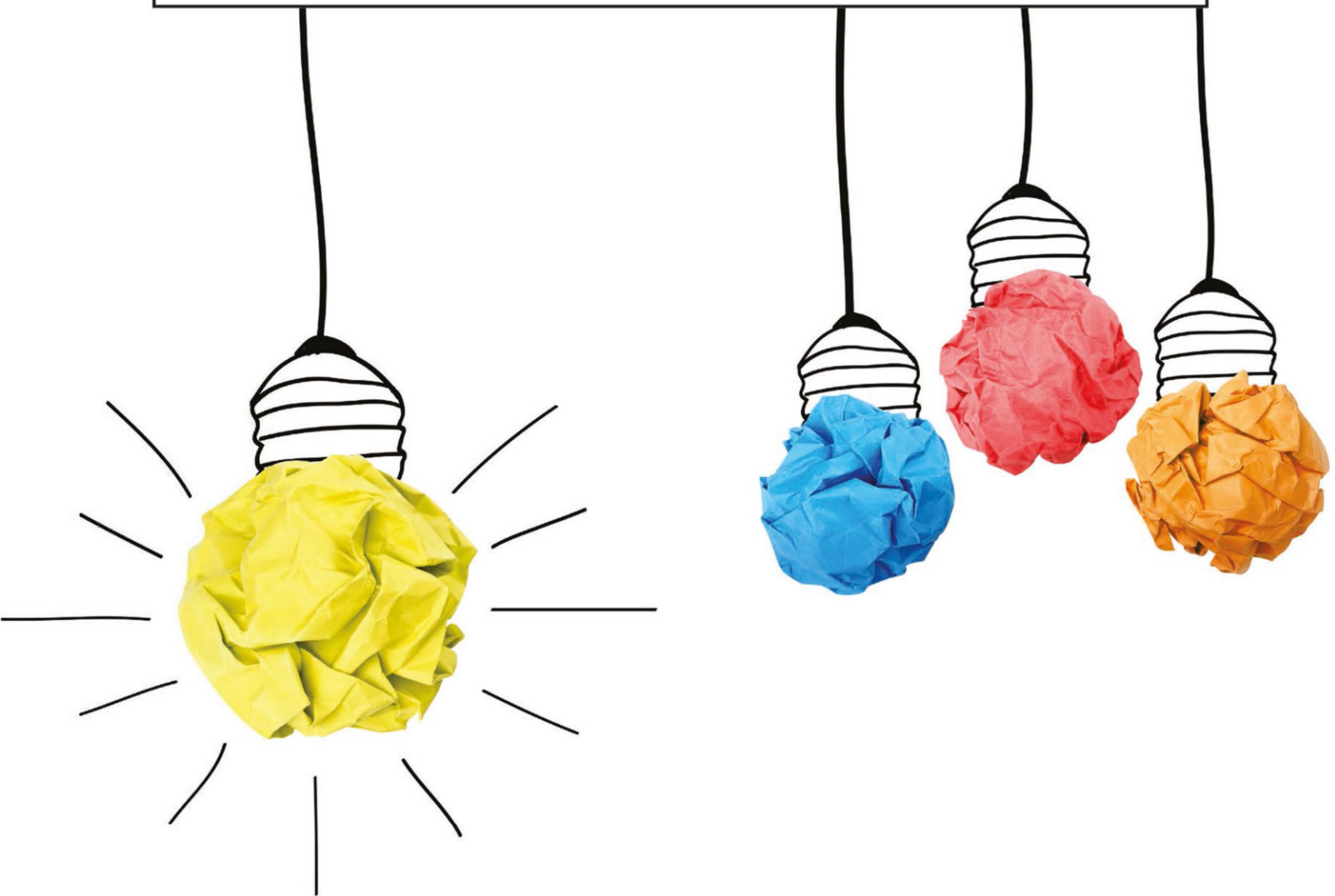


Writing Ethnography

Jessica Smartt Gullion



SensePublishers

Writing Ethnography

TEACHING WRITING

Volume 2

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The *Teaching Writing* series publishes concise instructional writing guides. Series books each focus on a different subject area, discipline or type of writing. The books are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate courses across the disciplines and can also be read by individual researchers or students engaged in thesis work.

