A Student's Guide to Reading and Writing in Social Anthropology

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HARVARD COLLEGE

Cover image from *"Anthropology 1662: Anthropology of Middle Eastern Communities"* taught by Zahra N. Jamal in Fall 2008.

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Image from *"Anthropology 1972: Reconceptualizing the U.S.-Mexico Border: Comparative and Global Perspectives"* taught by Robert Alvarez in Fall 2009.

Introduction

Welcome to Social Anthropology. This world of social anthropology is endlessly varied. Its practitioners may be found in Japanese fish markets, Argentine labs, Lebanese bars, Indonesian photography studios, East St. Louis neighborhoods, Thai temples, and Brazilian favelas — to name just a small sampling of the ethnographic locales studied by Harvard faculty and students, past as well as present. Despite the conceptual and physical distance amongst its sites of study, the coherence of social anthropology stems from its distinctive intellectual frameworks, methods, and lively internal debates conducted around shared passions and inquiries. Your courses serve as point of entry into some of these disciplinary conversations, and the mission of this guide is to offers tips and guidelines that will make it easier for you to join them.

The writing practices and conventions of anthropologists are not always transparent.

While it is often and rightly stressed that ethnographic field research lies at the heart of the discipline of social anthropology, scholarly publication is its life-blood: it is chiefly through writing that most anthropologists disseminate the results of their time in the field. Writing transforms data and personal observations into texts that inform, provoke, and inspire debate and conversations amongst anthropologists and members of allied disciplines, and at times even reach public arenas beyond the university. This guide starts from the position that the writing practices and conventions of anthropologists are not always transparent, and that engaging with the questions, data, and conclusions found in anthropological texts is not a self-evident task. Keeping in mind your position as a newcomer navigating an unfamiliar disciplinary culture, we have tried to demystify some of the challenges you may encounter. As you read the texts assigned for your courses and engage them in your own essays, immersing yourself vicariously in the fieldwork of other scholars, we hope you will find your own appetite for conducting — and writing up — ethnographic research being whetted.

Image from *"Anthropology 1720: Anthropology, Cultural Studies, and Film"* taught by Steve Caton and Ramyar Rossoukh.

I. Reading Anthropological Literature

If you are taking several anthropology courses at the same time, the reading load may appear daunting or even overwhelming. The truth is that it does not need to be so, even though it is not uncommon for upper-division undergraduate anthropology classes to assign over 200 pages to read in any given week. In this section of the guide we will examine the major forms of publication in social anthropology that you are likely to encounter in your courses and suggest some strategies for reading them more effectively.

Essays

Essays on a single subject are one of the primary vehicles through which scholars present their research and ideas to the academic community, adding to existing knowledge through innovation and debate. They are generally published in journals or in edited volumes that are focused on a single topic. Most of the essays/journal articles you will read in your classes will probably fall into a handful of categories discussed below.

Programmatic Essays. These essays examine one or more theoretical issues in anthropology and suggest new directions for future research. For instance, Sherry Ortner's (1974) essay "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" argued that the universality of female subordination across all known human societies should be viewed as a reflection of ideological preoccupations found in all cultures, and not as an outcome of biological determination. Programmatic essays offer an overview of key positions and arguments, frequently capturing ongoing shifts in how a major topic is being conceptualized and researched. The fact that the authors of programmatic essays tend to draw upon a wide range of literature (in addition to their own research) makes them particularly informative in this regard.

Since programmatic essays by their very nature address topical issues and dilemmas, they tend to become superceded by later work. Sometimes, however, the very "datedness" of an essay becomes part of its overall significance. For instance, Ortner's essay is still widely read and assigned,

even though her concepts of "culture" and even "gender" have been thoroughly challenged and revised since the time of its writing. For all its datedness, however, it still stands as a landmark essay (which is quite different from a period piece.)

Research Articles. Anthropology research articles pose and address a question or problem arising from the author's original data (generally gathered through fieldwork, but sometimes in the course of archival research). Such research reports are self-contained works of scholarship whose conclusions are intended to be applicable or illuminating in the context of other ethnographic settings.

Scholarly essays range widely in their ambitions for producing generalizable knowledge: some are primarily oriented towards reporting specific research findings, while others seek to chalk out a program of wide-ranging scope and significance.

The distinction between programmatic and research articles is not carved in stone. By drawing it, we hope to draw your attention the fact that scholarly essays range widely in their ambitions for producing generalizable knowledge: some are primarily oriented towards reporting specific research findings, while others seek to chalk out a program of wide-ranging scope and significance. You may find it illuminating to discern and analyze the author's ambitions in this regard. Is she primarily attempting to account for a particular set of circumstances and/or events? Or is she seeking to develop concepts or approaches that can be applied to comparable situations elsewhere?

The two objectives are not incompatible. An example of a research article that is simultaneously programmatic in scope is J. Lorand Matory's (1999) article entitled "The English Professors of Brazil." Here, Matory re-examines the widely accepted notion that Brazilian Candomblé (an Afro-Latin American religion) is based upon preserved cultural memories brought to the New World from Yoruba and other regions by enslaved Africans. Matory uses his own research on the circulation of free black travelers across the Atlantic Ocean to argue that much of what is often seen as "purely African" about Candomblé was actually formulated through inter-regional exchanges between Nigeria and Brazil in the nineteenth century. The article thus speaks to scholars of other regions who are studying the circulation and agency of diasporic persons, or the ways in which local cultures can develop under influences that do not obey political and geographic boundaries.

Theoretical Chapters and Articles. In some social sciences like economics or government, "theory" refers to explanatory or predictive models into which data of varying types may be fed. In contrast, anthropologists tend to think of "theory" in ways more similar to their colleagues in the humanities: as an interpretive lens to be borrowed from one context and adapted to another

for the purpose of illuminating it. At the same time, boundaries between anthropology and other fields of such as history, geography, gender studies, and science studies, etc. have become increasingly porous since the 1970s. As result, a great diversity of directions and topical subfields have emerged within the discipline, complementing established areas of study (like ecological anthropology and historical anthropology) with a whole host of "anthropologies of _____" (fill in *science*, *humanitarianism*, and *globalization*, *Christianity*, or any other contemporary keyword.) Not surprisingly, this eclecticism is likely to represented in the reading list of any given anthropology course. Since the sources of "theory" vary widely, instructors will be your best guides on what to read for and how to think with the theoretical readings assigned for their courses. (See also this guide's section on "Working With Sources").

In anthropology, theory tends to be used as an interpretive lens that can be borrowed from one context and adapted to another.

Book Reviews and Review Articles. While book reviews are unlikely to form part of your required course readings, you should consult them whenever you need help understanding or contextualizing an ethnography or monograph. Book reviews in anthropology journals succinctly address the scope and contribution of a specific work, allowing you to get a "quick fix" on its contents and how it was received by other scholars upon its publication. Single book reviews should not be confused with review articles, which provide an in-depth overview of scholarship on a given topic. The latter are particularly useful to consult in the early stages of the essay-writing process, when you are trying to develop a feel for the key ideas and debates surrounding a particular topic.

Ethnographies

We now turn to the signature publication of anthropological scholarship. As you are probably by now aware, "ethnography" refers not only to a specific way of doing research — immersing oneself in a naturally-occurring social setting — but also to the book-length genre of scholarly writing in which such research often culminates.

Ethnography is a rather unusual genre of academic writing because it combines analytical argumentation with detailed, evocative descriptions of the people and communities that are the subjects of the research. If you are new to anthropology, you may find the mixture of objective and subjective stances displayed in ethnographies frustrating and difficult to parse. For instance, your prior notions of what qualitative research or social science ought to look like may be shaken when you read an author's discussion of how his own gender, ethnicity, upbringing or sexuality shaped the direc-

tion of his research and its conclusions. Isn't social science supposed to be impersonal and detached? Not necessarily. In fact, such concerns are not at all out of place in the human sciences, whose key difference from natural sciences lies in dealing with value-laden data (like behaviors and symbols), which, by their very definition require interpretation. To invoke a term popularized by Clifford Geertz, every description is already 'thick' with interpretation. And an interpretation is not a view from nowhere but one that is necessarily grounded in a specific position.

Isn't social science supposed to be impersonal and detached?
Not necessarily.

As a reader, the thickness of ethnographic writing can seem like a liability at first. You may become so caught up in the personalities and events evoked in the text that you are at a loss to discern which details are primarily evocative and which serve as building blocks for an argument. But just as it takes a trained ear to apprehend the role of various musical parts within the performance of a symphonic work, so too with practice you will be able to discern the elements of description, narration, and argument in a given ethnography as well as to assess the author's success in fitting them together. Here are some of the hallmarks of ethnographic genre to keep in mind:

- *Ethnographies are assemblages of heterogeneous data types.* Page through almost any book-length ethnography, and you will realize that the author has worked hard to seamlessly interweave a heterogeneous range of materials. You may find many or all of the following: maps, tables, photographs, personal narrative, transcripts of interviews, references to secondary literature, and excerpts from archival documents, media reports, vernacular texts, and other primary sources. Most of these materials may represent "qualitative" data but "quantitative" facts and figures may also be included. Some of the information presented may be "objective" in the sense of being independently verifiable, while a large portion of the evidence may appear to rest entirely upon the author's idiosyncratic experiences and observations. A good reader will pay attention to the way in which these various types of data reinforce (or contradict) other, while assessing each form of evidence on its own terms.

