

Building Skills for Writing Anthropologically

I teach an anthropology course that emphasizes intensive writing and cultural and global diversity through a series of progressively elevated anthropological writing experiences. I introduce students to anthropological writing through seven skills-building assignments followed by multimodal presentations and class discussions of stylistic practices for essay writing, all of which progressively build communication tactics students use in their semester's end cornerstone essays.

Skills-Building Assignments

Seven assignments precede two cornerstone essays. The seven assignments include 'culture' definition (CD), Snippet Spotting (SS1, SS2), Video Analysis (VA1, VA2), and Case Review (CR1, CR2). Generally, each assignment is due every other week. Due dates usually occur in the sequence of CD, SS1, VA1, SS2, VA2, CR1, CR2. The goal for these shorter assignments is to provide context for writing anthropologically while continuing to build critical thinking skills.

When each of the preliminary writing assignments is returned to students, I provide an accompanying half-page of feedback on the student's writing that serves to explain how the grade was determined. Communication strengths are emphasized first, followed by suggestions about how students can strengthen their writing by using supporting evidence for concept development, thinking critically about source(s), exercising grammatical consistency, or other concerns that apply. I also directly quote students' effective word choices in my feedback to show them what discipline-specific language resonates with an anthropological audience. I assume few students have had someone quote from what they write and so this is impactful for them.

'culture' definition

I jump right into describing the 'culture' definition assignment (purposely lowercase) following an introduction to the course. In this assignment, students take notes on ten of fourteen instances where the term 'culture' or 'cultural' appears in our textbook's Index (Eller). From the notes, each student formulates a definition of culture, which is due the next time that class meets. To augment a discussion of the perspectives and "sciences" of anthropology based on the textbook, I show a 91-second video, Multi-Sited Ethnography (Idea Couture,

Inc.). After viewing it I ask students, "Has anyone ever done any work that is multi-sited?" Following the usual response of "No," I tell students that the 'culture' definition assignment was multi-sited research, as it focused on reviewing multiple ways culture can be considered.

Snippet Spotting

To complete Snippet Spotting assignments, students must find a specific key term in either print or online news media. SS1's key term is "borrowing" and SS2's key term is "globalization in [city]," both of which are meant to encourage critical thinking about claims and reports offered as news. A PDF copy of their chosen article must be submitted with the snippet, so a portion of in-class lecture is used to explain how to scan a printed paper into a PDF file. Because of this requirement, students also learn a practical skill (document scanning) during the assignments.

Video Analysis

An in-class video (roughly 30 minutes) is shown for each Video Analysis and later posted on the course web page using Kanopy or Films-On-Demand. The first video focuses on non-commercial agriculture and the second focuses on animal husbandry (ranching). Each video illustrates food production by plant or animal domestication, which is a core concept in anthropological discussions of human subsistence. Students receive a writing prompt for each video that asks them to research the illustrated practices within a non-Western society. I offer feedback on students' writing that reviews the accuracy of their research and concept recognition.

Case Reviews

Case Reviews are critiques of anthropologists' field projects or approaches featured in Anthropology News articles. CR1 requires that students analyze what information in an article provides supporting evidence that effectively explains the project, whether there is omitted information that could strengthen the writing, and identify content that contradicts the article's main idea. CR2 requires students to take a position on which set of actions is ethically correct. The two Case Reviews encourage a scaffolded approach to critical thinking. In feedback for this assignment, I highlight where, or if, students provide evidence of critical thinking.

Abstract Scrutiny

To prepare for cornerstone essay writing, students participate in an exercise I call Abstract Scrutiny. I distribute printed abstracts to a class, the number of which depends on class size: for small classes, I hand four abstracts to each student; for large classes, I deliver four to five double-sided abstracts to groups of three to four students. To teach students how to look for citations on abstracts, I ask students whether anyone has an abstract written by three or more authors. I also use this as an opportunity to explain that anthropologists typically publish as single authors, though colleagues who review a draft are thanked in the Acknowledgments section. To further familiarize students with the structure and purpose of abstracts, I may ask, "What is the journal's name? What keywords accompany the abstract? What is the opening sentence? Does anyone have an opening sentence that cites a publication?" The questions I generate are meant to familiarize students with research concepts, topics, and themes, as well as the general tone and style of anthropological writing. Then I project a slide that defines three types of texts (argumentative, informational, and narrative) and moderate a classroom discussion aimed at identifying which type of text a selected abstract likely describes. Students must identify key words or concepts from the abstract to justify their categorizations, an exercise that is (hopefully) supported by my past highlighting of effective word choices in their skills-building writing assignments.

Writing for Anthropology Journals

As an additional resource to familiarize students with researched anthropological writing, I assign students to read "Tell the Story," an article prepared by the editor-in-chief and copyeditor of *American Ethnologist* that describes how to write for an anthropology journal. The article covers several features of anthropology (theory, ethnography, and relevance) and identifies conventions of researched anthropology journal writing, such as using the active voice when describing the subject(s) studied or generalizations derived from field research.

General Professional Writing Tips

Sometimes I show excerpts from the film *Obit.: Life on Deadline* (Gould), a documentary about *New York Times* obituary writing. Throughout the film, professional obituary writers discuss their work and detail strategies for effective writing, including "using as few words as possible to say as much as possible," avoiding euphemisms, and keeping an eye to their audience's expectations. One obituary writer's efforts are interspersed throughout the film, as are excerpts that illustrate his attention to careful, but stylistic, writing and his rationales for past obituaries. I tell students that they, like the obituary writers, have deadlines for assignments as well as a set of effective anthropological writing conventions they should follow when writing anthropologically.

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Obit.: Life on Deadline. Dir. Vanessa Gould. Kino Lorber, Inc., and Green Fuse Films, Inc. 2017. Videocassette.