

Anthropology

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What this handout is about

This handout briefly situates anthropology as a discipline of study within the social sciences. It provides an introduction to the kinds of writing that you might encounter in your anthropology courses, describes some of the expectations that your instructors may have, and suggests some ways to approach your assignments. It also includes links to information on citation practices in anthropology and resources for writing anthropological research papers.

What is anthropology, and what do anthropologists study?

Anthropology is the study of human groups and cultures, both past and present. Anthropology shares this focus on the study of human groups with other social science disciplines like political science, sociology, and economics. What makes anthropology unique is its commitment to examining claims about human 'nature' using a four-field approach. The four major subfields within anthropology are linguistic anthropology, socio-cultural anthropology (sometimes called ethnology), archaeology, and physical anthropology. Each of these subfields takes a different approach to the study of humans; together, they provide a holistic view. So, for example, physical anthropologists are interested in humans as an evolving biological species. Linguistic anthropologists are concerned with the physical and historical development of human language, as well as contemporary issues related to culture and language. Archaeologists examine human cultures of the past through systematic examinations of artifactual evidence. And cultural anthropologists study contemporary human groups or cultures.

What kinds of writing assignments might I encounter in my anthropology courses?

The types of writing that you do in your anthropology course will depend on your instructor's learning and writing goals for the class, as well as which subfield of anthropology you are studying. Each writing exercise is intended to help you to develop particular skills. Most introductory and intermediate level anthropology writing assignments ask for a critical assessment of a group of readings, course lectures, or concepts. Here are three common types of anthropology writing assignments:

Critical essays

This is the type of assignment most often given in anthropology courses (and many other college courses). Your anthropology courses will often require you to evaluate how successfully or persuasively a particular anthropological theory addresses, explains, or illuminates a

particular ethnographic or archaeological example. When your instructor tells you to “argue,” “evaluate,” or “assess,” s/he is probably asking for some sort of critical essay. (For more help with deciphering your assignments, see the Writing Center handout on how to read an assignment.

Writing a “critical” essay does not mean focusing only on the most negative aspects of a particular reading or theory. Instead, a critical essay should evaluate or assess both the weaknesses and the merits of a given set of readings, theories, methods, or arguments.

Sample assignment: Assess the cultural evolutionary ideas of late 19th century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan in terms of recent anthropological writings on globalization (select one recent author to compare with Morgan). What kinds of anthropological concerns or questions did Morgan have? What kinds of anthropological concerns underlie the current anthropological work on globalization that you have selected? And what assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies inform these questions or projects?

Ethnographic projects

Another common type of research and writing activity in anthropology is the ethnographic assignment. Your anthropology instructor might expect you to engage in a semester-long ethnographic project or something shorter and less involved (for example, a two-week mini-ethnography).

So what is an ethnography? “Ethnography” means, literally, a portrait (graph) of a group of people (ethnos). An ethnography is a social, political, and/or historical portrait of a particular group of people or a particular situation or practice, at a particular period in time, and within a particular context or space. Ethnographies have traditionally been based on an anthropologist’s long-term, firsthand research (called fieldwork) in the place and among the people or activities s/he is studying. If your instructor asks you to do an ethnographic project, that project will likely require some fieldwork.

Because they are so important to anthropological writing and because they may be an unfamiliar form for many writers, ethnographies will be described in more detail later in this handout.

Sample assignment: Spend two hours riding the Chapel Hill Transit bus. Take detailed notes on your observations, documenting the setting of your fieldwork, the time of day or night during which you observed and anything that you feel will help paint a picture of your experience. For example, how many people were on the bus? Which route was it? What time? How did the bus smell? What kinds of things did you see while you were riding? What did people do while riding? Where were people going? Did people talk? What did they say? What were people doing? Did anything happen that seemed unusual, ordinary, or interesting to you? Why? Write down any thoughts, self-reflections, and reactions you have during your two hours of fieldwork. At the end of your observation period, type up your fieldnotes, including your personal thoughts (labeling them as such to separate them from your more descriptive notes). Then write a

reflective response about your experience that answers this question: how is riding a bus about more than transportation?

