How to Write an Autoethnography

An ethnography is an examination of a group or a culture, specifically about things we call “folkways” — customs and beliefs practiced by a particular group.

Auto” means “self.” The word “autoethnography” may look like the word “autobiography” to you, because they both start with “auto” and end with “ography.” (“Graph” means “study” or “writing.”) An autoethnography is like an autobiography, in that both of them are written by you, about you. But, while an autobiography is your own life story, an autoethnography is an examination of your behavior and your ideas — your personal culture or “folkways.”

Writing an autoethnography is basically the same as writing any other paper. There are five steps.

1. You review what you already know about a topic.
2. You do research to get more information.
3. You decide what you think about the topic and what you want your reader to know or believe.
4. You organize your information and your views in a written document so that it will be as persuasive to your reader as possible.
5. Revise your work to fix any weak spots.

Just follow the steps. Here’s how:

1. **You review what you already know about a topic.**

The information you gather for your autoethnography falls into two categories: information about how you behave and what you believe, and information about larger group behavior and knowledge in society. Your ethnography is about you and your food, and how your food folkways are part of mainstream or other group folkways.

At this stage, you should predict what you will find out when you examine your behavior and beliefs related to food.

*Classwork:* Predicting Worksheet

2. **You do research to get more information.**

Your research will require two stages: (a) research about your own folkways related to food, and (b) research about mainstream or other group folkways with regard to food.

(2a) It is a mistake to think you already know everything there is to know about your own behavior and beliefs. Each of us has habits that we don’t realize we have. Each of us makes complicated decisions every day that we don’t really think through. **This is your time to observe yourself and think about your decisions.** Don’t change anything you do yet. Just make a note of it and think about it.

*Classwork:* 5-Day Food Diary Worksheet, Food Acquisition Worksheet
(2b) **Find out if there are folkways** you can call “mainstream” and if there are other folkways, such as ethnic or racial folkways, **that you participate in.** Also, find out if there are current popular movements, such as the Slow Food movement or the Buy USA movement, that you sympathize with. Research the folkways that apply to you and the movements you sympathize with. What are their beliefs about food? What are some food-related behaviors they endorse or recommend?

**Make sure you keep track of where you get your information.** You will need to cite sources for *everything* in this paper, including your own beliefs and behaviors. (Your sources for your own folkways will be the worksheets and writing assignments you have completed.)

*Classwork:* Connections Worksheet, Information Source List

3. **You decide what you think about the topic and what you want your reader to know or believe.**

Look over your records of your own behavior. **(a) Summarize the main food-related folkways you practice.** Some examples could be that you eat mostly fast food, which you pay for with money you earn at your job; you eat mainly home-cooked meals that your parents prepare and pay for; you eat certain kinds of food, because that is what your family eats; you eat certain kinds of food, because you have moral or ethical concerns about eating other foods; you eat certain kinds of food, because you try to take care of yourself physically; you eat certain kinds of food, because that is what is trendy or popular right now.

Now, **(b) summarize the larger “mainstream,” ethnic, or racial foodways that you participate in. Summarize the food-related social movements you sympathize with.**

The next step is where your 150-word reflections really become useful. Look over your reflections and your notes about what you’ve read. Based on these written records, **(c) organize your thoughts into a written explanation of the reasons that drive your food-related folkways.** Do you eat what is readily available, because it’s easy? Do you eat certain things because they are affordable? Do you eat certain things because they are sweet, salty, or fatty, and they make you feel better emotionally?

Finally, **(d) respond to these questions: Is there anything you want to change about your food-related folkways or those of the groups or movements you sympathize with? Why or why not?**

*Classwork:* Composing Worksheet

4. **You organize your information and your views in a written document so that it will be as persuasive to your reader as possible.**

You thought you were done! Nope, all that organizing and writing in step 3 is just to prepare to write your actual paper. Once you get all that done, writing the paper is easy.
(a) Use the “Bare-Bones Paper Format” (BBPF) as a model for your document, but leave out the “naysayer” part. Notice that the BBPF includes a source or quote sandwich in every single paragraph except the introduction and the conclusion. You should do the same.

(b) Copy and paste your work from step 3 into the appropriate parts of the BBPF. Don’t write your introduction or conclusion yet. Add anything else that you haven’t already written, such as thesis statements for paragraphs or transitions between paragraphs. You will find that your 150-word reflections are very good sources for the “bottom bread” of your source sandwiches in each paragraph, where you explain to your readers what you want them to understand, based on your sources.

In order to persuade your readers that your information is authoritative, you must (c) cite your sources. You can do this by referring to your sources in your text or by adding in-text citations. Both these methods are described in the Purdue OWL. You must also always include a Works Cited page at the end of your paper, listing any outside sources you have used (not including your classwork). See the Purdue OWL for instructions.

Now, look over your paper. (d) Write your introduction and conclusion, based on what you have written in the rest of your paper.

Is your paper still very rough or wandering? Do not freak out! This is only the first draft of your paper. It is like a sketch for a painting that is not finished yet.

*Classwork: Autoethnography 1st Draft*

5. **Revise your work to fix any weak spots.**

In order to fix your weak spots, you need to:

a) See what is working well and understand why it works.
b) See what is not working well and understand why it doesn’t work.
c) Know what to do to make the non-working parts work.

You may laugh at how simple that sounds, but it is very common for students to try to fix their work without understanding what they are doing. First, you must understand how your writing choices either work or fail to work to persuade your reader that you are credible.

It is hard to understand what makes writing credible if you don’t read or write much, and especially if you don’t talk with other people about what you read and write. You have done a lot of reading and writing and talking in this class up to now, so your skills are much better than they were before. You can do this!

Also, you have your group to rely on for help. Other people understand things differently than we do, so they can be very helpful as they tell us why they think some things work in our writing and others don’t.

To help you with (5a), (5b), and (5c), here are some suggestions:
• Read your work aloud, saying every word exactly as it is written on the page. Record yourself if possible. Listen to the recording or to yourself as you read aloud and mark the places that seem awkward or confused.
• Have someone else read your work aloud and do the same thing, you listening and marking your paper as they read it.
• Take your paper to the Writing Center for a help session with a tutor. If you do this, make sure to take a copy of the Writing Center worksheet (found on Blackboard). If you forget your worksheet, you can have the tutor look it up on our class Blackboard site.
• Have members of your group read your paper and tell you why they think certain parts work or don’t work. Make sure they tell you why. Ask them for suggestions for how to make your paper work better.
• Have Dr. G read your paper and tell you what you can do to make it stronger.

Classwork: Writing Self-Analysis Worksheet, Autoethnography 2nd Draft