

The Anti-Racist Classroom

Exploring Difference through Ethnographic Research & Writing

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Why Ethnography?

Because most English instructors do not have a degree in sociology or anthropology, assigning an ethnographic assignment might seem intimidating. However, many of the skills central to ethnographic writing are also common objectives in the first-year writing classroom. While it is important to introduce ethnography as a genre requiring much training and practice to compose professionally, with a little research and care, instructors should feel confident in their ability to coach students in the writing moves a short ethnographic assignment requires.

Benefits of Ethnographic Writing Assignments:

- The freedom to research a subculture of the student's choice encourages genuine interest in the task at hand while also discouraging plagiarism.
- A short ethnographic assignment requires students to engage in primary research, often for the first time.
- Ethnographic research asks students to consider carefully how culture and community impact identity.
- Successful ethnographies require great attention to detail, smooth integration of quotations, and strong critical thinking skills as writers must move beyond summary to nuanced analysis.

Example Assignment:

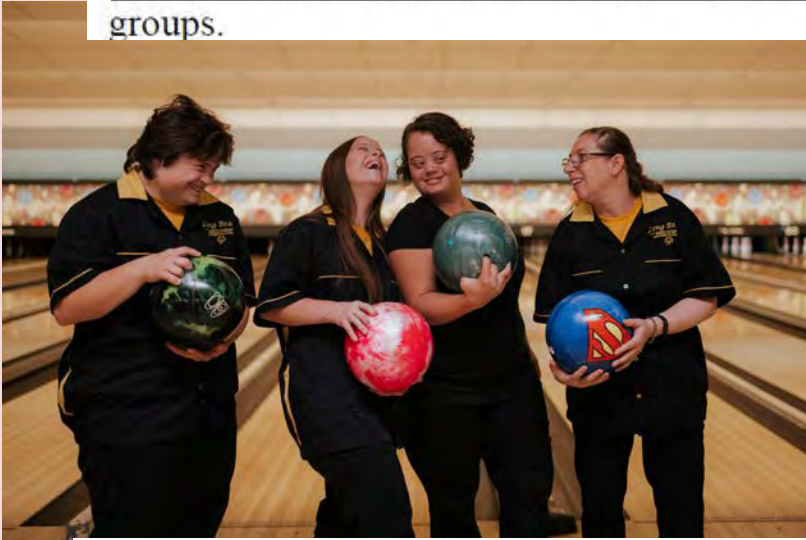
“People’s minds are changed through observation and not through argument.” —Will Rogers

The Basics

For your first major written assignment in this class, I ask you to observe your site/subculture at least twice and interview at least one informant. Then, report back to me about your experiences, why you’ve chosen this group to observe, and what you hope to gain from further research.

Choosing a Site

You should choose a site that you can observe at least twice for at least an hour at a time. You may either take notes while observing or free-write as soon afterward as possible about what you observe. I highly encourage you to see this as a graded excuse to visit somewhere you’ve always wanted to go or learn more about a group you’ve always wondered about. When at this subculture or site, you should choose at least one person to interview with questions. You should make sure the person is aware you will be quoting them in your paper and always approach your site as a respectful observer. Specific examples, as well as quotations accurately attributed, should be included in the observation paper. Over the next few weeks in class, we will also talk about how to cite quotes from a personal interview. Here are some examples to generate ideas: Church groups, self-help groups, athletic teams, video parlors and game rooms, tattoo parlors, upper class majors (architecture students, art students), day care centers, businesses of all sorts (fast food restaurants, stores, bars), farmers, hang-outs (coffee houses, etc), dorms, libraries, gyms, student organizations, animal shelters, running or hiking groups, online communities, and study groups.



Remind students to pay close attention to verbal and body language used within the subculture they observe. What words are new or unfamiliar to an observer? What kind of knowledge is an insider of this subculture expected to possess and how do they gain that knowledge?

Important/Critical Questions to ask yourself about your site:

- What can/have I learned from these people?
- What’s ordinary about my site?
- What’s extraordinary or unusual?

The point of the ethnography is to watch, to try to understand what’s going on from the perspective of an insider, and to ask questions to test your observations. You are going to be the expert on this site; you’re teaching your peers, and you’re teaching me. One way to do this is through the thesis statement. What is the single most important and significant point that the reader will need to know about the group?

Scaffolding and Modeling

From the Assignment Sheet:

Due Dates

Thurs. Sept. 20: Bring in at least two pages of observation notes toward the assignment.

Thurs. Sept. 27: Bring in at least three pages of writing for this assignment for workshop.

Thurs. Oct. 4: Meet with Ms. Rawlins for your conference at the assigned time and place.

Thurs. Oct. 11: Submit observation paper to D2L before class. Bring a folder with all drafts and process work to class.

Though it will mean more work for the instructor the first time they assign this paper, it's a great idea for them to conduct observations and compose some version of the assignment alongside students, so that they can model the process of taking good fieldnotes and working to make meaning from those notes during class lectures and discussions.

Be sure to check-in with students often, especially early in the process. Instructors will want to be sure the student's chosen subculture does not cause safety concerns. Asking students to bring in signed consent forms from members of the subculture observed is a smart first step that introduces students to basic principles of responsible research.

Example of Consent Form:

I give my permission to

_____ (Student Name) to use my written and spoken words for a research project written for the English 1101 course taught by Ms. Paula Rawlins at the University of Georgia. I understand only the student writer and Ms. Rawlins will have access to my real name if I ask for a pseudonym to be used.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

**Include the instructor's contact information on the consent form and make sure students give a copy to any informants quoted in their paper.*

Suggested Resources for Using Ethnography in the Composition Classroom

- Alvarez, Steven. "Taco Literacies: Ethnography, Foodways, and Emotions through Mexican Food Writing." *Composition Forum*. Vol. 34., 2016.
- Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth, and Bonnie Sunstein. *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*. Boston: Bedford, 1999.
- Sinor, Jennifer, and Michael Huston. "The Role of Ethnography in the Post-Process Writing Classroom." *Teaching English in the Two-year College* 31.4 (2004): 369.
- Zebroski, James Thomas. *Thinking through Theory: Vygotskian Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing*. Boynton/Cook, 1994.