- *Argumentation in ethnographies tends to be embedded and cumulative.* Ethnographies are not like legal briefs or philosophical papers that meticulously spell out their premises, warrants, and conclusions; neither are they like those kinds of novels or travelogues that command your attention only for the time that you are reading them. Because the argument of an ethnography is worked out

throughout its narrative arc, you will need to preview, read, and distill the point of each chapter in order to discern whether the book succeeds in executing the author's intentions. These intentions are often made explicit in the introduction, moving back and forth between foreground and background during subsequent chapters before becoming highlighted once again in the conclusion. Your reading will be more effective — and efficient — if you tailor your focus to different sections of the book: skimming some sections, closely reading (and re-reading) others, and underlining or highlighting key terms, phrases and claims that recur throughout.

- *Ethnographies reward readings that are both generous and critically engaged.* An ethnography typically seeks to evoke a local social world. To enter that world, you need to accept the author's bona fides and the portrait he has painstakingly sketched, at least until your instincts as a reader provide you with ample evidence to doubt them. Paying attention to your own responses — Where is your attention gripped? Where does it flag? Where do you find yourself skeptical or wanting more information? — will provide you with a sound basis for assessing both the strengths and weaknesses of the book.

You need to accept the author's bona fides and the portrait he has painstakingly sketched, at least until your instincts as a reader provide you with ample evidence to doubt them.

Image from *"Anthropology 1992: Anthropology and the Uses of History"* taught by Michael Herzfeld and William Fash in Spring 2009.

II. Moves Anthropologists Make

When it comes to writing papers for social anthropology courses, the general principles of good expository writing — using and attributing sources appropriately, motivating and developing an argument, and crafting an effective organizational structure — still apply. Too often, however, student writers expend their writing energies on the conventional elements an essay is supposed to contain — introduction, thesis statement, body, and conclusion — and lose sight of what they intend these elements to do. In his helpful book entitled *Rewriting*, composition scholar Joseph Harris suggests paying attention to writing moves — textual strategies that authors employ to engage with ideas and to move them in new directions — as a way for students to improve their own reading and writing practices.

The moves needed for writing a compelling student essay are no different than the ones characteristic of published scholarly work.

Each academic discipline has its characteristic writing move, and anthropology is no exception. In this section of the guide, we list and unpack five of them with examples from the work of our colleagues, our students, and ourselves. As you will see, some moves are particularly suited for the opening paragraphs of an essay; others for the body or conclusion. Nevertheless, these moves do not map neatly onto the linear essay structure mentioned above, for the conceptual work they accomplish may be required at any point in the argument.

To be sure, variations on these moves can be readily found in writings by non-anthropologists; equally, if one were to closely scrutinize a given piece of anthropological prose, many more moves than these five would probably come to light. With these provisos, you should find this list useful for identifying strategies that make for effective anthropological writing. Keep in mind that the moves needed for writing a compelling student essay are no different than the ones characteristic of published scholarly work.

1. Entering a Conversation

This is our term for the work of establishing a context and motivation for your ideas. More than simply a statement of your topic, *entering a con-*

versation entails letting the reader know which intellectual conversations you propose to join and what contribution you hope to make.

Consider the following example from Curtis Chan's final paper for the sophomore tutorial:

> *More than just a dance, b-boying is "performance," to use a rather specific sense of a word that commonly evokes images of a stage or theater with choreographed lighting and sound. Richard Schechner, however, calls upon a broader notion of performance. Largely recognized as the founder of the academic, cross-disciplinary area of performance studies, Schechner writes that there is "no historically or culturally fixable limit to what is or is not 'performance'" (2002:2). According to another performance theorist, Deborah Klens-Bigman, performance exists wherever an action is done for an audience, even if the audience is not before the performer but within the performer himself, By this notion, then, the way that b-boys walk, talk, and watch their fellow dancers is a performance.*

Anthropologists often borrow and adapt key terms and concepts from a variety of disciplines and intellectual frameworks.

In this passage, Chan first readies his conceptual tools by distinguishing commonsense and specialist notions of "performance" and by assimilating the practice of b-boying to latter sense of the term. Now he is ready to use his ethnographic data on b-boying as a point of entry into a conversation with key figures in performance studies.

2. Borrowing and Extending

Anthropologists often borrow and adapt key terms and concepts from a variety of disciplines and intellectual frameworks. Here we offer three illustrations of this common move. The first is taken from a published article by Smita Lahiri, one of the authors of this guide:

> *To mobilize discourse in the sense developed by Michel Foucault is to claim for one's enunciations an authority that one does not personally own. Rather, its ultimate source lies in a structure of statements embedded in and institutionally validated by a field of power relations. This, I argue, describes the authority of at least one popular-religious leader at Mt. Banahaw who is frequently figured as an embodiment of national culture within Philippine academic scholarship and journalism.*

In this straightforward example of *borrowing and extending*, Lahiri first offers a brief explanation of Michel Foucault's approach to discourse and then offers a preview of how she will use it to illuminate her own topic. A somewhat more complicated version of the same move is executed in the following passage, which comes from Jeff Leopando's final essay for the sophomore tutorial:

> *Charles W. Eliot, the President of Harvard during the early years of the Arnold Arboretum, wrote about it in one of his yearly reports:*
>
> > *[t]he natural woods and the systematic collections attract the attention of the greater part of these visitors chiefly for their beauty, which varies with the succession of the seasons; but there is a considerable number of visitors on foot who visit the Arboretum for study combined with enjoyment" (Eliot 1895:30).*
>
> *His comment underscores a duality that has defined the Arboretum from its inception; it is a place that is at once "natural" and "systematic" — a site for both the "enjoyment" and the "study" of nature.*

Here, Leopando quotes Eliot not so much to borrow his ideas as to glean from his words an implicit theme that will play a prominent role in Leopando's own analysis of the Arboretum, which is undertaken from an anthropological perspective.

In a still more complex instance of *borrowing and extending*, Michael Herzfeld draws upon the work of Paul Willis to explain a counterintuitive finding of his own: the fact that in training apprentices to become skilled and highly valued artisans, instructors in Greek craft institutes inadvertently reinforce their own as well as their students' sense of being working class and undervalued. In the following passage taken from *The Body Impolitic*, Herzfeld describes similarities and differences between Willis' approach and his own:

> *These are also questions that Willis has asked, but asking them in the Greek context reorients the investigation to larger patterns of [global] domination... In asking questions to similar to those Willis posed about the self-reproduction of working class culture in Britain, I have instead chosen to explore these matters among artisan-instructors who are reproducing their own sense of inhabited class identity, and who are also reproducing a sense of regional and national humiliation.*

Note that Herzfeld is not just borrowing Willis' theory in order to apply it in a different context; he is also *extending* its implications from the national level to the European transnational and and global levels.

3. Establishing Authority

Anthropologists employ a diverse range of textual strategies to establish themselves as credible authorities on their respective subjects. These strategies include displaying a command of the relevant scholarship, explaining one's own positioning vis-à-vis the subjects of one's research, or piggybacking upon another scholar's previously established authority. But perhaps the most distinctively anthropological technique for establishing authority consists of describing and elaborating upon unique observations made in the field. We provide one example of this move from *Yemen Chronicle*, by Steven Caton:

Moments of narrative disclosure often work subtly in a longer ethnographic work to lend credibility to analytical claims advanced further down the line.

> *I assumed at the time that there was such a thing as an "authentic" tribal poetry, whose heart beat in a rural and seemingly remote setting such as Khawlan al-Tiyal and not in a complex urban setting such as Sana'a (where later I fact I would study the works of many tribal poets, who had migrated from Yemen's drought-stricken countryside to enlist in the army or become taxi drivers or private security guards). But after only six months, I realized how simplistic that assumption was. The urban-rural dichotomy and the cultural dichotomy of tribal-nontribal, not to speak of the political one of state-nonstate were, if not exactly wrong, then misleading. .For example, the "hottest" tribal poet in Yemen in 1979, Muhamman al-Gharsi, whose cassette tapes sold out before everyone else's in the stereo stores, had his main residence in Sana'a, where he was in the army.*

At first glance, acknowledging the shortcomings of one's initial notions might seem like an unlikely way to establish authority. Yet it is precisely by showing how and why he was forced to set aside specific preconceptions that Caton demonstrates the robust and authentic nature of his field research. Such moments of narrative disclosure often work subtly in a longer ethnographic work to lend credibility to analytical claims advanced further down the line. Incidentally, this passage also illustrates a common device in anthropological writing: the use of a "lightbulb moment" to succinctly evoke an incremental process of discovery. Here, Caton uses the example of the urban tribal poet of Sana'a to show the reader why he was forced to rethink the relationship between rurality and tribal poetry, thereby condensing a six-month-long process into a few short phrases.

4. Countering

To counter is not only (or even necessarily) to criticize, although a well-informed critique of another's work may certainly form part of it. The true purpose of *countering*, however, is to enhance your readers' understanding of a topic by identifying and addressing weaknesses in how it has been previously understood. Let's return to Curtis Chan's paper on b-boying to see how he counters views expressed by some gender theorists:

> *Senelick puts forth Marianne Wex's contention that gender is not natural or biological but rather historical. He writes, "Centuries of social pressure… have frozen men and women into these physical classifiers of gender" (1992:22). But even this statement seems to indicate that notions of gender and by extension of manhood and masculinity are "frozen," static, and uniform across the world, whereas in fact they are none of these things. In speaking of "masculinity," one must not assume that it is a singular thing, but rather that there are multiple masculinities and even multiple performative manifestations of these masculinities.*

A characteristically anthropological version of *countering* takes the form of denaturalizing commonplace assumptions. Kimberly Theidon employs this common and effective strategy of anthropological writing in the following excerpt from a published article:

> *I argue that although survival may be less dramatic than armed struggle, an analysis of the domestic economy of war reveals the extent to which survival in itself becomes a daily struggle… As the members of the mother's club in Purus related, "We were so sad because we could not feed our children well. Our children cried for food, and it is the mother who must do something." What the interviews with these women underscore is the implicit acknowledgment of women's central role not only in production but also in social reproduction — both threatened during the war, putting mere survival in doubt.*

By denaturalizing and *countering* commonsense notions of struggle, Theidon advances her argument that Peruvian peasants caught up in civil-military conflicts understood "war" not just as armed combat but as a comprehensive struggle for survival. Incidentally, this countering move itself rests upon another, implicit move of *establishing authority*: the reader will accept Theidon's conclusions only if she finds Theidon's original interview data and interpretations credible.

