Culture Essay for Year-Abroad Students in English-speaking countries, 2015–16

Aim

The aim of your essay is to show that you have coherently researched and reported on an aspect of your host country’s culture during your year abroad. This is an investigative essay: you will need to show that you have engaged with local people and local sources in the researching of your essay.

Planning

Your essay co-ordinator (and first marker) is me, Ms Giskin Day (giskin.day@imperial.ac.uk). Please send an e-mail to me to introduce yourself with a short description of what you intend to address and how you are going to go about it. Examples of previous essays are on Blackboard (please note that these are not necessarily of first-class standard). Your essay is worth 4 ECTS which represents about 100 hours of work.

Choosing a topic

You do not need to choose a topic straight away. I suggest you spend the first few weeks of your placement looking out for potential topics and thinking about how you might execute your project. One of the biggest issues is delimiting the scope of your project. You’re unlikely to do justice to a huge issue, e.g. gun control or the justice system, within the time and word count allowed for your write-up. Think about what the issues are of interest to the community in which you are living. It helps to look at local media and attend local events. Be sensitive in your choice of topic. Will you be able to ask questions that don’t run the risk of causing offence? It will be essential to have a workable research question. If your topic can be formulated as a research question which your project can address (this is different to ‘find an answer for’ – you project won’t necessarily resolve an issue), it is always a good sign of a valid, executable project. A good research question will also help to keep your project focused.

Methodologies

Bearing in mind that we want you to engage with your local community, you will need to choose a method for your investigation that requires you to do more than merely browse the internet.
**Quantitative methods**

As the name suggests, these are methods that require accumulating and analysing data in numerical format. The most frequently used quantitative methods are questionnaires and surveys. This involves asking a targeted group of people for their opinion on a subject. This could be to evaluate something (an exhibit in a museum, an event, etc.), or an attitudinal survey. It requires careful thought on the construction and delivery of the questionnaire, identification and location of participants. It's highly unlikely that you will have enough participants for the data to be statistically significant. Also, given that questions like *how?* and *why?* are more interesting than *how many?*, I recommend that you use questionnaires sparingly and concentrate on qualitative methods instead.

**Writing up quantitative results**

If you have used a questionnaire, for example, you would give the results in a suitable format (charts, graphs or tables). Don’t report results in percentages for small sample sizes. Your results won’t be scalable and this gives a veneer of significance that isn’t really justifiable.

**Qualitative methods**

These methods don't involve number crunching but they do pose challenges for writing up data. I won’t give an exhaustive account of methodologies here as you can look up what these involve, but these are some you could consider:

**Interviews:** You may want to interview individuals who are stake-holders in your subject of investigation in order to elicit opinions or information. You will therefore need to think carefully about the questions you want to ask in order to elicit the best responses. The way in which you ask a question has an effect on the answer (e.g. you’re like to get very different responses to these two questions: ‘Do you favour the killing of unborn babies in order to extract their stem cells for medical research?’ and ‘Do you favour the use of existing stem cells in research to cure or treat dozens of serious diseases like Alzheimer’s and diabetes?’). Make sure your questions are as neutral as possible. You will need good interview techniques. Ask permission to record the interviews, and it is also best to take notes even if you are recording the interview. [Here is a useful tip sheet](#).

**Focus groups:** This involves bringing a group of people (usually between 4 and 8) together in which you facilitate discussion by asking stimulus questions and analysing the group discussion. As a facilitator you should not participate in the discussion: your role is to provide the impetus and then sit back and be a neutral observer. Again, recording the discussion will be invaluable for analysing it. [This website is a good starting point](#).

**Case study:** This is where you choose a particular ‘case’ and analyse it from multiple perspectives in order to gain an in-depth understanding of it. You will probably use a variety of methods to gather data (interviews, observations, document collection). A good case study investigates a ‘problem’ and comes up with some recommendations. [This article provides a useful introduction](#), but bear in mind that it aimed at PhD students and you should scale things right down.

