



**Cornell University**  
**John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines**

**Document Title:** Birth Experiences Oral History Project  
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**Course:** Development Sociology 1203  
**Course Title:** Medicine, Technology, and Control Over Women's Bodies

**Year of Award:** Fall 2010

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**Fall 2010 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize**

We are pleased to invite applications for the James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar (honorable mentions, if any, will receive \$150).

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics. These sequences probably represent work assigned during a portion of the course rather than all of the essay assignments distributed over an entire semester. Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you prepare students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

The winner will be announced to the Cornell community. Prize Winning Materials will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing.)

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 10. No exceptions can be made.

**Fall 2010 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application**

-Please Print Clearly-

Instructor's name Marygold Walsh-Dilley

Department DSOC Course # and title 1203 Medicine, Technology + Control over Women's Bodies

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Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the assignment sequence, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the assignment sequence in a web accessible archive and make it available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna O'Hara (dlo1@cornell.edu) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

Birth Experiences Oral History Project

Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature Marygold Walsh-Dilley Date 12/10/10

James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Price  
Application Materials

Birth Experiences Oral History Project

In this sequence of assignments, students are exposed to the sociological and feminist discussions on childbirth in the United States. This is one of the areas of women's health that has received the most attention and critique in the literature, especially given the poor ranking of the United States in international comparisons of childbirth and related health indicators. This sequence was designed to expose students to the dominant forms of health care for pregnant and new mothers, stimulate analysis and evaluation of the effects of this form of care on women and families, and motivate critical engagement with issues that frequently do not yet affect them directly. It was also designed to give students experience with different forms of writing, put into practice a number of tips and skills for excellent writing, and push students to develop their own analysis while engaging with and integrating the larger conversation in their own writing.

This sequence of assignments involves an interview, an interview summary, and ultimately, an analysis of childbirth practices in the United States. Students worked in groups of four on many of the activities in this sequence, but ultimately they were each responsible for conducting the interview and writing the two essays. There were two formal assignments that were due, the interview summary (Part 1) and the analysis essay (Part 2). This was coupled with a number of in-class and short homework assignments. The prompts for the two parts of this project are attached. Below is a description of some of the shorter preparatory assignment

This sequence of assignments fit into a longer series in which we discussed reproductive technologies and evaluated their impact on women individually and at a society level. Thus, the readings and discussions we had about childbirth fit closely with the previous and following discussions about birth control, reproductive and prenatal technologies, ideologies about women as mothers and caregivers, medicalization, sociology of the body, and legal regulation of women's bodies. We began the sequence on childbirth specifically with an in-class writing in which students described their initial image of a woman having a baby. Students wrote about the sudden breaking of the water, the rush to the hospital, the screaming and pain, and the ultimate joy when a baby is placed in its mother's arms. This set the stage for subsequent discussions about the history of the medicalization of childbirth, media representations and the resultant framing of women as inferior and in need of medical intervention, the various models of birth, and the rise of cesarean sections, which were covered in readings and in class activities and conversations. It also provided the basis for an activity at the end of this sequence in which I ask students to reflect on their initial ideas and how they had changed.

Because this project involves students doing their own research by interviewing mothers about their birth experiences, I need to teach students not only about writing but about how to conduct research as well. To that end, students were required to complete a short

institutional review training. We also worked together in groups to develop an interview guide, and code interview data. Students used the data from their group members' interviews, and relied upon group members for peer review and the development and discussion of themes for the paper.

We worked on students' writing skills throughout this process. We used some of the preparatory and finished writing in this project to do activities that focused on writing tools. For example, I asked students to use an initial "what do I know about childbirth" writing that they had already completed at the beginning of the sequence to practice skills about signaling voice and author, planting a naysayer, and answer the 'so what' question. We also used a draft of the analysis paper to do some activities on passive/active verbs, transitions, and precision.

The plan for responding to student writing relied heavily on peer review. I did this for a number of reasons. First, we spend significant time in the earlier part of the semester working on revision and self-revision, and I wanted students to be able to practice some of what we learned. Second, since we were working in groups, and ultimately the 'audience' for the interview summary was fellow group-members, I thought it was important that students read and respond to each other's work. Students were required to read and engage in group members' work anyway, and peer-review was an easy next step. However, I did read and respond to interview summaries before the childbirth analyses were completed, which allowed me to highlight themes or problems for students to then incorporate or avoid in their analytical essays. I indicated in the assignment handouts what I expected and what they would be evaluated on, and developed a simple rubric (guided by Peter Elbow's grid suggestion) that indicated how well students met each requirement. I also provided ample comments to each student and the opportunity to revise for the final portfolio. Both the interview summary and the analysis of childbirth practices were revised after peer review. The analysis was also subject to an in-class self-review. I actually told students that their papers were due on Monday, November 8, but in class on Monday we did a self review and a peer review and I gave students a few more days to complete this work. I hope that this process prompted greater self-reflection and engagement with revision.

