

# ANGLISTISCHE LITERATUR- UND KULTURWISSENSCHAFT

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## WHAT IS A CULTURAL STUDIES ESSAY?

While Literary Studies is defined mainly by the object of study, i.e. literary texts, Cultural Studies is defined primarily by its theoretical approaches and by the issues it addresses. It is concerned with representation, power relations, and constructions of difference which are not tied to any particular kind of text. On the contrary, they can be investigated in various cultural texts, whereby the term “text” is very open and the range of possible objects of study very wide.

A cultural studies essay is the independent analysis and interpretation of a cultural phenomenon with a thematic focus. In view of its formulation of problems, its objects of investigation, its theories and its methods, the work of Cultural Studies goes beyond Literature and Linguistics and enters such areas as Media and Film Studies, History and Sociology, Politics and Religion. With the exception of films or television productions, it is first of all necessary – as it is in the disciplines just listed – to decide exactly what is to be investigated. In other words, whilst literary and cinematic “texts” can be acquired, cultural “texts” have to be constituted from time-consuming searches in various media.

The sheer range of cultural phenomena eligible for study calls for methodologies from other disciplines, including Linguistics. Working in Cultural Studies calls for theoretical approaches, concepts and methods to identify the various group interests (political, economic, social, etc.) that are represented in the chosen cultural area and to bring out the power relations that are inscribed there. This is where Cultural Studies differs from school-taught Area Studies, which are confined to the description of phenomena such as the British school system or the American political landscape. A solid theoretical and conceptual foundation is indispensable if the mere description of phenomena is to be avoided. Chris Barker’s and Emma A. Jane’s workbook *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (5<sup>th</sup> edition 2016) can be recommended here, because it presents definitions of culture and analytical tools as well as providing thematic and methodological stimulus on central categories and problem areas such

as ethnicity, gender, ideology, identity, social class, power, media, spatiality, representation, and the production of knowledge.

A cultural studies essay formulates key questions and/or an independent thesis, i.e. a claim or position that has to be substantiated; and it presents these with clear argumentation. In order to help develop a theme, the following questions from Norbert Franck and Joachim Stary, *Die Technik des wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens* (ch. 4.1. applied here to the example of identity), may be helpful:

- ▶ What? deciding upon the object (what is identity?)
- ▶ How? manner (how are identities de/constructed?)
- ▶ Who? persons and social groups as agents (who de/constructs identities?)
- ▶ Where? location, relevant area (where are identities de/constructed?)
- ▶ When? time (when are identities de/constructed?)
- ▶ Why? cause, reason, purpose, aim (why are identities de/constructed?  
What functions do they have and for whom?)

As in Literary Studies, the main concern of the essay is independent interpretation, i.e. the theoretically-based explanation and interpretation of the phenomenon under scrutiny. In contrast to Literary Studies, the analytical section of the essay cannot simply draw on pre-established analytical concepts (as can be done with a literary genre, for example). Instead, materials and sources pertaining to the chosen object of study must be freshly gathered. The analytical focus of a cultural studies essay is not usually on the structural features of the “text” or phenomenon, although these, too, are always relevant. It lies rather on the question of its ideological position and hence on contexts of production and reception.

In its structure and form as in its critical engagement with secondary literature, the cultural studies essay proceeds in the same way as an essay in Literary Studies (*cf.* the guidelines in *What is a literary studies essay?*)