

## ANTH 100: Introduction to Cultural Anthropology

# Assignment: Dial-a-Definition — The Anthropology Audio Glossary

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## Overview

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Every discipline has its own language. Anthropology is no exception: words like ‘thick description,’ ‘liminality,’ ‘positionality,’ and ‘ethnography’ carry precise meanings built up over decades of scholarship. Learning what they mean is part of entering the discipline. But understanding a term well enough to define it in a textbook is different from understanding it well enough to explain it to someone who has never heard it before. This assignment asks you to do the harder thing.

You will choose one key anthropological term from the list provided, research it thoroughly using your course readings and any additional sources your instructor approves, and record a short audio explainer (60 to 90 seconds) in which you explain what it means, where it comes from, and why it matters, in language that a curious friend with no anthropology background could follow.

Think of it as an audio version of the short-form explainer videos that circulate on social media: direct, engaging, specific, and free of unnecessary jargon. The goal is not to recite a definition. The goal is to make someone understand something they did not understand before, and to make them glad they listened.

Although not a requirement for the assignment, with your permission, the recordings you produce can potentially become part of an installation: a vintage rotary phone through which visitors can dial a number and hear an anthropologist’s explanation of a term. Dial 201 for ‘thick description.’ Dial 202 for ‘liminality.’ Your recording will be genuinely used. That is worth taking seriously.

## What Makes a Good Audio Explainer

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A good explainer is not a definition read aloud. It is not a summary of a Wikipedia article. And it is not a lecture. Here is what it is:

- **Specific.** Good explainers use a concrete example to anchor the term. Instead of saying ‘thick description means interpreting cultural behaviour in depth,’ you might say: ‘Imagine you see someone wink. A thin description is “they moved their eyelid.” A thick description asks what that wink means in that moment, in that relationship, in that culture. Clifford Geertz called this thick description, and it is the difference between recording behaviour and understanding it.’
- **Conversational.** You are speaking, not writing. Short sentences. Active voice. Say ‘anthropologists argue’ not ‘it has been argued by scholars in the discipline.’ Pretend you are explaining the term to a friend at a coffee shop who is genuinely curious but has never taken an anthropology course.

- **Honest about complexity.** You do not need to resolve every nuance in 90 seconds, but you should not pretend the term is simpler than it is. A phrase like ‘this gets complicated, but the core idea is...’ signals intellectual honesty without getting lost in the weeds.
- **Well-sourced.** Your explanation should draw on the course readings and assigned sources. You do not need to cite them in the recording itself, but your written notes should show where the ideas came from.

**REGISTER**

*A useful test: read your script aloud and ask yourself ‘does this sound like a person talking, or a textbook being read?’ If it sounds like a textbook, rewrite it until it sounds like a person.*

## Terms (sample)

Each student will be assigned one term from the list below. Your instructor will confirm your assignment. If there is a term not on this list that you would like to cover, discuss it with your instructor first.

Term	What it means (in brief)
<b>Ethnography</b>	The method of immersive, long-term fieldwork that is central to anthropological research
<b>Thick description</b>	Clifford Geertz’s term for interpreting cultural behaviour by attending to its full context and meaning
<b>Participant observation</b>	Being part of the community you are studying while simultaneously observing and recording what you see
<b>Fieldwork</b>	The practice of conducting research in a specific place and community over an extended period
<b>Positionality</b>	How a researcher’s identity, background, and perspective shape what they see and how they interpret it
<b>Liminality</b>	Victor Turner’s concept describing the in-between state of transition in ritual and social life
<b>Culture</b>	One of anthropology’s most foundational and contested terms; what it means and why defining it is hard
<b>Ethnocentrism</b>	Judging another culture by the standards of your own, and why anthropologists work to resist it
<b>Cultural relativism</b>	The principle of understanding a culture on its own terms, and the debates it raises
<b>Kinship</b>	How societies organize relationships, belonging, and family, and why anthropologists find it so revealing
<b>Reflexivity</b>	The practice of examining how the researcher’s own presence and assumptions shape the research
<b>Intersectionality</b>	How overlapping social identities (race, class, gender, and others) shape experience and inequality

## Learning Objectives

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By completing this assignment, you will:

- **Deepen your understanding of a core anthropological concept.** Explaining something clearly to someone else is one of the most effective ways of learning it yourself. The process of turning a definition into a spoken explanation will require you to understand the term at a level that a multiple-choice test does not.
- **Practice translating academic language for a general audience.** One of the most transferable skills in any field is the ability to communicate specialist knowledge to non-specialists. This assignment asks you to do exactly that: take a term from the academic literature and make it genuinely understandable to someone with no background in the subject.
- **Develop confidence in spoken communication.** Speaking clearly and naturally about ideas you have researched is a skill that takes practice. This assignment gives you a low-stakes opportunity to develop it.
- **Think critically about accessibility and communication design.** Because your recording will be part of a physical installation, you will also consider how to make your content accessible to listeners who are deaf or hard of hearing, and produce a written version accordingly. Thinking about who your audience is and how to reach them is fundamental to any form of communication.
- **Contribute something real to your department.** Your recording will be used in the Calls from the Field telephone installation and may appear in other departmental contexts. This is a genuine contribution, not a practice exercise.

