Tribe

Just as we are shaped by the places in which we live, so too are we constructed by various cultural communities. This assignment asks you to describe in detail a particular culture or “tribe” that you either belong to or have had an opportunity to observe. Here is your chance to preserve elements of this chosen culture for others to read and experience.

The culture you choose to write about might be your own ethnic heritage. Or it could be a subculture that you’re part of. On the other hand, it might be a culture that you don’t belong to but that you’re close to and know plenty about. Instead of picking a group so large that it is impossible to deal with adequately in 4 - 6 pages, you might focus in on a particular aspect of that culture (examples below). One way or the other, your challenge here is not to stereotype the group or culture you’re writing about, but to describe it in rich enough detail that it surpasses superficial characterization.

You’ll want to describe your membership in the “tribe” you have picked to write about: Have you belonged to it since birth, or did you join it later on? Are you indeed a “member” of it, or an outsider looking in? If the latter, how did you come to know this group? Let the reader understand the circumstances surrounding your relationship to this tribe.

Next, describe this tribe in as much detail as you can. Remember, if the tribe is large and complex, you’ll probably need to zoom in on a specific feature of it: for example, describing and giving examples of particular rites and rituals, such as dating in traditional Mexican families, teenage mall or shopping culture, or longtime cooking traditions and gatherings of a particular family or ethnicity. As a footnote, note that although you may think of rites and rituals as actions performed by obscure indigenous tribes, in fact every day in the life of any member of any culture or sub-culture is filled with rites and rituals: behaviors that characterize that particular group and thus its values.

Or, as another possibility besides the group’s rites and rituals, remember that language, too, reflects a particular group’s values and the ways it looks at the world. For example, you could write about the slang of a particular sub-culture you’re familiar with, characterizing its people, offering plenty of examples of its slang--along with “translations” into standard English--and reflecting on what this language reflects about the group’s values. (For example, why does English have no fewer than 4,431 terms for the idea of drunkenness? What does that say about what is important to us?)

So show the reader who the people are that you’re writing about, where they come from, what they do and how they interact with each other in ways different from
those who don't belong to this tribe. What stands out about this tribe? What are their beliefs and values? Why is it important that this culture be preserved in writing? Or if you’re writing a culture to critique it, show why you are doing this.

In the past, students have written about a range and wealth of topics—for example:

- The culture of driving
- Children's play
- Tortilla making
- Bumper-sticker culture
- Hanging out/ party culture
- The language or culture of particular non-human animals
- Family celebrations, like kids' birthday parties (a critique), or quinceañeras
- Dating in various cultures
- Drinking in various cultures (usually a critique)
- Slang comparison of various US regions
- Various internet groups or language

The above are just examples. Write about what you know, what interests you. Expand the assignment to suit you. For example, choose an aspect of the ordinary, everyday culture you're a part of and "make it strange," writing about it as if encountering it for the first time.

Above all, show what characterizes this culture and what its values are.