

What I Want From an Essay: A Diatribe by Ian

Some of you, especially 101 holdovers, may have a version of this already: forgive the repetition, but it's still valid.

Folklore essays do not, for the most part, vary from “regular” essays: all are efforts at demonstrating the presence of a particular phenomenon within a particular field of inquiry. Simply put, an essay is an effort (Fr. ‘essayer’) at establishing an argument about a particular something. The principal difference is that the primary data under consideration are collected ethnographically, in the field. The implication is that when you are studying a group (or a person within a group) it is in the foreground.

Say, for example, I want to look at a group of men who get together every winter for a big hunting trip. The bulk of my essay would be on these few men: their stories (how they got together, their individual first times among the group, infamous occurrences on previous trips), their joking behaviour (which serves to underscore how they relate to each other), their material culture, their foodways while on the trip, and what they think about hunting in general, what it means to them. This would be my primary data, and I would probably use a blend of **documentation** (photography, video, audio recordings, even measurements if I were looking at things like shack construction), **interview** (not an oral questionnaire but a guided conversation), and **ethnography** (the observed experience rendered in my own words in the form of fieldnotes and subsequent revisions). In the body of my paper, I would cite these in the same way as I would cite a quotation from a book, quoting them either directly or indirectly, and I would list them as references in my works cited. (Most style guides – MLA, Chicago, APA – would have a preferred way of citing these materials: consult one. Better yet, by the one best suited for your major concentration, since you’ll be doing this a lot.)

But I wouldn’t stop there: I also want to locate this group within a larger context. Their activities may be **distinct**, but not necessarily **unique**.

Furthermore, other people have likely studied similar activities, albeit in different contexts: could I not get insight from their work, and associate it with my own? This is where you cite what other people have said. You may want to look at other studies about (a) the culture in which the activity occurs (rural Cape Breton), (b) the activity itself (hunting), (c) the constitution of the group (men at leisure), and/or (d) theoretical perspectives to help frame the activity (feminism, Marxism, post-modernism). This last one might start to be asking too much from an intro-level paper, but that is the direction that you, budding folklorist that you are, might be heading.

The essay locates the argument within a larger tradition (informing influences) and in relation to similar arguments (parallel examples); it offers new evidence (in folklore, we are assuming a new study with primary data based on fieldwork, but in other disciplines we refer either to (a) primary data based on some other discipline-related means of data collection or (b) a confluence of perspectives which in concert offer a

Excerpt from an imaginary essay

When I entered the cabin, my first sensation was of encountering a pile of dirty laundry: there was a smell that hinted at stale air, body odour, and meat (Fieldnotes). This shouldn’t be surprising: Simon Bronner has written, about his fieldwork among hunters in Pennsylvania, that “Part of the tradition is to emphasise manliness by braving the elements and refraining from shaving or bathing” (“Menfolk,” 6). Frank agrees: “Yeh... it’s no place to bring a lady, but it’s not meant to be, right?”

Works Cited

Brodie, Ian. Fieldnotes. 10-12 Mar 2007.

Bronner, Simon J. “Menfolk.” *Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities*. Ed. Bronner. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2005. 1-58.

Mulcahy, Francis “Frank”. Interview with author. 13 Mar 2007.

new perspective); it connects the new evidence to the larger tradition, allowing for either reaffirmation or challenge to what the tradition tells us; and it allows for a personal voice to speak both from and to that larger tradition, occasioned by the privileged perspective of being an 'expert' on the subject, even if the subject about which one is expert is a fairly narrow slice of the universe. Because you are the producer of primary data, you are the (or 'an') expert on whichever topic you have studied: someone has likely done a study on something similar before, but as you look at a distinct occurrence of that phenomenon, you have a particular contribution to make. A gajillion people have studied Halloween traditions before you, but they have not looked at Halloween, 2007, Glace Bay (for example).

So, like any essay, you have a point that you're trying to make. Say what it is ("hunting is important to these men"), locate it within a larger context ("recreational hunting is common throughout North America"), describe what they do (be specific, and show similarities and differences to the larger phenomenon), and struggle with the question of *why*.

A word about plagiarism and essay-writing

Plagiarism is defined by the university calendar as follows:

Plagiarism is the act of representing the intellectual work of others as one's own. Such misrepresentation is treated as a serious violation of academic standards and principles. When a student submits work for a course, it is assumed that the work is original except where the student properly acknowledges the use of other sources. Of course, good scholarship often requires drawing on the work of others, but any borrowed material – including words, ideas, data, statistics, graphics and other intellectual matter, whether drawn from print, electronic, or other non-print sources – must be fully acknowledged according to the accepted practices of the relevant discipline. (*CBU 2007-2009 Calendar*, p.27)

This means that when you use sources, whether they are from the library, from the internet, or (as is often the case in folklore) from interviews with people, you must clearly distinguish both (a) what are someone else's **ideas** as opposed to your own, and (b) what are someone else's **words** as opposed to your own. I tend to go through my day with the idea that no student ever intends to commit an act of plagiarism: it may be naïve of me but I'm okay with that.