A characteristically anthropological version of *countering* takes the form of denaturalizing commonplace assumptions.

5. Stepping Back

This move entails just what its name suggests: stepping back from the particularities of a case study or research topic in order to establish its overall significance. This move is often (but by no means always) flagged by phrases such as "In sum, I argue that…" or "in this paper, I have examined…" Here we take up another passage from Jeff Leopando's paper on the Arnold Arboretum, where *stepping back* is conjoined with another move, namely *countering*:

> *Arnold Arboretum offers an interesting case for analysis because, in contrast to many other natural spaces that anthropologists have studied, it is a site where the myths of "wilderness" and "ahistorical" nature are dispelled rather than reproduced. At the Arboretum, nature is presented as domesticated rather than wild, and deeply intertwined with human history rather than divorced from it.*

Qualifications are not copouts but positive statements that help define the overall scope and significance of what the writer has accomplished.

Here, Leopando steps back from his subject to situate it in a body of literature on the anthropology of the environment ("natural spaces that anthropologists have studied") that deals specifically with how cultural artifacts elaborate ideas of nature. He also reiterates the significance of his case study, which challenges (i.e. *counters*) some of this literature's central ideas.

Stepping back may also take the form of *qualifying*, in which an author acknowledges the limits of his or her claims (e.g., "I do not mean to imply that…" or "I am not suggesting…"). These qualifications are not copouts but positive statements that help define the overall scope and significance of what the writer has accomplished. Consider the final example in our discussion, a passage taken from an article by Larry Hirschfeld:

> *Systems of racial thinking vary considerably across cultures and historic time. My proposal neither denies this variability nor implies that it is trivial. Nor am I suggesting that racial thinking is impervious to the cultural and political environments. Indeed, racial thinking is literally unthinkable in the absence of such environments. Something, and typically it is a system of cultural belief, channels an abstract set of expectations about human difference onto a specific range of differences and a specific way to viewing them.*

Here Hirschfeld *qualifies* the scope of his argument by anticipating two likely misinterpretations of his ideas and denying that these are in fact implications of his argument. In this way, he clarifies the relationship of his argument to widely held anthropological views on race.

Tips for recognizing anthropological moves in a book-length ethnography

1. Read the introduction or first chapter for an explicit discussion of the social phenomena, events, ideas, questions, and analytical frameworks that motivate the work **entering a conversation**.

2. In Chapter One (or early on), look for an "arrival scene" that sketches out the social world of the ethnography and establishes the work's validity and reliability by showing the author's actual presence and positioning within that world's specific milieus **entering a conversation**, **establishing authority**.

3. Is there a specific discussion of how the author established rapport, negotiated a crisis, or was granted insider status? How does this episode (or episodes) illustrate the process of coming to feel and think as a member of a specific community? **establishing authority**.

4. Look for key terminology. From where has the author taken her central concepts and how has she developed them further? How does she utilize these ideas to illuminate her ethnographic materials? **borrowing and extending**.

5. Examine the author's discussion of existing ethnographic and other literatures relating to the same area or topic. How does he relate his approach, methods, and findings to previous work? **borrowing and extending**, **countering**, **qualifying**.

6. Look for moments of reflexivity, wherein the author explores his or her own positioning relative to the research questions and field setting and consider how such moments affect the credibility of the data and/or claims being advanced **establishing authority**, **qualifying**, **stepping back**.

7. Read closely some of the ethnographic scenes. How are informants' voices represented, through direct quotes or paraphrases? What contextual information about informants does the author provide? **establishing authority**.

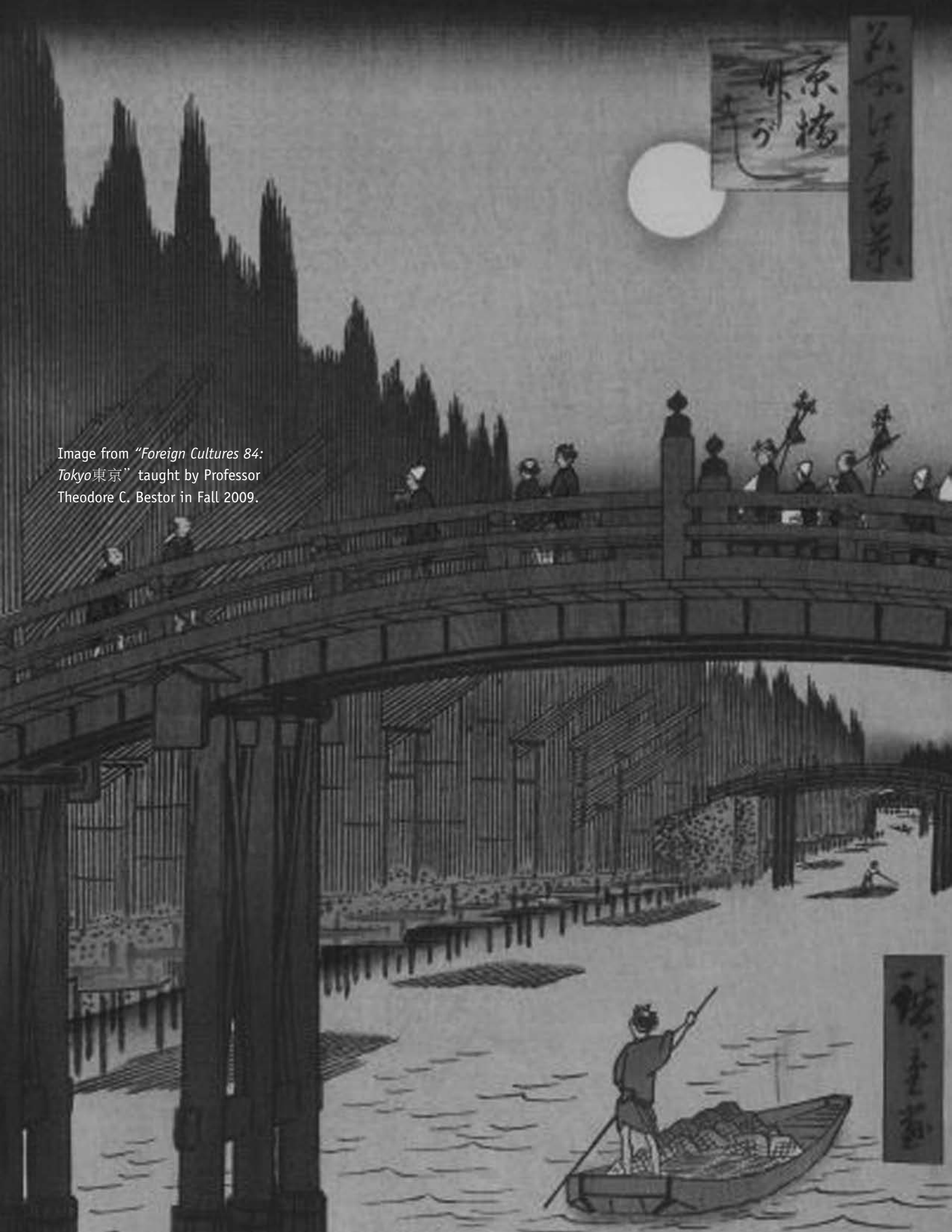

Image from *"Foreign Cultures 84: Tokyo東京"* taught by Professor Theodore C. Bestor in Fall 2009.

III. Writing Assignments

The written assignments for a social anthropology course often include several or all of the following: short weekly response papers of a page or two, one or more lengthier essays whose topics may be assigned or left to your choosing, and an individually-designed research paper due at the end of the term. In this section of the guide, we will cover some key issues to keep in mind as you approach these assignments. These include arriving at a motivation for writing, defining and delimiting the subject and the argument of your essay, reading between the lines of assigned topics, conducting research, and consulting with advisors.

No matter how informal your writing style, you should always avoid sentence fragments, check your grammar, and back up claims with quotations or page references.

Response Papers: An Informal Formality

Many professors require regular response papers from their students as a way of insuring that students arrive in class having read and seriously engaged with the assigned reading. Response papers may even be circulated amongst your peers, giving you the chance to receive informal feedback. Because most teachers genuinely want students to speculate and take risks with new ideas even when they may not be 100% certain of being on solid ground, response papers are often graded relatively informally (e.g. using the "check" system). But make no mistake: these assignments are not throwaways. Writing response papers give you a chance to practice and improve important skills of summary, analysis, and critique that will be crucial to the success of your longer, higher-stakes essays. And no matter how informal your writing style, you should always avoid sentence fragments, check your grammar, and back up claims with quotations or page references.

Balance Summary and Analysis

One of the challenges posed by response papers is striking an effective balance between summary and analysis. These two aspects should be closely integrated (i.e. you should avoid having a section called "summary" and a section called "analysis"). It is important that you provide a well-crafted summary that refers both to the overall arc of the reading as well as to some of its most crucial details. However, your summary

should not occupy more than one third to one half of a response paper. The major part should be analytical.

