

Verbal and Visual Portrait

THE BROADER CONTEXT

From our readings so far, you have probably noticed that ethnographers very commonly use profiles, or “verbal portraits” of people, to complicate perspectives and illuminate important aspects of the culture they are studying. At this stage in your research project, you want to be thinking about how your informant can lead you to an issue, clarify its significance to your fieldsite, and identify other issues that need further investigation. The portrait is one of the most important parts of your ethnographic research because it allows you to gain an insider’s perspective on your culture while also letting the culture speak for itself. It allows you to blend your various sources of “data” and to show off your observation skills by recreating particular “scenes” from your fieldnotes that make us feel like we were there. In this way, you build authority and credibility as a writer (*ethos*). If a portrait is well done, it will give your audience a sense of how your informant fits into or conflicts with the culture.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Based on the data you gather from your four-part observation, this assignment asks you to compose a verbal and visual portrait that creates a **dominant impression** of your informant by addressing an issue from their point of view. Consider how non-verbal cues, thick description, and physical spaces can help you to create that dominant impression. If page length helps you get a sense of the assignment’s scope, then plan on about 4-5 pages plus a separate “Works Cited” page in MLA format, and a separate visual component.

CHARACTERISTICS AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

This assignment is worth **150 points**. The following major characteristics will guide my evaluation:

Purpose & Argument: Portraits often illuminate larger social issues or cultural patterns in more concrete and personal ways. Your portrait should evoke a dominant impression of your informant in such a way that it supports an argument. Decide on a purpose or theme that will tie both parts of your portrait together and guide all of the other considerations below. In other words, what is the issue that your informant helps you to investigate? What kind of “story” do you want to tell about your informant? How can you convey where they agree with and/or are at odds with their culture?

Dominant Impression & “Mood”: You aren’t composing a biography of your informant’s entire life, but you are creating an impression you want your reader to have of the informant. Be selective by using embedded language and details of setting, character, and theme to highlight their most important characteristics. Carefully consider how you will represent them to your audience. Show us not only what they do and how people respond to them, but also how they view things and what they stand for, and how they interact in their environment.

Introduction: Provide a leading introduction with some type of statement that guides the reader into an understanding of your informant and issue (this statement doesn’t have to be explicit). Your introduction might narrate an incident, describe your informant, illustrate a related event, make a metaphor or analogy, or introduce a quotation. How can you be creative but informative?

Organization & Coherence: You should do more than just narrate the interview. Think of your portrait as a series of sections or building blocks, with some sections setting the scene, introducing the issue, giving biographical background, or giving personal anecdotes. These sections or blocks need an organizational framework with spatial, temporal, and logical transitions to smoothly connect them. How can you “thread” each section together, so that their main points work towards a conclusion that synthesizes to a new point?

Sources & Triangulation: Although the style of this paper is somewhat descriptive, it should also be “academic” by effectively incorporating factual information (*logos*) from more than one source, including quotations and conversation summaries from the interview, insider terms or stories, and published sources. For this portrait, I want you to incorporate **at least two published sources** related to your informant, issue or fieldsite. These can include the theoretical and site-specific articles we have read in class so far, but you may also incorporate new sources from scholarly books or journals if you would rather do so. You should adequately set up or introduce any quoted passages and explain any outside references that you make. Please use in-text citations when you paraphrase or quote directly from any text.

Points in Time: A portrait usually focuses on the present time, creating a sense of immediacy and intimacy for the readers. The verbal portrait may represent “a day” in the informant’s life, but that doesn’t mean that you cannot bring in background information or details that take place at other times. How can you create several different “moments” in order to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy between your informant and your audience?

Language & Clarity: As a writer, you want to consider how your use of language and syntax can strengthen, not weaken, your work. Pay particular attention to the different “grammars of observation” in the various profiles we read, and aim for clear, unbiased descriptions and elegant sentences. No major patterns of sentence- or paragraph-level error should get in the way of your meaning.

Formatting & Discourse Conventions: Compose a title that engages your reader and also reflects your argument. Follow MLA citation style for both in-text citations and your “Works Cited” page (see “Appendix A” in our *Fieldworking* textbook or see the MLA Style links from our online course resources page). Your verbal portrait should be typed, double-spaced with 1” margins, in 11 or 12 pt. Times New Roman. Please put your name, course number, assignment name, and due date in the top left corner of the first page.

Visual Argument: Since your informant will represent or illustrate a larger issue, the visual component of your portrait should evoke an association with that issue. It should give us a sense of how your informant fits into or conflicts with their fieldsite and culture, and it should take into account how your audience views your informant or how your informant views him/herself. Rather than just constructing a visual representation of “facts” about your informant (i.e., a plain photograph of them doing their normal routine), you want to create a portrait that helps you argue for your informant’s relationship to his/her culture.

Visual Medium: Once you decide on what “argument” you want it to deliver, choose a technology or medium that would be best to use (i.e., Photoshop, PowerPoint, or more conventional paper and glue). Think about the dominant impression you are trying to convey, and what emotions and associations you want to evoke. What medium will allow this dominant impression to be most visible, and what technology would be the best venue for delivering those ideas to your audience? Would a single manipulated image be more effective than a collage? Would it be best to focus on your informant or on things that are associated with them? If the image has been manipulated in Photoshop, will the significance of the manipulations be clear? Any images you use should be cited in your “Works Cited” page with source or caption information.

IMPORTANT DUE DATES

2/8/08 – copy of signed consent form due in class

2/15/08 – four-part observation must be completed (including follow-up)

2/18/08 – 2 copies of complete first draft due in class (please bring visual component on a CD-ROM)

2/22/08 – final draft due in class (please bring visual component on CD-ROM) with peer review materials