

Guide for Writing in Anthropology

By Dr. Melissa Johnson

About Writing in Anthropology

Thinking anthropologically first and foremost means temporarily suspending ones' assumptions about how the world works, about what is "normal" and what is "strange." In other words, anthropology exhorts its practitioners to be "culturally relative"—to try to understand cultural difference on its own terms. Anthropological thinking refuses ethnocentrism and attempts to see difference without arranging that difference in a hierarchy.

At Southwestern we focus on sociocultural anthropology. When writing in/for sociocultural, or cultural, anthropology, you will be asked to do a few things in each assignment:

- Critically question cultural norms (in both your own culture and other cultures).
- Analyze ethnographic data (e.g., descriptions of everyday activities and events, interviews, oral histories) to identify significant and interesting patterns.
- Organize ethnographic and other types of evidence (such as historical accounts, newspapers, maps, etc.) to describe and analyze a phenomenon, event or cultural feature, or to support an argument about such.
- Critically review a theoretical perspective for its effectiveness in making sense of cultural phenomena.

About this guide

This guide contains the following sections:

- About Writing in Anthropology
- Common Types of Writing
- Book Reviews & Ethnographic Analyses
- Evidence in Anthropology
- Conventions of Writing in Anthropology
- Citation & Formatting
- Common Errors in Writing in Anthropology

The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.

Types of Writing in Anthropology

In your anthropology classes at Southwestern, you will encounter several different types of writing, including:

Personal Reflection

Journal-entry style personal reflections ask you to connect class material with your own life experiences, beliefs, and emotions. The mechanics of writing matter less in these assignments than authentic engagement with the topic assigned.

Short Essay

Short essay assignments may ask you to engage with (often controversial and challenging) class material. These may be reflective essays (like the journal-entry style reflections described above), or they may ask you to synthesize information and concepts that were covered in class lectures, discussions, and readings. In these essays, the mechanics of writing do matter, and there should be strong organization and development of ideas.

Research Paper

Research papers address a topic that is chosen by the student or assigned by the instructor. These kinds of papers entail putting course content into conversation with other scholarly literature on a topic or theme. You will be expected to do effective searches for information in the library—both among the library's book collection and through the electronic databases that hold journal articles. Typically, you are not limited to books and articles that are strictly 'anthropological,' but you will be expected to find material from a range of disciplines that addresses the topic you are writing about. These articles and books will then need to be synthesized and organized to speak to the argument you plan to make. Research papers must be well organized, with each section building upon the others and supporting the main argument of the paper. Sources should be cited as they are used; it is not necessary to use direct quotations. A list of works cited should be included at the end.

As an anthropology student at Southwestern, you'll also be expected to write book reviews and analyses of ethnographic data. You will encounter these latter assignments as either a short paper on a small set of data in Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, or as a longer more in-depth analysis of a larger set of data in the Ethnographic Methods class. Below you will find a further explanation of these two common types of writing.

A Closer Look:

Book Reviews and Ethnographic Analyses

Book Reviews

In the SU anthropology program, book reviews are **not** book reports summarizing the content of a book. Rather, book reviews are essays that **critically** evaluate the effectiveness of a text in fulfilling its stated goals and in relationship to the content of the course in which it is assigned. Reviews should be like the book reviews found in academic journals (such as *American Ethnologist*, *American Anthropologist*, *Ethnos*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* and other similar journals). Reviews describe what the author tries to accomplish in the text and how they make their point. They include a discussion of what evidence is provided and how it is used, and they evaluate how well the author achieved their goal in writing the book. Additionally, book reviews should describe the theoretical perspective and/or main concepts the author uses to make their argument. Finally, effective book reviews find the connections between the material covered in the book and the themes and concepts addressed in the course in which the review is assigned.

Ethnographic Analyses

A number of anthropology courses require students to engage in ethnographic analysis. You will collect ethnographic data (through participant observation and interviewing) and analyze this data for any patterns and cultural meanings that emerge. You will then write up rich ethnographic description, or detailed physical descriptions of the places and people involved, as well as descriptions of how people behave and interact. Often, assignments will ask you to connect the ethnographic data you've created to scholarly literature on related topics; thus you will be expected to conduct a search of relevant scholarly literature through the library and its electronic databases. One hallmark of our anthropology program is our close attention to the production of knowledge—the question of how knowledge is made legitimate and academic. Because of this we ask students to take a reflexive approach to their ethnographic writing. You **should** use “I” and clarify who **you** are in relationship to the research you've conducted and the analyses you put forth. Excellent ethnographic analysis will include all of the above elements and will be coherently organized around a broader point that you are making with the analysis.

Evidence in Anthropology

You may be asked to use any of a wide array of types of evidence.

For assignments asking you to engage in ethnographic analysis, you are expected to use your own field notes (the notes you write describing the cultural phenomena you are studying, your accounts of your own participant-observation in the cultural context on which you are focusing), or transcripts of interviews or oral histories you have conducted. These kinds of sources can either be summarized in the paper in which they are used, or they may be directly quoted. You may also use newspaper or magazine articles, websites, advertisements, or a range of other materials.

For book reviews, you will use the text of the book as their evidence. In mid- and upper-level courses, students who write research papers or contextualize their ethnographic analysis in related scholarship will be expected to use information from scholarly journal articles and academic texts that contain information on their topics. The best place to begin your search for scholarly articles and books is the library's main catalog, which leads to World Cat, the largest database available for journals (and books), which offers extensive, immediate access to the full text of articles. JSTOR is also good, but has a five-year publication delay, so you will not find sources for the most recent five years available in that database. The library also has a rich collection of both monographs and edited volumes that can be useful, and a very useable interlibrary loan service. Remember: any student paper that includes reference to published sources should include a works cited list.