The type of analysis you offer in a response paper will depend on how many readings you are required to address. If you are dealing with a single book-length work (usually an ethnography), you will need to provide, first of all, an overall assessment of its contributions and shortcomings. Secondly, you should devote part of your response paper to some specific aspect of the book that you found interesting, troubling, or especially revelatory. This could be a corollary argument the author proposes, an ethnographic vignette, or a theme that relates this book to the history of anthropology or to other themes discussed in the course.

Summary should not occupy more than one third to one half of a response paper.

In many anthropology courses, however, you will often be assigned various articles or book excerpts to read in the same week, rather than a single book. In this case, your response paper will need to address simultaneously the texts of different authors. Once again, your instructor might set some guidelines for your course, but in general there are some options when responding to multiple texts at once:

1. Focus on one main text, and refer to the others to enrich your analysis of the main text.
2. Compare and contrast all texts. Thinking about why your instructor put these readings together in the syllabus, examine how each speaks to a central theme and/or to each other.
3. Choose a narrow question that is relevant to the course or to that week, and use the readings to develop possible answers to it.

***The Précis:* a specific type of response paper**

Instead of a generic response paper, some courses might ask you to write a "précis." A précis is an interpretive summary, which requires you to integrate closely the summary and the analysis parts of your response paper. As you will discover, précis-writing is an invaluable preparatory step for writing an argumentative essay, or for discussing a text orally in class. More than just offering a set of notes on the contents of a text, a précis connects those contents to the text's argumentative structure and presentational strategy. In the context of an ethnography, the task of a précis is to concisely recap the author's motives, main argument(s) and key supporting points, as well as the overall arc and most important turns of his/her narrative.

The first component of your précis should be a statement of the main issues or problems addressed by the text. Is the book primarily concerned with a specific group of people and their interlocked set of beliefs? With their institutions and codes of behavior? With specific events and their repercussions? While all these elements may be present in the text, they are not equally important. It is your job to discern which concerns are pre-eminent and which are hierarchically subordinated to others — in part by paying attention the author's explicit cues, and in part by comparing them to the claims and evidence s/he presents.

Next, your précis should discuss the text's logic or pattern of development. It may be helpful to study carefully the table of contents, as you try to understand the narrative structure of the text. Here, for illustrative purposes, are two templates for sentences that discuss logical patterns: "By examining the sources of _____, the author shows the consequences of _____"; "In order to _____, the text shows the interrelationship between _____ and _____ ." Typical verbs indicating such logic include compare, contrast, link causally, cause, and follow from. In this part of the précis, you should illustrate the author's logical moves by summarizing key information from the text, supplying page references wherever possible. Here, as you look over the ethnography for evidence, you will find it useful to ask yourself what categories of information are being supplied by the narrative and expository sections of the text. Possible categories of information might include the following: characteristics of events, groups, or subgroups; stages in an event or process; limitations, restrictions, or other constraints upon the research process.

By following these steps, you will undoubtedly sharpen your skills at culling important details and summarizing the most crucial aspects of the text. You will also have found a direction for the third component of your précis: critical analysis and interpretation. Here, you will draw out the implications of the text (backed up by page references, as usual) and advance your own assertions or questions about it. In setting up the narrative (or argument) in a specific way, what has the author overlooked, asserted, or brushed aside? What seems novel or conventional about the inferences or arguments of the text?

The Nebulous and the Open-Ended: Pitfalls of the "Short Long" Essay

Another type of assignment might be called the nebulous paper. As an example of this, imagine that you are asked to write a paper of 5-10 pages on some theme (say, the relationship between gender and globalization) without being provided with a specific question to answer or otherwise given much guidance about how to approach the assignment. Alternatively, imagine an assignment that provides a question, but one that is overly broad for a short long essay and in effect does little more than suggest a topic or theme.

Sometimes instructors provide a nebulous paper prompt but in fact have a specific question or set of questions in mind that they would like students to address in the essay.

Faced with such an assignment, the first thing you should do is verify that the assignment is indeed as open-ended as it appears to be. Sometimes instructors provide a nebulous paper prompt but in fact have a specific question or set of questions in mind that they would like students to address in the essay. It's best to ask about this.

If the assignment is truly open-ended, the crucial thing to keep in mind is that a topic is not a yet a question or problem that you can usefully address in an essay. You cannot write a paper about gender and globalization, which is a huge and ill-defined area of inquiry; rather you need to identify some specific question or problem under the broad heading of gender and globalization that can be tackled in your paper. In other words, just because a paper assignment does not provide you with a specific question to answer does not absolve you of the need to come up with one. How then do you arrive at a problematic or question to address in the paper?

A good place to start is often your instructor's presentation of the material you are writing about, or issues that have come up during class discussion. Often class discussions will gravitate toward 'live' or contested issues, research problems, or scholarly debates that might form the basis of a specific paper problematic. The readings assigned for the relevant part of the course might also suggest debates, contradictions, puzzles or tensions that could form the basis of a question. If you know the source texts well but are still perplexed or annoyed by some aspect of them, often such perplexity and annoyance points to some difficulty in the texts that might be worth sorting out in a paper.

Even when the paper assignment is quite vague, your paper still needs to take a specific argumentative form. There are several broad argument

types in anthropology that you might consider as you try to figure out an approach to a thematic or nebulous paper assignment. Common essay types in anthropology include:

- *Intervening in a scholarly debate.* Here you stake out an original position in a scholarly debate by weighing the plausibility of various other positions and making the case for one point of view or, even better, formulating your own hybrid or novel position.

- *Testing a theory with evidence.* You can take a theoretical framework and test it by putting it to work on ethnographic or some other sort of cultural evidence. The basic question for this sort of essay is: Does the theory produce the insights that it is supposed to produce? If not, how would the theory need to be revised in order to work better?

- *A lens essay.* The lens paper is a variation of the test-a-theory paper in which you take a theoretical or interpretive framework (Goffman's notion of a 'frame,' say) and apply it to new material. The lens paper differs from a test-a-theory paper in that the emphasis is less on evaluating the theory (whether 'frame' is a useful analytical concept) than on interpreting the evidence in a new way.

- *Comparing theories, methodologies, texts, or approaches.* In this sort of essay you attempt to reveal non-obvious relationships between theories, texts, etc. by comparing them along some relevant dimension. You might find for instance that although two texts advance contradictory claims, they actually make similar underlying assumptions and are not so at odds as they might first appear.

- *Questioning the assumptions of an argument or text.* Any argument assumes some things to be true and not in need of defense or analysis. You can identify the assumptions embraced by a particular argument and scrutinize them. In doing so you can uncover non-obvious implications of an argument or text.

- *Recontextualizing a theory or claim.* Anthropological writing often draws on arguments made in one particular social context (say, an argument about gift giving in Japan) and extends them to new cultural material.

There are, of course, many other types of arguments in anthropological writing, although most will fall loosely into the categories adduced above. The crucial thing to keep in mind is that the nebulous paper assignment should not be treated as license to write a nebulous paper. Your paper still needs to articulate a specific question or problematic and a specific, arguable thesis that addresses the question.

Taming the Term Paper Monster

Term papers in anthropology requiring original or independent research may be (at the discretion of the professor) anywhere from 10 to a daunting 25 pages in length. In preparing to write such a paper, you will confront several challenges: choosing a topic that satisfies the aims of the course while reflecting your own interests; delimiting the subject matter in order to arrive at a manageable focus and motivation, building your knowledge of the topic through research and analysis, and getting approval for your topic and preliminary feedback on your ideas from advisors.

The crucial thing to keep in mind is that the nebulous paper assignment should not be treated as license to write a nebulous paper.

Choose A Topic

One way to go about choosing a topic is to start with something covered in class. Was there an assigned reading that you found particularly intriguing? Did one of the sections of the syllabus touch on an issue you have always wanted to learn more about? You can start with a text or texts from the class and ask yourself what made them stand out for you. Was it the writing style? The subject matter? An intellectual debate they were

Topic Development:

Use Course Materials as your Point of Departure

Perhaps the course introduced you to the study of kinship, covering not only the mysterious terminology that anthropologists have developed to distinguish patrilateral cross-cousin marriage from virilocal endogamy but also the dilemmas and challenges of constructing kinship in non-traditional ways, such as within gay families. Perhaps, over the summer you volunteered with an organization that coordinated transnational adoptions. Could you write a paper that combines your personal interests with some of the course teachings?

Another way to begin your quest for a topic is to look for something that was not covered in class, starting from, say, materials that you have encountered in your own reading or in other classes, or issues connected with personal experience.

contributing to? Once you have pinpointed your interests, you can start to explore and define them further through additional research. Although you should eventually investigate many resources beyond the Internet, you can start researching from your PC using online search engines such as Google Scholar. Harvard library databases like Lexis Nexis and Proquest are also helpful resources. Don't neglect either scholarly literature in anthropology or information-rich mass media reports.

Another way to begin your quest for a topic is to look for something that was not covered in class, starting from, say materials that you have encountered in your won reading or in other classes, or issues connected with personal experience.

Develop, Motivate, and Focus Your Ideas

Once you have arrived at a promising topic, you are ready to start elaborating your ideas. At this early stage, it is important to make sure that the project you set yourself is feasible as well as relevant.

