

# Acknowledgements

## **Kids' Guide to Local Culture produced by**

Madison Children's Museum, 2004

In conjunction with the  
*Hmong at Heart* exhibition

Written and organized by Mark Wagler, Ruth Olson & Anne Pryor

With support from Brenda Baker, Sue Manske & John Robinson

Layout and design by Larissa Winterhalter

Illustrations by the students in Mark Wagler's classroom  
at Randall Elementary School, Madison, WI

Tristan, Teddy, Elena, Leora, Alexandra, Nico, Chiara,  
Jeremy, Sara, Martha, Izzy, Max, Nikki, Sam, Benjamin,  
Sam, Mariah, Cristina, Anna, Jay, Rosemary, Miracle, Chou

Ruth A. Shelly, Executive Director,  
Madison Children's Museum

## **Special Thanks**

University of Wisconsin Center for the Study of  
Upper Midwestern Cultures and the Wisconsin Arts Board.



## **Presented by**

the Freeman Foundation Asian Exhibit Initiative  
Administered by the Association of Children's Museums

## **Madison Children's Museum**

© 2004 Madison Children's Museum  
100 State Street, Madison, WI 53703,  
[www.madisonchildrensmuseum.com](http://www.madisonchildrensmuseum.com)



# Contents

1	<b>Acknowledgements</b>
3	<b>Contents</b>
5	<b>Introduction</b>

## Seeing Local Culture

9	<b>People Watching</b>
10	<b>Local Culture</b>
10	<b>Enjoying Variety</b>
11	<b>Seeing Deeply</b>
12	<b>History or Culture?</b>
13	<b>Who Has Culture?</b>
14	<b>Groups</b>
15	<b>Insider/Outsider</b>
16	<b>Different/Same</b>
17	<b>Tradition/Change</b>
17	<b>Patterns</b>
18	<b>Systems</b>
19	<b>Dialogue</b>
20	<b>Stories</b>

## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

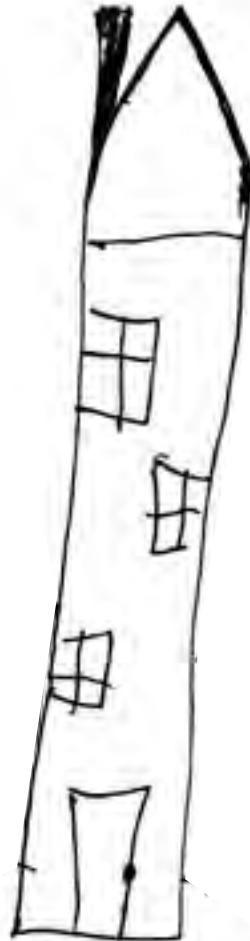
23	<b>Spying</b>
25	<b>Fieldnotes</b>
26	<b>Plan Ahead</b>
27	<b>Curiosity</b>
27	<b>Self Inventories</b>
28	<b>Family</b>
29	<b>Elders</b>
30	<b>Neighbors</b>
30	<b>Observing Places &amp; Objects</b>
31	<b>Observing People</b>
33	<b>Observing Events</b>
34	<b>Interview Questions</b>
35	<b>Performing Listening</b>
36	<b>Audio &amp; Video Recorders</b>
38	<b>Surveys</b>
39	<b>Background Research</b>
41	<b>Telephone &amp; Computer</b>
42	<b>Participation</b>

## Cultural Elements

47	Relationships
48	Groups & Identities
50	Family
52	Mealtimes
54	Cooking
55	Farming
57	Occupations
59	Informal & Formal Learning
61	Local Knowledge
63	Memory
64	Keepsakes & Heirlooms
66	Storytelling
68	Oral Lore
70	Language
72	Communication & Media
73	Music
76	Dance
78	Crafts
79	Clothing
81	Adornment
83	Aesthetics
86	Buildings
88	Home Interiors
90	Gardening
91	Landscape
93	Cemeteries
97	Time
99	Seasons
101	Gathering Places
102	Visiting
104	Recreation
106	Games
108	Celebrations
110	Rites of Passage
113	Cultural Change & Tradition
115	Beliefs
116	Health
118	Religion
119	Power
122	Economy
124	Exchange
126	Transportation

## Presenting Culture

131	Informal Presentations
132	What Media?
132	Audience & Purpose
134	Documents
135	Team Media Skills
136	Archives
137	Representations & Interpretations





## **Introduction: A Field Guide for Fieldworkers**

People who study nature (naturalists) use field guides to help them identify, observe, and understand the trees, flowers, birds, amphibians, mammals, or rocks they study in the “field.” That means they go outside their offices and laboratories to observe nature.

**Ethnographers** (people who do a lot of people watching) also go outside their offices to study culture. When they talk about doing “**fieldwork**,” they mean they are observing people in ordinary local places, and documenting (recording) their observations.

This *Kids’ Field Guide to Local Culture* will help you observe, interview, and understand people. It includes tools and skills for people watching and ways of presenting your research. The main part of this guide is a list of some of the things you will see (what we call **cultural elements**), such as foodways, celebrations, and recreation. Under each item you will find examples, ways of thinking, and ideas for projects.

Read this guide in any order. This chapter will give you ideas for thinking about culture. If you want practical suggestions for doing fieldwork, go directly to chapter two (*Tools & Skills for Ethnographers*). If you want to get ideas of what is included in culture, browse through the list of cultural elements in chapter three (*Cultural Elements*). Ready to present to others what you have learned? Then check out chapter four (*Presenting Culture*).





---

## **Seeing Local Culture**







## Seeing Local Culture

The purpose of this chapter is to help you see culture differently—by looking in new ways, and noticing things you’ve not paid attention to before. You don’t need to read this entire chapter before you begin your fieldwork; in fact, you will better understand what you read here if you have already begun observing people in your community.

### **People Watching**

Studying culture begins with people watching. We notice what people wear and eat, things they say, objects they make, ways they work and play.

If we talk to the people we are studying we learn even more—where they come from, the groups they belong to, what they know and believe, why they do things.

Culture is about people—including their languages, creations, behaviors, beliefs, institutions, and all their interactions with other people.

***Make a long list of things that are cultural.***



---

## Seeing Local Culture

### Local Culture

People watching is a lot like bird watching—it's always local. We can learn about faraway birds and people in books, videos, and websites; we can even observe birds and people when they visit from faraway places; but whenever we observe them, it's always in local habitats.



Even if we travel to another country, the birds and people are local in that new place. Hands-on study of culture is always local. Walking and talking are always local, as are most other aspects of everyday life.

*How far away from home is still local for you?*

### Enjoying Variety

Bird watchers love variety. They want to see not only the handful of common birds that spend the whole year in their backyard, but also the birds that can be found in other nearby habitats, and rare species that only briefly fly through their area. Bird watchers aren't satisfied to call a bird a sparrow or a warbler—they want to know exactly what variety of sparrow or warbler they are seeing. They get excited when they see new birds—they enjoy the beautiful colors, songs, and nests, and want to discover everything they can about the behaviors of these birds.

People watchers likewise delight in variety. We enjoy hearing new dialects and new dance tunes, admire distinctive clothes,



## Seeing Local Culture

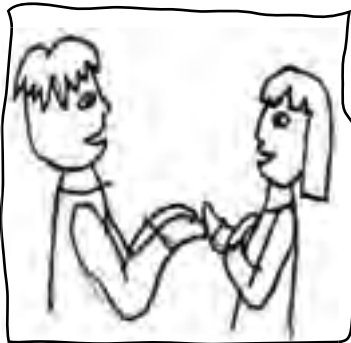
relish unfamiliar food, and respect a range of beliefs. If everybody else were just like our families, we would miss the beauty that comes with human variety.

We also find variety among the people we know best. Our parents change recipes they learned from our grandparents. We never tell a story exactly the same way twice. There are many different ways to play tag, and many rhymes to say while jumping rope.

*What varieties in culture do you already notice?*

### Seeing Deeply, Understanding More

Most of us recognize common birds—robins, cardinals, crows, ducks—but only understand the simplest things about them. Because bird watchers want to know everything about what they are seeing, they look at birds differently. They concentrate, pay attention to everything connected to the birds, use special tools (binoculars, field guides), and take notes.



Most people also have a shallow knowledge of culture. We know enough to get by, but not enough to understand. We're often satisfied with a few stereotypes about groups of people, over simplifications that keep us from deeply seeing people and their cultures.



---

## Seeing Local Culture

Someone tells us that Mexican-Americans eat tacos and celebrate the Day of the Dead, but we never learn that there are many ethnic groups in Mexico, bringing a great variety of cultural expressions with them when they move to the U.S.

Even our own culture is often unknown to us. How many of us know much about the cultures of our neighbors and friends? How many of us know the deep culture of our family?

*What do you already know about your local culture?  
What do you want to understand more completely?*



### History or Culture?

It's easy to think that culture is in the past. In school social studies, and in many museums, we usually learn more about the past and about distant places than we do about local culture in the present. When you visit a new community, you'll notice that many tourist attractions are focused on history.

History is only one of many powerful ways of looking at culture. This field guide targets contemporary everyday life. Fieldworkers are interested not so much in what happened long ago as in how things from long ago are "passed to the present:" old buildings that we live in, skills and knowledge



## Seeing Local Culture



handed down through generations to us, ceremonies we observe today similar to older practices.

Some people think the main reason for telling stories is to remember the past, and forget that storytellers also inform us about the present and entertain us. Oral history is only a small part of storytelling.

***Find out how folklorists, geographers, economists, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and linguists look at contemporary culture.***

### **Who Has Culture?**

It's also easy to think that only other people have culture—people of different ethnicity or religion, or people who look different from you. In the United States, textbooks often present history with a European American point of view, and culture is seen as belonging to everyone else.

White Christians have the same amount of culture as other American groups. However, if your father is of Irish and German background, and your mother is mixed Italian and Polish—or even if you don't know your family's background—it's more complicated to describe your family's traditions than if all your ancestors were Norwegian or Hmong. We live totally enmeshed in culture, even when we don't know our traditions.



## Seeing Local Culture

Ethnicity is only one of many ways of looking at culture. For example, maybe where you live is more important for your family than where your ancestors came from. Or maybe your family's cultural identity is based on what you do together, like playing basketball, going fishing, or traveling.

*Do you think some groups have more culture than others?*

### Groups

People belong to many groups: family, neighborhood, recreational, occupational, religious, political, ethnic. Groups are formed as people cluster together because of marriage, background, location, beliefs, work, and play. It is in these groups, especially in families, that we see most local culture.



Some groups (family, ethnic) we are born into, others may change quickly as we move to a new neighborhood, take a new job, or join a new soccer team.

The easiest way to understand people is to see and hear them in face-to-face interactions with others. One place to begin is with people we already know, in groups that we also belong to. You may also want to study people whose culture appears different from your own.

*Which groups do you belong to?*

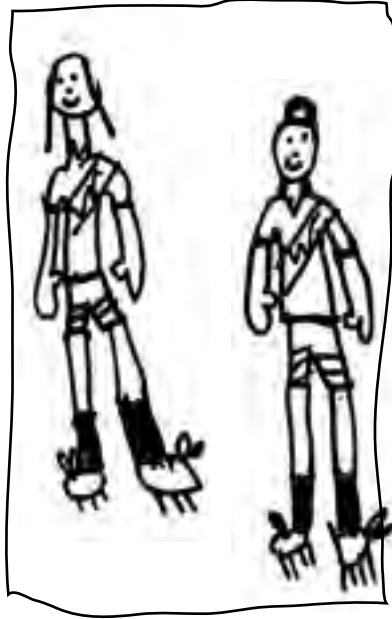
*Which groups do you want to study?*



## Seeing Local Culture

### Insider / Outsider

We are insiders in some groups, outsiders in others, and depending on how we look at things, sometimes a bit of both. For example, we live with only our closest family, and are outsiders in the homes of other relatives. At the same time, we are insiders in the larger group that includes all of our relatives—the people we regularly meet at holidays, weddings, and other extended family events.



We begin life belonging to only a few groups. Whenever we enter a new group, we feel like an outsider, but over time we learn to understand the culture of this group. The same thing happens when we study the culture of strangers; after a while their culture doesn't feel strange anymore.

***Tell the story of joining a new group.***

***What did you feel like in the beginning?***

***What did you notice at first?***

***What do you see differently after being in this group for a while?***

***What does it feel like to belong?***

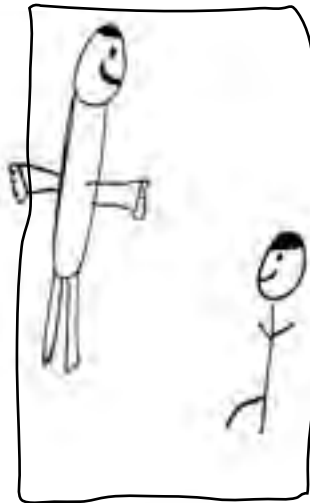


## Seeing Local Culture

### Different / Same

Whenever we look at the culture of others, even relatives and close friends, we find this puzzling question: "Is their culture the same as mine or different from mine?" Usually we first notice what is different— unusual sounds, smells, and other sensations. In fact, it's often easier for us to notice cultural differences than to be aware of the traits of our own culture.

When we begin to experience similarity, we are noticing structures of culture that are deeper than surface details. If your family eats bread at every meal and my family eats rice every meal, that's both something different and something the same. Every culture has a ceremony when someone dies, but every culture has a different funeral ritual. In every culture, people give gifts, but what we give and the way we give varies.



Every cultural expression, then, is both the same and different from mine!

***Why are people often afraid when they are in a culture that is very different?***

***When do we begin to trust strangers?***





---

## Seeing Local Culture

### **Tradition / Change**

We learn culture from others—parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, teachers, indeed from everyone we interact with. “Tradition” is that culture which is passed on person-to-person, by word of mouth or example, from generation to generation. But culture also changes as it is passed on, and individuals change the culture they receive.

The same person can pass on exactly a home remedy for sore throat (gargling with salt water), learn a new remedy for high fever (a bath in ice water), change a remedy for indigestion (from ginger ale to 7-Up), or replace an old cure for cough (mullein tea) with a new one (Vick’s Vapor Rub).

Tradition is conservative, keeping what is most important. Tradition is also creative, changing to meet contemporary needs.

***Which family traditions will you pass on to your children?***

***Which family traditions do you most want to change?***

### **Patterns**

Culture has patterns. When we see something repeated in time or space, we understand the shape of culture. Examples include quilt designs, dance steps, seasonal celebrations, job routines, processes of making things (e.g. crafts) and doing things (e.g. housework), daily schedules, speech rhythms, etc. Every cultural detail repeats another detail, either exactly, or with variation.



## Seeing Local Culture

We understand a culture—our own or others—by seeing these patterns. We enjoy the beauty of a culture by noticing how colors, sounds, shapes, memories, places, and other elements are combined. We become skilled in cultural practices when we are able to use patterns to create objects, events, and relationships.

***What cultural patterns do you notice right now?***



### Systems

Our local culture goes beyond personal and small group behavioral patterns to larger systems, sometimes called *institutions*. The economy, government, religion, schools, mass media, and transportation are global systems; connected to places, people, and ideas distant from our homes.

Yet each of these complex institutions has a local as well as a global component. We work, study, worship, vote, shop, bank, ride, and watch TV locally. A trip to a foreign country begins in our garage or our local bus stop. Our neighbors help elect the President of the United States. Garage sales are a part of the national economy.

***What institutions do you want to observe?***



## Seeing Local Culture

### Dialogue

The core of culture is human relationships. We speak, learn, work, exchange, play, love, raise children, entertain, celebrate, and make decisions while relating to others.

Dialogue means not only the give-and-take of people talking with each other, but all of the lively connections between people—contests, contracts, play, exchanges, and people watching!

Out of these trillions of human interactions, the thick web of culture is formed.

***Put your name in the center of a sheet of paper; then write the names of the most important people in your life, placed equally distant from each other. Draw lines between the names for every kind of dialogue or interaction you or they have with each other. Label each line with the kind of connection (relationship, activity). See how full and complicated you can make this web.***





## Seeing Local Culture

### Stories

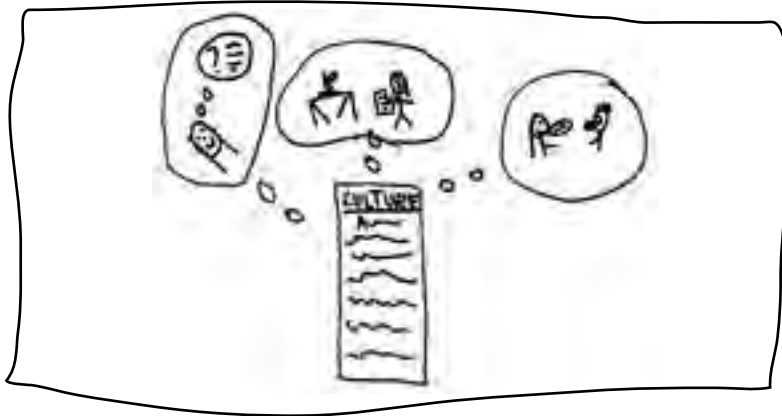
People tell stories and live out stories. Stories hold together the information we have about people, places, problems, events, and skills. While we mostly hear stories told with words, we also understand stories communicated in photos, movement, music, and other art forms.

