All semester long, we’ve been looking at the smallest details of phonological theory and its descriptive mechanisms. Now it’s time to step back and look at a bigger picture. Aside from theoretical issues, such as how many places of articulation can contrast in a language, or whether a language can contrast front, central, and back vowels regardless of rounding, or whether rules can exist in a language in a bleeding or counterfeeding order, we need to think about what questions we are trying to answer about an individual language when we want to describe its phonology. Here is a first step.

1. List all the sounds of the language. Separate them into classes such as Consonants (plosives, fricatives, affricates, nasals, liquids, glottals), Vowels, etc.
2. Group the sounds into contrastive units (phonemes). State where each allophone occurs. If a phoneme has more than one, list them in increasing order of distribution, so that the one with the least limited distribution (the “elsewhere” allophone) appears last.
3. List any weird sounds that occur in very limited contexts, such as [³] in British English [ˈrestƷ] ‘restaurant’, [k³pɔə] ‘compere’, or theophones¹ such as [ɔ] in ‘God’ in otherwise [ɔ]-less varieties of American English, or [l¹] in Arabic.
4. Show which features are distinctive and which redundant in the language. E.g., are all and only the nonlow back vowels rounded? All back vowels, as in Persian? Or is rounding distinctive, as in French and German?
5. Give the sequence-structure constraints of the language. What is permitted in onsets, nuclei, and codas? What word-level constraints does the language have, if they are different from the syllable-level constraints?
6. Are there any constraints beyond the syllabic? Does the language show vowel harmony? Consonant harmony?

¹ ‘Theophone is my own term; I use it because many languages seem to have words referring to God (or gods) with sounds not generally found in other contexts. E.g., English [ɔ] or Arabic[l¹] as noted above; Hindi Krishna [ɔ].