To Quote or To Paraphrase?

When you use your own ethnographic data, you are encouraged to directly quote your research participants (from interview transcripts and oral histories, newspaper articles, or historical documents, etc.). However, when using information from journal articles and academic texts, you should aim to summarize, paraphrase, and synthesize as much as possible. Anthropology courses are sequenced to help you master the skills required to synthesize (find common themes and connections between a number of scholarly texts) scholarly literature by the time you reach the capstone course. Paraphrased material should be cited at least once per paragraph, or, if several sources are used in a paragraph, at the end of each sentence in which the source is used.

If there are short quotes that perfectly capture a central point a writer is aiming to make, it is acceptable to quote the sources. Quotations three lines or shorter should remain in the text, and should be indicated with quotation marks, and followed by a parenthetical phrase indicating author, date of publication, and page number on which quote appeared). Quotations longer than three lines should be “blocked”: located on a line below and indented on either side by 0.5 inches (and should include source information at the end the parenthetical as indicated above).

Conventions of Writing in Anthropology

Use of the first-person “I”

In anthropology papers, it is often acceptable to use the pronoun “I” to make the writer visible to the audience. This pronoun should be used judiciously depending on the assignment.

Clearly, anthropology instructors want students to use “I” and express their opinion in the journal-type assignments. Using “I” is also expected in ethnographic analysis. But because these papers are not primarily about the student, but rather about the cultural phenomena being analyzed, we expect a more judicious use of “I.” For critical book reviews, research papers and the literature review (particularly the related scholarship section) for the methods and capstone papers, the use of “I” would be less appropriate.

Active vs. Passive Voice

We encourage you to use the active voice, but we also recognize that beautiful writing may contain both active and passive voices. However, just as using “I” reveals the author to the audience, active voice makes the “actor” or “subject” front and center, which is something we generally aim for—we want the people we study to be as present as possible in our writing.

Verb Tense

What tense to write in is a challenging issue. The most important point related to this is consistency. The second point to remember is the problem of creating a false sense of authority and surety through using the present tense in describing cultural phenomena, and yet at times a writer will indicate that something is an on-going still present feature of what is

being described. Be aware of these issues, aim for consistency and the anthropology instructors will work with you to find the best way to use tense in your writing.

A Note on Style

Readers in anthropology appreciate beautiful writing with elegant style. Complex sentences are welcome and should be mixed with shorter sentences. You should aim for beautiful, clear, elegant and evocative style. Particularly in papers that include ethnographic analysis, we encourage students to write as rich and thick an ethnographic description as possible. You should aim to conjure up the experiences you had, the events and interactions you witnessed, for their readers. Metaphor and other figures of speech are welcome. Of course this kind of rich writing should be well matched with clarity!

Citations and Formatting

It is conventional in anthropology to use parenthetical in-text citations to indicate a scholarly source, and then a works cited list at the end of the paper that includes all sources used in the paper. Using footnotes to indicate sources is relatively uncommon in anthropology. As a discipline, anthropology does not have as uniform a practice of citation style as (for example) psychology does. Each main anthropological journal has its own particular citation style. Thus, the most important point regarding citation style is **consistency** within a paper. Instructors may assign a specific citation style, or else students should choose one style and use it consistently. You should take care with on-line bibliography generators. These often will create errors in your reference list. Carefully proofread your works cited list and your in-text citations, using a guide to the citation style you are using to ensure your paper conforms to the style. As a department, we provide some information on the Chicago B (author-date) style that is close to a number of the styles that different journals use. Look for such a style guide on moodle sites for your course, or in the [“Student Resources”](#) section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website.

You should feel free to use either footnotes or endnotes to add additional comments or notes about a point in the paper. However, anthropology does not use footnotes or endnotes as a format for citing sources. Sources are cited in text and a works cited list should be the last page(s) of the paper.

How to Avoid Some Common Errors

One of the most common errors in anthropology papers is some kind of **ethnocentrism, or lapse in cultural relativism**. This is often expressed through erroneously attributing an emotion or value to why people are doing what they are doing. For example, if a student noted that all the men at a party were winking at each other for ten minutes, they cannot assume they know **why** unless they actually spoke to each man. Therefore, they cannot write that this was an example of, say, “sexism” on the part of the men. Sometimes, in book reviews, students will make comments about how “weird” something is—again, that is not how anthropologists think. **Something might be different, but we do not judge those differences.**

One of the most difficult aspects of writing upper level ethnographic analysis papers is **identifying the best related scholarship, and ensuring that the thick ethnographic description, the analysis of the moment, and the related scholarship all fit together well.** You should not freak out if that seems hard: it is hard.

All anthropologists struggle with this. Strategies for working through this include 1) taking a break from the paper and coming back to it with fresh eyes; 2) having a peer (ideally someone with experience in writing in anthropology) read and provide feedback and 3) making outlines of what you actually have on paper to see if the flow and linking of your arguments and data make sense.

You should **make certain that your paper flows logically**—one idea follows the next, arguments/points are well supported with evidence, arguments cohere throughout the paper. **You might try reverse-outlining your paper or bringing it by the writing center** to ensure that your arguments are well organized and clear.

Try not to over-write. Although we encourage students to develop an elegant style, especially in lower-level classes, **you should aim first for clarity and precision in your writing.** As you master clarity and precision, you can experiment more with complexity of sentences, with the use of figures of speech, etc.

Be sure to **read your prompt carefully and to answer each part of it.** Anthropology instructors put a great deal of thought and time into designing assignments, prompts, and assignment guidelines. The Debby Ellis Writing Center offers online [“Tips for Reading a Prompt”](#) in the “Student Resources” section of their website, and you can always ask your professor or a writing consultant if you have any questions about what is expected of your paper.