

Department of Anthropology
Statement on Writing in the Major
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Anthropology is a discipline that straddles the intersections of science, social science, and the humanities in its quest to explore the nature of all things human, past and present. The four sub-fields of Anthropology: biological anthropology, archeology, sociolinguistics, and socio-cultural anthropology deploy different conventions of writing. An analysis of a recombinant DNA experiment with primate gamma globulin or a faunal analysis of food eaten at a prehistoric archeological site might read like a laboratory analysis in the hard sciences, while a critical review of an ethnographic narrative might, on the surface, have more in common with writing conventions in the languages and cultural studies. However, given the range of methodological variation in the anthropological paradigm, three characteristics hold constant in the nature of anthropological inquiry: the analysis should hold up to comparative scrutiny (across time or space or both), it should be holistic (grounded in historical, environmental, and historical context), and it should contribute to developing or assessing the analytic frameworks upon which coherent ethnography and meaningful ethnographic comparison rely. All good writing in anthropology, regardless of sub-discipline, strives towards this ideal and it is the standard by which we measure our students progress in writing as they progress through the major.

We seek to guide our students toward these goalposts through a variety of exercises beginning with FYS and one-hundred level courses by helping them to learn how to identify the central points (thesis ideas for example) in anthropological texts, evaluate the use of evidence (cultural and historical cases, archeological remains), how to record empirical research (field notes), how anthropologists interpret field notes, and how anthropological writing engages theoretical debates and developments within the field and beyond. Throughout the major students are exposed to a range of technical and expository writing exercises in graded levels of difficulty. We are explicit in our expectations about the stages of different types of writing and beginning in the 200- and 300-level core courses in research methods and theory we stress the importance of clarity of prose, editing, and revision, as we do in some iterations of 100 level courses though to a lesser degree in smaller assignments, due to class sizes. Our three hundred level seminars require students to take major responsibility for class discussion based on written work and the requirement of writing a substantial term paper based partly on empirical research on a topic related to the seminar. The culmination of our major is the Capstone 401 Senior Seminar that requires a written thesis of 35-40 pages, based on original research and an oral presentation delivered at a departmental colloquium where students are organized onto panels by research topic and facilitated by a faculty discussant, much in the same format as our discipline's professional association meetings. In this seminar, stages of the ethnographic writing process are foregrounded for discussion, peer review is fully integrated into the learning model, and revision at several critical junctures of thesis writing all contribute to the students' final grade in the Capstone.