As you begin to understand your family better, you will know more family stories—stories of long ago, stories of important events, accounts of what family members are currently doing, even the steps of doing things in your family—the stories of how you do laundry, make dinner, take trips, celebrate holidays. The same becomes true as you study any other local group.

*What stories do you most like to tell?*

*What culture is revealed in these stories?*

*What local stories do you want to learn?*





---

**Tools & Skills for  
Ethnographers**





## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

Ordinary, everyday attention to local culture doesn't require you to use special tools and skills. You can simply notice and enjoy the world you live in. But if you want to understand and enjoy more deeply, focus your attention to develop new abilities.

This chapter will help you research cultural elements you are curious about, find local people you can study, learn ways to observe and interview them, explore tools for recording your fieldwork, and think about the family and community you live in.

### **Spying**

Harriet, the title character in Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy*, has a regular route of people she spies on. After school, she gets out her notebook and other spy tools, then walks around her New York City neighborhood, writing down what she observes. She peeks in windows, sneaks into houses, uses binoculars—so that she can spy without getting caught. She would learn a lot of local culture, except that she is more interested in odd secrets than in ordinary behaviors.



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

Even without pretending to be a spy, all of us often watch people—it's how we learn how to do things, and how we discover what's happening in our world. Like Harriet, ethnographers watch people very closely. Like Harriet, ethnographers record their observations—in notebooks, with cameras and tape recorders, or on video. And like Harriet, ethnographers make people-watching a serious project. But unlike Harriet, ethnographers usually ask people for permission to study them. And unlike Harriet, we respect what we see and hear.

Walk around your neighborhood with a notebook, writing down whatever grabs your attention. Find a place to sit where you can watch lots of people—at a park, store, or other gathering place. Use lots of precise details in writing your observations—names of people, places, and objects; colors, shapes, sizes, patterns; conversations overheard; movement and activities.







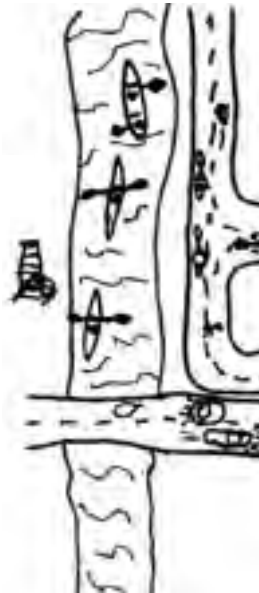
## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

### Fieldnotes

Get a notebook you will use only for your exploration of local culture. Use this notebook to organize your study. You may want to write responses to some of the prompts in this guide—make lists, answer questions, keep track of your thinking as you read, record some of the images you have of your community.

You will also use this notebook to record your observations and interviews. Make a habit of writing a lot, otherwise in a month you will have forgotten things you want to remember. You will also draw what you see and make maps.

Written *fieldnotes* are useful for all possible presentations. Write as quickly as you can, using abbreviations and key words. The only spelling you need to fuss with are names and places mentioned by the person you're interviewing. Written notes become much more useful if you rewrite them soon after your observation or interview.

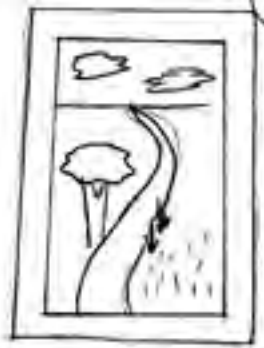


Quickly *sketch* what you see. It's usually better to make many quick sketches than to spend a long time putting in details. Soon after redraw any sketches you intend to use in a presentation.



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

Your rough drawings will prompt you to remember important details.



Make many *photographs*, especially if you are documenting the steps of a process. Practice using your camera in advance. Use automatic settings unless you understand how to make manual adjustments for light, movement, and depth of field.

***Get a notebook! Get a notebook!***

### Plan Ahead

Fieldworkers, as they begin documenting cultures, already are thinking of possible presentations for future audiences. Exhibits, web sites, videos, radio documentaries, articles, and community celebrations are several of the options. How one intends to present fieldwork determines the tools used to record the fieldwork (see chapter four, *Presenting Local Culture*).

If you plan a public presentation, you will likely need a *release form* from every person you tape or photograph--which will give you legal permission to present the documents you have collected. See the model release form in the appendix.

Understand that fieldwork must be revised for final presentations. The key, in the field, is to record as much as possible. Later you can critically review and edit your documents.



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

### Curiosity

You can begin your study of local culture anywhere, with any person, group, event, or other element of culture. The key is to begin with your curiosity. Your questions, interests, and excitement will sharpen your attention, helping you to see culture clearly.

In the beginning you may have few questions. You can browse through the chapter on cultural elements to help you think of ideas. You can also take a mental walk through your neighborhood, looking for all the things you want to understand better, people you want to know better. The longer you work on this project, the more questions you will have.



***Make a list of topics you are interested in, questions you want to answer, local places you want to visit, people you want to talk to or understand. Keep adding to this list.***

### Self Inventories

Often the best way to begin fieldwork is by writing down what you already know about a topic. Each of us is a culture bearer, with basic knowledge of the culture in which we live. We know a lot more than we realize about many of the elements of this culture. In fact, you know more about contemporary kid culture than most adults do.



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

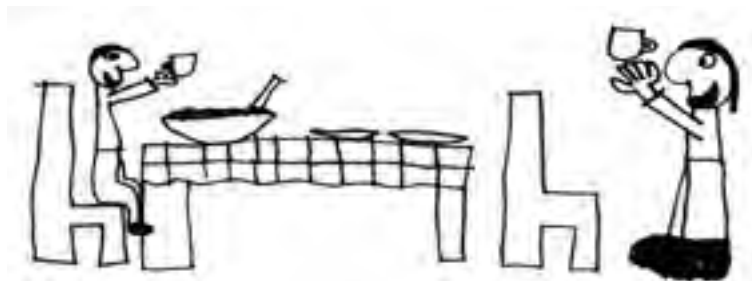
As you begin writing down what you already know about a specific topic, you will discover many things you don't know. Your knowledge and your curiosity are woven together. When you write down what you know (a self inventory), you simultaneously discover the questions which will guide your fieldwork.

***Write an essay about your culture, including as many elements as possible.***

***Write your autobiography. Tell not only what has happened in your life, but also the context (the culture) of your life stories.***

### **Family**

Instead of spying on strangers, you might decide to look more closely at the culture you already know best, your family. Families are the most important cultural group—it's where we learn the most important social skills, spend the most time, know people best. More elements of cultural behavior can be observed in families than in any other group.





---

## **Tools & Skills for Ethnographers**

An excellent way to begin is to record what you already know (a self inventory). Take any topic and write down everything you already know. If you're exploring holidays, and it's near Thanksgiving, you might jot down where your family has Thanksgiving; who usually comes; who prepares the food; what food is made; how the table is set (including decorations); what happens during meal time (especially storytelling); and other traditions connected to Thanksgiving, like taking walks or playing football.

Not only will you know a lot about the topic, you will probably become interested in what other family members know. You're almost ready for your first interview.

### **Elders**

In traditional cultures, extra respect is given to older people, elders who are recognized as having special skills and wisdom because of their age and experience. Elders often are the most skilled craftspeople, storytellers, gardeners, healers, and teachers in our communities; they help us connect to the past and traditions; they have deep understanding of present events; and many times they can give us valuable advice.

***When looking for elders to interview, first consider your grandparents, even if they live far away--they will be especially willing to help you in your study of family and local culture. Also consider older neighbors and friends of your family.***



## **Tools & Skills for Ethnographers**

*To gain a deep understanding of the culture of your elders, consider doing an apprenticeship with one of them. In a typical apprenticeship, the elder will teach you something they know, while in exchange you help them with chores that may be difficult for them.*

### **Neighbors**

Who in your neighborhood always knows what's going on? Who can give you a tour of the neighborhood? Who participates in local events? Who has cool stuff in their homes and yards? Who do you want to get to know?

Every neighborhood has its own experts, artists, and leaders. You don't have to look beyond your own street to find interesting people to interview.

*Make a list, with phone numbers, of local people you can interview. Include the topics you might talk about. Ask parents, friends, and neighbors to help you make this list.*

### **Observing Places (and Objects)**

Go any place, indoors or outdoors. Record what first grabs your attention in this place. This focus could be a tree in a front yard, a game in a park, a piano in the living room, a large stained-glass window in a church. Notice how everything else in this place connects to what you are focusing on.

Next, step back and describe the whole place, the big details: what and where is this place? how big is it? what is it used for?



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

what are the most important things in it? Check out all your senses. Usually we begin with what we see, but also consider sounds, textures, smells, and tastes. Use spatial words to organize your descriptions: left, right, center, above, below, inside, next to, behind, in front, etc.

Finally, describe things in or about this place that one doesn't notice at first. Surprises. Small details.

***Repeat this exercise for a variety of places: indoors, outdoors; at home, in public.***

***Now follow this same sequence in describing an object: what you notice first; then the whole object; finally small details.***



### Observing People

Observe a person you know. Watch them doing something; watch them talking with someone. What photo could you take that would best represent the person you are observing? What are the main words needed to identify her or him and give an overall impression—name, age, gender, background, posture, size, clothing?



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

Pay extra attention to this person's face, their expressions that communicate emotions and reveal personality, and to their eyes. Be aware that in some traditional cultures we show respect by not looking in the eyes of the person we are talking with.

Study, also, the posture and physical actions of the person you are observing, paying special attention to their hands. What gestures does this person use while talking?

Finally, listen to words and voices, what is said and how it is said:

- pitch (high or low?)
- volume (loud or soft?)
- speed (fast or slow?)
- rhythm (pauses? steady pace?)
- tone (soothing? angry? excited?)

***Repeat this exercise to describe a variety of people: overall impression, faces and eyes, hands and gestures, voices and words.***







## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

### Observing Events

Events (people acting in places) are stories, best presented as a series of images. Use time words to organize your telling of an event: first, next, then, when, while, before, after, soon, later, yesterday, in 1963, etc.

First find the focus of the event. When documenting a conversation, highlight the give and take between the participants. When describing a craftsperson making an object, or a cook making dinner, zero in on tools, materials, and skills. When recording a ceremony or celebration, pay attention to everything: location, participants, relationships, conversations, music, gestures and dance, food, gifts, speeches, and stories.



***Tell the steps, in sequence, of the event you are observing. Like a sports announcer giving a play-by-play account of a game, record what grabs your attention each moment.***



---

## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

### Interview Questions

Interviews and observations are the two main forms of fieldwork. Before interviewing someone, it's good to know what you hope to hear and learn. Are you looking for facts, stories, detailed steps in making or doing something, or reflections? Make a list of topics or questions, similar ideas grouped together, arranged in an order where one topic easily leads to the next.

Sometimes the best way to ask for information is not with a question. "I'd love to hear a story about hunting" will get much better results than "Do you know any stories about hunting?"

If the person you are interviewing is a stranger, it's often a good idea to get some background information at the beginning: correct spelling of their name, birthplace, age, occupation. Obviously you don't begin an interview with your mother in the same way! As the interview progresses, you'll want to encourage longer answers such as stories and detailed explanations.

Writing questions beforehand helps you get ready for listening. Now you can stop worrying that you won't know what to ask—and get ready to listen to what the other person has to say.

***Practice writing questions that prompt long answers:***

***Tell me about a time when you . . .***

***What are the exact steps in making . . .***

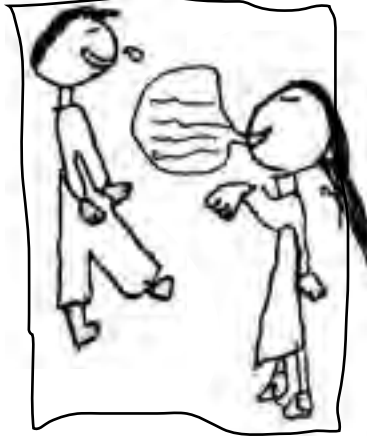
***What is most important about . . .***



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

### Performing Listening

During an interview, your questions mostly come from listening to the interviewee (the person you are interviewing), not from the list you prepared in advance. As much as possible, look at the interviewee, not at your list of questions. Put your list to the side where you can find it if you get really stuck.



Think of an interview as a conversation. Your main job is letting the interviewee know that you enjoy hearing what they are saying—by acting out your listening. Most important is to always look in their eyes, unless you are in a culture where you show respect by lowering your eyes. Respond to what is being said with appropriate facial expressions, nodding, saying “uh-huh.”

Your most important response is to ask follow-up questions that come from listening to what’s just been said. If the interviewee has just told you she loves gardening, your next question most likely responds to that statement. You might ask any of the following questions: “What do you most enjoy when you are gardening?” “Tell me about your garden.” “What do you grow in your garden?” “I help my dad put horse manure on our garden. What do you use for fertilizer?”



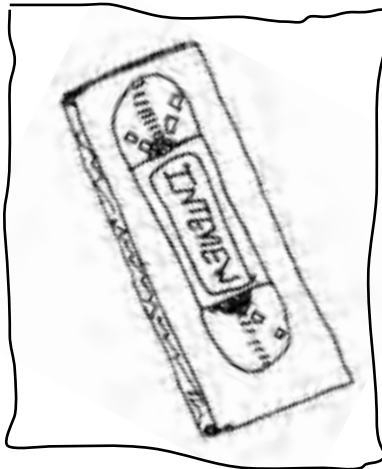
## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

A successful interview builds a relationship. Your excellent listening may help your interviewee remember things they haven't thought about in a long time. Listening is your main way of honoring the experience and expertise of your interviewee. Of course, you'll also say "thanks" several times at the end of the interview.

*If possible, schedule your first interviews with people you already know: parents, grandparents, neighbors, and family friends.*

### Audio and Video Recorders

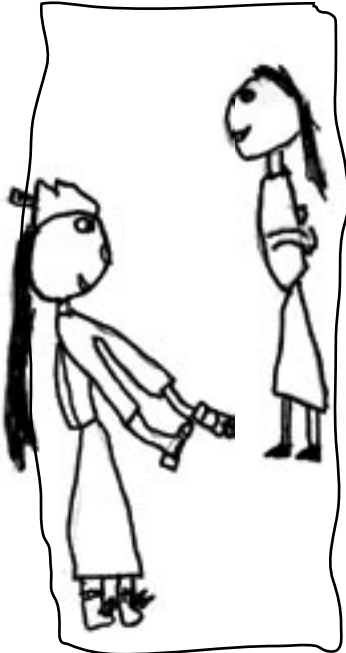
The simplest way to remember what we learn in an interview is to write it down quickly. But sometimes we want to record the exact words that are said. The primary tool for recording an interview is a tape recorder.



A taped interview allows you to listen again to what was said and to transcribe (write out word for word) the most important sections. Transcribed interviews are very useful for creating media presentations for your community. Although transcribing takes a lot of time, sometimes it is necessary.



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers



An external microphone will greatly improve the sound of the interview; necessary if you want to use the tape in presentations. At the interview, place the mike as close to the interviewee as possible.

If you are using a tape recorder to document an interview, it's a good idea to begin by saying: "Today is (date). I am (your name), talking to (name of the person you are interviewing), at (place of interview), in (city, state)." This helps you get started, lets the person you are interviewing relax, and puts important information in the front of the tape for later use.

Usually it's better to use a tape recorder for an interview, unless the interviewee will be showing you material objects during the interview. In that case, use a video recorder if it's available—or a tape recorder plus a still camera. If you are using a video recorder, ideally you will have two people, one to interview, and the other to do the taping.

The biggest mistake students make with video recorders is moving images too often or too quickly. Zoom (moving from close to distant, or distant to close shots) and pan (moving



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

the camera horizontally or vertically) as little as possible. Focus on the face of a person who is talking; focus on the hands of a person who is demonstrating the steps of doing something.

Audio and video recorders are also used for recording music and documenting events.

***Practice using your tape or video recorder a number of times before you go to your interview.***

***Before transcribing parts of an audio or video tape, first create an audio or video log--brief summaries of what is said or shown, cued to either the built-in timer or a stop watch.***

### Surveys

Another way to gather information about local culture is to interview many people with the same questions. If you want to know what rules you have in your family, you can simply write out a self inventory, and ask your parents and siblings for ideas. If you want to know what rules families have in your neighborhood, you'll need to ask many people. It might be interesting to compare what parents and kids say!

RULES			
~	~	~	~
~	✓	✓	✓
~	✓	✓	
~	✓	✓	✓

While interviews will give you lots of in-depth information, surveys can give you quick information from many people.



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers



For example, what percent of households have rules about jumping on furniture, using the telephone, or how much TV can be watched? While yes-or-no or multiple choice questions usually lead to poor interviews, they are perfect for surveys of many people.

The challenge is to ask questions important for the study of local culture. Finding out what percent of your neighbors drink Pepsi may be less important than discovering what percent decorate for Halloween or attend parent-teacher conferences.

An equally difficult challenge is to understand the data you have collected. Try to interpret it in a number of different ways, and give evidence for each interpretation.

***What do you want to know about a specific cultural element in your neighborhood? Now write important survey questions that will help you answer your inquiry.***

### **Background Research**

Students of local culture often do background research in libraries and archives to help them better understand their fieldwork. Every photo, every piece of writing—historical or contemporary—is a document that might help you answer your questions about local culture.



