



Writing Anthropology at University

GUIDES FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES

1 What is Social and Cultural Anthropology?

Social and cultural anthropology is the scientific study of human society and cultures. It focuses on “what makes us human” (see the [American Association of Anthropology’s statement](#)) – both the commonalities of human cultures across the world and the unique characteristics that distinguish societies and social groups.

Positioned at the crossroads between humanities and social sciences, social and cultural anthropology covers a wide range of topics, from the gift economies of the Trobriand islanders to the circulation of care in transnational families, from the liquid worlds of Wall Street investment bankers to the spirit worlds of Northern Mongolians, from hacktivism to fractivism, and from Bedouin women’s poetry to Bollywood and brass bands. What unites anthropology across such widely divergent topics are its gaze, its theories, and its methods.

One of the distinctive traits of anthropology is its fieldwork, known as **ethnography**. Researchers immerse themselves in a community or group to observe their everyday life, including social organization, rituals, norms, values, practices, and behaviour. This is typically achieved through long-term participant observation, unstructured interviewing, and complementary methods. Rigorous fieldwork requires building trust with members of the community, adhering strictly to research ethics, being reflexive about one’s own role in the research, and maintaining a continuous dialogue between theoretical expectations and observations.

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2 General characteristics of writing in Social Anthropology

Writing is a key activity for social anthropologists. Ethnographic observation relies on the researchers’ precise and detailed descriptions of their observations and experiences –field notes–. This means that ethnographers must be able to organise all the relevant aspects of their observations, because these field notes become their main data. Writing is also key to qualitative data analysis, where a back-and-forth between writing and data informs the results. Furthermore, it is needed to convey research conclusions to diverse

audiences, such as other anthropologists, students, the broader scientific community, research participants, funding institutes, and society as a whole. Lastly, writing is essential to obtain research funds and teach the discipline to students.

Because anthropology is primarily “a discipline of words” (according to Margaret Mead (1995). *Visual anthropology in a discipline of words*. In Paul Hockings (ed.), *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (pp. 3-10). De Gruyter), anthropologists use a wide range of linguistic registers depending on the purpose and audience of each type of text. Texts aimed at broad audiences need to be accessible and engaging, while texts intended for academics tend to be more complex and specialised, using highly specific terminology. Funding applications adopt techniques of persuasive writing, in addition to specialist texts. Fieldwork diaries do not need to follow particular styles, as long as they are factually accurate. In contrast, monographs can employ literary registers to evoke the context and convey experiences and cultures more effectively to someone who has never been a member of a particular community.

Despite the wide range of linguistic registers, anthropological texts have various general characteristics that are typical of the discipline.

First, many anthropological texts build heavily on **empirical evidence**, collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and other methods, mostly qualitative. The reliance on this type of data means that each argument needs to be accompanied by specific examples from the fieldwork that illustrate the point. The logically structured argumentation must be clearly connected to the data presented and the conclusions.

Second, researchers in all disciplines must be transparent about how the data was collected. However, one peculiarity of ethnographic observation is that researchers are the main participants in data collection and their active participation in the daily activities of the observed community means that they are not a neutral tool. Who they are can influence the types of observations made. For instance, a woman studying Wall Street investment bankers may make entirely different observations than a man studying the same people, even if they have received the exact same training and have the same research question. This highly masculine collective may behave differently toward a man than toward a woman, open up about different topics to the two researchers, or provide differential access to certain spaces for men or women. Consequently, a male and female researcher may observe different parts of their social reality. Therefore, one characteristic of anthropological writing is **reflexivity**: reflecting on the impact a researcher’s characteristics has on the research process and the obtained results.

Third, anthropologists are expected to fully contextualise the empirical evidence, placing it in its historical and cultural context. **Contextualisation** helps readers understand how to interpret the findings and what their implications are. In particular, anthropologists aim to understand behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and values within the context of the

culture from which these features emerged, rather than judging these features from the perspective of their own culture. To do so, they need to describe the context in detail.

Fourth, and in relation to the former point, anthropologists strive to use **language that is culturally sensitive and respectful**. This involves avoiding stereotypes, biased assumptions, and any form of discriminatory or offensive language regarding gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic class, physical and mental health, appearance, and other features. Inclusive language guides can be helpful for ensuring that the language used is respectful.

