Notes on Reader Interviews

One of the most valuable things you can do in a technical writing project is talk to your potential readers face to face to find out about their perception of the need and value of your project are and what if any concerns they have. It is not a requirement of your ethnography that you interview your readers face to face but when you can do it, you will always be better for the experience.

Good technical writing always focuses on the needs of a specific readers and nothing beats direct, personal interaction for learning about readers. This research is valuable no matter how well you know your material. In fact, the better you know the content, the more critical good reader research becomes. Writers always have a different point of view than readers. The deeper your knowledge of content, the more you take for granted.

If you have the chance the interview readers you can either gather a group of people together in a focus group or interview people one on one (try to talk to more than one if that is possible.

You need to do a good deal of planning to prepare for these interviews. You need to articulate your objectives for the interview, you need to prepare a schedule of questions to ask, you need to plan an appropriate place for the interview, you need to recruit subjects, and you need to decide how you will record and write up your notes. In general you will want to find out whether your potential readers see the problem the same way you do, what aspects of the issue most concern them, where they will use the document, why they will use. If similar documents existed in the past, what was their strengths and weaknesses, etc. You will want to talk to them about their background and try to learn if any aspects of that background will influence their use of your document.

Interview tips

- Find a neutral site.
- Use icebreakers.
- Prepare an interview schedule
- Ask open-ended questions first, specific questions last.
- Be flexible,
  Don’t be afraid to abandon your list.
- Listen intently.
- Take notes.
- Use silence.
- Don’t let your subject start asking you questions.
- Immediately after the interview, write down everything you can remember.