---

## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

What have other ethnographers written about the type of group or cultural element you are studying? Although the most useful material is typically written for adults, you can probably work your way through a few pages that can greatly increase your understanding.

What is the local history of the cultural element you are investigating? If you're lucky, you'll find a book in a library to help you gain historical perspective. More likely, you'll need to look in archives (places where documents are stored). If you have a local historical society, you might find old letters, diaries, photos, or other artifacts. Check out historical museums also, a kind of archive for old objects.

Chances are that some of the best documents are in the homes of people you interview. Begin by asking at home for old documents. Whenever you interview friends and neighbors, ask if they have old photos, letters, or other historical records.

Contemporary documents are easier to find. Libraries often have old newspaper articles on microfilm; local newspapers often have more recent articles available on web sites.

You can gain geographical perspective by comparing what you observe locally with what students are observing in other places, sometimes published on web sites.

***List local libraries and archives useful for your project. Make sure you include family archives such as photo albums and old furniture.***



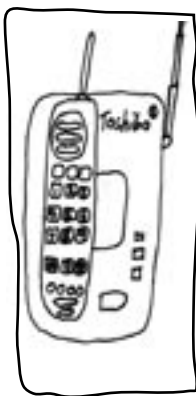
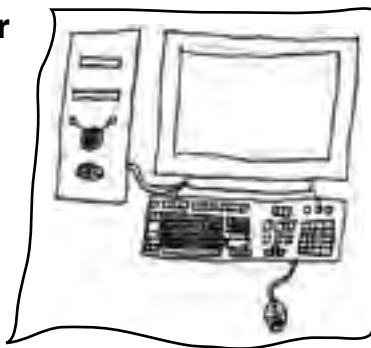


## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

*Find web sites with documents related to your local culture; and student-created web sites that show the local culture of other places.*

### Telephone and Computer

Also important for studying local culture are your telephone and telephone book. Many times you can answer your questions with short telephone interviews. Sometimes you'll want to call to schedule longer face-to-face interviews.



You might be scared the first time you call a stranger. With practice, you'll discover that adults are usually happy to answer questions from kids who know what they want. Before you call, first write down questions to help you organize your thinking.

Email letters are another great way to ask quick questions about local culture. More and more local information can now be found by doing web searches.

You may also use your computer to write up your fieldnotes—and if you have the skills, edit your digital photos or video. Later you may use your computer to present what you have learned in a web site, slide show, newsletter, or visual display.



## Tools & Skills for Ethnographers

*Ask your parents how to use all of the sections of your telephone book: residential, commercial, and governmental; white, yellow, red, and blue pages.*

*Role play making telephone calls to strangers. Quickly identify yourself, your project, and your questions.*

*If you have access to a computer, get email addresses for your grandparents and other adults who can answer your questions about family or local culture.*

### **Participation**

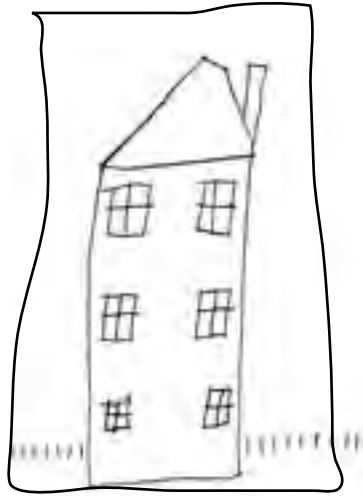
The best way to learn local culture is to become involved. If you want to understand how to make salsa, there's no better way than helping someone who knows how. If you want to understand local politics, go to local meetings, drop off leaflets for candidates door-to-door, or go with your parents to a polling booth. If you want to understand polka music, learn how to dance the polka.





## **Tools & Skills for Ethnographers**

Kids often want to improve the world they live in. Think locally! It's much easier to preserve an endangered local wetlands than a distant rainforest. It's easier to help stop bullying in your school than to stop wars in the Middle East. Often the most effective way to be of use in the world is to work with your neighbors. Possible community service projects are as numerous as the ideas in your imagination.



***Find other kids in your neighborhood who want to create a neighborhood newsletter or web site.***

***Work with your neighbors to organize a regular neighborhood potluck.***

***Ask your parents how to best help the neediest people in your community. Can you volunteer for a food pantry or Habitat for Humanity? Which neighbor needs help with simple chores such as mowing the lawn, raking leaves, or shoveling snow?***





---

## **Cultural Elements**





# Cultural Elements

## Relationships

Culture is built out of relationships between people. Make a long list of the categories of people you relate to, and the most important people who belong in each category. Make up new categories if you need to that fit your experience. For example, you can either include all brothers and sisters, half brothers and sisters, and step-brothers and sisters in the same group—or put them in separate groups. Note overlapping categories (e.g. siblings who are friends, a neighbor who is your coach).

Here are examples of categories:

- parents
- brothers and sisters
- grandparents
- aunts and uncles
- cousins
- nieces and nephews
- other relatives
- friends
- classmates
- teammates
- playmates
- neighbors
- teachers (school, classes)
- coaches
- minister, priest, or rabbi
- doctor, dentist, therapist
- storekeepers (where you are a regular customer)
- employers (if you do child, pet, or lawn care, etc.)



---

## Cultural Elements

The people that you name in this list are the people that you have cultural relationships with. Think about these people and these relationships as you go through the other cultural elements in this field guide.

***Now, describe the kinds of interactions you have in the different relationships you listed. Include when and where you interact, the activities you do together, the responsibilities and decision making you each have in this relationship, the exchanges of gifts or money that you do, and the kind of respect that is shown in the relationship. Tell how long you've had this relationship.***

### **Groups & Identities**

Local culture is made up of the different groups that people belong to. Some groups are based on parts of a person's life that can't be changed. These "assigned" groups include:

- Family, including the family you're born into, the family you live with, and the family you marry into,
- The region you are born into,
- Whether you're male or female, and
- How old you are.

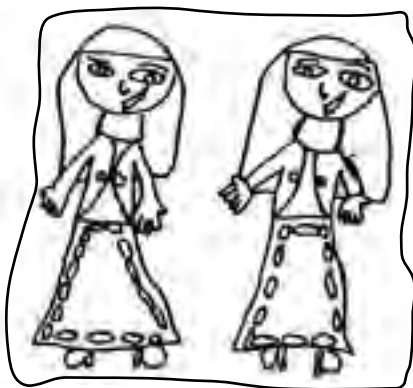
Other groups are based on shared interests that people usually choose. These "voluntary" groups include:

- Occupational groups,
- The place where you live,
- Recreational groups, and
- Advocacy groups (groups that work toward mutual goals like labor unions or service organizations).





## Cultural Elements



***Choose one person in your family. Make a list of the assigned and voluntary groups that the person belongs to. Each group has traditions and customs (long-established practices and beliefs) that it holds as important. Each group has certain privileges (advantages, benefits, or honors) and responsibilities (duties, expected tasks). Find out one tradition, custom, privilege, and responsibility for each group. For example, an eldest boy in a family might have the responsibility to take out the trash every week, the privilege of being the first one to be served dessert, and the tradition that he will work in the family's business after he grows up.***

A person's cultural identity is based on the groups they're a part of. But just because a person belongs to a group, they might not identify with it. For example, someone might have Cuban and Irish ancestors but identify themselves only as being of Cuban descent. A person might belong to a union at work but not participate or feel connected with it. A person born in Hawaii might move away and live in Oregon but still call Hawaii "home." Those are choices the person makes about their identity, about who they say they are culturally.

*Ask your family member what their cultural identity is. Does it include all the groups they belong to or only some?*



---

## Cultural Elements

Why does someone choose to emphasize one of the groups they belong to and not others? It's usually because of social circumstances. Maybe one of the groups they belong to has low social status or is discriminated against. Maybe another of the groups they belong to is eligible for special benefits or privileges. Maybe there are lots of other people nearby who are part of one group, creating more opportunities for participation. Maybe a political crisis has made it dangerous to be identified with a group. Many people emphasize or ignore part of their full identity because they think it is to their advantage to do so. This tells us that cultural identity is something that may change throughout a person's life based on the groups they belong to, the choices they make about those groups, and social circumstances that influence those choices.

### **Family**

How big is your family, and who is in it? Some people have parents and brothers and sisters as part of their family. Some include grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Some families have two moms or dads. Some have one or more stepparents. Some have other adults as part of the family. There are lots of different kinds of families.

Families can range from very small—one parent and one child, for example, to very large. Many Indian tribes are organized into clans, for example the Bear clan of the Ho Chunk, or the Bitter Water clan from the Navajo. Clans are family relationships that come either through the maternal or paternal line of the



## Cultural Elements

family, and members of your clan are members of your family. So you might have hundreds of people in your family! If you are Ho Chunk, and a member of the Bear clan, you would never marry another person from the Bear clan, even if they grew up in another town and you never met them before. That would be just like marrying your brother or sister!

Families have their own cultures. Many families will share certain words or expressions that mean something special only to them. For example, if your little brother had trouble pronouncing your name when he was learning to talk and called you “Way Way” instead of Larry, that might become your nickname in your family. Families also have their own special traditions, like an annual rubber ducky race or making popcorn on Friday nights.

Your family is your best jumping off place for local culture studies. Because this is the group you spend the most time with, you can learn a lot about your own culture by interviewing and observing your family members.



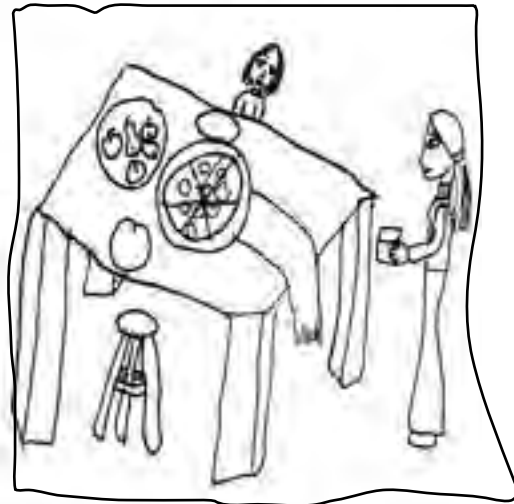


## Cultural Elements

### Mealtimes

A good meal can be more than food. For some families, it's important for everyone to sit together around a table while they eat. Other people watch TV. Some want to have a beautiful table, with place settings and flowers; others focus on the food. Some families see mealtime as a chance to talk; others listen to music while they eat. What does your family do at mealtime?

Many families are so busy they can't always eat together. Still, they might choose one meal a day, or once a week, where they all sit down together. Often at mealtime families have special traditions, like a prayer or song before the meal. ***What traditions are important to your family?*** Often each person has a job related to the meal—setting the table, pouring drinks, or cleaning up afterward. ***What are your mealtime chores? Which mealtime is the most important in your family—breakfast, lunch, or dinner? Why? Interview different family members to find out what they think makes a good meal.***





## Cultural Elements

We might have mealtime customs that we use everyday within our families, but rules can change when a guest comes or when it is a special meal or holiday. Maybe with guests, you use cloth napkins instead of paper towels. Maybe your assigned seat changes so that the guest can have the “seat of honor.” Maybe food is served in pots and pans for regular meals, but is served on platters or special dishes for holiday meals. ***How do your family’s everyday traditions differ from traditions during a special meal with extended family and guests?***

Not everyone behaves the same at mealtime! Some people think it’s fine to slurp while they eat, or to lick their plate when they’re done. Some people burp at the end of a meal to show they’ve enjoyed it. ***Have you ever been a guest and found that your host family had different behavior expectations from you? Have you ever had a guest at a meal who did something you considered unusual?***





## Cultural Elements

### Cooking

We have to eat to live. But food does more than keep us alive. It can make us feel loved and valued. It can make us feel at home, or feel as if we are really experiencing a new culture. The culture of food can be seen in how it is selected, how it is prepared, how it is served and how it is eaten.

What we eat is cultural. We can see how culture affects food when we think about what is considered food. Some cultures eat bugs! Some regard fat as a real delicacy. Other cultures would never consider eating beef. Food can also be a bridge between cultures. Every culture has “staples,” foods that get eaten every day. Depending on your family, you might expect bread, or tortillas, or bagels, to be served at least once a day. For other cultures, the “staple” might be rice, beans, or potatoes.

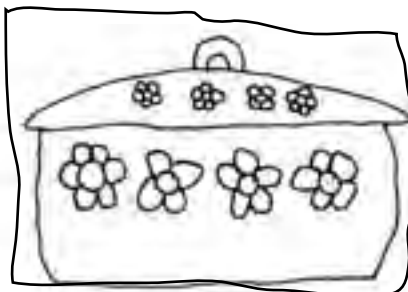
Some cultures or religions have certain foods that they are prohibited from eating. Traditionally, Jews and Muslims do not eat pork, Sikhs do not eat beef, and Hindus eat no meat at all. ***Are there foods that your family doesn't eat? Why? Are there times when your family avoids certain foods? Are there other times when certain foods are supposed to be eaten?***





## Cultural Elements

***Think about your own family's cooking habits. Make a list of your family's expectations about food. Which foods do you eat every day? What foods do you expect to eat raw, and what foods have to be cooked? Why? Do you have a special family recipe? What is it, and what makes it special to your family? Where does it come from? Who are the cooks in your family? Do certain people cook certain meals? Are cooking duties shared—and if so, who is in charge? Why? Take notes while someone is cooking. Do they work alone? Who else is there, and what are they doing? Step by step, write down what happens while food is being prepared.***



## Farming

How does your family get its fruit, vegetables, and meat? Most people buy their produce and meat at the grocery store. This food comes from farms. Some of these farms are very large and are far away from the grocery store—maybe even in another state or country. In the summer, many people go to farmers' markets to buy produce. Many of the farmers who sell at farmers' markets come from smaller farms in the local community. Often, local farmers will know their customers, but the owners of large farms that sell their products beyond the boundaries of their community probably won't know who is buying from them. ***Ask farmers who sell locally if knowing their customers is important to them.***



## Cultural Elements

While some types of agriculture are found all over the country, certain crops and types of farming are associated with certain regions of the country, because of soil conditions, weather, land availability, or other factors. The Mississippi Delta is known for growing cotton. Massachusetts' and Wisconsin's marshes are top producers of cranberries. Because they have large



areas for grazing, Texas and the western states raise a lot of beef cattle. ***Find out what types of crops are grown near you, and why.***

There are many different types of farms: factory farms (farms that raise only one product in extremely large numbers); ranches (large tracts of grazing land); family farms (where the land and farming practices are passed from one generation

to the next); and community-supported agriculture (where people can buy shares or even help work on a farm, to get produce during the year). ***Do you know anyone who farms? Interview them. What crops and/or animals do they raise? How big is the farm? What type of equipment does it need? What changes has the farmer seen over years of farming?***

At one time, maybe during the lives of your great-grandparents, half of the United States lived on farms. Now, only





## Cultural Elements

about 1% of our population lives on farms. ***Interview family members to learn if anyone in your family has lived on a farm. If so, when? Where? What crops did they raise?***

### Occupations

Jobs are a great way to learn about culture. Every workplace has traditions and special knowledge shared by workers. You can interview anyone who works to learn how each workplace creates its own kind of local culture. Ask about:

#### **Tools and clothing.**

Every worker has special tools they use to get their job done, whether it is a wrench, a backhoe, a net, or a computer. And many workers have special clothing they wear when they work, such as a nurse's uniform or a judge's robe.



#### **Skills and Training.**

Each job requires knowledge to do it right. Often, someone experienced in a specific skill will train a new worker—how to manage a certain machine on an assembly line, or how to carry a heavy tray filled with hot dishes. Sometimes a worker undergoes a “rite of passage” to prove to fellow workers she has the skills needed for her job. A carpenter's aide might be



---

## Cultural Elements

sent for a “board stretcher;” if he realizes there is no such thing, and laughs at the joke, he is welcomed into the fold of workers.

**Special language.** Often workers use special words, like code words, for things they work with a lot. A police officer can respond to a 10-31 (crime in progress). An office worker might fill out a TER (travel expense report).

**Stories and jokes.** All workers have stories about their jobs. Waitresses tell stories about bad tippers. Firefighters talk about dangerous fires. As workers tell stories to each other, they show they have the same concerns. Stories also teach new workers about the job. People also may tell jokes about their work, and some occupations especially seem to attract jokes: “What do you get when you cross a librarian with a lawyer? All the information you need—but you can’t understand a word of it!”

Sometimes, jobs get passed from generation to generation within a family. If your family owns a business, like a bakery, it is likely that the next generation will want to keep that business going. If your father is trained as an electrician, it is likely he will pass those skills to you. Sometimes jobs are common to a community because of the natural resources nearby. Logging, tree farming, wreath making and paper mills are common industries for places that have extensive forests. Commercial fishing, sail making, boat building and installing piers are common in coastal communities. ***List the jobs of your family and friends. Are these typical jobs within your community?***



## Cultural Elements

### Informal & Formal Learning

How did you learn to tie your shoes? Partly by watching other people, partly by practicing yourself, partly by being taught by someone who already was good at it. Maybe it was something you learned at school. Did you follow the same process when you learned how to braid hair, or set the table, or play 4-Square, or bait a fishing hook?

