

## Thoughts on Scholarship

Our class, the College and even anthropology are all communities of scholars. Any community has ideals it honors, customs it values, and sins it abhors. I take adjusting these three to be an unending struggle with ourselves, not a match with the Devil to end sin altogether. To be sure, I don't advocate evil but a community that obsesses over sins ends up trivializing its ideals and idealizing its customs. That stifles life and defeats our purpose. We can do better than that. Our goal—growth—requires creativity.

Communities of scholars create and carry knowledge. That requires trust and sharing. We rightly abhor plagiarism. It kills our community. Don't do it! It's a sin. Yet that said, I find the ideal—scholarship—easily lost in the energy spent damning this sin and closing loopholes. For me, if you aim at scholarship, not only will you be 'saved from sin' but you'll be enlightened. It's a much better deal and a happier choice. It'll make you a thinker, not merely an echo of other's thoughts.

What's scholarship? I can't speak for my colleagues, but to me scholarship is the working practices that sustain a community of scholars. Communities vary. Artists and physicists go about their crafts differently. That's good. Each should have its own customs. Following a community's customs helps us learn its nature.

What's anthropology's nature? To be true to our subject, humanity in all its diversity, we need to be flexible. I can, however, suggest some guidelines that typically help students write good anthropology papers.

- Evidence always anchors a strong argument or a discerning discussion but a good paper is never just what the sources say. You also need an original or significant thesis.
- Use citations as building blocks to make your case. Aim for exact citations. I say "aim" because for most of us writing comes in crises where time is short. Sometimes we can't find that exact page we remember. I can live with a vaguer citation (e.g. "Turnbull, ch.2" instead of the exact page). It's a weakness, not a sin. What's lost is an opportunity to strengthen your case. Checking your source heads off errors and it often turns up the subtle distinctions--nuances--that distinguish the best analyses.
- Aim for a nuanced argument. Don't take your cue from today's confrontational politics. That's ideology, not scholarship. Work towards a judicious assessment of the evidence. Anthropologists live in a complex world of mixed cases. We too must come to conclusions but these are rarely black and white. Capturing these shades of gray and yet keeping a clear argument makes writing a challenge. Your task, finding clarity within complexity, requires imagination and rigor.
- Use citations liberally, quotations sparingly. A lengthy quotation (over 3 lines) is best indented and single spaced. Anthropological citation is easy (name, date, page: e.g. "[Turnbull 1957: 3]") but any style will do.
- Mark your ideas. Distinguish your observations from what your sources say. Use "I" if you like. The first person is often appropriate in anthropology. To my ear saying "I argue that . . ." is more honest and forceful than "The paper will show that . . ." But take care not to fool yourself. "I" makes it personal but the authority of what you say must rest on evidence and reasoning, not the fact that you said it.

Other professors have other guidelines. I offer these as practices that typically help my students. They're not rules you must follow or face damnation. I don't want 'fear of sin' to hamper your thoughts or haunt the pleasures of discovery. Where fear drives us to find safety in custom, obedience displaces scholarship. I can't accept that. Aiming at scholarship and writing a good paper is never easy but it shouldn't be threatening or joyless. What drives scholars is the simple but hard-won thrill of creation. Don't settle for less.