

Cultural Studies as an Academic Discipline

Contrary to what its name suggests, Cultural Studies as an academic discipline does not concern itself so much with studying different cultures from across the world. *What, then, is Cultural Studies?*

Quoting from the Cultural Studies Department at Claremont Graduate University: *“Cultural Studies situates culture as a site of power struggles between competing systems of representations and the ways of life that they support. Our methods of study are critical: not only exposing the ideological dimension of culture but also exploring its radical political potential.”*¹ This description, while brief, captures the essence of Cultural Studies and its core concerns—**power, ideology, and radical cultural politics**. In other words, the primary focus of Cultural Studies researches and scholars is not on how culture serves as a one-dimensional representation of beliefs and norms practiced and endorsed by certain groups of people, or one that helps us understand another “culture” that is foreign to us. Cultural Studies, by suspending the traditional anthropological vein of approaching culture, considers culture as material practices through which power is constructed, resisted, and reinforced.

Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies

The key foundation of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, in “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” (1992) highlights that Cultural studies should maintain its “anti-disciplinary” spirit. To be more specific, Hall warns the reader of the danger for Cultural Studies in remaining in academic institutions is the difficulty of not sacrificing its counter-hegemonic position and stand in opposition to the dominant power structure with its alignment with those in marginality. That being said, Cultural Studies as an academic discipline would be best described as “interdisciplinary,” if not completely anti-disciplinary.

As an interdisciplinary discipline, Cultural Studies and its methodology employed may be quite diverse. However, what’s shared by Cultural Studies scholars is how the interrelation between power and knowledge shapes the structures of different categories of what makes a subject, if leaving the term identity aside. Continuing its Marxist tradition of viewing culture as the materiality of ideology, some common topics among Cultural Studies often surround everyday practices that creates, receives, and represents cultural artifacts (i.e. Museum Studies), the

¹ “Cultural Studies Department,” *Claremont Graduate University*. March 23, 2017.
<https://www.cgu.edu/departments/cultural-studies/>

daily consumption of cultural as commodities through different media and exchanges (i.e. Media Studies), and so on.

As a result, rather than asking the question of “What is Cultural Studies?”, what we should be asking is “What does Cultural Studies do?” considering the field of Cultural Studies itself should be constantly shifting as a response to the diverse points and locations among the power network. Therefore, in addition to the previously mentioned programs of Media Studies and Museum Studies, issues of gender and sexuality (i.e. Gender/Queer Studies) and discussions of race and ethnicity (i.e. Critical Race Theory) are also core discourses that drives the direction of the field. What is central to the methodologies of Cultural Studies is based on the premise that language, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and class shapes our identities, representations, and social relations. This complicity justifies the interdisciplinary approaches to the study of different facets of culture in the field. The question being asked determines the path for finding the answer.

As Cultural studies values highly its own self-reflexivity, writing in the field of Cultural Studies needs to keep in mind a self-reflective awareness that the writer and the projects he or she embarks are themselves partaking in an ongoing dialogues or social discourses and in the larger context of meaning-making. In addressing questions from this niche, cultural studies both draws on and continues key strands of contemporary cultural theory: semiotics, deconstruction and poststructuralism, dialogics, subaltern and postcolonial studies, etc. and this anti-discipline also gives birth to several methodologies that challenges conventional methods in an academic setting, such as auto-ethnography, hybrid genres of writings, and other new forms of critical research approaches that sometimes spring from an “oppositional” position reacting to the dominant academic conventions.

Writing a Cultural Studies Paper

The difficulty of writing papers in the discipline of Cultural Studies is, thus, a contingency of its nature of being an anti-discipline. Sometimes students have doubts about which methodology would be the most appropriate for their project. The rule of thumb is to confirm with your instructor and see if s/he has a specific guideline in mind. If not, then it is completely up to the writer’s own discretion for deciding the best methods based on the nature of the project.

As mentioned earlier, students in Cultural Studies may be interested in completely different topics, such as an analysis of the archive-building of a museum, an investigation of the bias behind big data in the media, or an interrogation of how power networks is deployed through the shared experience in popular culture. Such projects would require drastically different methodologies, from personal interviews, visiting the archives, reviewing documentations, to programming or coding for observing and generating a pattern. Keep in mind the goal and aim of the project, and then select the methods accordingly.

The following a few more reminders should you ever feel uncertain about writing a Cultural Studies paper:

1. Remember Cultural Studies is *interdisciplinary* in essence, and you are writing across disciplines. Writing across disciplines denotes that you may sometimes need to include new methods or “hybrid” approaches in order to achieve the main aim of your research project. When in doubt, consult your instructor.
2. It is very common that the methodologies reflect or vary with the diverse academic background of the writer or researcher. Choosing the most appropriate method should also suggest that the writer takes into consideration of with which s/he feels most comfortable to work, as the methodology that steer the project also speaks to your reader about the writer *per se*.
3. Sometimes it helps to review a few sample papers in the field to get a sense of what a paper similar to your topic would look like. The following are a list of journals published in relation to Cultural Studies that may be helpful: [Journal of Cultural Studies](#), [Cultural Studies](#), [Cultural Machine](#), [International Journal of Cultural Studies](#), [Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies](#), etc.