagined map) to explore people's memories or experiences of specific places. The map / floor plan used, within this activity, is intentionally abstract to facilitate playful, creative engagement with the research, as such this exercise can take different forms. The activity draws upon approaches from creative research methods and design-led approaches (see further reading) and yet no prior creative experience is necessary.



Example of a Speculative Floor Plan. Adapted from the Sensing Spaces of Healthcare project's 'Mapping your Dream Hospital' activity designed by Alex Higlett, Pirrip Press.

WHY WOULD YOU USE IT?

The practice of taking a pen, pencil or tracing the tactile outline of an imaginary map / floor plan can promote creative, playful engagement with environments. The process can allow people to attend to specific sensory / embodied aspects within imagined environments – exploring, for instance, what they may see, hear, touch, smell and so forth. This process can facilitate a process of de-familiarisation whereby people re-encounter specific environments in different ways due to the creative process.

The scope of this activity is vast, but it may be used to:

- Explore and depict aspirations surrounding future environments
- Identify opportunities for change / improvement within current settings
- Explore and depict memories / complement oral histories
- Creatively engage with archival research

WHEN WOULD YOU USE THE ACTIVITY AND WHERE WOULD YOU DO IT?

This activity promotes imaginative engagement and so it does not need to be carried out in-situ. People may complete this activity remotely, without a researcher present, they may complete it within a facilitated workshop, or they may work one-to-one with the researcher in the context under study. The approach is designed to be flexible and facilitate engagement in multiple ways and forms. As the activity is rooted within creative and design-led approaches it can be suited to many different contexts. No matter how this research activity is undertaken it is important that researchers and participants feel comfortable and supported. For example, when using the activity remotely you need to provide the necessary tools and materials for people to be able to participate in what they are being asked to complete. If you do plan to use this activity remotely this needs to be carefully considered. As with all research activities, remote research methods require rigorous planning and preparation to ensure that everyone involved in the study (researchers and participants) are supported as fully as possible. If your research involves asking people to respond to challenging environments or sensitive subject matters, participants will need specific support before, during and after the activity and so remote working may not be appropriate.

IS THIS AN INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP ACTIVITY?

This activity can be done with individuals or with groups. The activity can be presented as a remote method which means that participants engage in the activity on their own without the need for a researcher present, or it can be developed as a workshop, or as a one-to-one in person activity. As this activity involves the use of specific resources you would need to carefully adapt your resources depending on how the activity will be used. This activity is structured as a research method that involves working with research participants; however, it could be adapted to complement individual research practices and as such may complement archival research / ethnographic research.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

This activity can be a short task (10-15 minutes) and can be used to support exploring / engaging with sensory experiences, or it can be a much more in-depth activity which people contribute to over a period of time. This depends on the nature of your project and how you

facilitate participation. For example, if you were to give a participant the resources and invite them to complete the activity in their own time it is important that you recommend how long someone should spend completing it. You would also need to consider if a follow-up discussion (in person or online) may be appropriate. As this method is inherently flexible, it is not possible to put a limit on how people may engage with this task, this is something that would need to be defined within the context of your project.

WHAT MATERIALS / EQUIPMENT DO YOU NEED?

This activity can be resourced in many ways and an important aspect of your work may be to co-create the resources that you use. For instance, depending on your project, you may work with patient and public involvement groups, colleagues, creative practitioners, designers, illustrators and so forth, to develop the creative research activity used. Developing approaches in this way can support the extent to which the activity is inclusive. As the activity can involve many ways of working you can employ a range of approaches to record people's speculative maps and their responses. As with all research activities the ways in which the process is recorded and the ways in people participate would need to be carefully considered according to the project's aims and ethical considerations.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

There are many possible ways of conducting this activity and this will be defined by your specific project. The resources that you use will depend on how you facilitate the activity.

For example, a resource pack for one person may contain:

- A booklet containing a series of prompts that guide people through completing their mapping activity
- An A3 speculative floor plan (see example attached)
- Stickers of images or symbols that people can stick on their floor
- Coloured pens

A resource pack for a group speculative mapping activity may contain:

- Prompts / questions that guide people through completing the activity as a group
- An A1 speculative floor plan
- Stickers of images or symbols that people can stick on the floor plan
- A range of sensory materials e.g. fabric swatches, natural materials e.g. dried leaves, pressed flowers, textured paper / card, acetate, tracing paper
- Coloured pens and scented pens
- Glue, tape scissors

To support people's engagement with the activity you will need to consider how to facilitate their involvement. Participants will likely need different types of support in completing the activity. You may want to consider the following:

- Where will the activity take place?
- How will you facilitate the session?
- Will participants work on their own or work as group? If working as a group will participants create their own speculative floor plans and then discuss them, or will they work together on one floor plan?
- What materials will you provide? For instance, will people share materials or be given their own pack?
- How will you record the session?

Recording the activity can be complex and you will need to think about the context in which you are working, (including practical and ethical considerations). For example, you may wish to document (1) the process of creating the speculative map, (2) the completed map, and (3) participant reflections. Flexibility is important, it may be useful to take notes, photographs, and make audio recordings (when working with participants in person). Where appropriate / feasible you may wish to video record the session, this may be particularly important depending on the people you are working with.

