

Overview

Ethnography, the signature mode of anthropological writing, spins a yarn from the fieldworker's immersion in the everyday worlds of others, a yarn that loops back-and-forth between theory and description, self and other, and, in our case, human and animal. Drawing from your observations at the parks, neighborhoods, and other bestial spaces of Philadelphia, our goal in this course is to patch together a quilt or "rush" of stories about ordinary encounters between humans, dogs, cats, pigeons, squirrels, turkeys, hawks, and other nonhuman species. Through such stories, we will aim to unsettle both scholarly and common-sense distinctions between nature and the city. Our focused attention to the lived reality of this "accidental ecosystem" and its multispecies ecologies will allow us to theorize, from the ground up, contemporary urban form as a wild mesh-work of human territories and animal habitats. We will ask: How is the anthropological condition—the state of *being human*—knotted with, or entangled in, the mobility and livelihood of animals, specifically in an American metropolis today?

To do this, we will participate in two primary writing exercises that will build upon the preliminary reflections you have already completed. The first, Paper One, will ask you to knit your site into some broader context(s)—historical, social, political, cultural, and/or environmental—whereas Paper Two will invite you to conceptualize the materialities that mediate the interspecies interactions which you have researched. This guide will steer you through the process of learning to write anthropologically. It will span the characteristic features of the ethnographic text from narrative vignettes to theoretical exposition. It will also identify my criteria of paper evaluation, and point to further writing resources.

Ethnographic Style

A distinguishing property of an anthropologist's text—if not *the* distinguishing property—is its *narrativity*, the embedding of analytical argumentation within detailed and evocative descriptions of the people, events, activities, and, increasingly, animals that define a given site or locale. Famously, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz characterized this as "thick description," but we have seen what, in a related sense, Donna Haraway calls the layering of "facts on facts." At first, you might not think these texts are *about* anything at all. But, upon deeper inspection, you will discover that the argument slowly and gradually accumulates, thereby offering not just an intimate glimpse into the daily lives of a community's members, but a qualitatively rich and empirically grounded investigation into diverse social phenomena as they are enacted day-to-day, in the flesh, phenomena like race, capitalism, hope, and, of course, human-animal meetings. Anthropologists thus shift, nimbly, from the concrete to the abstract, and so on and so forth.

Anthropologists cannot, obviously, record and relay everything they witnessed, so *differentiation*—the separation of salient aspects from the totality of what we name "the social"—is imperative. In this course, we are focused on the "contact zone" between humans and animals, to be particular, the spatial features of their intersection. Another way of saying this is that ethnographers foreground someone or something against the back-ground or -drop of a community. Recall that the language of "figuration" can help us to center a particular animal within that one differentiated social world. Even with a limited set of observations, you must decide what evidence to marshal in support of that idea. To this end, anthropologists often use an *ethnographic vignette*: a story, typically opening an article or book but often inserted throughout the text, that exemplifies, or otherwise, introduces an

argument. These techniques, together, establish the parameters of the anthropological text: the topic, scope, agents, relationships, and site.

In addition to weaving from concrete to abstract, anthropologists also weave from the subjective to the objective, from the human experience of the world to the material conditions that subtend that experience. Another dynamic they explore is that between structure and agency, that is, between the larger patterns that shape human actions (e.g., social norms, economic systems, cultural categories, etc.) and the moves individuals make within those structures. Ethnographers speak about the context of their fieldsites: the larger structures that give rise to, or mold, the people and the place they observed. Our first writing assignment will focus on *contextualization*. Context can connote many things, from ecology and culture to society, politics, and the law. It will be up to you to determine an appropriate context that will illuminate the findings from your fieldwork.

The steps involved in generating theory are many and varied, but in brief, anthropologists usually lay out all of their notes, recordings, and other kinds of evidence and “code” the themes or subjects that recur across them. Because we have a limited dataset, you have likely already noticed a pattern emerging or some anomalous blip that you would like to understand. With this in hand, you might then consider what context would help explain it, or at least shed light on it. Perhaps you have noticed the absence of an animal at your site. Could that be due to their migration route? Could that be due to an episode in the history of urban planning in the region?

Once you have determined a fitting context, you should begin to think about significance. Why does this observation matter? Why should we care? To do so, you might point to other authors on the topic, either scholarly or popular. Does your observation differ from their assessment of your site? Does the way people at your site talk about their interactions with animals diverge from the way we often frame these interactions?¹ Alternatively, you might compare your site to another site nearby or disconnected. Whatever your comparative frame is, you should ask yourself 1) *why* that difference, or those differences, exist and 2) *how* that prompts us to think differently. Anthropology aims toward *de-familiarization*, or “making the familiar strange.” How can your observation serve as a starting point, or launchpad, for us to perceive the world anew? Trust your gut. Listen to what surprised you during your fieldwork. Our second writing assignment will emphasize this part of anthropological writing.