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3 Written texts commonly used in Social and Cultural Anthropology

One of the most common texts in anthropology is the **fieldwork diary**, which is the researcher's written, private record of everything a researcher observes in a community that they believe to be relevant to their research. It is typically not published.

Ethnographers quickly jot down notes in a notebook or on their phone while in the field to avoid forgetting meaningful actions, small details such as names, or precise statements. Once they are alone, they elaborate on the fieldnotes they made on that day, transforming them into a comprehensive fieldwork diary entry, while recalling more details of the day. At this point, they reconstruct the logical order of occurrences, describe activities and people, note overheard conversations, small talk the researcher held with them, and the setting where these interactions took place. Furthermore, they often comment on their own reactions to occurrences, such as dismay or surprise, as well as assumptions and questions that emerged during fieldwork or while writing in their diary. These reflections serve to orient their observations in the following days of fieldwork. The fieldwork diary then forms the basis for analysis and publications.

A second common text type, and the central genre of writing in social anthropology, is **ethnographies**. The term "ethnography" refers both to the type of empirical research through immersive observation in a community and to the written account of the results of that research for an audience, usually in book form. The quality of ethnographies depends heavily on the richness of the fieldwork diary, its "raw material", in addition to

the analysis of this material and its contextualisation. The writing style of ethnographies has evolved over the years, from realist to confessional and impressionist styles.

The writing style of ethnographies has evolved over the years, from realist to confessional and impressionist styles (John van Maanen (2011). *Tales from the field. On writing ethnography*. University of Chicago Press.) In the early days of anthropology, most ethnographies had a *realist style*. A realist style portrays a community matter-of-factly and with authority. For instance, in her ethnography (Larissa A. de Lomnitz (1975). *Cómo sobreviven los marginados*. Siglo Veintiuno Editores), Larissa de Lomnitz wrote a long descriptions of the routines of everyday life in a Mexican neighbourhood that started with

In Cerrada del Cóndor the day starts at six in the morning, when many men and women leave for work. Little by little, the rest of the neighborhood wakes up, and toward nine in the morning, the women who have not left find themselves in plain activity (p. 43).

As this fragment illustrates, the ethnographer tends to be absent in the text and uses the third-person to describe a setting. However, this can easily describe a reality from a Western point of view, which is suggested as “objective”. Later work adopted a *confessional style*, which attempted to demystify the work of ethnographers by giving them an active role and voice in the text. Ethnographers who adopt this style blend realistic tales with first-person narratives to explain their choices, doubts, decisions, and assumptions to the reader. For instance, in his ethnographic text about police officers, John van Maanen wrote,

By allowing myself to be closely identified with the patrolmen, I was purposely making a choice about the data I would gather. My self-imposed isolation from the managers of the organization and the other enclaves of the special police interests very clearly biased my study toward the perspectives of those at the street level (p. 88).

He continued to explain to the reader why he decided to do so. The fragment shows that the anthropologist is present in the text, which better conveys the nature of anthropological research. Last, the *impressionist style* tries to situate the reader in an unfamiliar world, and therefore makes greater use of characterisation and creative non-fiction writing to evoke a sense of the place, the people, and the events. An example of this style can be found in Jason de León’s powerful book about unauthorised border-crossing (Jason de León (2015). *The land of open graves: Living and dying on the migrant trail*. University of California Press) among migrants, describing his approach to the Juan Bosco migrant shelter:

I can hear the kitchen television from the street as I approach Juan Bosco. The Mexican edition of America’s Funniest Home Videos is playing at a painful volume.

Before setting foot inside, I can already tell by the aroma that Pato is making his delicious rice and beans (p. 163).

The comment about what is on television may not help readers understand the topic of the book, but places them in the scene, helping them vividly imagine a situation in order to gain greater insight into the context.

As these quotes indicate, anthropologists often make ethnographies understandable by including “ethnographic vignettes” – concrete fragments from their fieldwork and interviews. These vignettes provide evidence of the observations that lead to the formulation of hypotheses or theories and generate an awareness of the constructed nature of the text. They also evoke a sense of place and the character of the people, allowing readers to “be there”. Furthermore, including observed dialogue in the text introduces multivocality, allowing several voices to be heard directly, from their different perspectives and ways of being. This enriches the readers’ understanding of the issues being studied.

