

Essay #2. Reading Culture

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written that “the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts,” and that the job of anthropologists is to “read” those texts in the context of that culture. By *text*, Geertz does not mean a written artifact, but rather any cultural practice in which members of that culture engage. Geertz calls the practice of an good anthropologist *thick description*, a careful reading of a cultural text that delves deeply and carefully into what that cultural practice means, not just to the individuals who engage in it, but how it operates within the culture more broadly. It is worth noting that, even though Geertz has long been respected in his field, his observations have still been criticized by those who believe his interpretations of the east have a particularly western bias.

For this essay, please choose only one of the following two essay prompts for your essay.

1. Choose one cultural practice you know well and, as an *insider* write an essay in which you use *thick description* to explain fully how it functions both among those practicing it and within the larger culture. For instance, you might choose a sport, a cooking ritual, a holiday practice, a tradition in a particular location (for instance, school, a workplace, family, etc). Pay particular attention to ensuring that your explanation is complete enough and has enough detailed evidence to enable an *outsider* to understand it fully. Be certain that your essay has a central point to make, that you advance reasons in support of that point, and that you provide evidence to back up each point.
2. Choose one cultural practice you know well and in which you participate, but which you believe has been misinterpreted or wrongly described by some other group. As an *insider*, write an essay in which you refute this misinterpretation, then advance your own *thick description* to explain fully how the practice actually works and how it functions among those practicing it and within the larger culture. For instance, you might choose a practice in which your peer group engaged that was misinterpreted by parents or teachers. Or you might choose a situation in which a government policy was based erroneously on a misinterpretation of one or another cultural group, to their detriment. Be certain that your essay has a central point to make, that you advance reasons in support of that point, and that you provide evidence to back up each point.

Due Dates

1. By the end of class on 9/23/14, please turn in a potential thesis and topic for Essay #2. Your submission may be handwritten.
2. On 9/25/14 during class we will workshop the potential theses and topics turned in on 9/23.
3. On 9/30/14, please bring a rough draft of your essay to class for peer review.
4. Your final draft is due on 10/7/14 in class.