Analyses using fossil and material evidence

In some assignments, you might be asked to evaluate the claims different researchers have made about the emergence and effects of particular human phenomena, such as the advantages of bipedalism, the origins of agriculture, or the appearance of human language. To complete these assignments, you must understand and evaluate the claims being made by the authors of the sources you are reading, as well as the fossil or material evidence used to support those claims. Fossil evidence might include things like carbon dated bone remains; material evidence might include things like stone tools or pottery shards. You will usually learn about these kinds of evidence by reviewing scholarly studies, course readings, and photographs, rather than by studying fossils and artifacts directly.

Sample assignment: The emergence of bipedalism (the ability to walk on two feet) is considered one of the most important adaptive shifts in the evolution of the human species, but its origins in space and time are debated. Using course materials and outside readings, examine three authors' hypotheses for the origins of bipedalism. Compare the supporting points (such as fossil evidence and experimental data) that each author uses to support his or her claims. Based on your examination of the claims and the supporting data being used, construct an argument for why you think bipedal locomotion emerged where and when it did.

How should I approach anthropology papers?

Writing an essay in anthropology is very similar to writing an argumentative essay in other disciplines. In most cases, the only difference is in the kind of evidence you use to support your argument. In an English essay, you might use textual evidence from novels or literary theory to support your claims; in an anthropology essay, you will most often be using textual evidence from ethnographies, artifactual evidence, or other support from anthropological theories to make your arguments.

Here are some tips for approaching your anthropology writing assignments:

- Make sure that you understand what the prompt or question is asking you to do. It is a good idea to consult with your instructor or teaching assistant if the prompt is unclear to you. See our handouts on arguments and college writing for help understanding what many college instructors look for in a typical paper).
- Review the materials that you will be writing with and about. One way to start is to set aside the readings or lecture notes that are not relevant to the argument you will make in your paper. This will help you focus on the most important arguments, issues, and behavioral and/or material data that you will be critically assessing. Once you have reviewed your evidence and course materials, you might decide to have a brainstorming session. Our handouts on reading in preparation for writing and brainstorming might be useful for you at this point.

- Develop a working thesis and begin to organize your evidence (class lectures, texts, research materials) to support it. Our handouts on constructing thesis statements and paragraph development will help you generate a thesis and develop your ideas and arguments into clearly defined paragraphs.

What is an ethnography? What is ethnographic evidence?

Many introductory anthropology courses involve reading and evaluating a particular kind of text called an ethnography. To understand and assess ethnographies, you will need to know what counts as ethnographic data or evidence.

You'll recall from earlier in this handout that an ethnography is a portrait—a description of a particular human situation, practice, or group as it exists (or existed) in a particular time, at a particular place, etc. So what kinds of things might be used as evidence or data in an ethnography (or in your discussion of an ethnography someone else has written)? Here are a few of the most common:

1. Things said by informants (people who are being studied or interviewed). When you are trying to illustrate someone's point of view, it is very helpful to appeal to his or her own words. In addition to using verbatim excerpts taken from interviews, you can also paraphrase an informant's response to a particular question.
2. Observations and descriptions of events, human activities, behaviors, or situations.
3. Relevant historical background information.
4. Statistical data.

Remember that "evidence" is not something that exists on its own. A fact or observation becomes evidence when it is clearly connected to an argument in order to support that argument. It is your job to help your reader understand the connection you are making: you must clearly explain why statements x, y, and z are evidence for a particular claim and why they are important to your overall claim or position.

Citation practices in anthropology

In anthropology, as in other fields of study, it is very important that you cite the sources that you use to form and articulate your ideas. (Please refer to our handout on plagiarism for information on how to avoid plagiarizing). Anthropologists follow the Chicago Manual of Style when they document their sources. The basic rules for anthropological citation practices can be found in the AAA (American Anthropological Association) Style Guide. Note that anthropologists generally use in-text citations, rather than footnotes. This means that when you are using someone else's ideas (whether it's a word-for-word quote or something you have restated in your own words), you should include the author's last name and the date the source text was published in parentheses at the end of the sentence, like this: (Author 1983).

If your anthropology or archaeology instructor asks you to follow the style requirements of a

particular academic journal, the journal's website should contain the information you will need to format your citations. Examples of such journals include The American Journal of Physical Anthropology and American Antiquity. If the style requirements for a particular journal are not explicitly stated, many instructors will be satisfied if you consistently use the citation style of your choice. For more information on citation, please see please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

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