A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers

THIRD EDITION

THE SOCIOLOGY WRITING GROUP

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The Sociology Writing Group
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TO THE INSTRUCTOR

The quality of student writing is a constant concern to college teachers. Like their colleagues in other disciplines, many sociology instructors, preoccupied by the demands of their profession and dreading the likelihood of poorly written or perhaps plagiarized papers, despair of assigning writing and rely instead on tests. But to do so deprives students of the active, personal engagement with sociological concepts and data that only writing about them can provide. This book is an attempt to do something about this problem.

A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers grew out of our collective experiences as sociology and English faculty members, teaching assistants, counselors, and tutors at UCLA. The book is designed to relieve you of some of the burden of writing instruction and to provide your students—from beginning to advanced—with practical advice. Its format is flexible enough to accommodate specific modifications, yet "spelled out" enough to guide those who need to pay special attention to all steps in the writing process, from initial conceptualization to final presentation.

The underlying premise of the book is that thinking and writing are integrally related—that is, to write a sociology paper is to exercise the "sociological imagination." Our advice and examples are informed throughout by this practical pedagogical observation. For example, when instructors comment to students that their papers "are too psychological" or "really didn't address a sociological issue," students tend to be confused and rarely know how to correct the problem in later papers. Similarly, comments that a paper "has no structure," "follows no clear logic," or "lacks sufficient evidence" often baffle students. Our goal here is to provide both you and your students with illustrations and a common language for discussing and improving papers in these areas.

The book can be used in a variety of ways in both lower- and upper-division sociology courses. It can simply be assigned as a reference for

students to consult on their own. You can refer in class or in discussion sections to specific parts when you mention papers, explaining how students can apply our advice to your assignment and how our sample student papers do or do not represent what you expect. Or, in comments on drafts or in individual conferences with students, you can refer students to specific pages in the text.

This book can also be used in a range of writing classes from remedial to advanced. It is especially appropriate for adjunct writing courses paired with sociology courses. However, since much of the advice we present can be generalized to other disciplines, it is also suitable as a basic text in advanced writing courses emphasizing the social sciences. Much of the book—Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and Part III—applies equally to the humanities.

While we focus on priorities most commonly identified by instructors, our own writing style is intentionally "student-friendly." Students report that learning about writing is sometimes boring, and for some intimidating. Thus, our tone is deliberately easygoing, avoiding prohibitions where possible, including contractions where they soften the prose, and offering guidelines rather than commandments. We also include many specific examples, some taken from student papers, to make the guidelines less abstract.

The revised chapter on acknowledging sources (Chapter 4) brings the citing of examples up-to-date and includes the citation of electronic media. All other parts of the book have been rewritten where necessary.

Acknowledgments

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Last, but not least, we are grateful to Louise Waller, our editor at St. Martin's Press, for all her help.

A Note about the Third Edition

Particularly important in this edition is the entirely new chapter on acknowledging sources. This chapter explains how to avoid plagiarism, how to incorporate source material into a paper, and how to document it according to the new American Sociological Association (ASA) format. We have added new sections on writing essay examinations in class and on writing a proposal for an undergraduate paper, including a sample student proposal. This edition also updates the information on various computer aids to composition and provides a new sample ethnographic field research paper.

CONTENTS

TO THE STUDENT

If you're uneasy about the prospect of writing a sociology paper, you're not alone. Many students feel as you do; that's why we wrote this book. We can't promise that your assignment will be easy, but it *can* be done, and done well. This book can help you feel in control of the writing process from beginning to end, and it can help you produce your best work.

We've written the guide we wish we'd had as undergraduates. We learned too late what "explicate" means. We didn't know how to include our field notes. We had to return to the library at the last minute to find page numbers for passages we needed to cite because we neglected to jot them down in the first place, and we experienced many other problems in writing our own papers. We want to spare you some of the trouble we endured. And we have learned that procrastination—our own and that of others—is not always the result of laziness but often a sign of uncertainty about just how to begin and complete a given writing task.

Our students often tell us that they don't know what they're expected to do in a paper or that they don't know what the instructor wants. So we've tried to demystify the whole process. For example, we explain in Chapter 1 what makes a sociology paper different from papers in other disciplines and what sociology instructors want in terms of a paper's logic and structure. We suggest ways to get started and to stay on track, ways to deal with and present your data, and ways to troubleshoot your writing and to make your prose professional. All along the way our book gives practical illustrations, including some sample student papers you can match with your own. These papers are very good but they are not perfect. We have commented on their fine features and suggested alternatives where they illustrate problems.

We recommend that everyone read Part I on "Essentials" and Part III on "Finishing Up." Chapters in Part II, "Writing from Various Data Sources," can be used selectively. Use the table of contents and the index to look up what you need.