We learn much of the basic information we need to live in a culture when we are very young. A lot of times we don't even realize that we're learning! We learn how to live in a culture by using lots of different learning tools. We watch other people. We listen to what they say—even getting scolded is a way to learn by listening. We try things ourselves. We have an expert instruct us.



Who are the experts in our lives? They are all around us: our families, our friends, our neighbors, and people who work at teaching others. It might be your mom who makes great pie. It might be your friend who knows how to do a handstand. It might be your grandpa who loves playing the harmonica. It



---

## Cultural Elements

might be your neighbor who is expert at growing flowers. It might be your camp counselor who dives really well.

As we get older, we need and want more specialized skills and more detailed information. Sometimes we continue to get that informally, by observing and listening and practicing and getting advice. But sometimes we need formal instruction from a master or a textbook. A master is a person who is very good at what they do and can teach others to do it too. This might be your piano instructor or your Japanese language teacher. This kind of formal instruction usually happens in some type of school or class. It happens in a special place set aside for learning and at a specific time. Sometimes we can't learn directly from a master so we find a book that gives thorough explanations and detailed information.

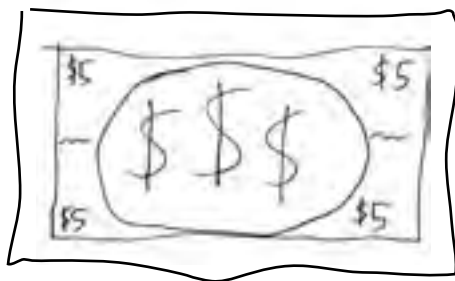
***Look around your school. What are the kinds of things you learn informally—how to fold a paper football or how to play a hand-clapping game? Who are the skilled people you learn from? Then, what are the kinds of things you learn formally, in a class with a different expert? Observe yourself for a day. Make a list of what you learn informally and formally at school and at home. Be sure to observe each of the cultural elements from this field guide. Specifically, observe how you learn about things like relationships, power, and exchanges as well as things like music, crafts and games.***

When we visit a culture that is different for us, we have to learn all over again. We use informal and formal means to learn:



## Cultural Elements

watching, listening, practicing, asking for help, going to a class, finding information in books. For many people, that is the fun part about traveling to other cultural places—learning the basics all over again. For people who travel as refugees or immigrants, that is one of the big challenges for them in the new place—learning basic parts of the new culture like rules



for driving, handling money, or shopping for food. ***Do you know a person who has lived in a different culture? Ask them for a story about how they learned the new cultural ways.***

### Local Knowledge

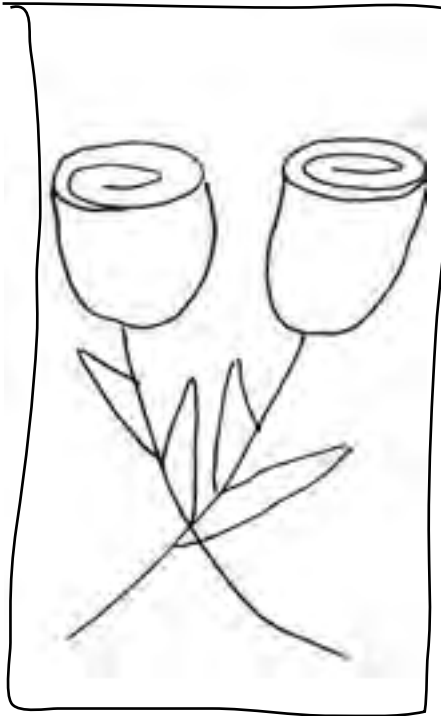
If someone tells you to turn left where the drugstore used to be, you know you are dealing with local knowledge. Local knowledge is information about a place that only long-term, local residents are likely to know. This can include knowledge about weather or local plants, or well-known short-cuts, or local history—even who is related to whom!

Local knowledge often includes local names for places, plants and phenomena. Local residents might refer to a house as “the Smith place,” even though the Rodriguez family has lived there thirty years. A poplar tree in Wisconsin might be an aspen in Colorado, or a poplar elsewhere. A drinking fountain in Kansas City is a bubbler in Milwaukee.



## Cultural Elements

Local knowledge can extend to knowing about local kinds of time (like the length of the growing season where you live) to knowing how to interpret nature signs to predict the weather (like recognizing from a certain kind of cloud that it is going to snow.) It can include knowledge about what to avoid in your environment (like knowing what a fire ant hill looks like) to knowledge about what to do with the resources in your environment (like pulling petals from a violet to show the king sitting on a throne, or biting off the end of a honeysuckle to taste the sweet part of the flower).



Local knowledge includes culture as well as nature. People who have lived someplace for a long time know shortcuts and paths that help them get from one place to another more efficiently. They know which roads are the best. They know which local businesses have the best prices, or the best merchandise. They know which neighbors don't get along. They know Mrs. Watson gets really upset if you let your dog stop in her flower garden.



## Cultural Elements



*Think about the local knowledge you have, and make a list of what you know that a newcomer to your community would not know. Collect stories from people who have moved to a place and had to learn local knowledge.*

### Memory

Most of culture is made up of what we remember. Consciously or not, we select the information that we remember. It's a good thing we don't remember everything that ever happened to us, because our heads would explode with all the details!

We are more likely to remember things if they either fit with our cultural ideas of how things are, or are strikingly different from our ideas. We also are more likely to remember details that fit well into the telling of a story. In other words, memory is an interpretation of the past. You can't always trust memory as completely accurate, but as you listen to what people remember, you hear what is important to them.

*Think about the kinds of things you find worth remembering. Do you remember particular events, like the day your baby sister was born? Or particular places, like your grandparents' house? Or special times and trips, like a family vacation when your brother was carsick the whole time and you had to sit next to him? Sometimes our memory helps us remember the usual—the details we are used to seeing every day, and sometimes our memory helps us remember the unusual—different “first times,” like the first time you hit a homerun or rode a bike.*



---

## Cultural Elements

Sometimes, when we hear stories from our friends or family, our memory helps us remember other people's memories. Telling stories is a great way to keep memories alive. Community members participate in "communal memory." Not just common stories, but also public traditions like parades, local museums, and murals or other public art can pass on information about important people or events to future generations.

***Try creating a "memory web"—in the middle of a piece of paper, write your name. Around it, write words that represent your important memories. Try to show how memories are connected by drawing lines between them. Create as many webs as you need to record your memories. Does this web help you tell a satisfactory story about your life? Interview someone older than you and try to create a "memory web" of their memories.***

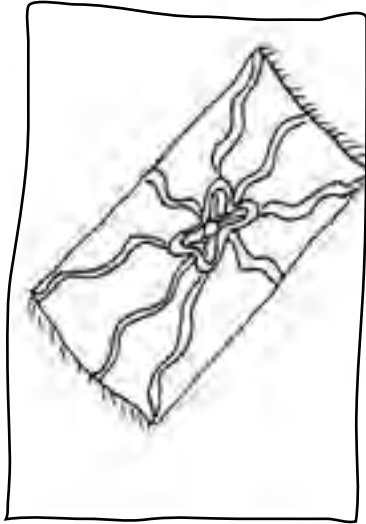
## Keepsakes & Heirlooms

Do you have something special that you keep to help you remember someone or something? That's a keepsake. Has anyone in your family given you something that belonged to an ancestor? That's an heirloom. Does your family have photo albums or boxes of photos that they like to bring out and look at together sometimes? Often we use physical objects or pictures to trigger memories or stories. The objects we keep around us help to tell the story of who we are. Keepsakes and heirlooms might be items that continue to be used over and over, or they might be items saved—not to





## Cultural Elements



be used everyday but rather to be preserved as treasures. We have many other kinds of objects that help us preserve memories: a souvenir, like a pennant from a ball game, can help us remember a specific occasion; a memento, like a ticket stub or a lock of someone's hair, can help us remember an event, a person or an experience; photos can remind us of special times or people.

***Look around your home for keepsakes, heirlooms and other objects that are important in your family. Ask an older family member to identify the keepsakes and heirlooms important to them. Make a list of these items. Are they used or treasured? Look in your bedroom and make a list of important "memory objects" you have kept. How does this list differ from your first list? Choose one object that has meaning and bring it to school; tell your classmates the story of why it has significance.***

Often, people will create objects meant to preserve memories. A retired mechanic might build miniature steam engines that he remembers from his youth. An immigrant might paint pictures of holiday scenes from her home country. Even more



---

## Cultural Elements

commonly, people put together lots of different items to create ensembles with sentimental value. A quilter can make a quilt with cloth from each of her children's clothing, as a way to remember their childhood. A family might create a display of their kids' awards and art projects. A traveler might create a scrapbook with items from the trip to remember where he has been. What ensemble could you put together to capture an experience you've had?

### Storytelling

Everyone tells stories—to remember, explain, and entertain. Although we are not always aware of it, our most common language use is hearing and telling stories—at the dinner table and playground, on the porch and the telephone, in classrooms and court rooms, in offices and factories. Mostly we hear and tell short anecdotes about recent events and people, places, and problems we know. Our best stories become polished by being told many times.

Here's how to recognize that a story is being told:

- the teller talks about specific people, in a specific time and place, who have a specific problem . . . or tells the steps of doing something;
- the people in the story often talk to each other (dialogue);
- the teller uses gestures to show actions;
- the teller often announces a story is beginning ("You won't believe what happened to me this morning!") or ending ("I'll never try that again").



## Cultural Elements



**Personal stories** are told about ourselves and people we know experiencing unusual problems or humorous happenings in everyday life. **Community stories** are somebody else's personal stories, passed on from teller to teller, about important or humorous local events.

**Legends** include ghost stories and stories about local place names told as true stories. "Urban legends" sound like newspaper stories that are "too good to be true." **Do you believe ghost stories when you hear and tell them?**

Some **jokes** are short funny anecdotes, told about character types (e.g., a numbskull, a shrewd farmer, "two guys"). The problems they encounter are quickly resolved with a humorous punch line. Other jokes are longer stories, like a "shaggy dog story." This is a rambling, elaborate story with a punchline that is a very bad pun. **What makes a good joke?**

**Tales** are longer fictional stories—about talking animals, tricksters, or magical events. These older stories, still sometimes heard in some cultures in the United States, are often beautifully patterned with repetition and poetic expressions.



---

## Cultural Elements

***Make a list of the stories you tell most often, and another list of the stories you hear most often. Who do you know who tells excellent stories? What makes their stories interesting? What kinds of stories do they tell? When and where do they tell stories?***

An excellent way to hear stories is to interview someone, if possible with a tape recorder. Ask about experiences that are easily remembered: accidents, illness, pranks, punishment, embarrassment, being scared, first times (e.g. catching a fish, dating future husband), work, accomplishments, travel, unusual characters.

### **Oral Lore**

Our lives are filled with oral lore. Everyday, we communicate with each other through proverbs and sayings, jokes and riddles, and traditional rhymes. “Lore” means knowledge, and these common expressions that we are used to hearing do contain advice and traditional ways of dealing with things.

Proverbs are traditional short statements that pass on advice, or that comment on situations. Usually, they are metaphors that allow us to relate one situation to another. If someone tells you “Don’t play with fire,” they aren’t necessarily talking about fire. They might be telling you to stay out of a “hot” situation—like teasing someone with a bad temper. People might tell you not to put all your eggs in one basket. Not many of us carry our eggs in baskets anymore—but the advice is still good. It means you shouldn’t put all your resources into one place, or you could lose it all. ***Do a survey where you ask different people***



## Cultural Elements

***if they have a saying for each of the following situations:  
What do you say when someone heads impulsively into a  
dangerous situation? When someone who is equally at fault  
in a situation blames someone else? When someone makes a  
mistake and then tries to correct it, too late?***



Certain types of jokes and riddles are traditional. A riddle is a joke form that asks a question and gives a funny answer. ***It's easy to collect traditional riddles from people. Ask them to tell you riddles that begin in the following ways: "Knock knock"; "What do you get when you cross a \_\_\_\_\_ with a \_\_\_\_\_?"; "How many \_\_\_\_\_ does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Think of more common forms that you recognize from listening to jokes, and ask about them as well.***

We use traditional rhymes all the time, for everything from jumping rope ("I love coffee, I love tea, How many boys are stuck on me? 1, 2, 3, 4"), to choosing ("Eeny, meeny, miney moe"), to teasing ("Alfie and Susie, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G"). Rhymes can also be used as jokes. Limericks, for example, often start by identifying someone from a certain place: ("There was an old lady from Kent, Whose nose was most awfully bent, She followed her nose, One day I suppose, And nobody knows where she went"). ***Survey your friends to see how many rhymes they know, and what they use them for.***

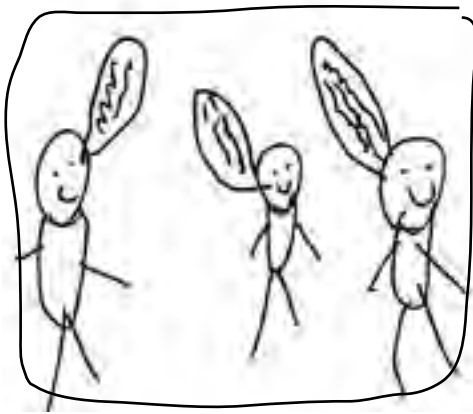


## Cultural Elements

### Language

People talk! Some estimates say that there are 6,800 different languages used around the world today. ***How many of those languages can you name? What languages are spoken in your community?*** Some languages are used more than others. If a language doesn't get used enough, it can die out. Then many rich ideas, important knowledge, and unique sounds are lost.

Many people use different languages in different settings. You might use one language at school and another at home. Some people use one language for worship and another for business. Sometimes a person knows how to read a language but can't speak it, or can understand it in a conversation but can't write it. ***What are the different languages people in your family speak? Who uses which language where? Do they know the language to speak, read, write, or listen to it?***



People use different levels of formal and informal language in different settings. You might speak more carefully when talking with someone you want to impress. Formal speech might include full pronunciation of



---

## Cultural Elements

words, such as saying “until” instead of “til;” using titles such as “Ma’am” or “Sir;” and not using interjections such as “um” or “like.” In other words, making your spoken speech more like written speech.

***What are the occasions when you try to speak as properly as possible? How do you change your speech to make it more formal? You might speak informally when playing with friends. Informal speech might include slang and nicknames. What are some nicknames that you and friends have for people or places? What is a slang word that you use that your parents or grandparents don’t? Ask a person of an older generation what some popular slang was when they were young. Record the meanings as well as the words.***

Think about the main language you speak. There are small differences between how you and someone from another place speak it. When those differences are bundled together, they make up a “dialect.” ***Do you say “sack” or “bag,” “soda” or “pop,” “coulee,” “hollow,” “holler,” or “valley” in your community? If you have a pen pal in another part of the country, ask that person which words they use.*** There will be differences in pronunciation between dialects too, such as in a “Southern accent” or a “Brooklyn accent.” ***Find out what defines your region’s pronunciation style. These kinds of regional differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and even grammar are true for lots of languages, not just English. Talk with someone whose first language was not English. Ask how the dialect they speak differs from how their language is spoken in a different region.***



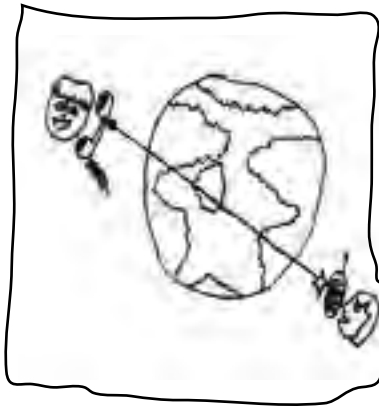
## Cultural Elements

### Communication & Media

People communicate, using many media or channels to send and receive messages. In mass media, such as network TV, the public has little control over what is communicated because relatively few people decide what will be broadcast. In local media, more people send messages and have control over what is communicated.

**Oral media**—listening, talking, and sign language—are always local, and are usually spontaneous. Face-to-face with family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and classmates, we exchange information, ask questions or ask for help, give commands, argue, discuss, and entertain each other with songs and stories. In a typical two-person conversation, participants send as many messages as they receive, and feedback is immediate.

***Next time you talk with someone, notice how much is communicated with facial expressions, gestures, and vocal effects.***



**Print** media, such as books, magazines, and newspapers, may be mass-produced. Print media for small local audiences include refrigerator lists, flyers, graffiti, even notes passed in school. ***Does anybody in your family keep old personal letters? Does your***

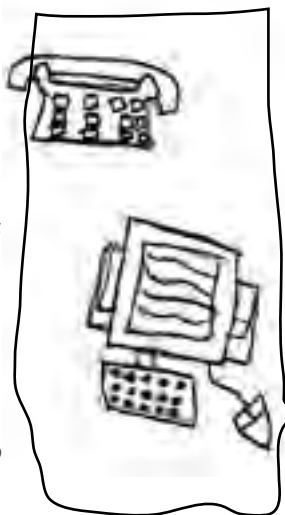




## Cultural Elements

*neighborhood have a newsletter? Who makes the outdoor signs in your community? Are photos a print media?*

**Electronic** media use electronics to send messages. TV, radio, and movies are usually created for a mass audience, but many communities support public access radio and TV for local audiences. Other digital media include the telephone, home videos and email. *Does the telephone change the way people talk to each other? Do you know anyone who plays telephone pranks? What are locally produced radio/TV shows your community listens to? Do you make home videos that you copy to share with family and friends?*



## Music

Listen to the tune your mom always whistles as she cooks dinner, the songs your friends sing on a long bus ride, the “Dreidel Song” at Chanukkah, or the fight song the band plays at football games. These are examples of music in local culture.

