

21 Ethnographic Writing

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Brief Description of Method

An ethnographic text is the central outcome of fieldwork. It is also the most important way in which anthropologists publish their research findings. Despite the centrality of ethnographic texts, how to write ethnographically has not been discussed in any depth until recently. To prepare students to write ethnographically, they first have to read ethnographies. Analyzing the ethnographic writing styles of others helps them develop their own writing. To apply this knowledge, students observe everyday social interactions, like riding an elevator, and write ethnographic texts about their observations. They receive constructive criticism from their peers and instructor(s) and learn how to revise their texts and improve their writing.

References for Further Reading

- Ghodsee, K. 2016. *From Notes to Narrative: Writing Ethnographies That Everyone Can Read*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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- McGranahan, C., ed. 2020. *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Menzfeld, M. 2021. Composing Ethnographic Texts. How to Use Stylistic and Argumentative Techniques Properly. *Ethnoscripts* 23: 92–115.
- Narayan, K. 2012. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pauli, J., ed. 2021a. How to Write? Experiences, Challenges and Possibilities of Ethnographic Writing. Special issue, *Ethnoscripts* 23: 5–188. <https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/ethnoscripts/article/view/1673/1527>
- Pauli, J. 2021b. No Magic! Teaching Ethnographic Writing. *Ethnoscripts* 23: 166–79.
- Schneider, C. 2021. Space to Write: A Student's Perspective on Ethnographic Writing. *Ethnoscripts* 23: 180–88.
- Van Maanen, J. 2011 [1988]. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Estimated Teacher Prep Time

This lesson is split into four parts. The instructor has to prepare the second and the fourth part of the lesson.

Second part: The preparation of the in-class discussion of writing styles will take approx. 80 minutes (defining ethnographic writing and writing techniques, based on Ghodsee [2016] and Menzfeld [2021]).

Fourth part: The reading and commenting on all ethnographic texts written by the students depend on the number of students in class. Per ethnographic text, an instructor should calculate approx. 20–30 minutes of preparation. Thus, for a class of 10 students, preparation time will be between 200 and 300 minutes (3–5 hours).

Estimated Duration of Lesson

- 90 minutes for preparatory homework activity
- 90 minutes for in-class discussion of writing styles
- 240 minutes for outside class observation, writing, and revising by students
- 90 minutes for reflective discussion in class

Materials Needed

- A whiteboard (or a flip chart, or a PowerPoint slide)
- Paper and pencils

Student Pre-Class Preparation

The students should have read ethnographies. Thus, the best results for the lesson will be accomplished with graduate students who have a sound knowledge of ethnographic writing. If students have problems finding ethnographic texts, the instructor can provide a list with exemplary ethnographies (for example, see Pauli 2021a, 2021b). As preparation for the lesson, students have to choose an ethnographic text they like and read Ghodsee (2016) Chapters 9 and 10 and Menzfeld (2021).

Learning Outcomes

Completing the lesson, students will: (1) be able to describe different ways of writing ethnography; (2) be aware of some pitfalls of ethnographic writing; (3) apply this knowledge to their own ethnographic writing; and (4) reflect on how these writing techniques can help improve writing ethnographic texts.

Lesson Instructions

This lesson has four parts: (1) a preparatory homework activity; (2) an in-class discussion of writing styles; (3) an observation and writing exercise; and (4) a final reflective discussion in class.

- 1 A preparatory homework activity (approx. 90 minutes)
The instructor asks the students (by email or in person) to choose an ethnographic text they enjoyed reading. If students have difficulties finding ethnographic texts, the instructor can make suggestions (for examples of ethnographic texts, see Pauli 2021a, 2021b). Out of their chosen texts, each student has to select a paragraph they think is especially compelling. In preparation for the class, the students have to read Ghodsee (2016) Chapters 9 and 10 and Menzfeld (2021).

2 An in-class discussion of writing styles (approx. 90 minutes)

The in-class discussion is divided into three parts: (1) definitions of ethnographic writing and writing advice; (2) discussing and accessing the quality of ethnographic writing; and (3) an observation and writing assignment.

(1) Definition and advice on ethnographic writing

At the beginning of class, the instructor and the students discuss how they define ethnography and ethnographic writing. The instructor can use Ghodsee's (2016) introduction as a guideline.

