

## EN765.01 “What is Performance?” (Prof. Andrew Sofer) First paper Assignment: Thick Description of a Cultural Activity

5-7 pages, typed, proofread, double-spaced; due in class October 20.

“The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.”

Clifford Geertz, “Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”

For this assignment, you are a cultural ethnographer providing a “thick description” of a cultural “text” (event or activity). You might choose something *apparently* marginal that allows us, in Geertz’s words, “to see a dimension of [our] own subjectivity” (Geertz 450) or, as Turner puts it, “a striving after new forms and structure” (Turner 10).

Pick a manageable strip of behavior—don’t bite off too big a chunk.

Required elements:

Your paper should have a **thesis** that is provocative and debatable (i.e., not self-evident: “The Olympics displaces national rivalry from combat to sports” e.g.). Your thesis should organize your **claims** the way a magnet draws iron filings into a pattern. Each claim should be supported by **evidence** (what counts as “evidence” is broadly construed here). Indicate your thesis in your title—be bold. Include a **Works Cited** (MLA style is preferred).

Among the elements you *might* choose to include (be selective):

- A quantitative description of “rules” and procedures;
- A formal paradigm (see Geertz 441);
- A distinction between shallow and deep instances of the activity;
- A distinction between “thin” and “thick” description (blink vs. wink);
- An applied theoretical concept (e.g., Turner’s social process/subjunctive mood, Schechner’s rebehavior, etc.);
- A multi-perspective analysis (e.g. psychological/economic/sociological/aesthetic);
- A genealogy of performance.

While you will need (some) description, your focus should be analysis—“depth” in Geertz’s sense. How much cultural meaning can you squeeze out of activity X?

Be writerly; Geertz is a good stylistic model. Avoid waffle (“Before considering X, it is important to . . . .”); cut to the chase. ☺

Proofread with care, and please change any proper names/identifying information.

## EN765 “What is Performance?” (Prof. Andrew Sofer) Guidelines for Final Papers

15-20 pages; typed, double-spaced, proofread; due Thursday December 9<sup>th</sup> in my box.

Purpose: to help you better understand a particular theory, theorist, or concept through its “dialogue” with a performance text.

### 1. Choose a text.

Write about *one* text.

Your text should be shareable.

Your text should be very rich—open to “thick description” (analysis) from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

Your text may be cultural (e.g., a prom); theatrical (e.g., a stage performance); or literary (e.g., a play).

Narrative film does not count as a performance text in this context. Videos of performance texts (e.g., *Fires in the Mirror*) are acceptable.

### 2. Choose a focus question.

Your question should concern what puzzles, disturbs, or intrigues you about theory; about the text.

Your question should address a theorist or theoretical concept in some way.

Your question should lead to a *debatable* point (thesis): the answer to your question will be the thesis of your paper.

The answer to your question should not be predictable from the outset; you should discover something new through the process.

Your question should ideally contain a principle of exclusion; relevant passages/sequences of your text should “pop out.” If every piece of your text is relevant, you may need more focus.

Your focus question must be answerable by textual analysis. It should summon analysis rather than judgment (“How successful is Anna Deavere Smith?”).

Avoid yes/no questions, which lead to flat papers.

Your question should ideally be a *little* too big for a 15-20 page paper.

*Sample focus questions:*

To what extent does *A Number* complicate Mulvey's theory of the male gaze?

To what extent is "difference" performative, rather than performance, in *Fires in the Mirror*?

What are the limits of Goffmanian "keying" in *M Butterfly*?

### **3. Write the abstract (due Nov. 17).**

The point of this abstract is to help you move from a topic (race in *Fires in the Mirror*) to a strong focus question--which will, in turn, summon a debatable thesis and argument.

Your abstract should be about a paragraph or two long. It should include your focus question and several hypotheses (potential theses) you are exploring, as well as what you want to clarify for yourself about the theory you are addressing.

Please add a preliminary bibliography of 3-5 critical sources relevant to your topic that you have read or intend to read.

### **4. Write the paper.**

START WRITING—at least in rough form—before you have finished reading secondary criticism. (You need mulch.) Go back to your posts for ideas.

Plan for at least two drafts: one in which you write your way to your strongest idea; one in which your strongest idea (thesis) comes first, and all ensuing material supports the thesis with textual evidence. Ruthlessly excise all material that isn't relevant to your argument.

Put your thesis (big idea) in your title; don't just state the topic ("Performing Race in *Fires in the Mirror*"). Include a thesis statement in your opening paragraph; give the reader a roadmap.

SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENT: "While Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* exemplifies queer performativity, it challenges Judith Butler's slippery distinction between performance and performativity by repeatedly undermining Butler's contention that performance presumes a prior subject. In this play, performativity always subsumes performance."

Use first person ("I") sparingly.

Edit for clarity of expression; use active verbs ("symbolizes" instead of "is symbolic of"). Avoid corporate-speak ("mindset" "impact" "lifestyle").

Assume your reader has read/seen the performance (unless it is obscure). Limit plot summary to a page or two at the most.

Theater Historiography website  
www.theater-historiography.org  
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Use parenthetical citation (Sofer 4). Cite authors, not editors. Include all cited works in your “Works Cited.” You may add “Additional Works Consulted” if you wish.

To paraphrase Valéry, “No paper is completed, it is only abandoned.” There will be no extensions.

Good luck! And please consult me in office hours.