To learn about music in local culture, listen to the music but also pay attention to the performance. Who is making the music? Where and for whom are they performing? How does the performance event connect with local culture? Music that is part of local culture tells us about important ideas and values shared by the people making and hearing the music.



## Cultural Elements

***When and where does your family sing—around a campfire, on birthdays, during holidays, every Wednesday at church? What are other groups you belong to: a Scout group, a sports team, a group of friends? What kind of music do those groups make—cheers, chants, yodels, body music (like using your armpit or cheek to make musical sounds), songs with words changed to be funny or disgusting?***

***Listen to the music in your community. When you walk through your neighborhood, are there places where people go to make or hear music? Who goes there and when? What kind of music is there? What are the songs that most people know how to sing? Ask different people you know to name three songs they think everyone in your community knows. Ask them to sing you a lullaby—do they choose the same one? Ask them to sing you a song that is part of a game.***

In some ethnic groups, certain musical instruments are especially important. You'll hear tamburitza music when Croatian-Americans or Serbian-Americans perform, the uod





## Cultural Elements



in traditional Arab-American music, and Native American drumming at powwows. These often have lyrics, but not always. With other instruments, the musician doesn't sing at all, like with qeej music at Hmong events or Scottish bagpipe music.

Favorite instruments might be regional too. Listen for accordions in local music especially in Northern Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Quebec and Minnesota, for example.

***What musical instruments are important in your community's regional and ethnic cultures? What is***

***the group that most values that instrument? Musical styles are regional too. In the blues, a music style created by African-American musicians, you'll hear particular styles in California, Memphis, the Piedmont region (the Carolinas and Georgia), Chicago, Texas, the Mississippi Delta, and St. Louis. Is there a style of music that is especially linked with your region? How have styles of music from other regions influenced your area's local music traditions?***



## Cultural Elements

### Dance

If you look for dance in local culture you'll find regional dances and ethnic dances. Regional dances are favorite dances from particular parts of the country. In the Upper Midwest, look for polka; in Appalachia you'll find clogging; in the West, people love the two-step. Some dances you'll find in any region, like the waltz. ***What is a dance that is part of the traditional life of the region where you live? Where is it danced—at weddings, community celebrations, in dance halls?***

Ethnic dances are traditional dances from ancestral countries. Sometimes these dances tell stories; sometimes they demonstrate a traditional activity like harvesting or fishing. Often these dances can teach you about the geography and history of that country's different regions.





## Cultural Elements



***Look for an ethnic dance troupe in your community; likely places are churches, fraternal organizations, and dance schools. Try to find a children's ethnic dance troupe. Go to a performance or practice. Listen to the music, look at any special outfits the dancers are wearing, notice if they use props or special equipment, and ask about the stories that the dances tell. Talk to the choreographer, the person who arranged the dancers' movements. Ask how they took the original dance and made changes to it.***

Ethnic dances have different characteristics. Watch to see:

- Are the dancers noisy or quiet, playful or serious? Is there a lot of foot stamping, jumping, and hopping or are the movements smooth, steady and graceful?
- Do the dancers touch or stay separate? Do they move in lines, circles or other patterns?
- How do the dancers move their hands, their heads, their feet? Are there other body parts that they move in special ways?
- Is the performance meant to be watched or can others join in?

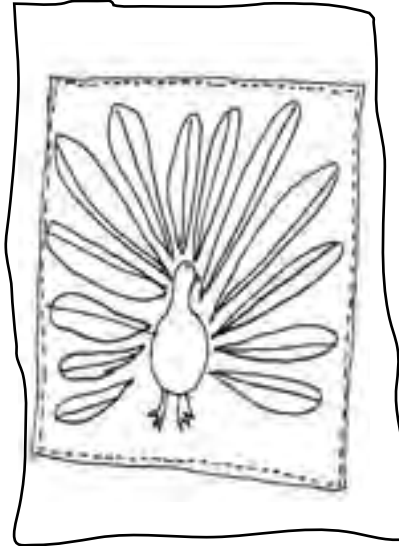
Be sure to dance along if you get the chance!



## Cultural Elements

### Crafts

Traditional crafts, often called folk art, usually are the result of handwork (creating something with your hands). Examples include sewing, blacksmithing, knitting, making baskets, rug weaving, and woodcarving. Traditionally, these craft items are made to be used. But that doesn't mean they can't be beautiful!



Sometimes people make things that show something that is important to them in their lives. A Hmong story cloth, for example, might show a story of war and immigration.

Sometimes people make things because a parent or grandparent did, and they want to carry on the tradition. An Oneida corn husk dollmaker who learned from her mother can teach her son to make dolls. And sometimes people make things as a symbol of their identity—ethnic, regional, or occupational, for example. A Danish-American family might make red and white paper heart baskets every year to hang on their Christmas tree.



---

## Cultural Elements

Often people learn to make something by watching or working with someone else. Those skills don't have to be passed from parent to child! You have probably learned to make things from your friends, such as a cootie catcher, a paper airplane, or a friendship bracelet. Sometimes people improve their traditional skills by working with an expert.

***Have you learned how to make anything yourself? Who did you learn from, and why did you want to learn? Is this a skill you have passed on to someone else?***

***Does your family own anything special that is handmade? What do you know about this object? How did your family get it? See if you can find out how this object is used or what it might symbolize for your family.***

## Clothing

There's an old expression, "Clothes make the man." How you dress tells the world who you are, what kind of people you hang out with, what kind of work you do, even what your religious values are. ***Think about what you want your clothes to tell other people. Do you and your friends wear the same kind of clothes? Why or why not? Do you and your grandparents wear the same things? Why or why not? Interview someone older, like a grandparent, about their ideas of what is "cool" and "uncool" in clothing. How do their ideas differ from yours? Why?***

Clothes are good clues to local culture. They can help us identify ourselves as part of a group, whether a group of



## Cultural Elements

friends, or family, or religion. The clothes we wear can tell someone what activities are important to us (do you wear sports team emblems? cowboy boots? outdoorsy, casual clothes, or dressy clothes?), or they can say something about the part of the country in which we live (do you own a winter coat and snow boots? or are most of your clothes lightweight and short sleeved?)

We also wear different clothes at different times. We all have special clothes for different events in our lives. If you play soccer, for example, you probably own soccer clothes. You probably have dress-up clothes for special events like First Communion, or work clothes for chores at home. Some people have “traditional” clothing that is meant to identify them as part of an ethnic group—saris for women of Indian ancestry, or kente cloth for those of Ghanaian ancestry.



***Make a list of clothing in someone’s closet. Try to create categories of types of clothing you find there. From comparing the lists of clothing in each category, what can you learn about this person’s culture? What activities are important to them? If you have time, compare this list to that of another person’s closet.***





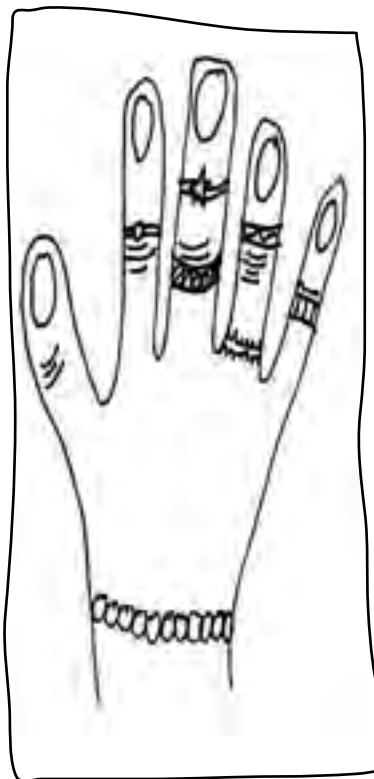
## Cultural Elements

### Adornment

Besides clothing, people have figured out all kinds of ways to adorn themselves. Men and women make themselves distinctive through body markings, jewelry, haircuts, make-up, nail painting and other forms of adornment. Sometimes the way we adorn ourselves delivers messages about us. Wearing a gold ring on your left hand can show you're married, for example.

People mark their bodies in various ways. Some get tattoos. Some will use henna to decorate their hands or feet. Many people pierce their ears or other parts of their bodies and decorate themselves with earrings or body rings.

We especially like to adorn ourselves for special occasions. Many Hmong women will wear elaborate necklaces for Hmong New Year celebrations. Older African-American women often wear very beautiful hats to church. A Pakistani-American bride may be draped in jewelry for her wedding ceremony.





## Cultural Elements



We also adorn ourselves in less conspicuous ways every day. Haircuts are one way we affect our appearance. These can range from very simple styles like a “butch” or “pageboy” to more noticeable styles, like shaved heads or intricately curled hair. Men might grow beards or mustaches. Women may use barrettes, headbands or other decorations in their hair. People also use different braiding techniques: from a simple plait to French braids to cornrows. Some people weave beads or hair “extenders” into their hair. Some twist their hair into dreadlocks. Some wear wigs. Some never cut their hair. Some shave initials into their hair. Some use dye. ***Spend some time in a barbershop or hair salon to observe the many things people do to their hair.***

Another common adornment is hats. How many hats do you have, and what types (baseball caps, stocking caps, etc.)? Sometimes head coverings are not seen as a type of adornment, but as a sign of respect to God. In many religions, women cover their heads with scarves, wigs or hats as part of their everyday dress. Men may wear yarmulkes or turbans for the same reason.

***Think about the forms of adornment you use in your everyday life. Which are to make you attractive? Which are part of another cultural identity?***

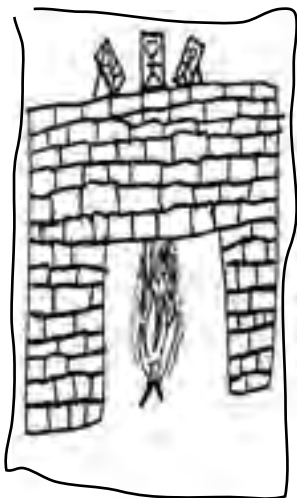


## Cultural Elements

### Aesthetics

Have you ever heard the saying, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder?” It means that people have diverse ideas about what is beautiful and pleasing. These ideas are what we mean by the word “aesthetics.” Like so many other parts of our lives, aesthetics are influenced by our culture.

Some of the most common beauty that people experience is found in nature. ***What are favorite places in your neighborhood where people go to see beauty in nature? Does your neighborhood have a place where people can hear pleasing natural sounds like a stream breaking over stones or birds singing? Have people done things to that place to make it even more pleasant—adding a place to sit, planting flowers, keeping it clean, creating a path?***



Most of our ideas about what is beautiful come from what our cultural groups teach us about what is pleasing and what goes well together. What to put in a garden or a living room, what colors to use in a quilt or a flag, how to decorate a basket or a pie, how to design a set of clothes or a building, how to decorate a boat or a child’s hair, how to sing a song, how to arrange a dance or a drawing—all these artistic decisions are influenced by cultural aesthetics.



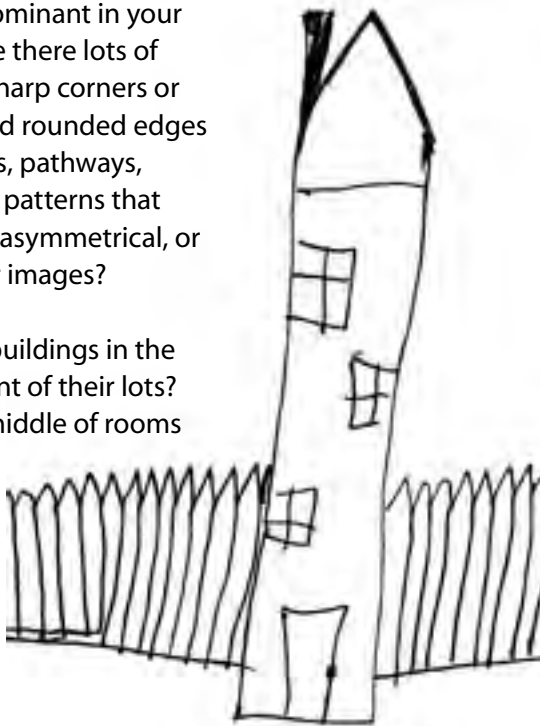
## Cultural Elements

Think about the aesthetics that are around you in—

**Color.** Is there a certain color that is dominant in your house? Which colors are often combined? Which color combinations are avoided or preferred? Is there a color that you wear for special occasions: red for happy celebrations, black or white for funerals, orange for religious ceremonies? Do colors help you feel and express certain emotions?

**Design.** Are there certain design features that are dominant in your neighborhood? Are there lots of straight lines and sharp corners or are there curves and rounded edges to buildings, streets, pathways, gardens? Are there patterns that are symmetrical or asymmetrical, or repeated shapes or images?

**Use of space.** Are buildings in the middle, back or front of their lots? Is furniture in the middle of rooms or along the walls? Is there a separation between public and private space or are they merged?





## Cultural Elements



Other aesthetic elements include decoration (what types, how much, where is it placed, on what), sounds (high pitch or low, single or multiple tones, soothing or energized rhythms), movement (smooth or halting, consistent or varied pace), word choice (proper or informal, rhyming or not, the rhythm of syllables) Aesthetics are important in lots of cultural elements described in this field guide. ***Read the pages for Mealtimes, Home Interiors, Gardens, Buildings, Cemeteries, Adornment, Craft, Music, Dance, Keepsakes, or Storytelling. Choose one of those topics and then survey your home or community. What are the aesthetic choices you can find that are present in different gardens or in how different people adorn themselves, in the music they make, the language they speak, or the movements they dance?***



## Cultural Elements

### Buildings

Buildings tell us a lot about our local culture. They can tell you what people in your community need buildings for, or even what people do to make a living. Think about your neighborhood. ***How are buildings arranged? Do they face the street? Are there apartment buildings, so that “homes” are stacked vertically? Are there houses close together? Are they far apart, surrounded by fields or large yards? Besides your house or apartment, are other buildings part of your home?***

If you live in the country, look at the barns around you. Sometimes, you can tell how a barn is used by the way it looks. A tobacco barn will have slats in its side walls that open to provide ventilation for the tobacco. An older dairy barn will have two floors—the animals live on the first floor, and hay is stored on





---

## Cultural Elements



the second floor. Newer dairy barns might be large single-story barns. If you live in town, notice the types of buildings used for business. Stores will look different from office buildings—larger windows and more open floor space. Public buildings, like courthouses or libraries, may look different from commercial buildings. They might be grander, or more decorated—even have public art—to symbolize the important role of serving the public.

Architectural style can tell you something about the history of your community. You might notice older, two-story houses with fancy detail work around the rooflines and windows. Split-level ranch houses may be more recently built, since the 1950s.

***In your neighborhood, be a house detective. Does one house look different than others? Perhaps it is older or newer. Can you find buildings that once were used for something else but now are used as homes? Look at the front of a house (the façade) and decide if it looks balanced. If it doesn't, that might mean that the house has been changed. What changes do you think there have been, and why were they made? In your neighborhood, are most homes in your neighborhood wood, or brick, or something else? Why? If you know a builder, ask him or her what skills they think are important to make a building.***



## Cultural Elements

### Home Interiors

What makes an apartment or house feel like a home? What's inside reveals a lot about your family culture. The interior of your home shows what is important to your family—comfort, cleanliness, informality, color, light, food, pets, or activity.

Your detective work begins with how you enter your home. Which door do you use to come in? Is it the same door that guests use? Do you come into a kitchen, or a hallway, or another room like a living room or family room? What is the first thing you see when you come into your home? Lots of people will have a family display area in a public space. This might be a table or other area with family photographs, and perhaps trophies, awards or other objects that are important to the family. ***Choose one room in your house, and describe all the furniture and objects in it. Ask an adult family member where each thing came from. Why does your family keep these things?***







## Cultural Elements



Often home interiors show what a family thinks is beautiful. Some families like to have lots and lots of interesting objects in their living space. Some like to have their living spaces very empty. Some find earth-tone colors more relaxing; others like bright colors and lots of contrast. Some families like to have more traditional, older furniture—wood, for example. Others like

a contemporary look, and still others buy furniture for comfort. *What does your family like? What decorations do you find on your walls? Who chooses them?*

*Draw a map of your home interior and show where furniture is placed, where your family displays are, and where people in your family gather. Is it around a kitchen table, or in a family room? Why? How are different rooms in your home used—bedrooms? Bathrooms? Basement? Which spaces are public and which are private? If you could change your home interior, would you? How? In the future, when you get your own home, what would you like to keep the same, and what would you change? Why?*



## Cultural Elements

### Gardening

Do you have a yard? People use their yards in different ways. Sometimes yards are filled with crushed stone or cement for easy care. Sometimes yards will have “yard art,” humorous or beautiful. Sometimes yards have playground equipment. Often, people raise plants in their yard, for beauty and for practical use. ***What kinds of things are in your yard? Does your family grow flowers or vegetables? Who is the gardener in your family?***



Any garden calls for lots of decisions, and often culture influences those choices. Some people raise vegetables to save money; some because they think homegrown food tastes better; some simply garden for recreation. Some grow plants organically; others use chemicals to help plants grow. Some gardeners plant large gardens. Some use community garden plots. Others just raise tomatoes in pots on their patios. Even choosing how much space to devote to flowers or vegetables can reflect cultural traditions.