## Process and Deliverables

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### 1. Research your term.

Using your course readings and any additional sources your instructor approves, research your assigned term thoroughly. Find its origins: who coined it, or developed it into its current form? What problem was it invented to solve? How is it used in practice? Take notes as you read, and keep track of where your ideas are coming from.

### 2. Write a script.

Draft a short script for your recording. It should run approximately 60 to 90 seconds when read aloud at a natural pace (that is roughly 150 to 225 words). Your script should cover three things: what the term means, a concrete example that makes it real, and a sentence or two on why anthropologists find it useful or important. Read it aloud several times before recording. If it sounds stiff or formal, rewrite it until it doesn't.

**TIP**

*A simple structure that works: (1) open with the term and a hook: a question, an image, or a surprising fact; (2) explain what it means using a concrete example; (3) close with why it matters for understanding human life. You do not need to follow this structure exactly, but it is a useful starting point.*

**3. Record your explainer.**

Record your script using your phone, laptop, or any available recording device. You do not need professional equipment. Find a quiet space with minimal background noise, speak clearly and at a natural pace, and do as many takes as you need to feel comfortable with the result. The final recording should be in your own voice: clear, confident, and conversational.

Technical specification	Required value
File format	WAV (preferred) or MP3
Length	60–90 seconds
Voice	Your own — no narration by others
Naming convention	Your surname _ term

**4. Produce an accessible written version.**

Because the telephone installation is audio-only, it is not accessible to visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing. As part of this assignment, you will produce a written version of your explainer that addresses this. This is not simply a transcript of what you said word for word. It is a short written text — roughly the same length as your script — that stands on its own as a clear and engaging explanation of the term. You may lightly edit for readability, and you should add a one-sentence introduction identifying yourself and the term. Think of it as the caption that would sit beside the handset: how do you make the experience equally worthwhile for someone who will read rather than listen?

**ACCESSIBILITY NOTE**

*Your instructor may display written versions alongside the telephone installation or make them available via QR code. Accessible design is not a workaround; it is part of what it means to communicate well.*

**5. Submit your audio file, written version, and source notes.**

Submit three things: your audio recording, your written accessible version, and a brief set of source notes (half a page is sufficient) listing the readings and sources you drew on and explaining how each one shaped your understanding of the term. You do not need to use a formal citation format, but your notes should make clear where your ideas came from.

## How Your Work Will Be Evaluated

Your assignment will be assessed on four dimensions:

Dimension	What we are looking for
<b>Accuracy and depth</b>	Does your explanation reflect a genuine understanding of the term? Is it grounded in the course readings and other approved sources? Does it capture the term’s origins, meaning, and significance without oversimplifying?
<b>Clarity and accessibility</b>	Would someone with no anthropology background understand your explanation after hearing or reading it once? Is the language clear, direct, and free of unexplained jargon?
<b>Use of example</b>	Does your explainer include a concrete, specific example that makes the term real? Is the example well-chosen and clearly connected to the definition?
<b>Accessible written version</b>	Does your written version stand on its own as a clear explanation of the term? Does it read as a text rather than a verbatim transcript? Does it make the content genuinely accessible to someone who cannot hear the recording?

## Why This Matters

The terms in this glossary are tools: they help researchers see things they might otherwise miss, ask questions they might not otherwise think to ask, and communicate findings in ways that can be built on by others. Learning them is not about passing a test. It is about acquiring a set of lenses.

But a lens is only useful if you can describe what you see through it. The most important ideas in any field are the ones that can survive translation: that remain meaningful and precise when you explain them to someone who has never encountered them before. This assignment asks you to find out whether you can do that with one term from anthropology. If you can, you understand it.

Your recording will become part of a listening station in which visitors (students, prospective students, members of the public) can pick up a vintage rotary telephone handset, dial a number, and hear a student voice explain what anthropology actually thinks about, and why. That is a real contribution. The concepts you explain in this assignment are ones that will come up again and again in your time in this department, and possibly well beyond it.