

How to Write an Ethnography

What is Ethnography?

Ethnographic writing originated in the field of anthropology to give detailed accounts of the lives and practices of various cultures. Researchers who aspire to create ethnographies of a particular culture immerse themselves in the experiences of that culture as a “participant observer.” Research methods can also be referred to as ethnographic when they employ the creation of ethnographies as a research tool.

Ethnographic writing and research approaches have now extended beyond Anthropology to include fields like Composition Studies, in which writing students may be asked to conduct short-term observations of a group and write an ethnography using their observations. According to Seth Kahn, a composition instructor who frequently teaches ethnographic writing, ethnographers “observe, participate, interact, analyze, reflect, write, rethink, and describe cultures, their members, and [their] own involvements with them.”¹

The Process

Ethnographic research often involves primary research that includes immersion and long-term study of the observed culture. Some of the basic methods of ethnography include: Secondary Data Analysis, Fieldwork with Observation/Participant Observation, and Informal and Semi-Structured Interviews.²

- Secondary Data Analysis
 - Secondary sources, or existing data about a culture already analyzed by a researcher, is important for generating ideas and questions to explore further in your research. These can include: scholarly publications, statistical data, records, etc.
- Fieldwork
 - This is the essential portion of ethnography that comprises primary research. The ethnographer spends an extended period of time in and among the observed group, learning their routines and customs. Ideally, the role of the researcher is that of both an observer and a participant/observer. The researchers should plan to listen to and watch how members of the culture interact, as well as participate when possible in the practices of the culture which he or she is researching. This allows the researcher to understand cultural practices through experience as well as observation.

¹ Seth Kahn, “Putting Ethnographic Writing in Context,” *Writing Spaces, Readings on Writing, Volume 2*, eds. Charlie Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, p. 177. Web.

² “Classical Ethno Methods.” *cusag.umd.edu* University of Maryland. 17 July 2005. Web. 7 November 2011.

- Informal and Semi-Structured Interviews
 - Conducting interviews with the participants of the culture can be an important source of information for the researcher. Informal “interviews” that are simply probing conversations with participants is one approach; more structured interviews with pre-determined questions is another approach. Your decision about what kind of interviews to conduct will depend on the demands of your assignment, as well as on the limitations of the time you spend immersed in the culture you are observing.

Links to Ethnographic Writing Resources

- 1) Seth Kahn, “Putting Ethnographic Writing in Context”: This is a great introduction to using ethnographies in a writing classroom, written for a student audience. The author explains the different kinds of writing that are involved in an ethnography and the process the writer will go through, from field notes to final product. You can download Kahn’s chapter here:
<http://writingspaces.org/sites/default/files/kahn--putting-ethnographic-writing.pdf>
- 2) Here are some sample ethnographic papers from Professor Randy Hodson’s sociology class at Ohio University:
<http://www.sociology.ohio-state.edu/rdh/Soc%20101/Soc%20101%20Ethnographic%20Study%20Examples%202011.pdf>
- 3) In this document, Professors Suzanne Blum Malley and Amy Hawkins of Columbia College, Chicago, discuss why they value ethnographic writing pedagogy:
http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/blummalleyhawkins/blumANDhawkins_module.html