Feasibility: To make a topic feasible you will need to have a 'motivating question' (e.g., a thesis to prove or a question to answer) that can be

Topic Development:

Cast a Wide Net

Let's say you come across several media articles on the growing demand for financial services in various Asian countries, and your interest is piqued. You do a scholarly search and you get too many hits; besides none of them look very anthropological. So you decide to specify your interest a bit more: are you going to look at the rise of mortgage brokerages? Investment advisors? No, it's hard to see what the cultural angle would be...You decide that life insurance might be a better prospect, figuring that people new to the practice might have mixed feelings about essentially making a bet with a company about how soon they might die. Back to Google and Google Scholar. Promising results: you find media stories about a life insurance ad campaign in India and about the increasing tendency of Indonesian pilgrims going on Haj to take out insurance policies. Google Scholar provides a number of references to articles in business journals (which may or may not be helpful), as well as a couple in of articles in anthropology journals. Bingo! You may have found a viable topic.

addressed within the space provided. For instance, what is feasible in a 90-page senior thesis would be too much in a 7-page paper, and vice versa. Usually, shorter the page limit, the more specific your motivating question will need to be. For instance, if you are interested in indigenous land rights and human rights but you are only expected to write a 15-page paper, you may want to choose a specific court case through which you can examine how a particular group asserted their rights to the land. If you were to opt, instead, for a broad overview of indigenous land rights movements worldwide, your 15-page paper might end up rather shallow.

Usually, the shorter the page limit, the more specific your motivating question will need to be.

Relevance: In addition to any requirements or guidelines your course might have, your topic will also need to fall squarely within the scope of anthropology. Because anthropology is such a broad field, you will not find yourself too constrained. Bear in mind, however, that not every question that motivates you will be appropriate. If you are interested, for instance, in writing about the Kennedy dynasty and their presence in the political life of the United States for your 20-page seminar paper, you will need to ensure that your motivating question falls within the purview of anthropology rather than, say, political science. If you were to ask something along the lines of "how the Kennedy name affects a candidate's likelihood to be elected," your question, though important, is unlikely to culminate in an illuminating anthropological analysis. Instead, your question might be something like this: "how are cultural and social capital transmitted within the Kennedy's dynastic kinship structure?"

Be prepared for the possibility that your focus and motivation may shift during this phase of discovery as you learn more about your (still provisional) topic. Few scholars can execute a lengthy writing project without hitting a dead end or going off on a wild goose chase but do consider taking one or more of the following steps to avoid veering too far off track:

- **Conduct a Preliminary Bibliographic Search.** Before you settle on a topic, spend some time at the library. What if you found a very interesting topic, but nobody else has ever written about it? Unless you are tackling a large, independent project, such as a senior thesis, and you can count on a lot of expert help, it would probably be best to stay clear of subjects about which there is no literature available. A trip to the library or an online library search are important first steps when assessing the feasibility of a topic.

- **Seek Advice.** Your instructor and/or teaching fellow should be your first stop when seeking help regarding your paper.If you are trying

to learn more about a topic, though, it may also be worth it to you to talk to someone who specializes in the topic you are researching. We are fortunate to have prominent scholars walk the halls of our department every day, and it is very likely that the authors of some of the texts you are studying are faculty members. Why not go and to talk to them directly about their research? Check the department website (www.anthropology.fas.harvard.edu) for a list of all our faculty members and graduate students, brief descriptions of their research interests and publications. If you see someone whose life's work has been about the topic you picked for your paper, sign up for office hours or send a politely worded email to ask for an appointment or to pose a brief question.

Researching the Paper

Once you have found a topic, specified a relevant 'motivating question', and checked to make sure that it is feasible in the allotted number of pages, you are ready to start your paper.

Be prepared for the possibility that your focus and motivation may shift during this phase of discovery.

In most cases, unless the instructor has included a practicum component in the course, you will not be conducting fieldwork for your written assignments. However, many of the texts you will be assigned to read are based on field research, and should be able to evaluate the research methods, data, evidence, and arguments of each (see sections II and III of this guide). Here are some additional strategies to consider:

- **Compile an Annotated Bibliography.** In an annotated bibliography, every entry is followed by a brief (2-3 sentence) description of the work and its relationship to your research topic. Organize the entries by sub-topics (e.g., "works about Brazil;" "works about Bolivia"), and then alphabetically by author within each section. This will help you to organize your material and to outline your paper.

- **Draft a Paper Proposal.** In some courses with a long final paper, you might be asked to submit a paper proposal by an earlier deadline; even if it is not required, the exercise is well worth the time and effort involved. The purpose of the proposal is to get you started on your research and writing with plenty of time to spare for possible changes, and to give you early feedback. Generally, a paper proposal should not be more than 2-3 double-spaced pages, and should include the following: a paper title; a discussion of your topic, motivating questions, and possible conclusions; and a list of works you have consulted or are planning to consult. A paper abstract can serve a similar purpose to a proposal in a shorter form (typically a

paragraph or 200-300 words).

- **Seek Early Feedback.** Take advantage of any opportunity to receive early feedback. If for some reason your topic does not work out as you hoped, you want to make sure you have plenty of time to revise it before the deadline. In some courses instructors will offer to read early drafts or paper proposals (if you are unsure, just ask!). Some seminars devote time to in-class paper workshops. Depending on specific course policies, you may be allowed to exchange help and ideas with your classmates. Putting in the extra work ahead of time to troubleshoot an outline or an early draft will help to ward off and avoid any unpleasant surprises after the deadline.

Take advantage of any opportunity to receive early feedback.

Drafting and Revising

After you have finalized your topic and conducted the necessary research, you are ready to begin writing. Obviously, many of the characteristics of a "good" paper are not specific to anthropology. Having a coherent argument, supporting your claims with adequate evidence, and writing correctly and effectively are considered strengths in most disciplines. If you need general help with your writing, The Harvard Writing Program offers guidance and materials to help overcome common obstacles with organization, argumentation, or grammar.

Locating the Right Sources

Make sure to familiarize yourself with the resources available at Harvard Libraries. Librarians are happy to schedule tours and training sessions to help you learn about the library system and electronic resources. Tozzer Library on Divinity Avenue is the official anthropology library at Harvard, where you will find most of the ethnographies and anthropological journals that you will need for your anthropology courses and a knowledgeable staff to assist you.

One of the major challenges of bibliographic research is not only to find sources but to discern appropriate sources. What if you decide to write about the spread of HIV/Aids in South Africa among urban youth, and a preliminary keyword search for your topic on a library database returns over 1000 hits? Your challenge will be to discriminate among those results, and find the most helpful and authorative ones. Here are some things to consider when evaluating a source:

- **Is it Peer-Reviewed?** Anything published in a peer-reviewed anthropological journal is probably a good bet. If a source you found is not peer-reviewed, you might want to check with your instructor to determine if it is appropriate. Major peer-reviewed anthropology journals include: American Anthropologist; American Ethnologist; Public Culture; Anthropological Quarterly; Current Anthropology; Cultural Anthropology.

- **Who Published It?** If your source is a book, make sure that it is published by an academic press (i.e., anything with a University name, as well as independent academic presses, such as Routledge). When in doubt, ask your instructor!

- **Glean Citations Wisely.** Once you have found a good source, you can look at its bibliography to find additional texts. Similarly, after you have found a few good sources, you can compare their bibliographies to look for overlaps. If you notice that a particular text seems to be cited by everyone else writing on the same topic, then you should probably get hold of that text too.

- **Use Online Resources.** JSTOR, Anthrosource, and Project Muse can be accessed from the Harvard Libraries website. The web-based Google Scholar is also worth a try.

Image from *"A1600 Introduction to Social Anthropology"* – taught by J. Lorand Matory, Fall 2008.

IV. Working With Sources *and a Note on "Theory"*

Unlike many writing handbooks, this brief guide has little to say on the mechanics of using sources in your papers — matters like the formatting of in-text citations and of bibliographies, the difference between summarizing and paraphrasing, and the importance of avoiding the kinds of sloppy composition practices that can lead to unintentional plagiarism. Those are important issues to be sure, but since they arise in scholarly writing across the board, there are already many resources that address them well. For this reason, here we'll confine ourselves to discussing the substantive use of sources: how to do things with them in your own writing. We'll also describe some possibly distinctive ways in which anthropologists tend (and you too might try) to engage their sources.

When it comes to using sources, attending to function — what are they sources of? — should take precedence over tinkering with form (or mechanics).

Like Gordon Harvey (whose essay entitled "Sources of What?" we have liberally redacted here), we think that when it comes to using sources, attending to function — what are they sources of? — should take precedence over tinkering with form (or mechanics). Harvey's message to us as writers is that "sources" do not have an autonomous existence as such; rather, in choosing to use a text or person to some argumentative end, it is we who make it a source of something, namely grist for our own rhetorical moves (see previous section). This has a liberating ring, but it may also sound overwhelming. Fortunately, Harvey also offers writers several practical pointers, not least of which is his observation that there are really only four possible kinds of answers to the question, "Sources of what?"

- A source can function as a ***claim***, ***opinion***, or ***interpretation*** that someone else has made of your topic;
- A source can provide ***fact***, ***information***, or ***data*** — whether reported first-hand or gleaned and summarized from elsewhere;
- A source can supply you with a ***general concept*** — whether something as small as a useful term or definition or distinction, or something as large as a explanatory theory or predictive model; and

- A source can serve as a ***comparable instance*** of the thing you are discussing.

Because the interplay of these source-functions in academic writing can vary across disciplines — which, as we noted in the previous section, tend to develop characteristic persuasive moves of their own — let's consider an example based on a paper that was submitted by Reihan Nadarajah (class of '11) for a course in linguistic anthropology. Choosing Malaysia's language in education policy as his subject, Reihan set out to explore discrepancies between the policy's intended and actual impacts. First, he drew on a number of studies and reports for ***facts*** and ***data*** about the policy. Framed in 1956 with the goal of unifying the multi-ethnic population of Malaysia, the Education Act sought to promote a national identity based on the Malay language while allowing non-Malay Chinese-and Tamil-speaking minorities to preserve their language and culture. It did so by establishing Malay as the sole medium of instruction in secondary schools, while permitting some primary schools to adopt English, Chinese, or Tamil.

