

Writing in Anthropology

Key terms:

Anthropology is the study of human behavior, culture and experiences in the contexts of today's and past societies. It attempts to explain the similarities and differences that exist among people and cultures and to understand these phenomena by considering all aspects of human behavior and experience.

Subfields:

Linguistic anthropology concerns the study and evolution of human language and its implications in culture.

Cultural anthropology, also known as socio-cultural anthropology or ethnology, involves the study and comparison of specific human groups and their cultures.

Archaeology is the study of human groups and cultures of the past through the recovery, documentation and analysis of material remains.

Physical anthropology explores the evolution of the human race from a biological perspective.

An **ethnography** is a description of a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular time. It is typically the result of an anthropologist's firsthand experience in a particular setting.

Fieldwork involves hands-on, active participation in the setting being studied. Field notes, which may include observations of activities, quotations from individuals being observed, and any other impressions of the anthropologist, are generally written during fieldwork and frequently become the best resource for paper-writing. In undergraduate anthropology classes, it is common for students to volunteer or observe at various places in the community in order to collect evidence to be used in assignments.

Compared to other disciplines:

- anthropological work focuses on making general claims based on very particular cases.

- even the most basic assumptions are questioned.

- the goal is not to develop theories given the evidence, but to understand the particular case in the best possible way; this may require one to draw from other disciplines and the theories they provide.

- Ex. An attempt to explain the French Revolution or "Why did Johnny buy a Red Corvette?"

Some common types of assignments:

Critical essay: an evaluation of a particular argument, theory or article. Assignments may ask you to compare and contrast arguments on a similar topic.

Analyses using material evidence: forming and supporting one's own argument based on outside records of fossils and artifacts, rather than studying these things firsthand.

Don't forget to:

Make a strong argument. Students are sometimes afraid to commit to an argument; they want to be diplomatic, and write equally about several different sides of an issue. You need to take a single point of view and make a single, persuasive argument (Foster).

Start your paper with specifics rather than generalities. Many students were taught in high school that the first paragraph of a paper should move from the general to the specific. This kind of writing might be a good way to get yourself thinking about a topic, but it should be left out of a final draft; the first sentence of your introductory paragraph should tell the reader what to expect in your paper (Foster).

Write in the first person, and use active verbs. "I observed the students in ITS for two hours" is better than "The students in ITS were observed for two hours." In the words of Professor Foster, "The person who writes the paper gets the grade, not some anonymous 'third person.' I prefer to acknowledge this condition in the writing itself" (Foster).

Communicate your ideas clearly. Even if you have great ideas, if your reader cannot understand what you are trying to say, your paper will not succeed. Consciously apply everything you know about writing well. Consider visiting the Writing Center or consulting a style guide, such as Joseph Williams *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, for help (Foster).

Use proper citations and to format your bibliographies correctly. The official format for anthropology can be found in the Style Guide of the American Anthropology Association website, http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style_guide.pdf.

Sources:

Noland, Robert L. Research and Report Writing in the Behavioral Sciences: Psychiatry, Psychology, Sociology, Educational Psychology, Cultural Anthropology, Managerial Psychology. Springfield, Il. Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1970.

http://www.writingcenter.pdx.edu/online_resources/anthropology_dg.htm

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/anthropology.html>

http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rlauriau/Anthropology/Anthrosylabus2.html#Useful_Links

Special thanks to Professor Carter, Professor Foster, and Professor Gibson.

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Key terms:

Anthropology is the study of human behavior, culture and experiences in the contexts of today's and past societies. It attempts to explain the similarities and differences that exist among people and cultures and to understand these phenomena by considering all aspects of human behavior and experience. There are four subfields within anthropology, described below. Anthropology is a very writing-intensive field, and common types of assignments are described below as well.

An **ethnography** is a description of a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular time. It is typically the result of an anthropologist's firsthand experience in a particular setting.

Fieldwork involves hands-on, active participation in the setting being studied. Field notes, which may include observations of activities, quotations from individuals being observed, and any other impressions of the anthropologist, are generally written during fieldwork and frequently become the best resource for paper-writing. In undergraduate anthropology classes, it is common for students to volunteer or observe at various places in the community in order to collect evidence to be used in assignments.

Four subfields within anthropology:

Linguistic anthropology concerns the study and evolution of human language and its implications in culture.

Cultural anthropology, also known as socio-cultural anthropology or ethnology, involves the study and comparison of specific human groups and cultures.

Archaeology is the study of human groups and cultures of the past.

Physical anthropology explores the evolution of the human race from a biological perspective.

Some common types of assignments:

Critical essay: an evaluation of a particular argument, theory or article.

Analyses using material evidence: forming and supporting one's own argument based on outside records of fossils and artifacts, rather than studying these things firsthand.

Ethnographic project (ethnography): a report based on fieldwork in a particular environment.

Appropriate pieces of evidence in an ethnography:

- Quotations of people being observed.
- Descriptions of events, behaviors, and situations observed firsthand.
- Relevant historical and statistical data.

Important things to consider when writing:

- Read all assignments carefully and understand what you are being asked to do. Pay attention to key directions such as "reflect," "explore" and "identify."
- Explain specifically what you mean when referring to broad concepts such as "culture" and "tradition."
- Accurately cite information when appropriate.
- If a professor does not specify a particular preference for citations and bibliographies, the official format for anthropology can be found in the Style Guide of the American Anthropology Association website, http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style_guide.pdf.

Tips from Professors

Professor Carter and Professor Foster offered advice on how to avoid the mistakes students often make in their Anthropology papers.

Professor Carter's advice:

- *Begin with statements of what your paper will argue, why your argument is important, and how you will support your argument.* Many papers begin with variations on "In (author's) book, (title), she (action)." A common first sentence that doesn't provide any information about the paper itself fails to engage the reader's interest.
- *Cite details rather than arguments.* Students sometimes try to support their points by citing arguments made in assigned readings. You should instead cite the telling details from the readings and then draw your own conclusions. These conclusions might be similar to the arguments made in the reading, but you must come to them through the use of evidence rather than simply appealing to the authority of published work.
- *Refer to your sources appropriately.* Call an ethnography an ethnography; don't call it a novel.
- *Revise your work before you turn it in.* Does your introduction introduce the paper you've written, or the paper you planned to write? In the case of the latter, read your conclusion; could it be modified to serve as an introduction? Read your paper aloud to yourself and listen for problematic words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Professor Foster's advice:

- *Make a strong argument.* Students are sometimes afraid to commit to an argument; they want to be diplomatic, and write equally about several different sides of an issue. You need to take a single point of view and make a single, persuasive argument.
- *Start your paper with specifics rather than generalities.* Many students were taught in high school that the first paragraph of a paper should move from the general to the specific. This kind of writing might be a good way to get yourself thinking about a topic, but it should be left out of a final draft; the first sentence of your introductory paragraph should tell the reader what to expect in your paper.
- *Write in the first person, and use active verbs.* "I observed the students in ITS for two hours" is better than "The students in ITS were observed for two hours." In the words of Professor Foster, "The person who writes the paper gets the grade, not some anonymous 'third person.' I prefer to acknowledge this condition in the writing itself."
- *Remember that writing is an act of communication.* Even if you have great ideas, if your reader cannot understand what you are trying to say, your paper will not succeed. Consciously apply everything you know about writing well. Consider visiting the Writing Center or consulting a style guide, such as Joseph Williams *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, for help.

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