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Writing Ethnography

Jessica Smartt Gullion

Texas Woman's University, USA



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PRAISE FOR *WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY*

“In this foundational text, Gullion accomplishes the herculean task of talking about the overlooked process of ethnographic writing with an intimate tone. It is like we are seated at her desk writing along with her. Gullion uses interesting exemplars and personal examples to show the important process of writing ethnography. This text will be required reading in my research methods courses and for my graduate students because of the meticulous breakdown of writing practice that creates a text that is both useful and engaging.”

– **Sandra Faulkner, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication, Bowling Green State University and author of *Family Stories, Poetry, and Women’s Work* and *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research Through Verse***

“When we were in the playwriting program together at New York University, John Belluso (the brilliant queer playwright who pioneered ‘crip theatre’ in the United States, and who died far too young) and I used to go see every new show together. I’d push him home up 2nd Avenue on the East Side and we’d debrief the show we’d just seen. John’s only criterion was ever: “Did she have something to say?” Jessica Smartt Gullion has something to say, and she says it, as always, in a smart (smart by name, smart by nature), readable, and useful way. I love this writer because she does her homework, cares about her readers, and writes a damn good story. Buy this book immediately.”

– **Anne Harris, PhD, Senior Lecturer of Education, Monash University and author of *Critical Plays: Embodied Research for Social Change* and *The Creative Turn: Toward a New Aesthetic Imaginary***

“The art of constructing writing from research in meaningful ways that engages readers to ‘linger in the scene’ awaits you in *Writing Ethnography*. As Jessica Smartt Gullion empowers you to provoke and incite social change, she does so in ways that diminish the complexities of producing public scholarship. I invite you to engage in this collaborative process aimed to healthfully enhance our craft, working to ensure that people who need our compelling stories receive them most optimally, so our efforts may favorably linger beyond words and pages.”

– **miroslav pavle manovski, PhD, independent scholar and author of *Arts-Based Research, Autoethnography, and Music Education: Singing Through a Culture of Marginalization***

“Jessica Smartt Gullion’s book is “directed to graduate students and new researchers,” yet I would urge experienced ethnographers to read and to use this book in your classrooms. Gullion quotes Norman Denzin’s charge to qualitative researchers to write social science that matters, and Gullion has done that in spades.”

– **Stacy Holman Jones, Professor, Centre for Theatre and Performance, Monash University and author of the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, with Tony E. Adams and *Autoethnography*, with Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis**

“Gullion acts as a gentle guide as she opens up ways in which people could conceptualize and execute writing ethnographies. She writes in accessible language and argues for the importance of such intelligibility. She offers tangible examples, creates possibilities, and shares her process of writing, publishing, and even working with rejection. This is a must read for anyone who is learning about ethnography and is unsure about how to start writing.”

– **Kakali Bhattacharya, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Kansas State University**

“Jessica Smartt Guillon’s new important book on ethnography is accessible and comprehensive. She carefully takes the reader through the nuts and bolts of ethnographic writing with clear examples of different narrative structures. The text is encouraging and filled with practical advice. Highly recommended for social science graduate students and qualitative research courses.”

– **Kris Clark, Associate Professor of Social Work, Fresno State University**

“Gullion provides a comprehensive history of ethnography, describes essential aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, identifies rarely discussed issues such as writing, editing, and publishing ethnographic research and shows how (and why) contemporary ethnographers can (need to) create vulnerable, creative, evocative, and socially-just tales. This succinctly and accessible text will make a fine resource for both new and skilled ethnographers.”

– **Tony E. Adams, Associate Professor of Communication, Northeastern Illinois University and author of *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction* and co-editor of *On (Writing) Families***

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Before I published my first book, I'd read acknowledgements sections and wonder who all those people were and how they could have contributed to the final text. I discovered through my own publishing journey that while the act of writing is generally a solitary endeavor, we draw on our communities to move our work from idea to printed book.