Having filled in this necessary background, Reihan then turned to a ***claim*** advanced by other scholars, namely that Tamil primary schools today perform poorly and are underfunded, trapping Tamil-minority children — some 60% of whom attend these schools — in a cycle of educational and economic marginalization. He then introduced the concept of a "language market" — one developed by anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu for analyzing the French state's use of language as a tool of social engineering — in order to frame additional ***facts*** derived from another set of scholars. The preponderance of upwardly mobile Tamils in Malaysia send their children to English-medium schools to insure they can compete at the secondary level even at the cost of losing some degree of cultural and linguistic competence. By deploying the ***concept*** of the linguistic market, Reihan was able to uncover an additional layer of significance in these facts. Specifically, he characterized the Education Act as an unintended form of social engineering, one that generated class differences and cultural separation within the Tamil community by motivating those with means to invest, compete, and trade on linguistic competence. Citing work on community-funded Chinese-language primary schools (which tend to be highly competitive) as a ***comparable instance***, Reihan was also able to arrive at the insight that Malaysian Chinese and Tamils have come to occupy highly distinct positions within the language market created by the Education Act.

Harvey's notion that the very existence of a source is contingent (upon how we use it) rather than autonomous has other important consequences — such as the fact that the same source can serve a different function

in another paper. We would only add that the same source can also play multiple functions within the same paper. In his paper on language policy, for instance, Reihan drew upon Pierre Bourdieu's work in not one but two ways. In the first, he mined the ***concept*** of the language market (as we saw above) for his own use in the Malaysian case. In the second, he drew on Bourdieu's account of standardization in France as a ***comparable instance*** of language-based social engineering. Given the diversity of source-functions assigned to Bourdieu's text, it is worth noting that the stance of Reihan's paper towards this source was correspondingly complex. In effect, Reihan accepted the concept but not the comparable instance, observing that that the dynamics of the French case — in which diverse dialects were subordinated to standard French — were quite different than those which emerged in Malaysia, where one language was elevated above several others into a national standard. Introducing new ***data*** from scholars, Reihan noted that in contrast to the stigmatization of regional and local dialects in France, poorer minority Tamils in Malaysia remain deeply attached to their language; indeed, their sense of self-worth as Tamils often enables them to withstand and resist Malay hegemony.

The kind of thing a source provides is only part of how it functions. The other part is the writers' disposition towards it.

Stepping back now a bit, the third lesson we can draw from Harvey is that is that the kind of thing a source provides is only part of how it functions. The other part is the writers' disposition towards it. Does he affirm, accept, or assimilate it? Does he reject, challenge, or differentiate it? Or does he qualify it — accepting it with a refinement, adjustment, or tweak? One characteristic found in Reihan's essay and other successful ones is that each time a source is marshaled as ***fact***, ***claim***, ***concept***, or ***instance***, it is inscribed with a clear stance of ***affirmation***, ***refusal***, or ***qualification***.

Finally, this is perhaps as good a place as any to touch upon the matter of "theory" and its use in anthropological writing. In anthropology, the mystique of "theory" — resting as it does on perceived difficulty, foreignness, and profundity — is striking. It also lends itself to caricature: theorists, one can predict fairly successfully, belong to distant disciplines (like philosophy), national traditions (France), and decades (the 1980s). We often hear students chit-chat about taking a "theory class", "applying" theory, dreading "theory" or even having a roommate who is "such a theory head." What is genuine and what is spurious in these constructions? More importantly — since "theory" seems to be part and parcel of the discipline of anthropology — how is one to deal with it?

For those who are turned off rather than on by the aura of a "theory" text, it may be useful to remember that your job is to treat it like any other

source (that is, to ask how can it be exploit it for the moves that you want to make). You may also need to set aside your notions of how theory works in the natural sciences — where it is often used to generate explanatory or predictive models — since anthropologists tend to use theory more like their colleagues in the humanities: as an interpretive lens to be borrowed from one context and adapted to another for the purpose of illuminating it. The devil is always in the details, and these maneuvers call for sensitivity to similarity and difference, to what fits and what doesn't, to opportunities for carving out a complex stance. Notice, for instance, that in the paper discussed above, Reihan set aside Bourdieu's account of language reform in French as being inapplicable to the Malaysian situation. At the same time, he accepted Bourdieu's notion concept of the "language market" and extended it to his topic with illuminating results.

In anthropology, the mystique of "theory" — resting as it does on perceived difficulty, foreignness, and profundity — is striking.

In the end, it helps to remember that in anthropology, theory rarely helps to "prove" or "disprove" anything. (In fact, a theory itself may be proved "wrong" and remain enormously useful — an example of this being Max Weber's effort to explain the emergence of capitalism in the West as an effect of Protestant asceticism). Rather, theory is most valuable when it offers a way of seeing facts in a new light — but one can usually choose some aspects of the view while declining others.

Nota Bene

- **Citations.** Although most instructors insist only that you use a single citation style consistently (MLA, APA, etc.), anthropology publications generally use American Anthropologist style and we recommend using AA style. (You can download a copy of the American Anthropological Association Style Guide at this URL: aaanet.org/pubs/style_guide.htm) For specific advice on using and citing sources in a paper, see Gordon Harvey's Writing with Sources, which is available on the Expository Writing Program's website. For advice on using internet sources effectively and responsibly, see the Expository Writing Program's booklet Writing with Internet Sources, also available on the program's website.

- **Bibliographic software.** You should consider using bibliographic software such as Endnote or Refworks to compile a database of sources you use in your papers. These programs allow you to accumulate a catalog of the sources you have used in your anthropology courses, and to cite such sources accurately and with ease.

- **Plagiarism.** Plagiarism refers to the failure to properly acknowledge the sources of your ideas in writing. It is a serious breach of academic integrity, the penalties for which can include failing the course or suspension.

Image from *"Anthropology 1630 Other People's Beliefs The Anthropology Of Religion"* taught by Smita Lahiri, Fall 2008.

V. An Annotated Paper

To illustrate writing strategies that you can practice in your own essays, we provide here a copiously marked up example of a successful essay that was submitted for a course taught by Smita Lahiri. The assignment was a fairly nebulous one: to "address on or more key respects in which classic practices of ethnogrpahy have been critically scrutinized and reoriented since the 1980's." James Herron did the annotations.

Silent Voices, Loud Voices:

A Comparison of Ethnographical Treatments of Verbatim Accounts from Informants

[1] When anybody, whether they are a layperson or ethnographer, enters a strange culture and wants to get a feel for it, they have three main ways to go about doing this. One is to simply observe what is going on, one is to join in what is going on, and one is to talk with members of the group about what is going on. Because the actions and interactions of a new group can be difficult to understand, the third way of learning about a culture – talking about it with people who understand it – is especially useful. For this reason, whether it appears in ethnographies or not, conversations with informants are an important part of fieldwork; the voices of these people, the very words they say, constitute a significant portion of the base of observations upon which ethnographies are constructed. Though most, if not all, ethnographies have this in common, there is considerable variability in how these voices are used and presented (or not presented) amongst ethnographic works. This essay will focus on Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and Laura Ring's *Zenana* (2006). It will explore the presence of informant voices in the two texts, and attempt to explain the different priorities of ethnographic construction and effect that are implicit in the choices each ethnographer makes by situating the two works in their historical context within the field of anthropology.

Comment: MOTIVE AND COMPARATIVE FRAME — In the opening passage the writer accomplishes two crucial moves. First, she establishes the *importance* of her topic: ethnographic research, whatever else it might involve, always relies on conversations with informants. So how an ethnographer presents the voices of his or her informants will be an important element in any ethnographic text.

Anthropological essays (and really any academic essay) need to make a case to the reader that the topic, theme, or problem under consideration in the essay is somehow interesting or important. One cannot necessarily expect the reader to glean this importance or interest without some guidance. Constructing 'the motive' of the essay in this way usually takes place within the first few paragraphs.

Second, the writer establishes a common ground or axis of comparison for the two texts she will contrast in the essay, a necessary move for any comparative essay.

Comment: INITIAL PUZZLE OR PROBLEMATIC — Here the writer introduces the *basic problem* or *puzzle* that will be addressed in the essay, a problem that will be sketched out more fully as the argument unfolds. The puzzle, in this case, is that while all ethnographies rely on the verbal testimonies of informants, they can differ markedly (as they do in the present instance) with respect to the extent such informant 'voices' are present within the ethnographic narrative. The paper will seek to account for such differences in the texts of Mead and Ring.

Comment: THESIS OR META-THESIS — Here we have the primary claim or thesis of the essay, although it's not a specific claim at all but a *meta-thesis*. That is, the writer indicates the *kind* of argument or explanation she will advance (that the differences between the two texts can be accounted for by "situating the two works in their historical context within the field of anthropology"). When can or should a writer use a meta-thesis in place of a thesis? Generally speaking a meta-thesis is used when (1) the actual claim is complex or multidimensional such that it cannot be easily rendered in a few sentences; (2) the specific claim or claims won't really be intelligible until certain background information is in place (theoretical concepts, facts, other information). In such instances the meta-thesis often stands in for a specific claim.

