

From Notes to Narrative

WRITING ETHNOGRAPHIES THAT
EVERYONE CAN READ

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INTRODUCTION

Why Write Clearly?

At the end of each semester, I survey student opinions of the required books on my syllabi. “Reading [this book] was like being forced to read Facebook’s terms and conditions for class,” a student wrote about one of the texts I assigned. The book in question suited the course subject and contained field-changing theoretical insights. As a piece of scholarship the book excelled, winning a major award from a large professional society. As a piece of writing, however, the book failed. My students judged the prose opaque, circular, jargon-laden, and gratuitously verbose. I agreed. I prepared a lecture on the core arguments and spared my students the headaches induced by needless erudition.

University students, especially at the undergraduate level, despise inaccessible books that use language to obfuscate rather than clarify. After many years of teaching, I believe it pedagogically cruel to force students to read bad books, no matter how clever or important those books may be. I have purged many a smart ethnography from my syllabi after watching students struggle to extract the main arguments from a fog of impenetrable prose. Each year, I explore university press offerings to find well-written ethnographies. The continued production of unteachable books amazes me.

Ethnography provides a qualitative method to focus on the experience of everyday life, and ethnographers literally “write culture.” Unlike any other research method in the social sciences, ethnography revels in the quotidian. Ethnographic research celebrates the diver-

sity of worldviews that shape the social politics of local communities, making “the world safe for human differences,” in the words of Ruth Benedict. In recent years, the ethnographic method spread from its original home in cultural anthropology to fields such as sociology, marketing, media studies, law, geography, criminology, education, cultural studies, history, and political science. Outside of the academic world, businesses now fund ethnographic studies of their target markets, and even the US military embraced ethnographically informed intelligence about strategic populations (with considerable controversy).¹ Yet as the ethnographic method grows in popularity, the writing of ethnography remains influenced by the widespread academic belief that smart scholarship must be difficult to read.

In the past, ethnographic texts gave popular audiences a window into other cultures. Books such as Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* or Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* shocked or enlightened general readers into reflecting on the peculiarities of their own cultural practices. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz contrasted the art of fiction with the craft of “faction,” a type of writing that presents social scientific knowledge in polished and accessible prose. Today, many ethnographic books are dull and technical, brimming with neologisms and tedious theoretical digressions that obscure valuable insights. How ironic that scholars who research the intimate experiences of ordinary people cannot write for them. Scholarship that tries to make sense of human behavior — the thoughts, ideals, motivations, and worldviews of men and women operating within particular societal or cultural constraints — remains inaccessible to the subjects of that research. To be fair, academic ethnographies often serve a credentialing function, and some of the dry and uninspired prose must be blamed on rigid, stylistic norms within the traditional disciplines. But even the great sociologist C. Wright Mills questioned the pretenses of “grand theory” within his own discipline when he translated into plain English the obtuse prose of the revered Talcott Parsons.

Although some ethnographic books find homes with commer-

cial publishers, most will come into the world through the gentle ministrations of editors at university presses. The oldest continually operating academic press in the United States is Johns Hopkins University Press, founded by Daniel Coit Gilman in 1878 with the idea of disseminating academic knowledge beyond the confines of the university classroom.² For the next eighty years, research universities created publishing houses to support the goal of democratic education. After the 1957 Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite and the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), the research output of American scholars increased exponentially. To win the Cold War, the US government believed it needed to support academic knowledge production. Between 1957 and 1970, American universities and libraries received federal subsidies to fund the acquisition of scholarly books, allowing university presses to publish books ill-suited to the lists of trade publishers. Competitive markets did not promote fundamental research when it had no obvious commercial value. At this time, university presses supported the development of American arts and sciences, and the quality of the writing mattered less than the rigor of the scholarship—a golden age for authors living in the world of ideas. Of course, white men dominated this academic world, and primarily white male authors benefitted from this federal largesse.

