These guidelines are of course for orientation only. If you come up with your own ways of working and writing, please feel free to confront and convince me. If you have any comments or questions, please do send an email to joerg.niewoehner@hu-berlin.de

Marking criteria

What these criteria are:
The following paragraphs present the marking criteria that I use when marking course work and final year projects – BA and MA alike. I have discussed them over time with many in the Institute of European Ethnology at Humboldt University, hence I presume that they are to a degree in line with the criteria that many others at the institute use.

What these criteria are not:
These criteria do not in any way represent official criteria that members of the Institute of European Ethnology consider binding for their own work. They have neither been vetted by my colleagues, nor have they been given any formal status by the institute.

My intention:
My sole intention with putting this list up on my personal website within the Institute for European Ethnology's domain is to increase transparency for students who intend to submit course work or final year projects to me. I hope that this list will give a degree of orientation as to what separates satisfying from good from exceptional work in my view. It may also help students to decide for themselves on a reasonable effort to outcome ratio given interest in the topic and time constraints in BA/MA degrees.

Criteria

"Good" (1,7-2,3)
Within a cohort, e.g. all course work in a given course, I aim for a vaguely normal distribution centred on 2,0 reaching from 1,0 to 3,3. I do not use any formal means of correction across the cohort to reach that distribution. What this means is that a piece of course work that does what one would expect of course work, i.e.

- answers the question it has set itself in a
- clear,
- consistent,
- well-structured manner,
- using the literature discussed in the seminar sessions and
- conforming with common scientific standards of writing and citation.

will receive a "good" (2,0).

If you develop your own research question rather than working with a given question, make sure you define it clearly at the beginning of the essay. The same holds for the common situation where a general research question is given but you need to specify particular aspects on which you will be focusing.

The standard essay starts out with a clear question and answers this with a thesis that it will argue over the following pages. Do start with this clear thesis/answer: it will help you structure your writing and it will make it easier for me, or anyone, to read. This is not a fictional essay where suspense until the end may be fun or exciting.

The argument you unfold to back up your thesis is the main part of the writing. It can take many forms: pro/con, comparative, thematic etc. Whatever you choose to get your point(s) across, aim for a clear and meaningful structure, straightforward language without jargon and draw on the

body of literature treated in the seminar sessions. Define terms you use, quote key passages from the literature that you use and discuss these quotations in your own terms. Do not drop names or theories without explanation assuming that I or anyone else will have read them the way you have done.

Do not be overwhelmed by a felt expectation that your text should be "critical" or original. A solid reading of the literature shaped into a clear argument is all that is needed. This is about scientific craft not magic or genius. You are very likely to work with texts that have stood the test of time and it is highly unlikely that you will argue convincingly major flaws in the points they are making. So find a positive stance towards the literature you work with and consider the contexts within which they were written before you judge them. This does not mean that you should not point out shortcomings in parts of the literature vis-à-vis the particular topic or aspect you are dealing with. Just assume that others have spotted these shortcomings long before you. Try to find those in the literature and cite them to back up your personal line of argument. Scientific practice may be passionate and knowledge personal and political but that does not change the fact that any good essay starts with systematic reading organised through literature searches along the common academic databases. "I think ..." only comes after a lot of hard and often boring reading.

Correct syntax, spelling and grammar will not win the day, but they irritate any reader when they go wrong beyond the odd typo. In the worst case, they become an indicator for lack of concentration during writing – something that I will quite quickly take personal, because I need to concentrate when marking your piece so why not you when writing it? Dyslexia et al. are an altogether different story. Do let me know if there is anything I should know about you. Most issues are easily solved.

The final text should 'stand alone', i.e. should be accessible to a social scientifically informed reader without any special knowledge of the matter at hand and without consulting any further sources. Avoid grand claims; avoid statements "from nowhere", i.e. without a clearly marked authorship be it yourself or someone from the literature (do prefer the latter by default); avoid exceedingly long sentences and check that you still understand yourself the morning after writing. Good texts have time to rest and are cross-checked or proofed by someone else before submission. Find that time.

Is "good" good enough?
A piece that does more or less what the preceding paragraphs have outlined, I will mark "good" in the span from 1,7 to 2,3. Many will argue that a "good" grade in European Ethnology or social science generally is not good enough due to an inflationary use of "very good" grades. I am aware of this issue and will do everything I can to help, particularly where application processes rest on sheer numbers. Few do these days and in the academic realm, where this has mattered most, student number development seems such that this will get better rather than worse.
I will not mark pieces up to conform with a (perceived) widespread social scientific practice because,
  - ethically, this seems to be a practice hard to justify against common fairness criteria in competitive environments such as university education;
  - institutionally, this will devalue the reputation of European Ethnology and social science in academia and public discourse even further;
  - didactically, it will hinder learning processes and
  - personally, it will cost me the last bit of self-respect.

„Very good" (1,0 and 1,3)
The category "very good" is reserved for exceptional and near flawless pieces of work. To start with: it draws on a body of literature that goes significantly beyond the seminar reading list in terms of breadth and depth. So you can decide before you even start to plan the piece whether

that is something that is in your reach in terms of interest and time. Very good pieces will display a very confident grasp of key concepts, apply them carefully to the matter at hand, discuss the results (self-)critically against a wider body of literature and present all that in a structure and language that leaves little to be desired. At my uni in England, the faculty line was that a senior professor in a relevant subject area who sits down and writes the piece will end up with something between a 1,7 and 1,3. Hence the top mark is reserved for those pieces that deserve a distinction. They are not common.

"Satisfying" (2,7-3,3)
Contra to common perception, you will fail the common "good" not for lack of genius or originality of idea. You may argue in your essay that the earth is flat and if you do it well receive top marks even though that idea is neither original nor particularly plausible. Marks slipping below 2,3 indicate problems with craftsmanship, technical skill or effort. This comes in different shapes and forms:

a) You may miss the point, be it a theoretical position, an empirical field or a structural form. While academic abilities differ, I believe that the large majority of students in principle are able to write "good" course work when they put their mind to it: understand the task, search the literature and outline the existing positions, sketch the argument, structure the argument, write, proof-read.

b) You may fail to grasp the question; you may choose an inadequate structure of argument or body of literature; you may entirely misread the authors with whom you are dealing. This is rare when you have taken part in the seminar and when you talk to people.

c) Formal mistakes and shortcomings such as inadequate citations, inadequate language or failure to stick to the required length may also shift you into this category.

d) Being a "good" student but then not bothering to put in the work resulting in sloppy language, argument or structure may also get you into this category.

Fail
I have never given a mark below 3,3 and I hope I will not have to. A few signs of hope and effort will usually get you within the broad range of "satisfying". You fail a piece of course work when you fail to hand it in, when you cheat (plagiarism, handing in pieces in more than one slot, etc.) or when you fail to show any understanding of academic practice whatsoever: no sign of reading or understanding, writing without structure and argument, formal shortcomings. Failing is rare and usually indicates that something else but intellect and craft is not in order.

Good luck.