

Ethnography

You may be wondering what an ethnography is. Ethnography is a term borrowed from anthropology. In ethnographic research, anthropologists go into a culture or a sub-group of a culture to try to figure out what makes that culture- what defining characteristics, what stories, what artifacts, what places and people and things, what words, what customs define the uniqueness of a particular group of people. Cultural anthropologists choose a particular group or place to study. They might want to study street gangs. Or they might want to study native culture in the Australian Bush. Or they might want to study NASCAR culture. There is really no limit to the kinds of groups/cultures that cultural anthropologists are interested in understanding.

Having picked his or her group, the ethnographer becomes something called a “participant observer.” This is the main way that an ethnographer gathers information about his or her culture: he watches it, pays good attention, takes very good and detailed notes. She listens in on conversations. She interviews people. He pays attention to what people are wearing and eating and doing and saying. He collects artifacts. He observes rituals and customs. And he or she takes very good notes (this is most crucial). From those good notes, the ethnographer finally writes that story, figures out what makes that culture. As an ethnographer you use your notes and data as evidence to prove a thesis about your observations.

This kind of research is different from the traditional research paper you would write for, say, a history class. This is inductive not deductive reasoning at work here. You go in just looking to see what you can see. And after you have gathered your information you read your data. It is at the end of data collection that an ethnographer tries to figure out what it all means, tries to figure out the answer to his or her question: what makes that culture a culture? What is the story of that group?

This is not easy to do. I will say that up front. You should not think it is easy. It’s hard to go in not thinking you know all the answers already. That is why this project is going to be broken down into multiple parts throughout the semester and will culminate in one final large paper. Why do this kind of work in a writing class about writing and information? Ethnography is, I believe, all about careful reading, thoughtful analysis and criticism, and writing that is responsible to the world it is going to be a part of. All of that is exactly what a writing class should teach you.

For this class you will complete an ethnography. You will write your paper in four parts. Each part will include a workshop draft, revised draft for me to comment on, and a final revised draft in your portfolio. Each short paper will ask you to complete some part of all the things that make an ethnography an ethnography. You will get feedback from me and your classmates. At the end of the semester you will use the four essays to compose one final piece for your final portfolio.

The site community you choose to write your ethnography on is up to you, as long as it relates somehow to your major or career field of interest. The other goal here, beyond writing and research, is to immerse you into a culture where you can gain knowledge to help you in your major or chosen career. I have two other stipulations: First, you cannot already be part of the culture and second, it must be completely legal. This means that you can’t get involved with the dark web or illegal gambling. You can’t observe your work or any organization that you are already a part of. You cannot, of course, put yourself in any danger.

A Few Topic Ideas (Feel free to choose other sites)

All sites must be approved by me

Education field-

- classroom
- Upper level class on campus
- After school program
- Preschool

Business/Management

- small businesses
- Non-Profit Organizations

Criminal Justice

- Police station
- Court house
- law office

Sciences

- lab course
- Zoo
- Museum
- Hospital

Humanities

- Museum
- Publishing Company
- Theatre
- Production at BSU

Athletic Training/Sports Med

- Sports teams
- Physical Therapy Office
- Personal Trainer
- Gym

Some Advice: You will be working on this research all semester. That is 3 months. Choose something you like, that you have easy access to, can get to, and will offer you information. The success of your work this semester, and your grade, depend heavily on your topic selection.