Next, the students discuss Chapters 9 and 10 from Ghodsee (2016). On a whiteboard (or a flip chart, or a PowerPoint slide), the instructor summarizes the discussion by listing Ghodsee's advice. This summary should include stylistic advice, like avoiding the passive voice, and grammar and syntax advice (e.g., the use of strong verbs). The instructor copies the summary to use again in the last part of the lesson. Next, the text by Menzfeld (2021) is discussed. Students name central elements of composing a compelling ethnographic text according to Menzfeld (2021). The instructor records the discussion on the whiteboard and copies it for later use.

(2) Discussing and accessing the quality of ethnographic writing

In the second part of the class, students introduce the ethnographic text that they have chosen. The students are encouraged to describe why they enjoyed reading the text. The instructor can collect the chosen paragraphs before class and send them to the students by email. This gives all students a chance to read the paragraphs before class. Alternatively, students read aloud their exemplary paragraph. After each reading, all students reflect on the writing style of the paragraph. They list and discuss which of the writing tips offered by Ghodsee and Menzfeld are used in the text. This enables students to access the quality of writing.

(3) Observation and writing assignment (approx. 240 minutes)

At the end of the class, the instructor gives the students an assignment in preparation for the next part of the lesson. The students are asked to ride an elevator, take notes about it, write a text of three to four pages on their observation, and then revise the text with the help of their peers.

The exercise is divided into two parts: (1) in the first part, students observe an everyday situation and write an ethnographic text about their observation; (2) in the second part, they share their texts with their fellow students, discuss the texts and revise them.

(1) Riding an elevator and writing about it (approx. 90 minutes)

Students can choose any elevator they want (Ghodsee 2016: 49). Elevators in university buildings, public train stations, banks, shopping centers, and even a paternoster—a chain of open compartments that move slowly up and down in a loop—in a Humburg municipal building have been the settings for student observations in my classes. Students have to ride the elevator for at least 20 minutes. They have to observe as closely as possible, independently deciding on the focus of their observation. If for some reason, elevators are difficult as sites of observation, an alternative can be bus rides.

(2) Peer discussion and revision of ethnographic texts (approx. 150 minutes)

After the observation exercise, students return home and write about their observation (approx. three to four pages). They send their texts to fellow students. It is recommended that students discuss and revise their initial texts in groups of not more than five students. Larger

classes have to be subdivided into smaller groups. All students in a group read the texts of their peers and then meet to comment and discuss the texts with each other. In my experience, students enjoy exchanging comments on their writing without an instructor (see also Schneider 2021). When an instructor is present, students often find it more difficult to express and accept constructive criticism of their texts. Thus, it is important that this first round of criticism is done without the instructor (see Pauli 2021b; Schneider 2021). After receiving their peers' comments, students revise their text. The revised texts are sent to the instructor and all students in class. In preparation for the next part of the lesson, students and instructor read all texts and make notes on the quality of the writing, including suggestions on how to improve it further.

Reflection and Class Discussion

(4) A final reflective discussion in class (approx. 90 minutes)

At the beginning of the final discussion of the texts, students comment on the observing, writing, and revising process. The instructor can use the following questions as guidance:

- How difficult has it been to do the observation and the writing?
- How did students choose a topic and a focus for their writing?
- Did ethical issues emerge?
- What challenges appeared and how were they overcome?
- How did the peers help each student improve and revise the text?
- What have students learned about their own writing and the writing of others?
- Have they developed techniques to enhance their future writing?

Students are encouraged to make a list on how to improve their writing, reflecting on the criticism they have received.

At the end of the class, the instructor returns to the summary of writing advice (based on Ghodsee's Chapters 9 and 10 and Menzfeld's text) from the beginning of the lesson. Using the summary, the instructor discusses each student's texts, acknowledging the quality of each student's writing, and making suggestions for further improvement and revisions.

This lesson can be repeated with other observational exercises (Pauli 2021b). Other options are, for example, observations at children's playgrounds or at university cafeterias. Students who have finished their own ethnographic fieldwork can use their ethnographic data to work through the composition, writing, and rewriting of ethnographic texts. Ghodsee (2016) and Pauli (2021b) provide further advice on more specific forms of ethnographic writing (e.g., writing portraits or dialog).

Online Teaching Modifications

This lesson can be adapted for online teaching. The in-class parts of the lesson can be done synchronously using video conferencing software and breakout groups. If the observation of an elevator ride is not possible instructors may substitute the elevator exercise with an observational exercise on queuing (or standing in lines).