By the late 1960s, however, priorities shifted. The American government was sending more young men off to fight in an unpopular war in Vietnam, and university campuses transformed into broiling pits of anti-Washington dissent. Federal support for higher education declined. Coincidentally, as campuses granted admission to more women and minorities and faculties grew more diverse, government dollars to support academic research and its dissemination fell further. This trend continues unabated today. University presses must look to publish more books that appeal to an audience beyond a handful of scholarly peers. Gone are the days when good scholarship alone guaranteed the publication of a monograph. Editors must also judge whether a potential title will sell enough copies to justify

the investment in its production. Originality and analytic sophistication are still tantamount, but the ability to write clear and compelling prose factors into the mix, especially for first-time authors. University presses hope their books will be adopted in the lucrative college textbook market, and this means producing books that students can read. Now more than ever before would-be ethnographers must learn to write, and to write well.

Some university presses publish trade books, and trade publishers seek out talented scholars who can make their research accessible for a more broadly educated audience. Popular journalists such as Malcolm Gladwell and Nicholas Kristof get rich by translating social science research for general readers. The success of books such as *Blink*, *The Tipping Point*, and *Half the Sky* demonstrates that general readers value the insights of scholars working in fields that examine human society and culture. More important than just the marketability of these books is their potential for influencing public opinion. Books like *Freakonomics*, *Bowling Alone*, and *The Lonely Crowd* ignited massive popular debates. In 2014, the unexpected success of an 878-page Harvard University Press book about the history of economic inequality by Thomas Piketty (*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*) testified to how a well-written academic book could sway popular thinking about important social phenomena. Social science scholarship should help make sense of the world, and not only earn individual researchers tenure or promotion. To quote the ethnographer John Van Maanen:

The ordinary truth of any research trade—ethnographic or otherwise—is that we traffic in communications, and communication implies that we intend to alter the views of our readers. From this perspective, our task is rhetorical. We attempt to convince others that we've uncovered something of note, made unusual sense of something, or, in weak form, simply represented something well. That is to say that our writing is both explicitly and implicitly designed to persuade others that we know what we're talking about and they ought therefore to pay attention to what we are saying.³

So why do so few ethnographers write clearly? The question perplexes me. Lack of training provides part of the explanation. In graduate school, professors concentrate on teaching ethnographic methodology: choosing a fieldsite, clearing human subjects review, identifying primary informants, ethnographic interviewing, and so forth. If apprentice ethnographers must learn a new language, hundreds of hours will be dedicated to mastering a foreign grammar and syntax. If writing gets discussed at all, instructors focus on producing fieldnotes. A plethora of books advise students on how to ethically deal with human subjects, make accurate observations about those subjects, and process those observations as ethnographic data.

When researchers return from the field, they often write theses with little guidance. Overworked professors and mentors care more about the message than the medium, and committee members will sign off on a well-researched thesis, properly situated in the existing scholarly literature, no matter how poorly the author constructed individual sentences or paragraphs. Most university professors don't consider it their job to teach English composition, and dissertations take long enough without worrying about the quality of the prose. A thesis has a limited audience anyway: four or five committee members, the student's mother, and maybe her partner. Completion matters more than elegance. *The best dissertation is a done dissertation.*

The problem arises when that dissertation has to make its way out into the world as a book. Young ethnographers face time pressure to establish themselves in the profession, either in the form of ticking tenure clocks or fierce competition for tenure-track employment. Amidst a host of new responsibilities, financial insecurity, and general upheaval, dissertations must transform into something publishable. Old mentors busy themselves with new crops of graduate students. University press editors possess limited time to counsel junior scholars trying to find a voice in their disciplines. New colleagues stagger under their own professional demands.

But bad prose is not the exclusive purview of the junior ethnographer. Many senior scholars fall into a routine of producing less-than-stellar texts. Seniority in the field provides greater ease of pub-

lication, but the ever multiplying siphons on the time of established researchers means they possess even less energy to devote to the craft of writing. If senior colleagues cannot write well or care little for the quality of writing of their students, who remains to teach the younger generation of ethnographers? The cycle repeats.