In Part I, Chapter 1 begins with the conceptual starting points that are fundamental for writing a good sociology paper. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively, present basic guidelines about organizing your time; writing and revising; keeping track of citations, notes, especially for electronic sources, and references to avoid plagiarism; and polishing your paper. Follow these guidelines from the beginning of your project.

Treat Part II on "Writing from Various Data Sources" as a reference tool. Read the introduction, and then delve into the individual chapters as you need them. These chapters cover four typical kinds of sociology papers that are, in turn, based on four different data sources: the textual analysis paper (Chapter 6), the library research paper (Chapter 7), the ethnographic field research paper (Chapter 8), and the quantitative research paper (Chapter 9). The chapter on library research includes a list of specialized sociological reference sources, and the other three chapters contain three student papers as illustrations.

Part III on "Finishing Up" is again for everyone. It contains a checklist for your final draft and suggestions for expanding your sociological imagination.

Don't try to read the whole book at one go. Chapter 2 and all the chapters in Part II are meant to guide you through steps in a process. Use these chapters as you would instructions for assembling anything—first scan the chapter to get a sense of what you're in for and then consult it carefully as you move along step by step. Sometimes writing assignments can loom as enormous, mysterious tasks because students don't know how to break them into smaller, more manageable tasks. This guide does that for you. There may be portions of the guide that you'll have to reread before they make sense to you, and other portions that you'll refer to again and again for present and future writing assignments.

The primary purpose of this book is to help you prepare good sociology papers, and, except for Chapter 9 on quantitative research, which is more technical than the other chapters, you'll be able to use this book from day one of any sociology course. But you'll also find that much of this book applies as well to other social sciences. And many parts will even help you write papers in the humanities. *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers* will help you from start to finish of your college career.

Your own campus may offer other resources to help you further.

- Find out if your campus library offers tours so that you can get an overview of its organization. A short time invested at the beginning of the quarter or semester when schedules tend to be less demanding may save you many hours of wandering and wondering later.

- Find out if your English department offers composition courses in which you can practice these writing skills. Investigate writing courses even after you have fulfilled the requirement for freshman composition. (Don't let English majors corner the market on intermediate or advanced courses.) At some colleges special writing courses are attached to sociology and other courses, a combination that benefits you doubly. If you are concerned that your present writing skills might earn a less than satisfactory grade in a composition class, check out the possibility of taking the course as as an elective on a pass/no pass basis.
- Find out if your campus has a tutoring center where peer or professional tutors can review your work with you and help you strengthen your skills.

A Note on Our Writing Style

Before going on, we would like you to note two features of our writing: our occasional use of contractions (for example, "we've" instead of "we have") and our avoidance of sexist language.

First, we have tried to make this book as down-to-earth and practical as possible. We imagine ourselves talking to you as we talk to our own students—trying to be direct, friendly, and helpful. Our prose is therefore rather informal and includes contractions. Academic papers, on the other hand, have a different purpose and are usually more formal. Some instructors might object to your using contractions in a sociology paper.

Second, we have deliberately used inclusive language when we refer to people in general. Historically, masculine nouns and pronouns have been used to refer to women and men both—for example, "*Man* is a social animal." As a result of the women's movement, this usage is slowly changing. Chapter 5 explains ways of avoiding sexist language.

Finally, we wish we could show you some of the drafts of this book. Writing anything worthwhile—a paper or a book—is always a messy, frustrating, creative, and finally rewarding process. Our own experience has been typical. Final written work usually looks so neat that it's easy to forget the wastepaper baskets overflowing with outlines scribbled on scratch paper, penciled drafts, cut and pasted revisions, and annotated computer printouts. For example, the word processing program on one of our computers automatically counts the number of times a finger touches a key as each document is typed. Writing Chapter 7 involved over 80,000 keystrokes, as we typed in material, rearranged it, changed it, added to it, replaced it, or erased it. So don't be discouraged if you don't like what you first write. That's normal. The

paper will improve, and you will like it better with each succeeding keystroke or pencil mark. *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers* will show you how this happens and will guide you through the process.

PART I

ESSENTIALS

Perhaps the most disabling myth about intellectual activity is that writing is an art that is prompted by inspiration. Some writing can be classified as an art, no doubt, but the art of writing is a trade in the same sense that plumbing or automotive repair are trades. Just as plumbers and mechanics would rarely accomplish anything if they waited for inspiration to impel them to action, so writers would rarely write if they relied on inspiration.

RODNEY STARK,
Sociology

Writing is a craft as well as an art. As with any other craft, becoming a good writer requires understanding the principles of how papers work. A first-rate plumber must know some principles of hydraulics, and an outstanding auto mechanic, the principles of combustion. Writing a good sociological paper requires understanding principles of both sociology and writing.