CASE STUDY SENSING SPACES OF HEALTHCARE: MAPPING YOUR DREAM HOSPITAL

The following step-by-step instructions use a fictional example based on research encounters during the Sensing Spaces of Healthcare project. The Sensing Spaces of Healthcare project rethinks NHS hospitals through its focus on sensory experiences. It is funded by Victoria Bates' UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship MR/S033793/1 (2020 – present). The project involves working with Great Ormond Street Hospital's arts organisation, GOSH Arts, and North Bristol NHS Trust's arts organisation, Fresh Arts, to carry out this work. The project uses a range of approaches from archival research to creative research methods to explore / reimagine the hospital environment.

Background. This fictional encounter involved the researcher working one-to-one with a partially sighted young person in a hospital waiting area. The activity aimed to explore what the young person would want in their dream hospital and how that environment would make them feel.

Designing the activity. The resources and materials were created in collaboration with patient and public involvement members, NHS staff, hospital arts organisations, the project's advisory board and illustrator Alex Higlett, Pirrip Press. The resources needed to be portable, meet infection control measures, and be easy to use within a public area of the hospital. The resources included an A3 tactile floor plan (each participant received their own floor plan), and an array of sensory objects selected for their tactile, auditory, and visual qualities (see images below). The objects were cleaned in between use and so met infection control measures.

Carrying out the activity (approximately 30 minutes). The activity was carried out in a waiting area while the participant waited for their outpatient appointment. The researcher and participant spent time building rapport and getting to know one another, before working through the exercise. Creative activities can be met with nervousness - this needs to be carefully negotiated to facilitate a supportive, encouraging, and safe environment in which people feel able to share their ideas and experiences. Throughout the activity the researcher reiterated that it was the process, rather than the outcome, that was important. This meant that what was created was of value due to process of thinking-through-making. The researcher, who is not partially sighted, was guided by the participant in how they worked during the activity.

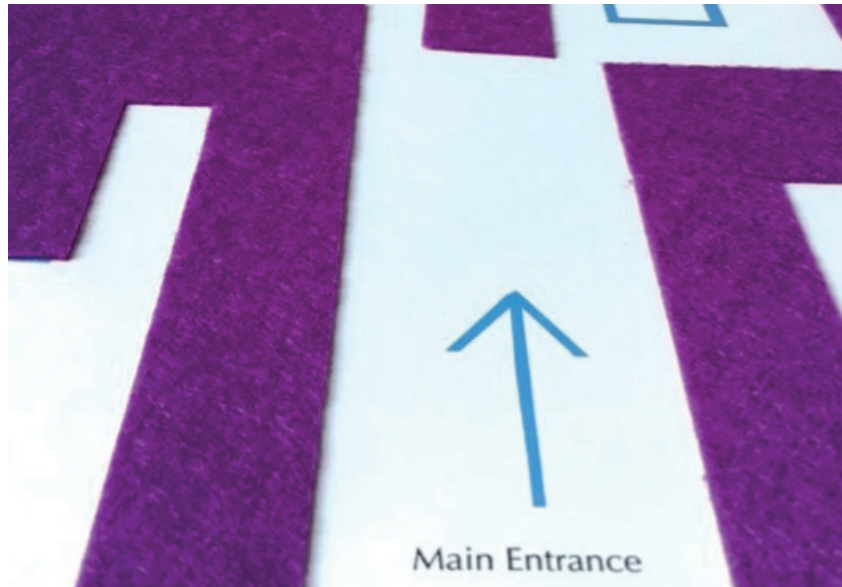
The researcher used a series of exploratory prompts to shape the activity and invited the participant to respond to these and select, interact with, and place objects on the floor plan.

The following prompts were used:

- What would you want to hear, smell, touch, or taste within this space?
- How would this space make you feel and why?
- Please tell me why you have chosen this [insert name of object]
- Please describe your floor plan



Example sensory resources and tactile Floor Plan used in the Sensing Spaces of Healthcare project's 'Mapping your Dream Hospital' activity.



At the end of the activity the researcher thanked the participant for taking part and explained that the project's next steps involved working with designers to create prototypes in response to the research findings.

Recording the activity. As the research took place in a public area of a hospital the researcher was unable to audio record the encounter. The researcher took notes during the session and expanded on these immediately after the activity. The researcher also photographed the work in progress and the final piece created.

Practicing reflexivity. The nature of this work is subjective, and this subjectivity should be embraced in how the work is carried out, analysed, and disseminated. This requires attending to the ways in which the work is iterative and participatory with researcher(s) and participants working together to shape findings. The researcher made reflexive notes after the research encounter and created drawings in response to the process of working with the participant.

Final considerations. This work can be resource heavy especially if you design and develop specific resources. As part of your preparation, you may wish to run a few practice or 'taster' activities to ensure you feel confident before you use the method 'in the field'. Inviting people to take part in creative activities can be challenging, so consider how you can frame the activity to best suit your project / research participants.

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The making of this booklet was managed by Victoria Bates, University of Bristol (2023). Booklet design is by Pirrip Press. Thank you to the Wellcome Trust for funding this resource [through Clare Hickman's MedEnv award: 218165/Z/19/Z]. All methods are shared on a CC BY NC ND basis. We encourage you to use them widely and share, though these should be considered only starting points or introductions to the methods. Please also get institutional support and ethical guidance if you are using these for research.