On top of this, many academics believe that smart scholarship requires the profuse deployment of disciplinary-specific jargon and what Ernest Hemingway once called “ten dollar words.” Academics write, “The individual subjective experience of despondency is exacerbated upon the unexpected expiration of a progenitor,” when they mean, “People grieve when they suddenly lose a parent.” They believe the first sentence better expounds the intelligence of its author. This style exudes erudition, but it’s pompous and needlessly complex. To be sure, disciplinary-specific jargon sometimes provides useful shorthand when conversing among professional peers. Doctors identify our ailments with medical terminology when speaking to other medical professionals, but good doctors use lay terms to explain illnesses to their patients. “Endogamous, bilateral, cross-cousin polygyny” captures a complex marriage pattern in as few words as possible, and proves invaluable when communicating with other anthropologists who study old-fashioned kinship relations. Unfortunately, scholars often deploy technical language to make an otherwise simple concept sound complex. It does nothing to enrich the world of ideas and exacerbates the insular and exclusionary nature of academic research.

Most ethnographers lack clarity on what constitutes good writing. “Few people realize how badly they write,” opines William Zinsler in his classic stylebook, *On Writing Well*. Social scientists spend years mastering their disciplinary subfields but spare little time honing the language through which they communicate all of their practical and theoretical insights. Once the fieldwork is done and the fieldnotes are analyzed, students and scholars need practical guidance on how to produce the article, paper, report, thesis, or book that will be the final product of the research.

So why write clearly? I can list five good reasons:

1. You are more likely to get published. Academic presses consider the marketability of scholarly books, particularly their potential for classroom adoption at the later undergraduate and graduate levels.
2. You are more likely to be read. Well-written books attract readers. If your immediate goal is tenure and promotion, you may not give a whit whether anyone reads your book. But why live the life of the mind if not to share your ideas with as many people as possible?
3. You are more likely to influence the way people think. Social science research enhances our comprehension of cultural diversity and human behavior, and good ethnographies produce insights that can inspire empathy and understanding. Why obscure those insights with bad writing?
4. You will enhance your credibility. Younger scholars believe that circuitous erudition is a prerequisite for acceptance in the scholarly guild. But original thinking shines, even when written in the simplest of prose. Smart people can see through the smokescreen of verbiage to expose the flimsy ideas hiding behind the jargon. Writing clearly requires intellectual courage and confidence—the academic equivalent of putting your money where your mouth is.
5. You owe it to your research subjects. Ethnographic research focuses on the intimate details of daily life, and ethnographers must endeavor to make their insights accessible to the people they study (as much as possible).

In the pages that follow, I offer a step-by-step guide to producing a readable ethnography without compromising the quality or rigor of your scholarship. The advice contained here derives from my own experience as an ethnographer and writer over the last two decades; I have researched, written, and published four ethnographic books, as well as dozens of journal articles, book chapters, grant proposals, and research reports. These works have won external recognition from scholarly colleagues and peers: multiple grants and fellowships,

four first-place book prizes, a best article prize, and an award for the best piece of ethnographic fiction. This doesn't mean I'm an expert, but I am someone who has spent a lot of time moving from notes to narrative.

I have also culled ideas from years of teaching and drawn lessons from my colleagues in anthropology and sociology. We all live in the world of ideas, but we need written words to communicate them. Each of the chapters contains concrete advice. Since this book focuses on *writing*, I leave theoretical and practical discussions about the genres, methods, ethics, and controversies of ethnographic research to other books, some of which are listed in the bibliography. I also don't review the constituent components of ethnographic books and articles, since this varies by discipline and is discussed at length in disciplinary specific handbooks on research methods.

These pages explore the craft of ethnographic writing, and it's the book I wish I had had as a graduate student trying to figure out how to write my dissertation and as a junior scholar struggling to transform that dissertation into a book. But all ethnographers may find something of use here, no matter what their discipline or the stage of their career. I also hope to encourage ethnographers to reengage with the public, making ethnographic knowledge relevant once again to wider social, political, and economic debates. Ethnographers have a lot to say. If only they could say it clearly.