Overall, this sequence worked very well. I hoped that interviewing their own mother, or someone they knew, would help make issues related to childbirth more relevant to students. I was very successful on this front. Students were excited to engage in the material even though childbirth is so far from their own realm of experience because of this personal connection. That data from our interview really made this somewhat esoteric topic very 'real' for students. However, the technicalities of doing our own research was a difficult. The coding activity was a bit hard for students to grasp so next time I teach this I will have to re-envision how that activity goes. Also, while some students did an astonishingly good job integrating both the articles and other reading materials with the interview data, some students found incorporating the interview data to be difficult. While we did talk about and read other authors who had done this successfully, I think we could have spent more time on this aspect of the assignment. Overall, however, I am thrilled with how this experiment worked out. I am particularly

proud that I figured out a way for students to become truly engaged and see the relevance of this issue despite it being something that is relatively removed from their current lives.

Below is a list of selected activities involved in this sequence:

**In class writing assignment:** I asked students to write a short paragraph on the following prompt. From your own perspective, write a description of what you think birth is like. You can base your ideas on whatever you have encountered about birth: maybe stories you've heard, TV shows, movies, what you've learned in school.

**Institutional Review Training Activity:** I asked students to complete a segment of the University's institutional review training, and to write a short reflection on the importance of institutional review and ethics in research.

**Develop an interview guide:** In class guided group work.

**Peer Review of Interview Summaries:** group members did peer reviews of interview summaries.

#### **Group discussion of interviews**

**Reflection on childbirth and "They Say/I Say" Activity:** in this in-class activity, students were to use their initial in class writing on what they think birth is like as a "they say", and write a response about how their mind had changed or how their original ideas had been reinforced. Students had read a selection of chapters from Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/ I Say*, and this activity asked them to practice a number of the tools from that book. See handout, attached.

**Interview data coding activity:** Students worked in groups to use the data from the interview summaries to develop themes to discuss in their analysis of childbirth practices (see attached handout)

#### **Outline of Analysis Essay**

**Self-Review of Analysis of Childbirth Practices:** On the day that this essay was due, I asked students to carefully read through their papers and compose a letter to me indicating what they would change if they had more time and how they could improve their paper. After this activity was completed, I told students they had a few more days to work on the paper.

**Peer Review of Analysis of Childbirth Practices:** Students reviewed each-others work in partners and then students had a few more days to work on the paper.

**Passive and Active Verb Activity:** we completed an activity on passive and active verbs using a paragraph from a draft of students' analyses.

**Transitions Activity:** we completed an activity on transitions using a segment from a draft of students' analyses.

**Concise and Precise Activity:** we completed an activity on being precise and concise with a sentence from a draft of the students' analyses (see attached handout).

Birth Experiences Oral History Project  
Part 1: Interview Summary\*

In this assignment, you will be interviewing a woman to learn about her experiences preparing for and giving birth. Ideally, you will interview your mother about your own birth. This assignment is intended to help you start making connections between what we are reading in class and real women and their real experiences. In the first part of the Oral History Project, you will gather your own data in an interview and write up a descriptive summary of what you learn. You and your colleagues will use these interview summaries in the next writing assignment. You will be completing some of the preparatory work in groups, though the writing assignment must be your own original work. There are multiple parts to this assignment.

- 1) IRB training online completed by Friday, October 8. See instructions.
- 2) Interview Guide. In class, October 8.  
Before we interview the mothers, we must have an idea of the kinds of questions we want to ask them. We will work together in our groups to devise an interview guide that will help us gather our data. Be thinking of the type of information you'd like to know before class on October 8.
- 3) Interview. Must be completed by Friday, October 15.  
Identify who you want to interview. Contact them by October 8, asking if they are willing to do the interview with you, and set up a time for the interview. This will likely take place over the phone, but you can also do it in person or over email, if necessary. If you don't want to interview someone in your family or that you know, then see me and I can set connect you with someone to interview.
- 4) Interview Summary. First draft due October 20; bring 2 copies.
- 6) **Final draft due Friday, October 29**; bring 5 copies.