**Ethnography:** This is the study of interactions within social groups or communities in order to understand how culture and ideologies shape behaviours, perceptions and
actions. This can get hugely complicated and time-consuming, but small-scale observational studies can be useful in coming up with a problem for a case study and also to provide some context for analyzing data gathered by other means. A good introduction is provided by this article.

Writing up qualitative results

Writing up qualitative data can be tricky because it isn’t always immediately obvious what there is to analyse. You should aim to pull out certain themes or strands of argument that emerge from you data. You could, if you wish, draw up a coding frame which is merely a list of criteria against which you assess your data (e.g. you could code across a number of interviews how many people feel strongly negatively and positively about a particular issue). The data you use in support of an argument should be directly linked to the research question. Present your data clearly in the text, so that quotations and their origins are clearly identifiable, e.g. if you are quoting directly or if you are analyzing interpretations of what the interviewed persons said. The citations or other illustrations must be clearly contextualised. If it is observational material, state whether you collected the data yourself or if you used data collected by someone else. Don’t get bogged down in giving too much raw data – there needs to be judicious but unbiased selection of relevant findings.

Using other sources

In addition to collecting your own data, you need to show that you have read about your topic and consulted a variety of sources. You can be imaginative when it comes to sources; they don’t all need to be academic papers or books. Images are a useful source of information, and you can also use audiovisual sources. It is essential to acknowledge your sources by citing them in the text (Harvard style is preferred) and in the reference list. Remember to cite the actual work you consulted (e.g. if you find old texts on the internet, you need to say so, e.g. (Darwin, 1861, cited in evolution.com, 2013). Interpolate your sources into your discussion, where appropriate, rather than merely providing a citation at the end of the sentence [e.g. ‘A survey by Donheim (1998) of 106 people, found that only 58 were in favour of the proposition’, rather than ‘Fifty-eight people were in favour of the proposition (Donheim, 1998)’]. If you have used the words of others verbatim, these must appear in quotation marks, cited, and listed in the bibliography. Mendeley is an excellent way of keeping track of your references and your own data.

You are encouraged to use images in your report, but these must be captioned properly and you must state the source of the image (put your own name if you are the photographer).

Structuring your essay write-up

You could use the following headings to organise your work (although this is just a suggestion – it will depend on your essay).

Abstract (no more than 100 words). This should outline the scope of your essay (what topics you cover), describe your method and give your main conclusions.
**Introduction.** This should explain why you chose your topic (your rationale) and give a brief background to the subject. You should also be clear here about your ‘research question’. What are you investigating?

**Method.** This section should show how you went about the research for your essay. If you interviewed people (always good to see in an essay like this), give details here. Explain how and why you selected particular sources. If you went to events or visited places to do your research, specify them here.

**Results.** You must be selective in your results: only the most relevant results should be included, and there should be some evidence of categorisation.

**Discussion.** In this section you should discuss your findings, put them in context of other literature or research, and provide an analysis (this means that your discussion should not merely be descriptive but should provide an interpretation of your material).

**Conclusion.** You should relate your discussion back to your research question and put your findings in the context of the work of others. You should be reflexive about your essay: what are its strengths and weaknesses? What could have been done differently with hindsight? Finally, you should outline what insights you have gained from the essay.

**Bibliography.** This is a list of references you cited in your write-up and also other sources you consulted that informed your work but not directly referred to in the text. Most students lose marks for poor referencing, especially of internet resources. The library has excellent guidelines on how to reference. Please ask if you are unsure about this.

**Submission**

Please submit a copy of your work by through the Blackboard portal for the Culture Essay. **The deadline for the final submission is 5 pm on 22 April 2016.** Your essay should be formatted in 1.5 or double spacing. Your essay should be at least 1,500 words. The upper word limit is flexible but if you wish to write more than about 3000 words, please consult me in advance. Your word count must be clearly stated at the end of your report.

You will need to give a 10-minute presentation on your work when you return. You will also be asked about your year abroad in general, and specifically on aspects of your essay.

I hope you enjoy researching and writing your essay. Please do get in touch if you have any questions or problems at any stage.

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