Think about how your garden is organized. Some people plant in straight rows. Some build raised beds, with plants close together. Some use traditional methods like the Native



## Cultural Elements



American “Three Sisters” garden, where squash, beans and corn are planted together in a hill to help each other grow. ***Ask the gardeners in your family how they make their planting decisions.***

Immigrants brought seeds from their native countries, so that they could continue to raise and prepare traditional foods important to their cultures. Every year, they saved seeds from that

year’s crop to plant again the next year. That way, certain plants have been passed from generation to generation, through heirloom seeds. ***What plants are important in your family? Do you know someone who grows a certain flower or vegetable every year? Find out why they do.***

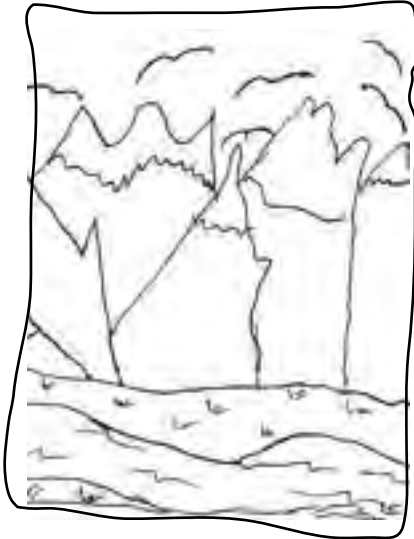
## Landscape

Everything you see is culture. If you look at the landscape around you, you see many different cultural elements at work. Sometimes people are drawn to a place because of how it looks. Sometimes people change a place as they build their community. ***Think about where you live. What kinds of trees and plants do you see around you? Is the land flat, or do you live among hills or mountains? Where is the water?*** Geographical features affect the way people live, and the way people live affects geographical features. We tear down hills



## Cultural Elements

and dam up water. Sometimes we create new lakes or new hills, or introduce new trees and plants to an area. Sometimes we don't do anything.



***Draw a “bird’s eye” view of your neighborhood. What geographical features—rivers, lakes, hills, forests—are included? What are the major roads and buildings? Are tall buildings and lots of people part of your landscape? Or is there lots of open space?*** This picture tells you what a distant observer might see from an airplane.

Gathering places, the places local residents value, are important parts of landscape too! ***Now draw a map of the places in your community that are meaningful to you. Where do you go to have fun with your friends? Where does your family shop locally? Where do you ride your bike or walk? Where do you feel safe? Where do you feel unsafe? What buildings or places do you recognize as important to you and others in your community? Where are these things in relation to each other?*** You have created a map of your community’s cultural landscape.



## Cultural Elements

### Cemeteries

Hey, you can study local culture even after death! Cemeteries are a wonderful place to spend time. Some cemeteries, in fact, have been designed to be like city parks, with green space, trees, ponds and beautiful landscapes. (In fact, this type of “garden cemetery” inspired the creation of city parks!) The first cemetery designed this way, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston, became a popular gathering place where people would dress up to meet their friends and neighbors on walks or rides through the cemetery.

How do you know where people are buried? In most cemeteries, the people buried there have “addresses:” the cemetery assigns a Section and Lot Number to each burial location. A section is a grassy area surrounded by roads. A lot is the area of one grave. The cemetery’s sexton will have a map of all the individual



lots. Often, people interested in genealogy (looking up their family tree) use information from cemeteries to get birth and death dates of relatives. But you can find other information there as well. Look in your local cemetery for family groupings or religious groupings. You might even notice that sometimes people of the same ethnic group are buried in the same section. You may find evidence of different religious traditions;



## Cultural Elements

for example, in the Jewish tradition, stones are left on the top of a headstone when someone has visited the grave. In some Asian traditions, an offering of food is left on the grave. You can look for other things too:

### Architecture.

Cemeteries often have crypts, buildings that house the remains of several people, usually from one family. Crypts and other monuments can reveal the architectural fashions from different times. For example, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Classical style, which emphasized symmetry and ornamentation like columns on Greek and Roman temples,



was very popular. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, you can find both the Gothic style, with pointed arches and high windows and roofs, and the Egyptian style, with pyramids, columns with papyrus scrolls as ornamentation, and obelisks (like the Washington monument). 20<sup>th</sup> century monuments



---

## Cultural Elements

and crypts can be more modern or personal, although some people still prefer the Classical or Gothic styles.

**Symbols.** Often headstones will be decorated with pictures of angels, or plants, or animals. These images are usually symbols of life or character. Because our experience of death connects us to our deepest feelings and beliefs, these symbols are often religious. See how many of the following symbols you can find: Anchor (hope, steadfastness, salvation); Angels (belief in heavenly afterlife); Blessing Hands (on Jewish graves, a sign of a kohein or priest); Broken column (life cut short); Cobra (immortality); Daisy (youth); Dove (love, purity, peace); Drapery (mourning); Eagle (courage); Garland or wreath of flowers (victory of death and reward in Heaven); Lamb (innocence, usually marks a child's grave); Leaves (triumph, immortality, victory over death); Lily (purity, chastity); Lion (courage, bravery, strength); Rose (love); Rosebuds (shortness of life); Tree trunk (number of cut-off limbs can indicate the number of children the deceased had); Star of David (on Jewish graves, often shows a man is buried there); Wheat (harvest of life); Urn (reminder of death).

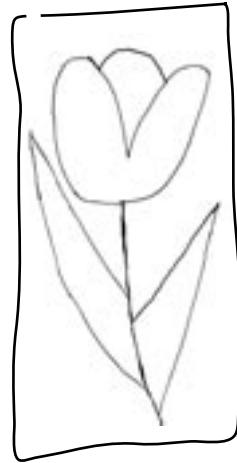
**Epitaphs.** Often, on headstones, you can find traditional or personal phrases or even rhymes that describe the person buried there or talk about the condition of death ("Remember, Man, As you walk by, As you are now, So once was I; As I am now, So you will be. Prepare for death and follow me,"). Walk in your local cemetery and write down the epitaphs you find. What topics get addressed? Are there other patterns that you notice?



## Cultural Elements

**Plants.** Some people look for old heirloom plants; for example, old species of roses planted on graves a century or more ago. Look to see what trees or plants have been planted on old graves.

**Events.** Sometimes, there are special events held in cemeteries, such as Memorial Day, when people visit the cemetery to honor their dead. Veterans Day, Day of the Dead, and Arbor Day may also be celebrated in the cemetery. Attend such an event to see how people honor the dead—for example, by planting, through prayer, or picnics. Funerals, of course, also take place in cemeteries. It is not a good idea to observe a funeral without permission from the family. Many people feel that privacy is very important at such a time.



***Try creating a gravestone rubbing. For this you need butcher paper, masking tape, carpenter's chalk (found in hardware stores), and maybe a bottle of water and a soft brush to clean the headstone. Ask permission first, then choose a headstone to document—avoid rough stones, or eroded or damaged stones. Cover the headstone with the paper, using tape to secure the paper. Using the broad flat side of the chalk, lightly stroke the paper and watch the design appear. At the bottom of the design, write in the name of the deceased, birth and death dates and the location of the graveyard.***



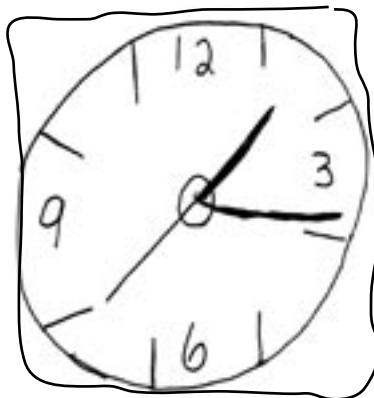


## Cultural Elements

### Time

Time is a way to measure each day and groups of days. We use seconds, minutes, hours, weeks, months, years, decades, and centuries and typically a clock and calendar for this measuring. But there are other ways to measure time too. ***How do you tell time without a clock? Do you listen for church bells or a firehouse whistle, measure the length of shadows, notice if you feel hungry or sleepy? What are the daily routines that people you know follow in a typical day? What are the labels that people you know use for different times in their day—bedtime, storytime, playtime, worktime, breaktime, naptime, bathtime, others?***

What does it mean to be “on time?” Different cultures have different ideas about that. Some languages don’t even have words for “late” or “on time.” For many Native American cultures, “on time” is not according to the clock but instead according to when it feels right. For many Northern European cultures, being precise about time is very important.



***Make a list of when you must be “on time.” Then make a list of when it’s OK for you to be “late.” Ask your family for when they can be late and on time too. Ask them, “How much time has to go by before you are ‘late’?” and “How early do you have to arrive in order to be ‘on time’?”***



---

## Cultural Elements

Proverbs from different cultures help us understand different ideas about time. Consider these:

**Mexican**—Darle tiempo al tiempo. (Spanish) Give time to time.

**Kenyan**—Haraka haraka haina baraka. (Swahili) Hurrying has no blessing.

**English**—Time is money.

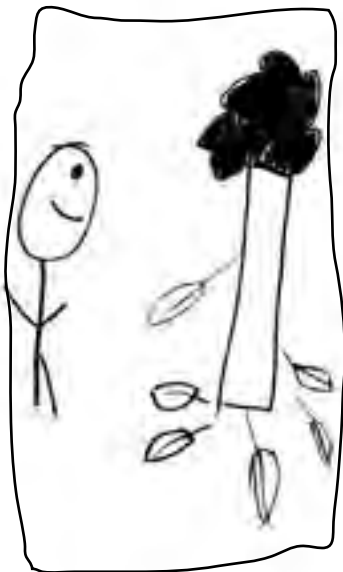
***Collect proverbs about time from your family and others. What ideas about time do the proverbs suggest?***

Time can feel like it passes at different speeds, often depending on where we are or what we're doing. People in cities tend to live with a faster pace of time than people in rural areas. And the cultural pace of time in the Northern Hemisphere tends to be faster than in the Southern Hemisphere. ***When does time seem to go slowly for you: at certain events, when you're with certain people, when you're in a particular place, or when you're doing a particular activity? When does it seem to go quickly? Do you notice a difference between time that is scheduled, like school or work, and time that is unscheduled, like weekends or holidays? Do you ever get so involved in an activity that time seems to stop?***

How people think about historical time is cultural too. Some cultures think about time like it's a line, going on and on. Other cultures think about time like a circle, going round and round. And other cultures think about time like a swing, going back and forth between different periods. ***Do you know how your culture thinks about historical time?***



## Cultural Elements



### Seasons

Local culture is a great place to look for different seasons that organize people's lives. One type of season relates to weather.

***What are the weather seasons like in your region? Is spring rainy, foggy, or hot? Is winter dry, snowy, or windy? Ask people you know when the different weather seasons begin and end. Ask if they have a nickname for any of the seasons, like "mudtime" for spring or "black fly season" for summer.***

Another type of season is connected to particular activities. These seasons might come from work or from recreation. Ask a hunter how the year is broken up for her. Is there a bow season, a black powder season? ***Ask a salesperson how his year is divided; are there slow seasons, busy seasons? What other occupational or recreational seasons are in your community?***

There are seasons for foods too. Is there something that grows wild in your area that people like to collect at the right time of year? Maybe it's black walnuts or mushrooms; maybe it's a certain kind of fish. ***Find out what it is. Ask the person how they know the season has begun, and how they know when it's over.***



## Cultural Elements

Sports also have their own seasons. Find out the athletic seasons that are important in your community. Those will be the ones that have many participants and get covered in the newspaper, radio and TV. There will probably be high school teams for those sports too. Now find a sport that is not as popular. Ask someone in that sport when its seasons begin and end.

Another type of season is a holiday season. These are for favorite or important holidays that spill over into several days, weeks or even months. **Is there a holiday your family celebrates that goes on for a season? What does the holiday celebrate, and when does the season begin and end?**

***Let's look at the seasons that organize your life. Draw a circle—that will represent a year. Draw lines from the center to the outside line to divide the year into different seasons. Include the different types of seasons that are important in your life: weather seasons, recreational seasons, local foods seasons, athletic seasons, holiday seasons. If there's one part of the year that holds lots of seasons for you, then that's your busy season!***





## Cultural Elements



### Gathering Places

Where do you like to hang out? Where do folks gather? It can be a small intimate space like a barbershop, or a larger place like a park or mall, good for people watching. Gathering can take place at a particular time, like an early morning coffee clutch for local residents in a small town, or for a particular event, like a high school basketball tournament.

People like to gather to catch up on local news, to do informal business, or for entertainment or recreation. Over time, people build up relationships with the other people in that place. Most gathering places are used in multiple ways. Maybe you go to a local grocery store to shop, but you also expect to find people you know there, and opportunities to socialize with them.

Public gathering places may be designed to help people share resources—like a swimming pool, a hockey rink or a library. Local businesses also offer opportunities for people to gather. Events are good places for people to gather. A local church supper, a neighborhood potluck, a barbeque at the fire hall or a school picnic can all offer people a chance to get together. Often, such community events are held in public places.



---

## Cultural Elements

At events, people get together at a specific time. But in other gathering places, not everyone uses the spot at the same time. And not everyone in that spot knows that a certain business or public space functions as a gathering place. Usually, only members of the community will know local gathering places.

***Go to a local gathering place to observe. What behavior do you see people enacting? How do they know when and where to gather? Look at several different gathering places to see what they have in common. Why would local residents want to gather there? Would an outsider have any way of knowing this was a gathering place for the community? Are there different gathering places for adults and for kids? What spaces are shared by everyone—families, kids, adults. Why?***

### **Visiting**

Sometimes we are hosts and sometimes we are guests. Our culture teaches us what is expected behavior for both of those roles. What is expected may vary for each person depending on their age, gender, position in the family, and purpose of the visit.

***Think about a place where you have been a guest several times in your life—maybe at your grandparents' home or your neighbor's apartment. You are probably expected to act differently there than at your own home. Make a list of these different expectations. Are you allowed to go anywhere in the home or into only a few rooms? Can you***



## Cultural Elements



***take food, open cabinets, use the bathroom without asking? Do you need to ask permission or wait until it's offered to you? Think about how these rules change if you are there for a special event, if there are lots of other people gathered, or if your parents are there. Are these rules different for your siblings because of age or gender? Are you expected to do any work at a home where you're a guest—clear the table, change the sheets? Are you expected to bring a gift when you visit?***

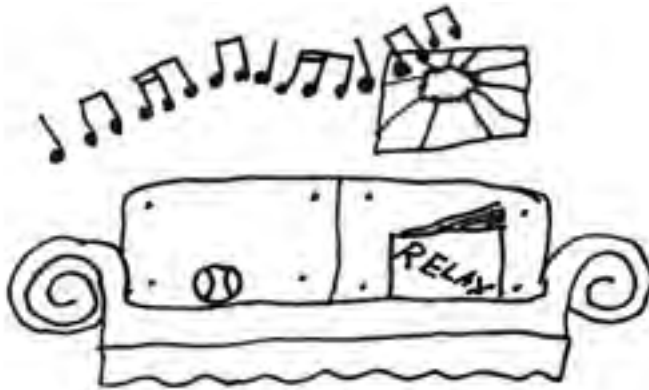
Each family has ways to make guests feel welcome. Some put food out right away, or offer a visitor a cup of tea. Some invite the guest into the living room, the dining room, or kitchen to sit. Some stand by the back door or on the porch. Some gather the entire family for the visit. What are the ways in which your family shows hospitality towards guests? What do different family members do to make someone feel welcome? Are there different forms of hospitality your family uses when a teacher visits your home, or family you don't see very often, or your next door neighbor? What are the stories, foods, drinks, entertainment, and decorations that are part of your family's hospitality practices?



## Cultural Elements

### Recreation

Recreational activities are what people do for fun or to relax. But people are so different from each other! What some people do for fun and relaxation, other people find too boring or too much like work. Recreation might include simple, everyday activities like going for a walk, visiting with neighbors, talking to family or friends, or watching television. Other recreational activities involve organized games or sports, or hobbies that need special equipment or instruction.



Let's look at different parts of your community to find examples of local recreation. ***How do the people who live in your house spend their free time? Do they read, bake, garden, make things, play an instrument? What special equipment do they use? What special skills do they use? How did they learn those skills? Do they do these things at certain times and in certain places? How did they begin this activity? Why do they find it fun or relaxing?***





---

## Cultural Elements

***How do your family's recreational activities connect with your community's? Does the person who likes to read belong to a book group or volunteer at the library? Does the baker in your family get together with others to bake? With whom does he share recipes? Look in your newspaper, in newsletters, and on bulletin boards in public places for announcements of group gatherings and events. These will tell you some of the recreational activities for which people in your community gather together.***

Some recreational activities are tied to the seasons. ***Are winter hockey or summer softball popular pastimes in your community? When are the different trapping seasons? Is there a place that is used for one recreational activity in the winter and another in the summer? What recreational activities go all year round? What recreational activities happen in one season but people do things to prepare in another?***

Some recreational activities are tied to the natural resources of the area. Surfing, riding boogie boards, swimming, building sand castles, reading a book on the beach, jumping waves, digging clams, kayaking, surf casting and sailing are all common activities for people who live near the ocean. Skiing, hiking, riding mountain bikes, camping, identifying wild flowers, rock climbing, whitewater rafting, fly fishing and hang-gliding are all possible for people who live near mountains. ***What are common recreational activities in your community that are possible because of local natural features?***



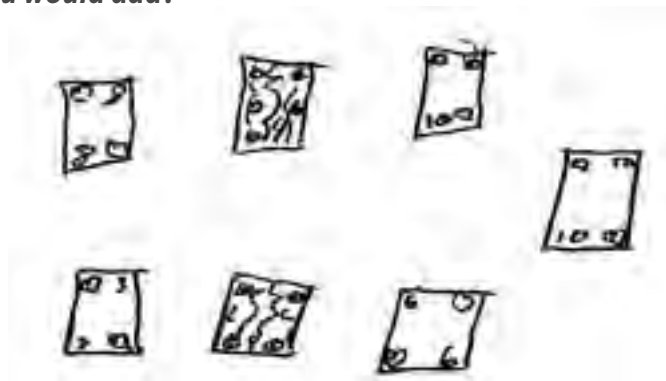
## Cultural Elements

### Games

Everybody plays! When we look for games that are part of local culture, we usually pass by the games sold at stores and look for the ones learned from a friend or family member.

