

Definition of genre

Ethnography is a genre of writing common in the social sciences, especially anthropology.

A comprehensive study of a culture, an ethnography informs its reader through narrative immersion, often using sensory detail and storytelling techniques alongside objective description and traditional interview style. Ethnography cuts a middle path between journalistic travel writing and traditional scientific objectivity, blurring the distinction between the two. Oftentimes ethnographers choose to use a first-person perspective in their writing to acknowledge their presence as both observer and active participants in the culture they are studying.

Ethnographic writing requires your presence on the scene: you can't write an ethnography from the library or using Internet research (unless, of course, you're collecting ethnographic data on those particular environments). It is not uncommon for ethnographic writing to tell the story of the research itself, beginning with the arrival of the ethnographer on the scene. Some ethnographies require years of immersion and fieldwork in a culture; others may be based on just a few hours of research.

Questions to ask

- Whom or what are you writing about, and why? What particular aspects of the culture will you focus on?
- For whom are you writing? What do you want your readers to learn about the culture you are studying, and why?
- What expectations or assumptions do you have, based on preliminary research (e.g. background reading)? What questions do you hope to answer through your research?
- What kinds of information do you plan to collect? For example, will you interview participants, collect artifacts, be a quiet observer or an active participant, etc.?
- What conclusions can you draw from the information you have collected? What gaps remain in your research?

Actions to take

- Take detailed notes of your surroundings—the sights, the sounds, and even the smells.
- Pay attention to what the people around you do, both when they know they're being watched and when they don't.
- Introduce yourself as a writer and ask a lot of questions. Be sure to ask your interviewees for permission to use their statements in your essay and whether they would prefer to remain anonymous.
- Be aware of your biases and cultural assumptions. Respect your subjects and their cultural perspectives.

Helpful Links

The Public Administration Program at North Carolina State University has a page with useful definitions and concepts to keep in mind as you embark on an ethnographic project:

<http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/garson/PA765/ethno.htm>.

UNC's handout on Writing in Anthropology includes multiple sections on ethnographic writing:

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/anthropology.html>.