Comprehensive Case Report Professional Paper Choice

A comprehensive case report is a type of professional paper for physical/forensic anthropologists. Physical or forensic anthropology graduate students may choose to prepare and submit a comprehensive case report instead of a thesis. Since this choice falls under the professional paper option, students who choose it need to plan to take 36 credits to complete their MA degree instead of the 30 credits required for the thesis option. Students who wish to gain and demonstrate professional competence then enter the workforce are encouraged to choose the professional paper option. Students who plan to continue to a PhD program are strongly encouraged to choose the thesis option.

A comprehensive case report is very different from the forensic anthropology reports that we write for law enforcement agents and which we teach students to write in ANTH 462, 463 and 564. A forensic anthropology report is designed to be read by law enforcement officers, which means that it needs to be simple, brief, and concise. In contrast, a comprehensive case report is designed to be read by a physical/forensic anthropologist and is therefore a much longer and more thorough document that reports on and discusses the results of the analyses conducted in depth. A forensic anthropology report focuses on the bottom line conclusions, whereas a comprehensive case report focuses on the methods and theory underlying the conclusions.

Here's how to do a comprehensive case report:

1. Locate a case you want to work with. Choose a reasonably complete case with at least fragments of both the skull and the postcrania. The case can be one from the forensic collection housed at The University of Montana, Department of Anthropology, or from anywhere else, so long as it has been legally obtained and housed.

2. If your project involves living humans in any way, you must obtain an exemption or approval from the Institutional Review Board for Use of Human Subjects in Research (IRB). Guidelines, directions, and forms can be found online at http://www.umt.edu/research/irb.htm, or may be obtained at the Office of Research in University Hall. Probably, the IRB will mostly be concerned with anonymity of the subjects. The Anthropology Department will also insist upon anonymity of the subjects. For most cases housed here or elsewhere, the identity of the subject is unknown. In cases where it is known, it must not be used in your report and must be expunged from all included documents such as police reports and custody sheets.

3. Locate any background documents for the case. In most cases there are none, but those that exist are housed in the Physical Lab (SS 250). Summarize these documents in a section of your report titled "Background" or something similar. For cases with no supporting documents, the "Background" section will be shorter. In the "Background" section you should also state where the case has been housed, discuss the conditions under which it has been housed, describe how it has been treated or used, and explain your interest in the case.

4. Next, inventory and thoroughly describe the condition of the bones. As many bones and fragments should be precisely identified and sided as possible. This is a major difference from the procedure used in routine cases where identification of small bones that lack interpretive value, such as ribs and phalanges, is normally not done. Present your results textually using terms described in the manuals for osteology and forensic anthropology, in a section of your report titled "Skeletal Inventory" or something similar. You may use one or more graphical forms in addition if you wish.

5. The meat of your comprehensive case report will be a series of sections including at least age, race, sex, stature, pathology and trauma, with perhaps other sections on abnormalities, occupational markers, non-bone artifacts, time since death, and other topics as required by the nature of the case you are working with. In each of these sections you should apply all of the commonly available methods described in books in the lab such as Bass (1995), White & Folkens (2000), Burns (1999), etc. For each method used you should present, interpret, and discuss the results, addressing such issues as reliability, reasons why the method may give the wrong answer, etc. At the end of each of these sections include a summary in which you synthesize and reconcile the results you obtained using the various methods. Be sure to give citations for the methods used. It is best to cite the primary literature rather than the textbook that it is presented in. See the document titled "Methods That Should Be Applied to a Case For a Comprehensive Case Report" for a list methods that should be applied to your case.

6. Choose at least one topic related to your case, such as estimating age from dental attrition, an obvious pathology
or abnormality exhibited by your case, estimating sex by discriminant functions analysis of the skull, etc., and do a thorough literature review. Track down early writings on the subject and follow its development through to the present. Present and discuss the major theoretical positions on the subject, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each viewpoint. Apply any relevant methods or analyses to your case and discuss the results. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate your mastery of the literature and methodology of at least one topic. Present this material in an appropriately titled section of your comprehensive case report.

7. Toward the end of your comprehensive case report include a conclusions section in which you summarize and reiterate the conclusions you drew from your analyses. Your case may be compared to other cases if appropriate.

8. Your comprehensive case report should include an extensive bibliography of the books, articles, and other sources you used.

9. At least two appendices should be included. Appendix 1 should be a table of cranial measurements taken. Appendix 2 should be a list of postcranial measurements taken. You should strive to take a complete set of measurements, at least those described in Bass (1987). Other appendices may be added if desired.

10. In preparing your comprehensive case report follow the guidelines in the most recent version of the Graduate School's document "Preparing your Dissertation, Thesis, or Professional Paper", available online at http://www.umt.edu/grad/Current/Forms/PaperGuidelines.htm, along with any other Graduate School or Anthropology Department requirements.

11. It hardly needs to be said that your case report should be free of grammatical errors and misspellings. The writing style should be clear and straightforward, and should use active voice. Correct anatomical terminology should be used. White and Folkens (2000) is the definitive source for correct anatomical terms. Bass (1987) has a section in the back of his text on the correct plural form for each bone.

Texts Cited in this Document