A third major type of text in anthropology is the **scientific journal article**. Some of the highest-impact journals in anthropology at an international level are the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist*, and *Human Nature*. In Catalonia, the *Quaderns de l’Institut Català d’Antropologia* is well-known for anthropological research. Furthermore, anthropologists routinely publish in interdisciplinary journals that are relevant to their subject areas such as *Ethnography*, *Social Networks*, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, or *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Journal articles typically follow a more prescribed format than ethnographic monographs, with the most common article structure starting with an introduction of the topic and its relevance, potentially a theoretical framework, substantive more in-depth analysis or contextualisation, the research question, a description of the methodology, the results, and a conclusion or discussion. The style is formal and objective and the choice of words is precise. However, in anthropology, writers often embed ethnographic vignettes into their writing. An ethnographic vignette can also be a great opener for an article, to draw the reader into the topic before transitioning to the more formal aspects of the article.

Fourth, anthropologists often publish **public or engaged anthropology** pieces in mainstream outlets. While many scientists value reaching out to audiences beyond their discipline, anthropologists in particular prioritise this due to the discipline’s unique focus on human cultures and social justice. They often feel they have a responsibility to use their knowledge for the public good and advocate against injustice. Articles in digital magazines such as *SAPIENS*, anthropologically informed op-eds on contemporary issues in newspaper magazines, and blog posts, bring anthropological insight and perspective to a wider audience, showing its practical implications. These texts need to be highly accessible and explain complex concepts in simple and straightforward ways, avoiding any jargon. Often, authors employ storytelling techniques for such texts, such as

anecdotes and metaphors, to draw readers in and make the presented information more relatable. They use vivid verbs (such as “puzzle” or “shoulder”) rather than abstract ones (such as “hypothesise” or “specify”) (See Helen Sword (2012). *Stylish academic writing*. Harvard University Press) whenever possible. Photos often illustrate the key message.

Apart from these four types of text, anthropologists write a variety of other texts, such as Master’s and PhD theses, funding applications, anthropological book reviews, student text books, research reports, and written feedback for participants. In some cases, they even venture into fiction and poetry. The best way to understand how these different texts are written is to read a diverse range of them.

4 Writing conventions in Social and Cultural Anthropology

Interview quotations

Anthropology often uses direct quotations from interviews or fieldwork to provide evidence or illustrate arguments. Shorter quotations from a person’s speech can be embedded into the text within quotation marks, whereas longer quotes are usually presented as block quotations, indented below the text, followed by the research participant’s name, pseudonym, or ID in parentheses.

If the quote contains parts that do not add much to its content (e.g., repetitions, filler words), they can be substituted with an ellipsis to signal where a part was removed. Alternatively, what an interviewee said can be described in the author’s words, thereby summarising it.

Ethical considerations often involve safeguarding participants’ anonymity by substituting their real names with pseudonyms, which need to be used consistently throughout the text, and omitting identifiable information or linguistic traits. For instance, if a participant named Pau Ferrer says, “My grandfather lives at the end of Carrer Roser in Olot, in the house where my mother grew up”, the researcher could indicate this as

My grandfather lives (...) in Olot, in the house where my mother grew up. (Miquel)

By using the pseudonym “Miquel” for all extracts related to this participant, and other pseudonyms for other participants, the researcher can still provide insight into the diversity of sources in the text.

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Transparency regarding the research process requires indicating if names have been substituted with pseudonyms. If the interviews were conducted in a language other than the one used in the text, it should be mentioned that the quotes were translated, along with any translation issues that might affect their interpretation. Furthermore, it should be mentioned if quotes are not presented verbatim but have been edited for clarity or brevity.

Visual elements

Many anthropological texts include photos, maps, kinship diagrams, graphics, or other figures. It is recommended to use these elements only if they serve a clear purpose in the argumentation. Figures should have a high resolution and be numbered consecutively (e.g., "Figure 1") and have clear descriptive captions. Figures are numbered separately from tables, so texts that include both may have a Table 1 and a Figure 1. Notes below the figure or its title (whichever is at the bottom) can provide further information that allows readers to understand the figure without consulting the text. Each figure should be discussed within the text to ensure it adds value to the argument. Therefore, all figures are referenced within the text (e.g., "(see Figure 1)").