You can think of a game as an activity done for fun by players who usually are competing against each other and who are following a set of rules.

There are many types of games that you can find in local culture. **Choose one type and find out all the games the class knows in that category: running games – games that use sticks or stones – hopscotch games – games that use special equipment like balls, jump ropes, tops, dominoes, dice, cards – guessing games – consequence games – games of chance – games adults play with babies – sleepover games – travel games. Is there another category of games that you would add?**





---

## Cultural Elements

Let's look at one category of games: card games. Some card games are special to certain parts of the United States, such as Sheepshead in Wisconsin, Rook in Eastern Kentucky, Pepper in Iowa, or Bouré (or Boo-Ray) in Louisiana. ***What is a favorite card game in your part of the country that might not be found in other places? Bid whist is a very popular card game with many African-Americans. Is there a card game that's especially popular with a particular ethnic group in your community? Find out if there are other games in your community that have special regional or ethnic connections.***

***Choose a game that's part of your local culture. Watch it being played and take notes about your observations. Here are some basic questions to answer. There may be other important points to note too that you won't think of until you're actually watching the game. If you can't figure out something just by observation, ask one of the players for more information. How many players are involved? Are there partners, teams or individual players? How do the players choose their partners or teams? How are the players arranged spatially? What kind of movements do they use during the game? What are the game rules? What equipment do the players use? What marks the end of a game? What happens to the winners or losers after the game? Listen for the sounds or speech used during the game; what special terms do you hear? Do the players tease each other or brag or encourage each other? Are there rhymes, riddles, or songs in the game?***



## Cultural Elements

### Celebrations

Good times deserve celebration! We find lots of reasons to celebrate—holidays, family occasions, community festivals, and other special events. Some celebrations may be very small and personal, like getting money when you lose your first tooth. Others can be widespread, across towns and states and even the country, like when your favorite baseball team wins the World Series. Some celebrations, like festivals, have many things going on at once. Some celebrations, especially holidays, are observed widely, but remain distinctive within each family.

All celebrations mark important times, and help us share those times with other people. Some celebrations are annual, repeated at the same time every year. This can include holidays like Hanukkah or New Year's Eve, and events like birthdays. Some mark rites of





---

## Cultural Elements

passage—important occasions in our lives like weddings, bar mitzvahs, or graduation.

Many celebrations center around food. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, for example, many people have cook-outs. When we celebrate Thanksgiving, most people eat turkey, and some people jokingly call that day “Turkey Day.” Often, special foods or treats become associated with certain celebrations: like matzah for Passover or dates to break fasting during Ramadan, or cake for a birthday party.

During celebrations people take part in activities they associate with celebrating. At a birthday party, the guest of honor blows out the birthday candles. At a wedding, guests toast the bride and groom. At Christmas, people exchange gifts. A community festival might host a parade.

Every celebration will also have certain symbols associated with it. This might include special songs (“Happy Birthday”), special display items (a Jack-o-lantern for Halloween, or paper cut-outs of skeletons wearing fancy hats for Day of the Dead), or special colors (red for Valentine’s Day).

***Draw a wheel that represents a year. Draw 12 “spokes” for the year to represent the 12 months in the year. In each month, list the annual celebrations that you participate in. How many celebrations do you have every year? Notice if different times of the year have more celebrations than other times. Why might this be?***



## Cultural Elements

### Rites of Passage & Ceremonies

When a person is born, when they die, when they get married, when they graduate—these are all life-changing events. The person is passing from one part of life into another. Usually there is some kind of special event to recognize and celebrate that passage. Such a ceremony is called a rite of passage.



*Think of the rites of passage your family may have celebrated. For instance, ask your parents what they do to welcome a baby into the world. Do they have a special ceremony? Who leads it? Where is it held? Does the baby wear special clothes for it? How long after the baby is born do they have the ceremony?*

Many rites of passage have ceremonies to mark them. These might be formal events that are held at special times and in special places, and are led by a ritual specialist. A judge might officiate as someone takes a vow of citizenship. A principal or president of the school board may present new graduates with their diplomas.



---

## Cultural Elements

People are invited to ceremonies to act as witnesses and to help celebrate. Witnesses underline the importance of the change that has just taken place. When you graduate from your class, your family comes to watch. When you get married, family and friends will come to witness your vows and to celebrate with you. When you die, family and friends will come to your funeral as a sign of respect.

Many rites of passage have special words or gestures (ritual actions) that help mark the move from one stage of life to another: “I now pronounce you...”, “I commend your spirit...”, having water poured over your head, stomping on wine glasses, placing a garland of flowers around another’s neck. ***List other ritual words and gestures that you have witnessed or participated in.***

A ceremony that marks a rite of passage might be a miniature version of the process it symbolizes. For example, a retirement ceremony could include speeches that summarize the person’s work life. A ceremony that marks a young person becoming an adult might have the youth do or say something that proves their maturity.

Some rites of passage are small and informal, without special ceremonies. Think of when you got your first library card or the first time you were allowed to stay home by yourself. That was a small event but it marked that you were older and more responsible, that you had passed into a new phase in your life.



---

## Cultural Elements

***Make a list of the rites of passage you have had in your life so far. What transition in your life did the rite of passage honor? What is the next rite of passage that you are going to go through? What rites of passage have other people in your family gone through? Did each of these rites of passage have a ceremony? If so, what were the ritual actions and words, who were the witnesses, were they held in a special place and at a special time? Was there an important passage in your life that wasn't marked by a ceremony (like moving or your parents getting divorced)? Do you think there should be a rite of passage for that?***

Not all ceremonies mark rites of passage. Ceremonies can be in honor of other types of significant events too. For example, a town might hold a ceremony to present a visiting dignitary with the "Key to the City." In that ceremony, the mayor and other elected officials are the ritual specialists, their ritual actions include speeches and presenting a symbolic key to the visitor, and the townspeople are the witnesses. Ceremonies can mark a certain passage of time, like the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of building or the passing of another day. Lowering the flag at sunset can be a ceremony, if there are ritual specialists and actions like a colorguard that walks in procession to the flagpole and a bugler who plays "Taps." If a custodian goes out at the end of his work day and lowers the flag all on his own, that is not a ceremony even though the same function occurred. What ceremonies that aren't rites of passage have you witnessed or participated in? What were the ritual elements in those ceremonies?

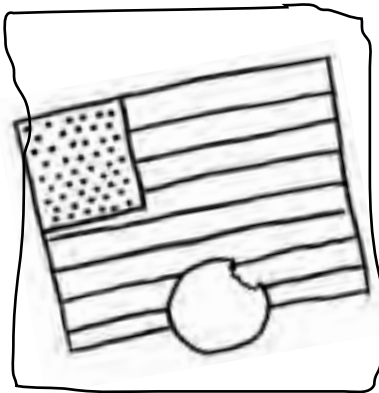




## Cultural Elements

### Cultural Change & Tradition

Culture changes over time and in new places. Sometimes it's because a creative individual or group develops a new way to do something. This kind of change is called an "innovation." An example is when Hmong basketmakers in the northern United States started making baskets out of plastic strips instead of bamboo. The traditional design and use of the baskets stayed the same, but the materials changed because bamboo wasn't available. This innovation was a creative solution to a need. ***Ask an older member of your family about a change they've seen in their lifetime that was a cultural innovation.***



Sometimes change happens because people in one culture borrow from another cultural group. This is called "diffusion." You can see lots of examples of this with food. Americans borrowed spaghetti from Italy and made it one of their favorite foods. More recently they adopted pita bread from Egypt. ***Find***

***local examples of food borrowing in your community. Make a list of popular foods and what culture that food is from.***

Most changes in culture happen little by little. But big sudden changes can happen too, usually because one group forces another to change. This might happen because a group



## Cultural Elements

comes into power and believes its ways are best. People in some cultures have been forced to give up their land and homes, stop speaking their language, use a different system for learning, or even take new names. ***Ask your parents about your cultural group's history. Were your ancestors forced to change parts of their culture?***

Some parts of culture stay the same even while other parts are changing. The parts that stay the same are what we call

“traditions.” An easy time to find traditions is during holidays or rites of passage. That’s when many families turn to the old ways in food, music, dance, dress, religion, names, and language. Following these traditions helps people feel that they’re carrying on the same values that past generations had. Choose a holiday or rite of passage that your family celebrates. Make a list of the traditions that are part of the event. Ask your parents why your family keeps those traditions.



Traditions are important in culture because they connect the present with the past. Most people want to feel some kind of connection with their ancestors and heritage. This means they want to find a balance between change and tradition—keeping cherished old parts of culture while adapting to new needs and trends.



---

## Cultural Elements

### Beliefs

Do you have a lucky pen you like to use on tests? Or certain socks you wear to help you win a big game? These kinds of actions show that you have beliefs about luck. If you do things to bring good luck, then you believe that you can influence the future in certain ways. ***Are there other things you do for good luck or to keep away bad luck? How did you learn to do these things? Ask the members of your family what they do for luck and how they started. Describe the lucky items people in your family keep. How do they use them? Where did they get them? If someone doesn't believe in luck, ask if they believe instead in providence (divine guidance) or something else that brings good things to their life.***

Beliefs aren't only about how to be lucky. People have beliefs about many different aspects of life: fate or karma (is the path of someone's life already determined before they are born?), illness and health (what causes people to get sick?), birth and death (what happens to someone after they die?) planting and harvesting (what signs tell us when to plant different crops?), or how to predict the weather (how do you know if it's going to be a cold winter?).

We can't see beliefs but we can see behaviors and hear statements that reflect beliefs. But be careful with your observations. Sometimes a behavior might look and sound like a belief but is a tradition or game instead. For example, most children who say, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back," and then try not to step on a sidewalk crack, don't really

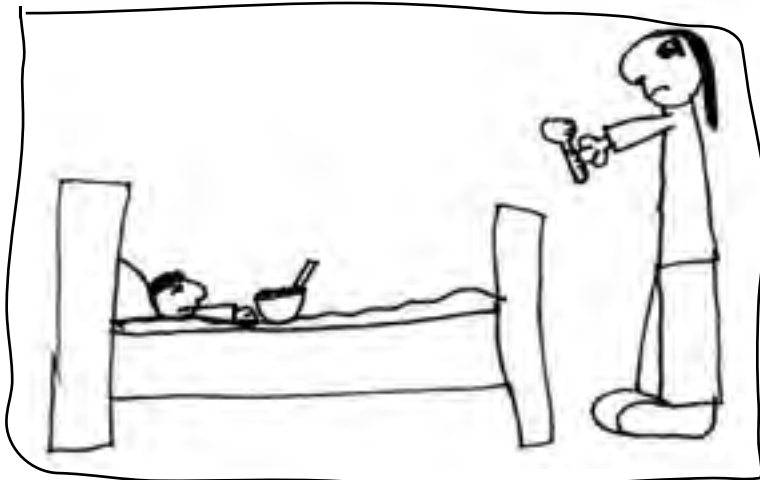


## Cultural Elements

believe they can break their mom's back. ***How can someone studying local culture be sure what is a belief and what isn't when it looks and sounds like one?***

### Health

The culture of health begins in our families. The beliefs and habits we learn and practice affect how we try to stay healthy. They also affect how we treat illness. Our beliefs include ideas about what is health—something in our bodies or in our minds? What causes bad health—germs, bad spirits, living right, fate? Our health habits include eating well, exercising, relaxing, getting enough sleep, and solving emotional problems. These take up a big part of every day! ***What stories do you, your family, and your neighbors tell about illnesses and accidents?***





---

## Cultural Elements

Unless they are seriously ill or badly injured, most people treat themselves with home remedies. You may be surprised to discover that other homes, even of cousins and friends, have remedies both similar to and different from your family's.

***When you get sick, do you take special foods, herbs, or vitamins (e.g. chicken soup, garlic, vitamin C)? Drink extra water, juice, or ginger ale? Take hot baths or use ice packs? What remedies do you use for a cold, stomachache, or a burn?***

***What training, skills, beliefs, and strategies for healing do health practitioners have in your community? Interview not only mainstream professionals (doctors, nurses, dentists, chiropractors, physical and mental health therapists) but also traditional and alternative healers (homeopaths, Christian Science practitioners, acupuncturists, herbalists, shamans, and faith healers).***

People who can't afford health insurance often do not get adequate medical care. What do people in your community who don't have health insurance do when they have medical emergencies?

The local environment affects everyone's health. ***What makes your community healthy? What are local health issues in your community? Do beaches get closed because of pollution? Do you have air pollution alerts? How many of your neighbors drink bottled water instead of local water?***



## Cultural Elements

### Religion

Religion brings together people who share similar ideas and beliefs about deities (sacred beings), the right way to live, and what happens before birth and after death. Religious ceremonies help people mark important changes in their lives like birth, death, and becoming an adult. Religious services invite people to come together for common prayer or to honor important days in that religion's history. Religious specialists lead ceremonies and help people deal with difficult parts of their life like illness or divorce.

Can you tell if a person has a religion by looking at them? Maybe, if they're wearing a symbol of the religion or dressing in a way prescribed by the religion. But those symbols and clothes would only give you some information. Most big religions have sub-groups with differences between them. You might guess that a person wearing a Star of David is Jewish but you wouldn't know if she is Reform, Orthodox, Conservative or Reconstructionist Jewish. You would have to ask.



You might see signs of religion when you visit someone's home. Are there images of deities or respected leaders? Is



---

## Cultural Elements

there an altar? Are there sacred writings on display? Do they subscribe to a religious newspaper or magazine? Note what you see and then ask questions.

***Consider the places of worship in your neighborhood. Visit the buildings and grounds. Notice the design, furniture and decorations. Attend a service. Read the bulletin or newsletter. Look through the hymnal. Listen to the music. Watch the prayer movements. If these things are not there, notice that too. What is there instead? Attend a festival, dinner or other social event there. Look in the yellow pages of your telephone book to find the range of religions in your community.***

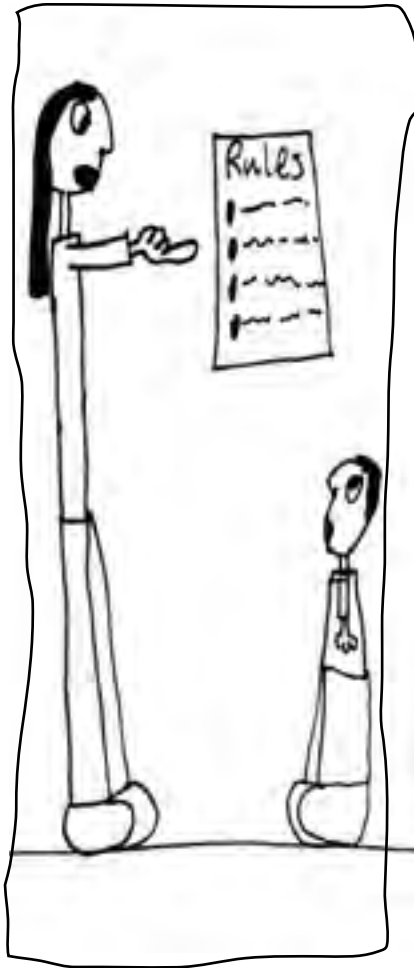
## Power

Who has power and who doesn't? Since you can't see power itself, you have to look for indirect signs of it. You might see signs of power in how drivers on the highway slow down when they see a police car because the police have power over speeders. You can see who is willing to wait for different services and who expects to never have to wait for anything. You might see which groups have power in a community by seeing who the leaders are: are they mostly of the same gender, a certain ethnic group, a particular age range, and of a certain economic status? Who the leaders are can reflect a community's ideas of who makes a good leader.