Last but not least, you will find, if you have not already found, that anthropologists often write themselves into the text. They frequently appear in the events observed, or at least reflect on how their presence impacted the observations. This is not simply to establish authority as an author, and therefore the validity of one’s observations, but more importantly, to mark the noninnocence or nonneutrality of the text. Fieldworkers are not impassive recorders of cultural phenomena, nor is the text they write a transparent window into a community. Anthropologists make choices, conscious or unconscious, to select certain people to study and materials to present, and these decisions as well as their “positionality” in the field affect how they represent communities. These portrayals are political as much as they are ethical. As you write, engage in the practice of *reflexivity* by asking yourself: Might my relationship to this person or group have influenced what I observed? How does my tone expose the nature of our relationship? Am I being conciliatory, judgmental, generous, critical, or productive?

¹ This is known as the distinction between “emic” and “etic” knowledge—knowledge that is “near” to a people or “far.”

There are numerous approaches to writing reflexively, and I encourage you to experiment with what works best for you, and to what end. That is to say: Who benefits?

Grading Rubric

I will evaluate your papers based on a holistic appreciation of the following criteria:

- Analysis* Your papers should express a point of view toward your site(s) and an analytical argument about how people there interact with animals, or do not. To put it another way, your paper should articulate a thesis, and this thesis should identify the site, the agents involved (human and nonhuman), their relations, and the significance of these relations. Your thesis should address the prompt as well as a question about your site (although it need not do so explicitly).
- Evidence* You should support your thesis, empirically and theoretically. You should support your thesis about the site with evidence drawn from your fieldwork, and you should conceptualize that evidence with course readings or related scholarship. If necessary for either paper, you should support your thesis with outside materials, such as news, drawings or photographs of material culture at your site, social media, etc. You might justify your methods, too. When appropriate, you should employ the proper citations for these sources.
- Clarity* Like the short-form anthropological essays that these assignments imitate, your papers are brief, approximately 4-6 pages. Unlike a journal article or a monograph, you have limited space to make a convincing argument. As such, I value the clarity of your papers. You should define your terms of analysis clearly and succinctly. Your thesis should be appropriately scoped for an essay of this length. Your analysis of the site should build progressively, without unnecessary facts, repetition, and vagueness. Write every word, sentence, and paragraph with intent, and only utilize what the poet Ezra Pound termed “luminous details”—those facts “swift and easy of transmission” that “govern knowledge as the switchboard governs an electric circuit.” Compose an essay as you wish, but do feel free to rely on the “topic sentence, supporting point(s), and concluding sentence” model. It is a standby for a reason.
- Style* Ideally, your essay should follow standard conventions of academic paper writing, including spelling, diction, grammar, and punctuation. Please reach out to one of the resources below if you do not know what this means. That said, I am less persnickety about formal rules of language. I am more interested in your voice and how you state your ideas. Aspire toward prose that is thoughtful, nuanced, compelling, and elegant. Above all, your paper should flow. Avoid writing that reads like a bullet-point outline without transitions.
- Creativity* Your papers should evince originality of thought that aims beyond the mere application of course readings toward critical assessment and creative directions. Exceptional papers will be creative. An exceptionally creative paper can recover from other errors in analysis, evidence, clarity, and style.

On your reflection papers, I left comments to help you achieve these goals. I recommend that you return to these comments throughout the writing process and incorporate my suggestions into your papers. In addition to reading my comments, you should review your essay after writing it. Drafting and revising your paper over several versions will significantly improve its quality.

A note on formatting: I prefer in-text citations with footnotes and a separate bibliography, but as long as you use a consistent and professional citational style (e.g., Chicago, APA, or MLA), you can use what best works for you. In terms of font, feel free to experiment with typography, especially if it supports your argument. That said, do respect the spirit of the assignment and its length, meaning: Do *not* tinker with the margins (1" all around), font size (11- or 12-point), spacing (double-spaced in your paragraphs and one space between sentences), or—and this is truly the most horrible—the size of the punctuation.

Do not under any circumstances plagiarize. Apart from being unethical to the person whose ideas you have plagiarized, to your classmates, and to me, it is an unpleasant experience to have to meet with the disciplinary review board, for everyone involved. If you feel the need to plagiarize, **please** write to me and request an extension. It should go without saying that using ChatGPT constitutes an act of plagiarism.

Campus Resources

The Weingarten Student Resource Center and the Mark's Family Writing Center both offer paper consultations and individual tutoring for writing. Please utilize their invaluable expertise to improve your skills. You can find their contact information on the "Campus Resources" guide I uploaded to Canvas. I am also available *during office hours only* to talk about your argument or read over your drafts.