Guidelines for Interview Summary:

In your 2-3 page description, you will use the information from your interview to write a summary of the woman's birth experience and the information from the interview. Your summary should include descriptive information about the mother, the place where she gave birth (both the city or town and if it was a hospital, birth center, or at home), who was present during the birth, and the birth story. How your written description of the birth story ends up largely depends on what the mother tells you in the interview. Your job is to summarize what she tells you, providing the appropriate level of description to get the gist of the story across to your readers. Please keep the descriptions to 3 pages. **Remember, this is not an analysis. This is a summary of the interview.**

**\*Note: If you do not feel comfortable completing the interview, see me for an alternative assignment. I can also help you find a mother to interview.**

Birth Experiences Oral History Project  
Part 2: Synthesis Essay

In the final part of the Birth Experiences Oral History Project, students will write an **analysis of childbirth practices in the United States**. In this 6-8 page paper, you will use class materials and discussions along with the data from your group's interview summaries, to formulate a unique argument about childbirth in our society. You may want to cover the following:

- 1) Describe the prevailing model of care and the predominant ideas our society has regarding pregnancy, labor, and birth. Evaluate if these ideas are woman-friendly and how they empower or disempower women and families.
- 2) Discuss the historical context for the current forms of care.
- 3) Identify alternatives to the prevailing model, and evaluate how they empower or disempower women.
- 4) Use the data from your group's interview summaries to provide the evidence to back up your claims.

For this essay, you are expected to engage with both the readings from class as well as the data from the interview summaries. **You are not expected to do additional readings or research for this paper.**

Your paper will be evaluated based upon the following:

- 1) The strength of the argument and how well it is supported throughout the paper. This should demonstrate your thinking, ideas, and insights as you grapple with the topic.
- 2) Appropriate engagement with and integration of class materials/readings in the paper, including proper citation and quoting. You should demonstrate your comprehension of class materials and themes.
- 3) Your analysis and application of the interview data.
- 4) The overall organization of the paper, including a strong introduction and conclusion. Use an outline to organize your thoughts before you write, and make sure to revise your paper so that the key ideas are stated strongly in your introduction. Use your introduction and topic sentences as a guide for the reader.
- 5) Language and mechanics.

A note about citation: When using data from the interview summaries, you should cite the author of the summary. It is appropriate to quote from these summaries as well, using the tools we have developed in class for appropriate integration of quoted materials. The interview summaries you use should appear in your works cited page, as follows:

Walsh-Dilley, Marygold. 2010. Interview Summary [or whatever title the author gives].  
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

**Outline due: Wednesday, November 3**

**Final draft due: Monday, November 8**

## Institutional Review Training

In the next assignment, we will be engaging in our own research by interviewing mothers about their experiences in labor and birth. Since we are working with “human subjects”—that is, our research is based on interviews with human participants—I expect students to complete the institutional review training on research with human subjects. The institutional review process is designed to protect these human subjects from potential harm that may result from the research. I have already submitted an application to Cornell’s Institutional Review Board and received approval to conduct this research in class, so each student does not need to complete their own Institutional Review application. Still, it is important to be aware of the ethical considerations that should be taken with respect to our research, and that is the rationale behind the required IRB training.

Please complete this assignment by Friday, October 8.

- 1) Go to the main web page of the Cornell University Office of Research Integrity and Assurance: [www.irb.cornell.edu](http://www.irb.cornell.edu)
- 2) Select “Education and Online Training” from the menu on the left side.
- 3) Select “Login to CITI with Cornell NetID”
- 4) Enter your NetID and password.
- 5) Click on “I don’t have a CITI username/password—Please continue making in a new account.”
- 6) Under Human Research Subjects, toggle “Social & Behavioral Research Basic” and select “Continue”
- 7) Enter the course and scroll down to the optional modules. Select “History and Ethical Principles” and complete this module, including the quiz at the end.
- 8) Review and/or complete other modules within the CITI training website if you are interested.
- 9) Write a **short** (less than 1 page) paragraph on: What is institutional review and why is it important to think about ethics during research?

Topics for group discussion:

1) Interviewing:

- a. How well did the interview guide work? Did you ask questions not on the interview guide? Which questions seemed to elicit the most useful information? What did the moms want to talk about the most?

2) Writing the summary:

- a. Was it easy or difficult to summarize the interview? Did you have all the information that you wanted? What type of information do you think is missing?

3) The data:

- a. What stands out most from the birth stories you gathered? Were there any surprises? Do the data you gathered match what you expected to find? Why or why not?

Birth Experiences Oral History Project  
Group Discussion

- 1) Coding your data
  - a. Read each summary carefully, marking in the margin the different themes (i.e., pain management; cesarean; doctor-patient relationship; family support; prenatal care etc.)
  - b. Once you have finished reading and coding, discuss with your group members. Questions for discussion may include:
    - i. What are the similarities and differences in the birth experiences you have all summarized?
    - ii. What is the most surprising?
    - iii. How do these interview summaries match up with, or disagree with, the class readings and discussions?
  - c. Compare themes together as a group, and identify some of the most common or most interesting themes (ie, the ones you would like to write about in your papers).
  - d. Compile a list of themes you want to cover in your paper.
  