[2] In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the rarity of direct quotes from Mead's informants is striking. Instead, the ethnographer paraphrases the life stories told by the girls she interviews; in lieu of her young female informants' exact words, Mead gives her interpretation of them. In the chapter "Experience of the Average Girl," readers today might expect to find an abundance of quotes from the girls in the village speaking of their experiences. Rather, the chapter is full of Mead's summaries of these experiences: "Tolu…was a little weary after three years of casual adventures and professed herself willing to marry" (151), "[Lotu] reconciled her church membership and her deviation from chastity by the tranquil reflection that she would have married had it been possible, and her sin rested lightly upon her" (154), and many more such sentences. These rephrasings might be an accurate interpretation of the girls' words, but they are not snapshots of what the girls actually said about their experiences.

Comment: FURTHER MOTIVATION — These passages, by highlighting a surprising feature of Mead's text, further establish the interest of the problem to be explored by the paper.

[3] Though there are perhaps a dozen instances in which Mead backs up a statement about Samoan culture with the words of a specific Samoan native, most of these quotes come from men – not the girls who are the focus of her study and the book. If Mead were male, we might attribute this gender imbalance in the direct quotations she chooses to use to the difficulty or awkwardness inherent in inter-gender conversations between the ethnographer and his subjects. However, Mead states that she chose to focus on female adolescents for the reason that she "could hope for greater intimacy in working with girls rather than with boys". A more likely explanation for

Comment: PARAGRAPH 2: OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT PRESENTED WITH LITTLE INTEPRETATION — This may seem like a rather uneventful paragraph, but in fact it accomplishes something basic and important. By presenting a straightforward description of Mead's rendering of informant testimony along with a few well-chosen quotes that illustrate this rendering, the writer grounds her initial characterization of Mead's ethnography in specific textual evidence. Notice how the writer does not yet try to *interpret* or make sense of Mead's text at this point. Such interpretive restraint is important as well, since the reader needs to have an *independent sense* of what the writer will analyze before the writer begins her analysis. This *separation of description and interpretation* (however formal) gives the reader a better capacity to arrive at his or her own reading of the evidence, a reading which may or may not align with that of the writer.

the lack of quotations from the girls whose lives form the support for Mead's argument about adolescence is that, consciously or unconsciously, the ethnographer has decided to withhold them from her finished product despite having been privy to many quotable narratives from the girls in her study group.

[4] Mead does include many exact phrases that are used often to describe the lives of adolescent girls in the villages – examples are *tautala laititi* ("presuming above one's age) and *Laititi a'u* (I am but young), both of which phrases appear many times throughout the text. The care Mead takes to include the Samoan words as well as the English in these instances suggests that she has done enough research to include specific, concrete pieces of verbal evidence to augment her more general descriptions in culture, and also that she deems linguistic accuracy important to the value of her ethnography. However, these words are seldom directly attributed to any specific member of the village. Instead, Mead attributes them to Samoans in general: "a Samoan would say 'X'", or "they say 'X.'" Reluctance to link individuals to their words is also apparent in the first appendix, where Mead presents "literal translations from dictated texts" of adolescent girls' descriptions of their household members -- the only prominent inclusion of words spoken these girls. It is not a paraphrasing, but it is not at all personal. The names of the girls who give the description are omitted, making it impossible to place the descriptions within the context of any one girl's personality and life story. The adolescent girls are treated a sort of

homogenously mixed soup of informants for this portion of the appendix – the descriptions could come from any or all of them. Though the work identifies many of the girls in the group by name and tells each girl's story connected with her name, the lack of a voice attributed to any of them means that these "characters" are not very well developed.

[5] One of the most dramatic ways in which Ring's *Zenana* differs from *Coming of Age in Samoa* is its high content of direct quotations from Ring's neighbors and informants. In chronicling the experiences of women in her apartment building, Ring often translates her informants' stories of past events and their emotional divulgements and provides them, verbatim, within the text. Aliya's recounting of an experience with an Eve-teaser (111) and Ruhi's confession of ambivalence toward her father-in-law (84) are included as blocks with different spacing and font from Ring's discussion of the lives of the women in her building. Here, in contrast with Mead's treatment of her subjects' words as implicit within her own ethnographic description, the blocked transcriptions of Ring's neighbors' narratives are made to stand out from Ring's commentary. Indeed, verbatim quotations have such central importance to Ring's style of ethnography that they inform the general structure of the book. Zubaida's choice of the word "tension" (61) prompts an entire chapter titled "Tension" that discusses both the choice of Kerachi women to use the English word and the many ways in which the concept of tension applies to their social and political lives. Ring seems so concerned with providing readers with exactly how her informants verbally described

Comment: PARAGRAPHS 3 & 4: MORE FINE GRAINED OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT COUPLED WITH INTERPRETATIVE CLARIFICATIONS — In these paragraphs the writer continues to refine the initial observations presented in paragraph 2 that Mead's text is mainly bereft of direct quotation from specific informants. In particular, in these passages the writer works to show that apparent instances of direct quotation are in fact generic — not linked to any particular individual — and therefore consonant with the writer's basic characterization of Mead's text. As with paragraph 2, in paragraphs 3 and 4 the writer abstains from offering a broad explanation of such patterns, limiting herself primarily to observation.

their lives that she includes Urdu words in parentheses next to English words when there seems to be a chance that something will be lost in translation. She also sometimes provides the Urdu when this linguistic problem doesn't seem to exist; for example, *rishtedar* does not have much special connotation other than its translation, "relatives" (17). Though this hyperfrequent inclusion of Urdu words might partially reflect an attempt to prove a strong grasp on the language of Ring's subjects, it could also be another example of the importance Ring places on capturing the exact way in which subjects verbally represent their own lives.

[6] It is rare that Ring presents any claim without supporting it with a direct quote attached to a specific person. This strategy runs nearly opposite to Mead's pervasive tendency to attribute the few included exact informant quotes to the population of the village (or of Samoa) in general, rather than to an individual. The result is that specific, named neighbors and their voices appear throughout Ring's ethnography as evidence whenever Ring makes a new point. Readers learn to recognize these voices; the characters that populate the society being studied are well-developed. This emphasizes the differences in their experiences and personalities; thus, even though these women inhabit the same physical space and, to an extent, the same social world, the ethnography frames their lives in a quite individualized way.

[7] These contrasting choices regarding the inclusion of verbatim quotes from informants lead to a different effect from each of the two works. While it offers evidence for this interpretation in the form of statements about

Comment: PARGRAPH 5: OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT PRESENTED WITH LITTLE INTEPRETATION — This paragraph follows precisely the same pattern as paragraph 2, first offering a general observation about Ring's text (that it contains a great deal of verbatim quotations from informants) and then substantiating this observation with textual evidence and detailed observation. The argumentative function is likewise similar to that of paragraphs 2-4: to establish the evidential basis for the broader contrast and interpretation the writer will introduce later in the essay.

Comment: SIGNPOSTING A SHIFT IN ANALYTICAL FOCUS — Notice how the writer clearly signals a shift in analytical focus from the way informant voices are represented textually (paragraphs 2-6) to a consideration of the "effects" of such presentation in paragraph 7. This sort of signposting helps readers better track the stages through which the argument unfolds.

Comment: INITIAL COMPARATIVE MOVE — Here the essay begins explicitly to sketch out an initial, rough sense of the contrast between the two ethnographies with respect to how they represent of informant 'voices.' But note that the contrast is still basically descriptive here, although the level of abstraction has moved up a notch or two and the writer begins to hint at an overall characterization of the differences between the two texts.

Samoan culture that have presumably been gleaned from the notes the ethnographer took in the field, *Coming of Age in Samoa* does not provide detailed descriptions of individual observations or (more importantly to the focus of this paper) of particular conversations with familiar informants. Instead of presenting concrete snapshots of Samoan life in the form of anecdotes and verbatim quotations along with its claims, Mead's work offers readers a trained ethnographer's interpretation of a foreign culture. On the other hand, Ring makes readers privy to exactly which information from her fieldwork suggested the claims about culture that she makes in *Zenana*. The liberal quoting of informants in the work contributes to an ethnographic style that emphasizes that the ethnographer's presentation of life in her Kerachi apartment building is based on specific experiences; these are presented to readers as anecdotes complete with dialogue and as verbatim transcriptions of certain conversations in which a particular informant whose personality is known to the reader said something specific. Mead acts as a medium for Samoan culture, using her training and talents as an ethnographer to translate what her informants tell her into summaries and impressions of the lives of adolescent girls in Samoa for the readers back at home; in contrast, Ring gives her ethnographer's sense of the culture she studies, but also brings readers directly into the world of the ethnography by reproducing the observations and introducing the informants that lead her to her claims in concrete detail.

Comment: A FIRST APPROXIMATION OF THE CONTRAST, RENDERD CONCRETELY — These passages contain a first approximation of the basic contrast that the writer will develop in the remainder of the essay — Mead's "trained ethnographer's interpretation" verus Ring's "presentation of her life based on specific experiences." The writer will develop this basic contrast more abstractly and generally at the end of the paragraph. Here it appears in a form that's clearly derives directly from the observations adduced in paragraphs 2-6.

This *gradual, inductive building* from specific textual observations to more general observations to an interpretative contrast is one of the things that makes the essay persuasive.

Comment: THE BASIC CONTRAST IN MORE GENERAL FORM — Here the basic contrast is again stated in yet more general and synoptic form. All of the evidence presented in paragraphs 2-7 leads up to this contrast.

