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21W.730-5 Writing on Contemporary Issues: Culture Shock! Writing,  
Editing, and Publishing in Cyberspace  
Fall 2008

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21W.730:05: *Culture Shock!*  
Fall 2008  
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## THE INVESTIGATIVE ESSAY

Proposal due Thursday, October 23

First version due Thursday, November 6 or Thursday, November 13

Revision due November 20 or 25

(depending on which date you signed up for)

The essay you will submit on November 6 or 13 will be an investigative one—that is, an essay that depends for its effectiveness not only on your style and voice, which you will have been cultivating for many weeks, but also on information you gather from sources outside your own experience in order to speak convincingly and with *authority* on the subject you have chosen to write about.

What the investigative essay is NOT is a “research paper” in the sense you may be used to thinking of that genre in school. It must be an *essay*: your voice, your perspective, your persona must be evident in the piece, and, as in the more strictly personal essay, your lived experience can be included in the piece, as appropriate or desirable. We will read some examples of essays of the kind I am asking you to write here, and we will discuss the various strategies the different essayists have used in order to make their case, whatever it may be.

Sources that are appropriate will depend entirely on your subject. The kind of research you may already be familiar with—library or online research of books, newspapers, magazines, articles, visual information—is likely to be necessary but will almost certainly not be sufficient. Interviews, searching archival records, laboratory experiments, visits to appropriate places, careful observation, seeing films, listening to music, critically scrutinizing ads—all these may supplement (or in some cases even replace) the usual kinds of research that may be familiar to you from your school experience.

Finding a subject is your first challenge. What have you wondered about lately and would like to know more about? What thoughts has your reading stimulated in your head? What particular passions or interests do you have that you could make interesting to a reader? Where have you been, what have you done that might provide you a basis for further investigating and reporting? Look around you to find possibilities; popular culture, you know, is everywhere. You need to be sure that your subject is one that you can inform yourself about adequately in the time you have, and you must give yourself *plenty of time* to do the reading, observing, checking out, thinking, interviewing, or whatever is necessary to support the claim you will make about your subject.

To help you get an early start, you must submit a proposal to me on Thursday, October 23, consisting of two parts: first, a typed half-page or more describing what you will write about and what *point* you want to make in the essay, and second, an *annotated bibliography* of all the sources you have found or plan to use to support your claim and to give you sufficient authority to make the piece convincing. (Including something in your proposal bibliography does not commit you to including that source in what you will eventually write; likewise, you are not limited to using only those things you list in your annotated bibliography.) Having to annotate all your sources will prevent your generating a list of titles at the last minute; when your proposal comes in, you must know your sources already—you must have read any print sources (or the relevant portions), have decided which people you will interview, which places you will visit for purposes of observation, which films you will include, and so on. When your proposal comes in, then, you will be well on your way to producing a strong essay by knowing your subject well, and you will need only to find the language that best accomplishes your purpose in writing the essay. I will be available to meet with you individually after the proposals come in to talk with you about your plans for your essay.

Your first version is due in class on Thursday, November 6 or Thursday, November 13 (depending upon which day you signed up to submit). We will have class workshops on Thursday, November 13, and Tuesday, November 18 to help you think of ways to revise the essay. Your revisions are due on November 20 or 25, again depending on your original submission date. As always, there is no firm length requirement—the essay should be as long as it needs to be to accomplish what you want to accomplish with the essay, and no longer. Somewhere around 7-10 pages will probably be about right.

I hope you enjoy this *essay* into investigative journalism, and I look forward to reading what you write!