This book never would have come to fruition had it not been for Patricia Leavy. Thank you for your big loans from the girl zone. I have been so blessed by your friendship and your support for my work. Thanks also to Peter de Liefde and the staff at Sense Publishers. Always a pleasure to work with you.

Dian Jordan Werhane, my cheerleader and friend. This book is dedicated to you. I'm looking forward to reading all of yours.

Thanks also to Anne Harris and miroslov manovski for your support and words of publishing wisdom. Anne, I'm delighted that you let me include your writing as an example of writing for social change. And much thanks and love to the rest of my ABR and ICQI friends. I'd also like to thank Amy Minton, whom I've only met online in a wonderful writing group called (appropriately) The Year I Finished the Book, for your suggestion to linger in the scenes. I use it often.

I am truly blessed to work at a university that supports and encourages my work. Thanks to my departmental and other colleagues at Texas Woman's University for your positive words. I would like to acknowledge the graduate students in my Fall 2014 Qualitative and Spring 2015 Advance Qualitative Methods courses, for listening to my ideas and helping to flesh them out. Particular thanks to Jessica Williams. Another thanks to Abigail Tilton, Gretchen Busl, Stacy Greathouse, and Sally Stabb for the Just Write sessions. I wrote a lot of this book during those.

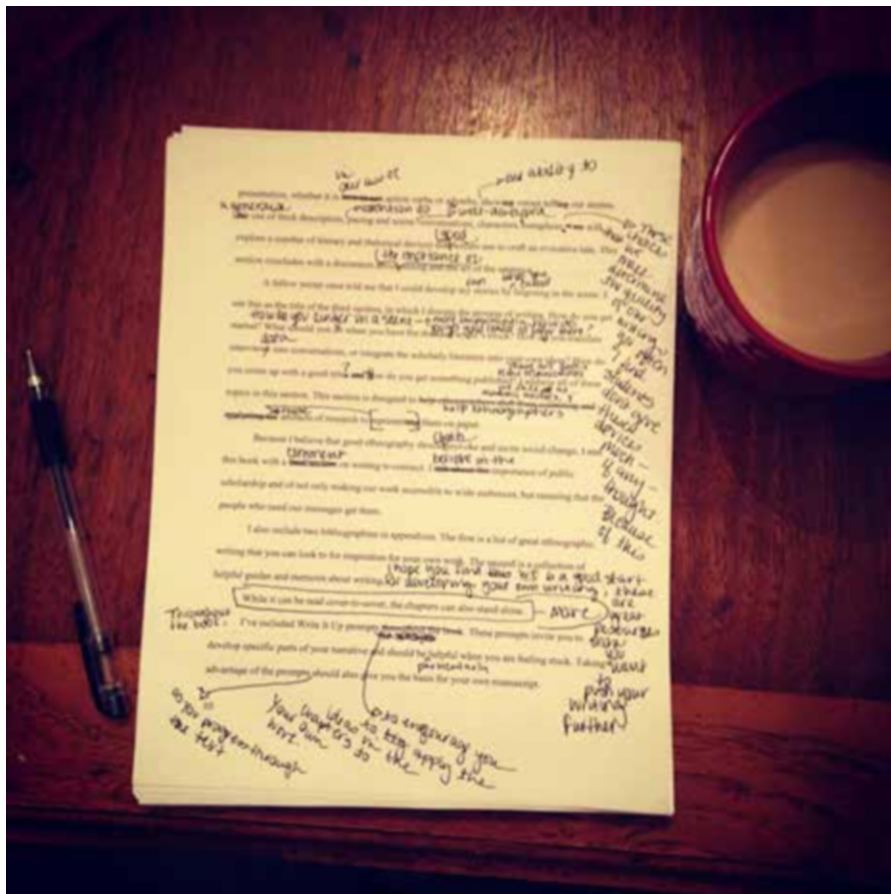
Over my academic career, a number of people have taken the time to mentor me as a writer. Brenda Philips first gave me a copy of Howard Becker's book on writing in graduate school, and refused to let me get away with lazy writing. Lisa Henry made me recognize that my researcher soul is ethnographic. Lisa Zottarelli—your advice helped me gain my footing as a new academic, and for that I will always be grateful. Michelle Garcia and the rest of the amazing women at The OpEd Project gave me a different perspective on writing for a general audience and for making effective

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Greg, Renn, and Rory—nothing happens without you. Thanks for understanding (and leaving me alone) when mama needed to work on her book. You are my love, my light, and my happiness.



