Anthropology: Writing at the Introductory Level

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Anthropology is perhaps one of the more mysterious disciplines within the social sciences offered at Whitman. Broadly defined, Anthropology is the study of human culture; it is both the most humanistic of the social sciences and scientific of the humanities. Writing for this discipline is equally broad and difficult to quantify in a set of structured rules. Therefore, when tutoring a student in Anthropology, it is important to keep in mind that there is no “right” set of conventions for writing in the discipline.

Some **Key Terms** and **Hallmarks of Anthropology**: These may come up as terms intro level anthropological writing that aren’t given a lot of description. It will be helpful for you as a tutor to have a general understanding of these terms.

**Cultural Relativism**

The perspective that all cultures and customs, no matter how different or strange they may seem compared to your own, deserve respect. Practicing cultural relativism requires one to withhold moral judgment about practices that are different from your own.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation sounds like what it is: actively taking part in the everyday proceedings one observes in an ethnographic context, as a way of integrating oneself more wholly into another culture.

**Informed Consent**

The agreement between anthropologists and the people they’re studying to take part in research. This is a cornerstone for conducting ethical research in the social sciences.

**Ethnography**

The “first-hand, personal study of local settings” (Kottak 1). Many Anthropologists do ethnographic fieldwork, meaning they spend time among the population they are actively studying to get a more in-depth picture of everyday life and specific customs. This term may come up in student papers to refer to the research practices of established anthropologists. Ethnography can be referred to as the written product of Anthropology.

**The FOUR FIELDS**

In the United States, Anthropology is divided into four sub-disciplines. These four areas will give tutors a sense for how upper level classes may be categorized, but in most intro-level classes tutees will be working in Cultural Anthropology or Archaeology. **Whitman’s Anthropology department is more heavily focused in the cultural field**, and thus most student writing will fall under the first category.

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| **Cultural Anthropology**  **The most popular sub discipline of Anthropology offered at Whitman.**  **Writing for this sub discipline embraces narrative and some creativity while maintaining simple, clear prose.** | **Linguistic Anthropology**  **Requires a more scientific and objective approach in writing.**  **Classes in this area may begin to be offered more readily in coming years!** |
| **Biological Anthropology**  **Requires a more scientific, straightforward approach. Most classes at Whitman do not fall under the Biological sub-discipline.** | **Archaeology**  **Most classes offered at Whitman within this sub discipline would be test based with research papers. An objective approach is preferred, given that subject matter is more tangible and concrete.** |

***Language in Anthropological Writing***

* **Don’t be afraid of “I” statements.** Part of writing in Anthropology is acknowledging your own role as an outsider.
* **Write in the simplest way possible.** Anthropological writing strives to simplify complex social and cultural behavior.
* **Embrace short sentences!** Clarity is paramount.
* **Define your terms and concepts** thoroughly. (With, perhaps, the exception of the four terms listed above.)
* **Connect your points to the broader themes** being explored.
* If you’re writing about another group, keep in mind that **you must put your language into the terms of the people you are studying.** 
  + This means **utilizing quotes**! You never want to sound as though you’re putting words in the mouth of a person you are interviewing or observing; practice cultural relativism!

***Reflexivity in Anthropological writing***

* **Keep in mind your own biases** when writing.
* Although Anthropology is about **understanding the “other”** through anthropological analysis, you do a great deal of **self-reflection** through your own observations and reactions: be sure students are maintaining a non-judgmental viewpoint.
* **Acknowledge your role** as anthropologist when you write: make sure tutees are being reflective!
  + Being clear about your position as an observer is key in anthropological writing.

***Anthropology as Creative Literature***

* Your goal in Anthropology is to **give the reader a real sense of an unvarnished world you are observing** and exploring.
  + Consider *Beloved:* Toni Morrison makes magical realism both believable and beautiful, and in doing so gives her reader an even richer sense of the world her characters live in. Like in her book, Anthropology helps us see life and culture from another perspective through a creative approach.
* When helping students in Cultural Anthropology, **encourage a creative and narrative approach:** this will help the audience connect with the subject matter!

***Tips for Tutors***

* Try not to guide students purely by “what the professor wants to see”.
  + Looking at **prompts as rubrics will stifle student writing**, says Professor Jason Pribilsky of the Anthropology department. Try to **see the prompt as a looser guide, and let the student interpret elements of the assignment creatively.**
* When in doubt, encourage the student to go to the professor if you are unsure of the student’s approach.
* Remember that writing in **Anthropology is not as structured as in other social sciences**. While being clear and straightforward is always ideal, professors are not usually looking for a certain, rigid structure.

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**Works Cited:** Kottak, Conrad Phillip. "Chapter 1." Mirror for Humanity: A Concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999. 1-12. Print.