Importantly, pictures, maps, and graphics made by others may be subject to licenses, either on their own or via the journals that published them. Therefore, they can only be used in new texts if the license permits this and under the conditions the license stipulates. Researchers can also search for license-free alternatives. Figures that do not originate from the presented research should mention the source.

Bibliographical references

All arguments must be backed up by either empirical evidence or earlier literature that supports the point. To cite the literature, a reference is inserted into the body of the text, usually by citing the author(s)'(s) name and year of publication in parenthesis (e.g., "(González, 2024)"). Multiple references in a row are separated by semicolons. At the end of the text (before any annexes), a reference list is inserted with the details of all cited works, arranged alphabetically. The reference list typically has the section title "References" or "Bibliography".

Anthropological journals use different reference style guides, such as the *Chicago Manual of Style* (used by the American Anthropological Association), *APA Style* (from the American Psychological Association) or a tailored style guide, these are periodically updated. Each style guide indicates whether to use authors' first names or initials, whether the year must be indicated in parentheses, and so forth. Scholarly journals typically expect authors to format their references according to the reference style mentioned on their websites, using the most current guidelines. Reference management software such as Zotero or Mendeley can help organise and format references according to the most widely used styles, thus ensuring consistency throughout the text.

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5 Publications and websites of interest for writing in Social and Cultural Anthropology

1. BECKER, Howard (2007). *Writing for social scientists. How to start and finish your thesis, book or article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Becker's book, which has been translated into different languages, provides information on how to structure and write social science texts, in a very approachable style.
2. BOELLSTORFF, Tom (2008). "*How to Get an Article Accepted at American Anthropologist (or Anywhere)*" [online]. *American Anthropologist*.
[<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2008.00034.x>]

This short paper by Tom Boellstorff, the editor of the top journal *American Anthropologist*, provides five tips to get a paper published in *American Anthropologist* or other anthropological or interdisciplinary journals.
3. BOELLSTORFF, Tom (2010). "*How to Get an Article Accepted at American Anthropologist (or Anywhere), Part 2*" [online]. *American Anthropologist*.
[<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2010.01244.x>]

This is the follow-up paper to Boellstorff's 2008 paper, where he provides five more tips for getting your research article accepted in a highly respected, anthropological journal.

4. EMERSON, Robert M.; FRETZ, Rachel I.; SHAW, Linda L. (2011 [1995]). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Second Edition. University of Chicago Press.

Fieldnotes are central to this discipline, and this book explains what to write and how to write it.

5. GHODSEE, Kristen (2016). *From Notes to Narrative: Writing Ethnographies That Everyone Can Read*. The University of Chicago Press.

This little book by Kristen Ghodsee is a true gem. It explains how to incorporate ethnographic detail, theory, images, dialogue, and yourself into ethnographies, describe places and events, and keep the writing clear and uncluttered.

6. NARAYAN, Kirin (2012). *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*. The University of Chicago Press.

Kirin Narayan uses the non-fiction book *Sakhalin Island* written by Anton Chekhov to explain how to creatively describe places and people, insert voices and connect the author to the text. She also provides a number of exercises.

7. WOLF, Margery (1992). *A thrice told tale. Feminism, postmodernism, and ethnographic responsibility*. Stanford University Press.

Margery Wolf presents three distinct texts based on her fieldwork in Taiwan, to show that the same events can be told and interpreted differently: fieldnotes, a scientific journal article, and fiction.

8. [SAPIENS. Public Writing Training: A Digital Booklet for Your Publishing Journey](https://www.sapiens.org/training/introduction/). [https://www.sapiens.org/training/introduction/]

The digital magazine *SAPIENS*, which aims to bring anthropological knowledge to a wider audience, offers a free online training resource that helps writers to pitch their dissemination article to the magazine (or others) and create a great story.

9. American Psychological Association (APA). [Inclusive Language Guide](https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines) [online]. [https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines]

This inclusive language guide helps writers address different populations and topics using both sensitivity and respect.

Servei de Llengües (UAB), Serveis Lingüístics (UB), Institut de Ciències de l'Educació Josep Pallach - Servei d'Aprenentatge i Innovació Docent (UdG), Institut de Llengües (UdL), Serveis Lingüístics (UVic - UCC)

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This guide complies with the accessibility criteria (with the assessment of Adaptabit and Mireia Ribera).