INTRODUCTION

Your field notes are compiled. Your interviews transcribed. You've written some memos and have hoarded all sorts of ephemera as data—maps, and drawings, and videos, and blogs, and technical reports, and websites, and photographs, and, and, and... You *know* your subject, you understand it, you've lived it. You're an ethnographer for goodness sakes! The only thing left for you to do is write it up.

You create a blank document on your computer. The cursor flashes on the screen.

Shit.

You freeze. Your mind as empty as the page.

The transition from field work to writing up our research can be rocky. Writing uses a different process, a different mindset, than what we've been doing in the field. Which is why I wrote this book. *Writing Ethnography* is intended for scholars in any discipline working with ethnographic methods, to help them to move from a sometimes seemingly insurmountable mound of data to a coherent written report, to help shift through the messiness and produce a written account of their work.

Anne Lamott's (1994) book, *Bird by Bird*, is one of my favorite writing memoirs. In introducing her own text, Lamott writes, "But you can't teach writing, people tell me. And I say, 'Who the hell are you, God's dean of admissions?'" Writing is a learned skill like any other. Perhaps writing comes easier for some people than for others, but we can all learn to write better.

Most ethnographers get a significant amount of training on the nuts and bolts of doing research in graduate school—if not in their classes, then in the process of doing their dissertations. Typically, ethnography students take courses on theory, methodology, data collection, and analysis. They learn about the underpinning philosophical stances that frame ethnographic practice and the ethical considerations associated with conducting qualitative research. They become well-versed on the practical aspects of how to conduct fieldwork, and how to collect data and keep field notes and memos. Many graduate programs, however, make an assumption that students already know how to write (surely you learned that in English 1013, if not in high school). Graduate programs are more likely to train students to be researchers, not to be writers.

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This is not only a problem for graduate students. I've met many new faculty who have minimal experience writing for publication without the close assistance of a mentor, faculty who spend the first year or two on their tenure track floundering. Faculty who receive a letter from their tenure track committees during their third year that lament the fact that they haven't published enough and suggest they start looking for a new job.

You've worked too hard to let that happen.

Unless you land a job at a strictly teaching school, most universities expect their faculty to be published writers. Different schools have different expectations as to the volume of that writing, of course, or as to the prestige of the outlets you publish in, but nearly all universities expect that you will publish *something*. Newly minted PhDs on the job market should have evidence on their vitas that they will be successful on the tenure track (let's face it, a university's investment in you is huge, and they want you to make it). That evidence comes in the form of peer-reviewed publications. Likewise, faculty on the tenure track are expected to establish a solid research agenda and record of publications in their area of expertise.

Despite all this, however, ethnographers have a tendency to emphasize the 'ethno' of ethnography, and pay less attention to the 'graph'—to the writing of the ethnography.

And this is unfortunate.

Ultimately, to succeed in an academic career, a scholar must 'write up' their findings. As Westbrook (2008: 110–111) notes, "Writing is a professionally constitutive act, and one had better write something respectable. One's career, and so one's sense of self, are on the line, always." As academics, along with all the other roles we occupy, we are also expected to be professional writers. But that transition—from researching to writing—can be difficult, especially if we've had little training on how to make that transition.

The good news is that *Writing Ethnography* is here to help you.

"Nothing is stranger," Behar (1996: 5) writes, "than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them." I wrote this book to help you through that process, the process of writing up ethnography. This guide is for those of you who have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork, and are ready to begin publishing off your data. While directed to graduate students and new researchers, ethnographers in general might enjoy the ideas inside for honing their craft. Professional writer is part of the academic job description, perhaps one of the most important parts. I hope this book will help you in that role.