To study power, we can look at decisions and rule making.  
***Let's start with your family. Who makes daily decisions, like***



## Cultural Elements



*what clothes you wear to school, what you eat for breakfast, or how much TV you can watch? Who makes bigger decisions, those that become rules or involve the whole family? How are those decisions made in your family—do you have a family meeting or do adults decide on their own? Observe your family for a day. What decisions do you get to make? What decisions do only your parents make? Who makes other decisions that affect you? What are some of your family's rules? How are they made? Who decides if a rule was kept or broken? What happens when someone goes against a decision?*

How do people try to influence decision makers? And how do decision makers assure their decisions are followed? For





---

## Cultural Elements

informal decisions like those made at home, people use different techniques like whining, gossip, threats, rewards, good behavior, praise, teasing, joking and stories. ***How do you try to influence people who make decisions? Do you use the same techniques for your parents, your teacher, your leader, your brother/sister/cousins, and your friends?***

Each community has formal decision making too, like making laws. In a democracy, people vote to elect representatives who make laws for all of us. Through voting the entire community helps to elect representatives they think will make good decisions. Police and sheriffs work to enforce laws, and judges make decisions about people who break the laws. ***Ask adults in your community what are the qualities they think a person needs to be a good elected representative, a good police/sheriff, and a good judge. Find out who was elected to represent your neighborhood to make formal decisions like laws. What is a law that was recently created in your community? How does it affect your family or your neighborhood? Did your representative vote for or against that law? Find out about the people who enforce the laws—where is the police station that’s closest to your home? Find out how many people are part of that police or sheriff department, how many are women or men, how did they join the department and why. Find out the name of a judge for your community and what kind of cases that judge hears. Where is the courthouse where the judge works? Do you know if the sheriff or judges for your community are elected or appointed?***



---

## Cultural Elements

### **Exchange**

Every family has its own economy. Family members make, sell, trade, buy, give away and receive items and services. Taken together, the different types of give and take of goods and services are called “exchanges.”

*What kinds of items do people in your family make? Does your mom sew curtains or your brother bake biscuits? Does your grandpa raise orchids or your dad build birdhouses? What kinds of services do people in your family provide for others? Does your sister take care of a neighbor’s dog or your brother babysit for your cousin? Do you mow lawns or deliver newspapers?*

*Now think about how these items and services are given to other people. Are they given away as gifts, traded for something of equal value, done as a favor for a friend or neighbor, done for the sake of the family, donated to a local charity, sold for a set price, or sold for a price that the buyer and seller negotiate?*

*Do the people in your family produce these items and services as their main job or as something done in spare time? Is it a required chore, done in order to get allowance, or done for pleasure and recreation?*

*What does the person do with any money they collect: save it for something special, spend it right away or use it to pay*



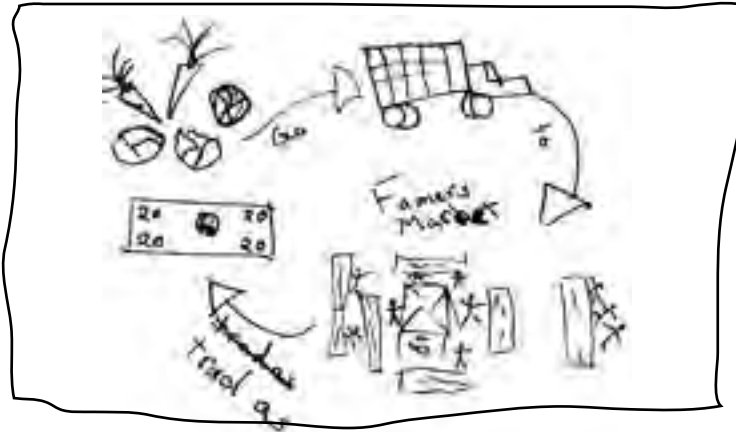
## Cultural Elements

*bills? If they save it, do they put it in a bank or in a jar on their dresser? Do they save all or part? Do they ever lend money to someone who asks? Do they make special deals with the borrower? With whom do they give and receive gifts? What are the occasions when people in your family exchange gifts? With which family members do they exchange gifts? With whom outside the family do they give or receive gifts? Do they try to make sure to give a gift of equal or greater value to the one they received? Is there always an exchange or does one person do more giving and another person do more receiving? Does the exchange happen right away or is there a time delay? Is the delay days, weeks, months, or years long? How old does someone in your family have to be before they are responsible for giving gifts?*





## Cultural Elements



### Economy

When we look at economy in local culture, we look at how people in a community make, sell and buy items and services.

Is there a particular item that a business in your community makes? Maybe it's a process that results in a food item, like canning peas, or baking kringle, making fruit juice, or roasting chiles. Or perhaps your town makes cars, or paper, or cosmetics, or clothes. ***Find out what manufacturing or food processing happens in your community. Where do those products go after they're produced? How many people do you know that work at a particular manufacturing place in your community? How important is that business to the local economy? How do changes in the business like expanding or downsizing affect life in your community?***

Some businesses provide services. Are there cleaners, drivers, landscapers, or well drillers in your community? These types of



---

## Cultural Elements

services fulfill a particular task. Other types of service providers give advice, like investment advisors or counselors. And other types of service providers help with a process, like lawyers when someone has a legal problem, or real estate agents when someone wants to buy or sell a house. ***Make a list of different types of service providers in your community. What is involved in the services they provide? Who do they provide them for? Do they always get paid in money or do they trade their services sometimes? For what and with whom do they trade? Or does the person who provides the service negotiate a fee with their client?***

Most communities also have public services provided by workers like police, firefighters, teachers, and librarians. These services are considered not to be private businesses but are part of what happens for the good of the overall community. Many times these people's salaries or work conditions are affected by decisions made by lawmakers. ***Who are the public service providers in your community? Are they paid or do they volunteer? What kind of training do they get? What services do they provide?***

Not everything that gets bought and sold comes from commercial places. ***Think about other types of products that are made and sold locally but on a small scale. Is there a farmer's market? Who are the vendors and what do they sell? What about artists? What type of art do they create and how do they sell it? Are there resale shops where used items are sold again? Who in your neighborhood has yard sales? Who attends them?***



---

## Cultural Elements

### Transportation

The most common way for people to get from one place to another is by walking. The most common way to transport things from one place to another is to carry them while we walk, in our hands or in bags, in a cart or wagon. Kids depend more on walking than any other age group; they also know the most short cuts. How far away from home are you allowed to walk? What short cuts and other paths do you regularly use? Which is your favorite? Why? Are there hazards on any of the paths like a scary dog or a very busy street? What kinds of things do you see people carrying when they walk by? What equipment do they use for carrying?

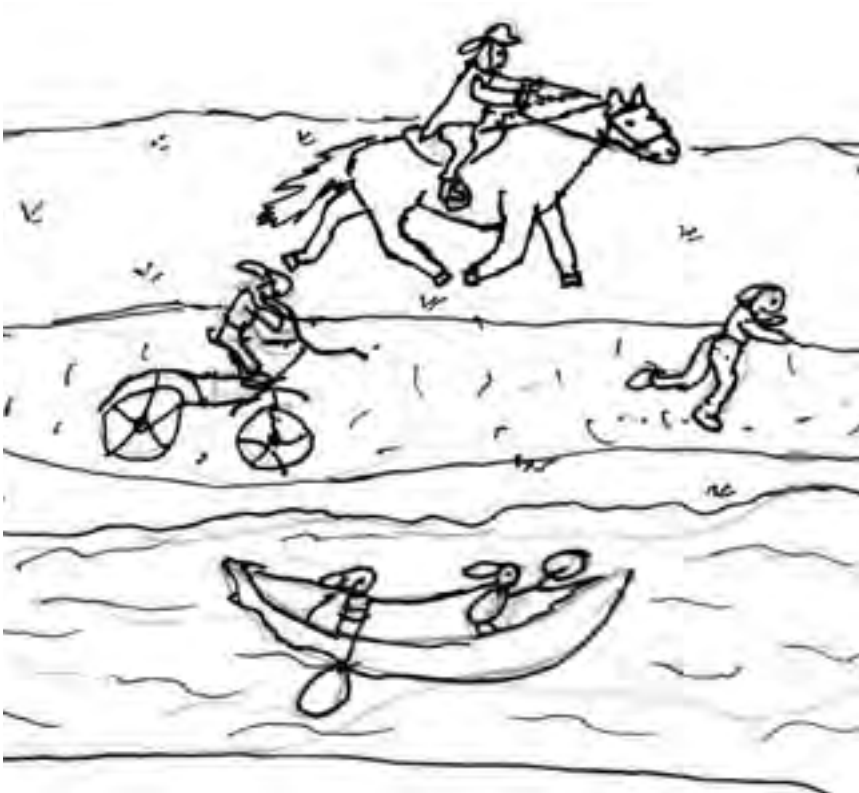
**Biking** is like walking because it is done mostly locally, it is energy efficient, and lots of kids do it. Bikers sometimes use the same paths as walkers and sometimes they share streets with cars. ***Tell a story about how you learned to ride a bike. How do you and friends decorate your bikes? What are the skills and tools needed for repairing a bike? What are favorite routes and destinations for bikers in your community?***

**Riding** in or **driving** a motorized vehicle (car, truck, bus, subway, train) increases the speed, cost, and convenience of transportation. ***When you ride in a car or bus, do you play a game based on what you see around you? Maybe you have to see as many different license plates as possible. Or maybe you have to be the first one to see a certain kind of car, a "Slugbug" or a "Woody." Do you sing or tell stories on car trips? How do you decide where you and your siblings sit in the car?***



## Cultural Elements

Horse-drawn carriages, horseback riding, boating, skating, snowmobiling, canoeing, and skiing are essential transportation in some cultures and mainly are used for recreation in other cultures. ***Which forms of transportation do you use? Which have the most rules? Why? Survey your neighbors to find out different kinds of transportation they use the most and the least.***









---

**Presenting Local Culture**





## Presenting Local Culture

Kid ethnographers not only document local culture, they also present what they have documented, using many different media. We understand local culture most thoroughly when we figure out how to present it to others.

### **Informal Presentations**

It doesn't have to take a lot of time or effort to tell people what you're excited about. It can be as simple as, "Guess what I heard today about companion planting!" or "Look at these pictures I took at the synagogue!" Without preparation, you can tell family, friends, or classmates the story of what you have learned. With only a little more work, you can tell the same story by showing photos you took, playing a bit from an interview tape, or sending an email message.

Such simple, spontaneous, everyday storytelling may be the only kind of presenting you do. But if you get really involved in a local culture project, you may want to create a more elaborate presentation—especially if you are working with other kids (friends, your class), and have the help of adults.



---

## Presenting Local Culture

### What Media?

What media do you want to use to present the local culture you have been observing in your community? It depends, likely, on the amount of time you have to create your presentation, the audience you want to hear and see what you have learned, the types of information and documents you have collected, the artistic and technical skills you, friends, and family have with different media, and the team of people collaborating on your project.

Consider the advantages of the following media as you read this chapter:

- Photo Album
- Visual Display
- Museum Exhibit
- Slide Show
- Web Site
- Video
- Music CD
- Radio Documentary
- Newsletter
- Article
- Booklet
- Live Performance (storytelling, music, dance, etc.)
- Live Demonstration
- Community Event

Occasionally the easiest way to present what you have learned is to contact a local newspaper, radio, or TV reporter, or your local children's museum.

### Audience and Purpose

Do you want your family, friends, or classmates to pay a lot of attention to what you have learned? Do you want a lot of people—maybe even some who live far away or in the



---

## Presenting Local Culture

future—to know what you have learned? Have you learned things so important that you feel responsible to let others know? If so, you will choose a media that allows you to edit your presentation until it communicates to a larger audience.



As you choose your audience, and consider your purpose, your presentation begins to take shape:

- If you want your neighbors to know each other better, you might plan a neighborhood potluck at which neighbors talk about favorite recipes, play traditional games, make music, tell local stories, pass around family photo albums, or look at a presentation you have prepared.
- If you want your class to dialogue with a class or classes from another state or country, the easiest way to show your community might be to create a web site that includes documents you have collected. Use lots of photos and drawings if you want to interact with students who speak another language.
- If you learn a lot about the culture of your grandparents, you might want to make a CD with photos, transcripts of interviews, and video excerpts. This CD will be an excellent gift to siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins.



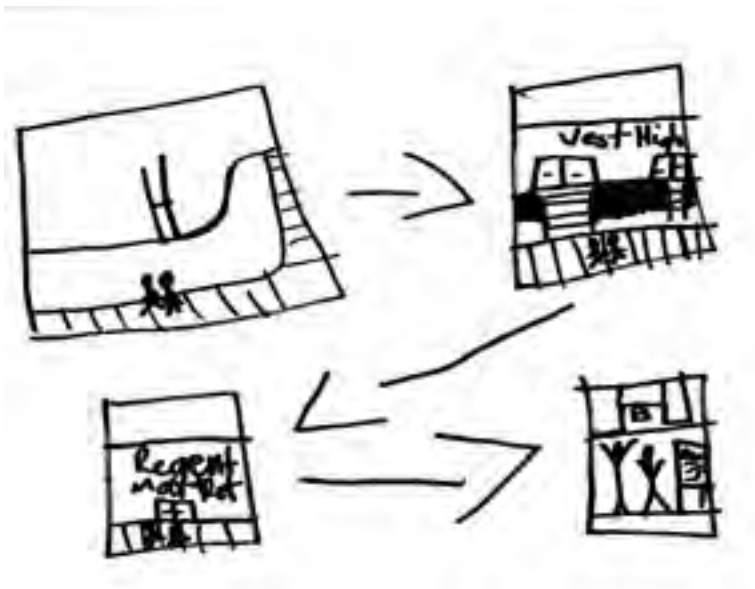
---

## Presenting Local Culture

### Documents

Often the kind of media you use for a presentation is determined by the kinds of culture you have studied and the kinds of tools you have used in your documentation. Storytelling and music can best be presented with audio, video, or live performances. Crafts can best be shown with photos, video, or live demonstrations.

Many cultural elements (such as holiday celebrations) can be shown best by using a variety of recording tools. In truth, you often have to use whatever tools are available. So if you have relied primarily on written notes, you will likely choose a print format for your presentation.





---

## Presenting Local Culture



### **Team Media Skills**

Many media projects require a team, especially if you want to document a lot of cultural expressions, or if you need help with new technology. Even the simplest project requires collaboration from the few people you are observing or interviewing.

Build a bigger project by exploring the connections between what you want to study, who you want to work with, and what you want to present. As you build your team, include teenagers or adults who can help you with finding people to observe, transportation, fundraising, and especially with media production.

Many books have been written about how to create the media listed above. Chances are that you learn best by doing, with the support of people who have more experience than you. For example, even if you know how to design a web site, you'll need help in finding a server to host it. Brainstorm with older siblings, your parents, teachers, or adult friends to help you find the support you need for your project.



---

## Presenting Local Culture

### Archives

Often we are primarily interested in preserving the documents we have collected. You may be fortunate in finding a museum or historical society that will archive your photos, tapes, and notes. In that case, they will ask you not only for the release forms for your collection, but also for the context (time, place, people, event) for each document. Plan to weed out materials that are hard to understand and those that tell exactly the same story as another document.

Much more likely, it will take a lot of effort to find a home for your collection. Think about who will be interested in your documents in the future. If you have studied family culture, find family members who want to save your documents. Schools, religious organizations, businesses, and civic agencies have systems for filing documents that relate to these institutions.



Sometimes the best way of making sure your documents don't get lost is by publishing multiple copies (books, web sites, CDs, etc.), distributed to multiple people.





---

## Presenting Local Culture

### **Representations and Interpretations**

A few community and academic scholars may be interested in looking through all of your documents in the future. But most people, now and in the future, will only be interested in your best documents. The challenge is figuring out which ones to select.

Every presentation of local culture requires us to choose which documents to use and which to disregard. The more intelligently you choose, the more readers, listeners, and viewers you will have for your presentations—and the better they will understand the cultures you have been studying.

Every selection of documents is an interpretation, one person's (or group's) idea about what is important and true. Someone else, observing the same events, talking to the same people, may have a similar or different interpretation, reflecting their perspective.

Keep asking, as you make your selections, do these documents and interpretations adequately:

- tell the story as well as I know it?
- represent the activities I have observed?
- represent the people I have studied—the diversity of occupations, ages, genders, economic and social classes, ethnic groups, religions, beliefs, and values?



## Presenting Local Culture

The best way to determine if your representation is adequate is to ask the people you interviewed and observed to critique it. Our job as ethnographers is to present the people we observe as honestly as possible, not simply our ideas about them. Our readers, listeners, and viewers can then trust that our media is the next best thing to being there.



## About the Authors

**Mark Wagler** was raised in an Amish-Mennonite farm family in Ohio. For nine years he told stories, did fieldwork and directed residency projects in more than 600 schools, hundreds of museums, theatres, historical societies, churches, libraries, and other community settings. Now a 4/5 teacher at Randall School in Madison, Wisconsin, he bases his curriculum on student inquiries into local cultural and natural communities. Among the academic and teaching awards he received are a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and a Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics and Science.

**Ruth Olson**, associate director of the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures, was born on a dairy farm in northern Wisconsin. Her love of traditional culture led her to pursue a Ph.D in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. She has taught folklore at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania. She studies the narrative traditions and material culture of the Upper Midwest, especially the occupational, recreational, and ethnic life of rural communities.

**Anne Pryor**'s many experiences with teaching led her to study Elementary Education at the State University of New York. Her fascination with cultural expressions started with her Irish immigrant grandparents and led to a Ph.D in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Wisconsin. She combines these interests in her current position as Folk Arts Education Specialist at the Wisconsin Arts Board. Since moving to Wisconsin, Anne has eaten lutefisk, danced at polka festivals and learned to play euchre, but still hasn't ice fished.