[8] What is the explanation for the difference in the use of the words of informants in these two ethnographies? One might argue that each ethnographer judges whether to use dialogue based on how its inclusion will support her specific argument. According to this explanation, Mead chooses to exclude portrayals of her speaking informants so as to avoid emphasizing their individual personalities, which might weaken her claim that Samoan culture is homogeneous (206) and thus causes less adolescent conflict; Ring includes these portrayals precisely because the highlight the diverse personas of the women in the apartment building who create peace despite their differences. However, Mead does admit that despite the apparent homogeneity of life among her informants, "in temperament in character they varied enormously" (139); this suggests that Mead's reluctance to use direct quotations is not a mere factor of her specific argument. Instead, it seems to indicate that certain restrictive conventions surrounded the use of informant voices in Mead's day, while Ring's work seems wholly free from these conventions and even to oppose them.

[9] Some of the early preference toward generalized, paraphrased renderings of information over verbatim quotes may have to do with the old distinction between ethnologists and ethnographers. Collecting direct quotes and other observations was the duty of ethnographers, whose work was not as appreciated as that of the ethnologists who would then take this data and extract claims from it, bringing scientific validity to the study through the anthropological authority that stemmed from their training. The concern of

Comment: EVERYTHING BEFORE PARAGRAPH 8: DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROBLEM — The entire essay prior to paragraph 8 may be viewed as the careful development of the analytical question posed in the first sentence of paragraph 8: the (to this point) unexplained difference between Mead's and Ring's representation of informant 'voices.'

Note the painstaking and deliberate way in which the writer develops the problem over several paragraphs; this is typical of anthropological writing, in which analytical problems do not simply present themselves but must be developed in dialogue with empirical and theoretical sources.

Comment: RESTATEMENT OF THE ANALYTICAL PROBLEM OR QUESTION — By restating the basic analytical problem here the writer (1) reminds the reader what the problem is (best to assume a fairly inattentive reader) and (2) clearly marks a shift from the largely observational first stage of the argument to the largely explanatory second stage of the argument.

Comment: INTRODUCTION OF AN OBVIOUS COUNTERARGUMENT — By introducing a counterargument here, the writer (1) anticipates a salient objection or alternative to her own explanation of the contrast and (2) introduces tension into her argument by showing that her position is potentially contentious.

Comment: COUNTER TO THE COUNTERARGUMENT — This passage makes quick work of the counterargument — one expects rather too quick work. If a counterargument is worth introducing, it should probably not be possible to dispense with it so easily.

Comment: FORSHADOWING THE TYPE OF EXPLANATION TO BE PROPOSED— By singling out 'restrictive conventions' here, the writer foreshadows the *kind* of explanation she will be offering for the differences between Mead and Ring. This is helpful, since it allows the reader to focus his or her attention on the different *conventions* of ethnographic writing and research under which Mead and Ring labored.

Comment: HEDGING — Hedging of this sort is appropriate when making speculative claims, as the writer does here.

ethnologists was to let readers know what constituted life for a given community, not for just a few people – an ethnographer would be capable of doing the latter through simple interview. Though Mead's mentor, Franz Boas, was one of the first anthropologists to bring these two branches of anthropological work together, it is notable that in the excerpt we read from his work *A Year Among the Eskimo* the voices of his individual informants are never directly quoted during their interactions with him; only folklore like the story of Sedna (50) or of Quadjaqdjuq (53), which are attributable to the Eskimo culture as a whole and thus allow Boas to present a statement in quotation form that represent the whole group, not just individual parts of it. The premium placed on gleaning and providing representation of a community as a whole might have still influenced Mead in the late 1920's; this, combined with her self-acknowledged worry that her sample size was too small to make generalizations about Samoan culture, might have made her fear that including direct quotes from her informants would make her first ethnography seem inexpert and second-rate.

Comment: CORROBORATING EVIDENCE — Introducing corroborating evidence here — that the same pattern of not quoting individual informants is evident in Boas's work — is crucial to rendering the basic explanation more persuasive. If Mead's practice is explained by 'restrictive conventions,' such conventions would have applied to Mead's contemporaries as well, such as Boas.

[10] Nowadays, virtually all anthropologists do their own fieldwork, and the distinction between ethnology and ethnography has vanished, taking with it the implications of an imbalance between the skill required to do fieldwork and that required to make conclusions from it. Indeed, Ring, a modern-day ethnographer, seems to take pride in liberally publishing the informant quotations gleaned during her fieldwork; her ability to gain the confidence of her informants boosts her professional authority in some ways,

because the ability to do comprehensive and subtle fieldwork is now considered valuable. In writing *Zenana*, Ring was probably also less concerned than Mead about conveying a sense of cultural omniscience through providing a generalized picture of culture in her apartment building that would include each of her informants – thus, she is comfortable with the development of unique, diverse characters that comes alone with allowing the voices of particular informants to return throughout her work. This is allowed to happen because the mission of ethnographies has largely shifted away from the creation of an accurate, full, generalized portrait of life in a community toward giving one or several perspectives on the culture being studied and focusing on what that perspective can bring to the intellectual discourse. This change may have been precipitated by intellectuals' realization that, since culture in America and other home countries was increasingly and significantly multicultural even within a given place, cultures elsewhere were probably much more complicated than earlier anthropology had given them credit for when making its claims on them.

Comment: APPROPRIATE HEDGING — More appropriate hedging here. Since the writer is speculating about Ring's 'concerns' as a writer, it's appropriate to signal the speculative nature of such remarks.

Comment: REFERENCE — A reference for these broach characterizations of shifts in ethnographic practice would be apt here.

[11] This argument can be taken a bit further to conclude the exploration of the differences between Mead's and Ring's use of informant voices. One might reasonably assume that with anthropologists' realization that their ability to verify their generalizing statements regarding culture was limited came a revisit of the legitimacy of anthropological authority. Mead's work seems to rest strongly on two assumptions common in early 20th century ethnographies; that as an outsider, she is better qualified than the natives she

Comment: PARAGRAPH 11 (CONCLUSION): BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARGUMENT — Until this point the paper sought to explain the differences between the two texts by appealing to the different conventions that governed ethnographic writing in Mead's and Ring's time. Now, however, the writer aims at something much more ambitious: to claim (again, speculatively) that the shifts in ethnographic practice from Mead to Ring are in fact diagnostic of a broad transformation in our understanding of ethnographic knowledge and in particular to the nature of ethnographic authority.

In conclusions a writer is typically granted greater license to work out the broader implications of his or her argument; this writer makes effective use of such latitude here.

studies to offer a reading audience of outsiders a perspective on Samoan culture, and that as a trained (if somewhat green) anthropologist she is better qualified than her readers to interpret the words of her informants. Both of these beliefs preclude the necessity of including verbatim quotes from informants, and so almost none are to be found in *Coming of Age in Samoa.* By the time Ring began work on *Zenana*, both of these beliefs had been challenged and dethroned to some extent. The self-consciousness that arose in the field of anthropology around the 70's and 80's due to the reductionist, generalizing, and even racist tendencies of early anthropology persists; ethnographers no longer feel sure that their training qualifies them to accurately portray foreign cultures, which can lead to the inclusion of large blocks of verbatim transcripts of informant's words. Many ethnographers, perhaps including Ring, are so reluctant to paraphrase these words and potentially lose some of the privileged authority now given to those who actually live within a culture that they include many words in the language of their informants in case there are extra layers of meaning inaccessible to English. The ethnographer's authorship and creation of an interpretation of a studied culture seems to have become less important than accurately capturing some perspectives of a culture with the understanding that other perspectives will exist – this priority lends itself to the inclusion of the voice of individuals. Providing these voices also lets readers in on the raw yields of fieldwork to a greater extent than they are in ethnographies like Mead's, where only the end results of the fieldwork are presented. This invites readers to disagree with the ethnographer's conclusions about the studied community, and in this way diminishes unquestioned anthropological authority by holding ethnographers more accountable. However, if selected well to fit an accurate claim, verbatim quotations from informants have potential to make the ethnographer's conclusions much stronger arguments than those that are backed only by the ethnographer's interpretive paraphrasing of informant's verbal information, since today's readers are reluctant to trust the accuracy of these interpretations based on professional authority alone. In sum, the different choices made by Mead and Ring in dealing with the voices of their informants are significant examples of the conventions surrounding the construction of ethnographic authority in each of their times.

Image from *"Anthropology 1612: Politics of Leisure and Recreation"*– taught by Katrina Moore in Spring 2009.

VI. Other Writing Support Resources

Resources on Campus

Harvard University Writing Center
Pre-scheduled conferences with trained peer tutors are offered Monday through Friday during the day; drop-in hours are offered from 7 to 9 PM Monday through Thursday at the Barker Center, and on Sunday evenings during the academic year from 7 to 9 PM in Room 209 at Hilles Library. (During the week, you need to arrive no later than 8 PM to guarantee a slot.) You are also welcome to drop in during the day, and, if one of the tutors is free, he or she will gladly meet with you at that time.
www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr | Barker Center 019 | t: 617-495-1655

Bureau of Study Counsel
The Bureau of Study Counsel offers students help with some common academic problems. There are workshops available about reading, writing, procrastinating, time management, and other academic issues. The Bureau also offers individual counseling, both academic and personal, as well as peer tutoring, and other services.
www.fas.harvard.edu/~bsc | t: 617-495-2581

House Tutors in Academic Writing
Several undergraduate houses have resident or non-resident writing tutors (Expos preceptors) who hold regular drop-in hours to tutor students on their writing. Contact your house's Allston-Burr Resident Dean for further information.

Lamont Library
www.hcl.harvard.edu/lamont/resources/links/citation.html

Online Writing Guides

Writing with Sources
www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources/writing_with_sources.zip

Writing with Internet Sources
www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources/writing_with_internet_sources.pdf

Making the Most of College Writing
www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/EWP_guide.web.pdf

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