However, I have found that many students leave themselves open to the charge of plagiarism by either doing little to clearly make the distinction between their own work and someone else's, or (more often) not quite grasping the concept of what the essay is. An essay is more than a number of sources interwoven with some linking material: it is an effort at expressing an original idea which is more often than not based *in part* on other peoples' own efforts at expressing similar or parallel ideas.

So, of course (as the policy says) you will be quoting and drawing ideas from other people, but remember:

- There is nothing wrong with quoting somebody, even quoting them extensively, **provided that** you recognise and indicate in the text that this is not your idea or words but those of someone else.
- There is nothing wrong with paraphrasing somebody, **provided that** you recognise and indicate in the text that, although they may now be your words, it is someone else's ideas.

- A list of references (bibliography, works cited, etc.) is simultaneously **both mandatory and insufficient** for citing.

Finally (and this is the critical part), the object of the essay is that you are **actually trying to say something**. An essay is not much different from saying:

Let me tell you what I think. First off, so that we're clear, here's the thing I'm talking about, with some data I got from this guy and this guy. Second, here's what a couple of other people say about it: this guy says this, but this guy says that (and she says it so well that I'm not going to put it in my own words). Now, here's what I have to say about it: see how it's kind of the same but also kind of different from those other guys? So there, that's what I think.

So, practice safe essay-writing: clearly indicate how you are using sources, and hand-in something that goes beyond an artful compilation of other people's ideas and aims at some kind of synthesis between what others have said and what you have to say. *It will make you strong like bull.*

But more importantly: if you plagiarise, you will receive a mark of zero.

When It Comes Time to Write It

By the time it comes to writing the essay, you should have (oh the hell with it, *will* have):

- looked around for an aspect of 'tradition' from your life/environment;
- read up on similar situations;
- read up on local context;
- framed a question;
- plotted a course of research;
- thought through the ethical implications of said research;
- done the original research; and
- begun the process of mining and organising said research.

And you are now in the position to write up your findings. You have been thinking about this for two months now, so it's practically just typing.

A Suggested Outline

Some of you have asked for something like this, so here's one possible way:

- **Introduction:** describe what you are going to do by
 - Identifying the group;
 - Naming some of the activities you will be describing in detail;
 - Identifying your source (the person you are interviewing) and their relationship to the group;
 - Describing how you are organising the materials (this can be chronological, or moving from smaller to larger groups, or something as simple as 'I want to talk about this, then this, then finally this': just impose some order.

- **The group:** tell me something more about the group; a history, a membership, etc. Sometimes groups are so large (in terms of 'a community' that you don't know everybody, and some don't lend themselves to a headcount, so be prudent.
- **The activities:** describe, using your own experiences and also the words or ideas of your source, the activities engaged in by the group. This is probably the bulk of your paper. These will be organised according to the principals you laid out in the introduction. You should be attempting to use the terms from the course (ritual, custom, narrative, *to name just a very few*) that you are encountering in the readings.
- **Synthesis:** what do these activities do? How do they shape the group? Are they specific to the group or do similar groups do similar things? This is where you would bring in secondary sources, comparing and contrasting you group to the groups other researchers have studied.
- **Conclusion:** more or less summarise what you have written.
- **Handy tip:** Write your introduction last. This is the 21st century: writing in order is no longer necessary.

Some More Very Basic Rules to Doing an Essay

Very basic, nothing of insight, but pure 'this is sound advice which you might not like much but which every prof you will ever have will appreciate someone having told you and telling you early':

- double space; type; 12 point font; clear font – Arial, Times (New Roman), Helvetica, Courier, etc. – ; and black ink.
- Take advantage of your word processor's spell check option, and do it slowly (don't simply accept the first option that comes along without thinking it through. See Jon Stewart's appendix to *Naked Pictures of Famous People* for a list of what Microsoft Word offers as possible corrections).
- Avoid exclamation points, italics or bold or colour or uppercase for emphasis, etc. This rule may be slightly disregarded: on occasion, an exclamation point or italics (only) can be used as a rhetorical device, but I caution you to do so judiciously.
- Be informed about your readership, even if it is a 'pretend' readership. You should be aiming to communicate your findings to a first- or second-year university, North American, Canadian, Cape Breton-familiar but not -centric audience, so you should expect a certain level of 'common sense'. Provide context and definitions (your own are fine: this isn't an 'according to Webster's' thing) for terms that you can reasonably expect people not to know, and skip definitions for terms that you can reasonably expect people to know. (For example, it is not unreasonable to assume that your reader knows what cheerleading is, but it would be unreasonable to assume that your reader has an understanding of Sydney-area high school rivalries.)