- 2) Building an argument
  - a. Discuss the major themes you have identified in your list (focus just on 3 or 4—write these on the worksheet on the back of this page).
  - b. Identify and make note of the class materials that relate to these themes, and that might help you make your claims about them (write these on the worksheet).
  - c. Remember, you can use the readings as naysayers. Also, don't forget class discussions, the movie, and the guest speakers.
  - d. In your discussion, you are to work towards making a point about the data that you have—this will contribute to your overall argument.
  
- 3) Write out a brief topic sentence, or identify the argument you hope to make, with 3-4 of the themes (write these on the worksheet on the back of this page)

Theme:	
Related Readings and Materials:	
Topic Sentence:	

Theme:	
Related Readings and Materials:	
Topic Sentence:	

Theme:	
Related Readings and Materials:	
Topic Sentence:	

Peer Review Instructions  
**Due Monday October 25**

Peer reviewers should:

- 1) Read the summary carefully.
- 2) Indicate on the text as you read where there are mechanical or language difficulties (awkward or unclear sentences, misleading grammar, etc.)
- 3) Write short answers to the following questions.

A) Is the description clear and rich? Indicate where the description is particularly strong, and where more description is necessary.

B) Do you have any lingering questions about the birth story? What would you like to know more about?

C) What major themes emerge from the data? What are some of the key ideas that you get from reading this interview summary?

D) Any suggestions for the author?

## Guidelines for Outlines

Creating an outline will help you keep track of a large amount of information, organize your ideas, present these ideas in a way that makes sense to the reader and to the argument you are making, and to make connections between ideas in order to strengthen your overall argument. Outlines also help you become a more self-reflective writer and to incorporate the revision into the act of writing, which as Sommers (2008) demonstrates, is a characteristic of more experienced writers. The goal is to use this pre-writing activity to aid in the process of writing the longer analytical essay.

Writing an outline entails\*:

- 1) Brainstorming—list all of the ideas that you want to include in your paper
- 2) Organizing—grouping related ideas together (concepts maps can help you brainstorm and organize)
- 3) Ordering the ideas—arrange material in a way that makes sense to building your argument.
- 4) Labeling—Indicate what each section or paragraph will be about, and then noting the points you hope to include in each paragraph.

\*Adapted from the Purdue Online Writing Lab; <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/02/>

For the assignment that is due **Wednesday, November 2**, please include the following in your outline:

- A *draft* introduction, including your intended thesis statement.
- An outline of the sections/paragraphs of your paper.
- A summary of the point that each paragraph is trying to make. You may want to formulate topic sentences for each paragraph, but the level of detail is up to you.
- Some indication of the evidence you will use to back up the claims you make in each paragraph.





## Analysis of the Birth Experience

Using your in-class writing and/or our discussions in class about what people usually think about childbirth, write a “they say/I say” response to indicate how your mind has changed or your original ideas have been reinforced about what labor and child birth is like. You can bring in the readings, class materials, and discussions to assert your own point of view and make a unique argument. In this analysis, take care to: 1) Use signals/voice markers; 2) Plant a naysayer in your text; and 3) Answer the “So what, who cares?” question.

## Precise and Concise

Say exactly what you want to say and only what you want to say

### *Make every word count\**

“Vigorous writing is concise... A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer makes all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject only in an outline, but that he make every word tell.”

—William Strunk, *The Elements of Style*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.

As you revise your paper, *cut the clutter*. Begin by cutting the big stuff:

- Cut any passage, block or paragraph that does not support your focus.
- Cut the weakest quotations, anecdotes, and scenes to give greater power to the strongest.

Then, move on to the sentence level. Targets for cuts include:

- Adverbs that intensify rather than modify: *just, certainly, entirely, extremely, completely, exactly*.
- Prepositional phrases that repeat the obvious: *in the story, in the article, in the movie*.
- Phrases that grow on verbs: *seems to, tends to, should have to, tries to*.
- Abstract nouns that hide active verbs: *consideration* becomes *considers*; *judgment* becomes *judges*; *observation* becomes *observes*.
- Restatements: *sultry, humid afternoon; good and powerful*.

\*Adapted from: Clark, Roy Peter. 2006. *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*. New York: Little Brown and Company. 50-52.

### Activity

1. Look through your paper to find a long, wordy, or awkward sentence.
2. Write that sentence clearly on the back of this page. Count the number of words in the sentence, and write and circle that number after your sentence.
3. Hand your sentence to the person sitting on your right.
4. Each person will cut one word from the sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence.
5. Continue handing the sentences to the right, with each person cutting one word, until no additional words can be cut.
6. You may reorganize the sentence if that helps to cut down the number of words.
7. When your sentence comes back to you, spend a few minutes finishing the edits—cut more, changing the order of words, or adding necessary words back in.
8. Count the number of words. Write the number down at the bottom and circle it.
9. How much shorter is the sentence? Is the meaning of the sentence still intact? Has the sentence been improved?
10. At the bottom of the page, write a short sentence or two on if this activity was helpful, and how.