As a sociologist, many of my examples draw from the social sciences, and as an ethnographer myself, many of my examples come from my own experiences. However, as ethnographic practice has spread across the academy well outside of its anthropological and sociological roots, this book can be used across academic disciplines. *Writing Ethnography* can serve as either primary or secondary text in a variety of courses, including general and qualitative research methods, courses on ethnography and field work, and courses on academic writing and publishing across a diverse range of disciplines.

Many wonderful books have been written about the craft of ethnography and ethnographic practice. While I touch briefly on these topics, the focus of this book is on the final stages of that process, on the writing up of research. I've divided the subject matter in this book into brief chapters within four broad themes: Writing Ethnographically; Narrative Structures; Linger in the Scene; and Writing to Connect and Writing for Social Change. While it can be read cover-to-cover, the chapters can also stand alone.

The first section, Writing Ethnographically, begins with brief history of ethnography (kept brief because I assume that readers of this book are already familiar with the practice of ethnography), followed by an overview of why researchers engage in this sort of work, and why it is important that we continue to do so. I follow that discussion with a transition into the idea of writing ethnography as creative nonfiction, a genre of its own but one that can inform and enhance our written products. Using creative nonfiction as our mode of operation, I explore the theories and foundations of what makes for a good story and how we can tap not only into the rational concrete aspects of our work, but also into the nonrational and emotive aspects of our ethnographies. Evocative, vulnerable writing draws our readers into our work, and makes our work resonate with readers long after they've finished reading, so I spend time discussing how to evoke vulnerability in your own writing.

As we write about real people who volunteered to participate in our research, I feel it is important for a text on writing ethnographies to include a discussion about the potential ethical issues specific to this type of writing itself. While most books on the practice of ethnography discuss ethical issues in the field, I briefly explore the ethics of representation. I follow this with a look at some of the major types of tales within the ethnographic tradition, and how they might inform your own writing. This leads into discussion of how to include researcher reflexivity in your

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written work as well as how consideration of audience shapes your final piece.

The second section of the book delves into issues of narrative structure. I review some techniques and particulars for writing good narratives. We start with an overview of narrative arcs and how those arcs play out in ethnographic writing. I talk about both the importance of and how to build tension in your work as a mean of pulling your reader through to the end of your story; about how to make your ethnography a page-turner your reader won't want to put down (and yes, such a unicorn of academic literature can exist). This is followed with a discussion of voice, and of how to find and develop yours. This section also begins to address issues of grammar and how the language we use shapes our presentation, whether it is in our use of action verbs or adverbs, in our ability to show the reader scenes from our field versus telling our stories, generous use of thick description, attention to pacing and scene, or well-developed conversations, characters, and metaphors. The stylistic choices we make determine the quality of our writing, yet often I find students don't give these literary devices much, if any, thought. Because of this we will explore a number of literary and rhetorical tools that good writers use to craft an evocative tale. This section concludes with a discussion about the importance of editing and about the art of the sentence.

A fellow writer once told me that I could develop my own stories by what she called 'lingering in the scene.' This is one of my favorite techniques for developing my own writing, and I use this as the title of the third section, in which I discuss the process of writing. How do you get started? How do you linger in a scene—and more important, how do you get your reader to linger in that scene with you? What should you do when you have the dreaded writer's block? How do you translate interview data into conversations, or integrate the scholarly literature into your own ideas? How do you come up with a good title, and how do you get something published? I address all of these topics in this section. This section is designed to help ethnographers represent the artifacts of their research on paper.

An ethic of social justice underlies all of my own academic work. Because I believe that good ethnography should both provoke and incite social change, I end this book with a comment on writing as a means to connect with others, to transcend the boundaries of our daily lives. I believe in the importance of public scholarship and of not only making our work accessible to wide audiences, but ensuring that the people who need our messages get them, and I address some suggestions for how to do this in this section.