Part I presents these fundamentals of craftsmanship. Chapter 1, "Getting Started," explains some topics that might be considered as much inspiration as perspiration, such as how to use a "sociological imagination" in writing. More specifically, this chapter covers some of the qualities that instructors look for in papers but that students sometimes have difficulty grasping. An instructor will frequently criticize student papers as being "not sufficiently sociological," "not addressing a real question," or "having problems of logic and structure." But often students are not sure what the instructor means, and instructors often find themselves at a loss how exactly to interpret their own comments. So we have explained what sociologists mean when

they require papers to "take a sociological perspective," to "be logical and well structured," and to "answer a well-formed question."

Starting a paper at all and then staying on a productive schedule is troublesome for many students, so Chapter 2, "Organizing Your Time," has some practical advice for this problem, both for papers assigned outside of class and for exams written in class. Chapter 3, "The Writing Process," recommends techniques for harnessing the power of the writing process itself to trigger insights and to continually clarify your ideas. Chapter 4, "Acknowledging Sources," explains what, when, and how to introduce and cite borrowed information, and Chapter 5, "Polishing Your Paper," shows how to edit and format a final draft of your paper.

Chapter 1

GETTING STARTED

Additionally, and especially in the social sciences, much unclear writing is based on unclear or incomplete thought. It is possible with safety to be technically obscure about something you haven't thought out. It is impossible to be wholly clear on something you do not understand.

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH,
"Writing, Typing, and Economics"

Writing a good sociology paper starts with asking a good sociological question. Picking a topic is just the beginning of planning your paper. You need to frame your paper's topic in the form of a *question.* Asking a good question will make the other tasks of writing your paper much easier and will help you hand in a good finished product.

Everything else follows from the question your paper asks. Think of taking a photograph. The deepest artistic sensitivity or the most sophisticated technical skills cannot create a beautiful picture unless you point the camera in the right direction. But carefully aiming the camera in the right direction can combine with simple competence and a personal point of view to produce a fine and, if you are lucky, breathtaking photograph. Likewise, when you create a sociology paper, you can produce interesting, high-quality results without being the smartest or most eloquent student in the world: the key is to take the time to "point" your work in an effective direction by asking a well-formulated question.

Sometimes instructors assign papers by requiring students to respond to a particular question. When that happens make sure you thoroughly understand the question and keep it in mind as you work on the paper. Not answering the instructor's question is one of the most frequent pitfalls of student writing. Even if you have a thoroughly researched, insightfully reasoned, and eloquently written paper, if it

does not answer the assigned question, most instructors will find it unsatisfactory. Read the question carefully when you begin your work, reread it as you are doing any reading or research that may be required, reread it when you sit down to write, and reread it as you begin your final draft. People's minds, especially intelligent people's minds, have a tendency to drift to interesting and related, but not always pertinent, topics.

Even when the assignment is not presented as a question, you must formulate one to address in your paper. Three features distinguish a question that will serve as a strong foundation for a sociology paper. First, a helpful question reflects an understanding of sociology's distinctive perspective on human life. Second, it is carefully posed and framed. Third, it is asked in such a way that it lends itself to a logical and well-structured answer (in contrast to a question that suggests an endless list, such as "What are all the roles adopted by leaders?" or is too open-ended, such as "Why are people irrational?"). The following sections will help you to meet these three criteria for asking good questions.

What Is Sociology?

Failing to understand what sociology is and what sociologists do is a main reason that students experience difficulty in writing successful sociology papers. Since asking a good sociological question depends on understanding what sociology is, this section defines sociology and discusses how it is different from other fields.

Sociology is the study of human social behavior. Its basic insight is that human behavior is shaped by interaction among people. In other words, who a person is, what she or he thinks and does, is affected by the groups of which that person is a member. Sociologists investigate how individuals are shaped by their social groups, from families to nations, and how groups are created and maintained by the individuals who compose them.

Another part of sociology's insight is that interaction takes place in ways which are patterned, even though the people involved may be separated by many years or many miles or may appear to have differences. For example, societies at different historical times or in different geographical locations all find ways to enforce rules, to teach children valued beliefs, and to organize the production of goods necessary to their members' welfare. Sociologists try to understand the consistencies in these processes—the ways in which their similarities and differences follow a predictable pattern.

Sociology and Other Perspectives on Human Behavior

Sometimes new students (and more experienced ones!) are confused about how sociology is distinguished from other disciplines that study people, such as psychology, political science, history, philosophy, anthropology, or economics. In fact, these fields are not totally distinct. Sometimes the interests shared by different fields are easy to see, as with political sociology and political science, for example. But even when the overlap is less apparent, some theorists and researchers in each field share concerns and methods with those in neighboring disciplines.

Right now, however, we want to focus on what is distinctive about sociology because, in order to write successfully in any discipline, you need to have some idea of its boundaries. Our brief sketch necessarily simplifies the definitions of sociology and its "neighbors" and exaggerates their dissimilarities. The differences discussed below are intended primarily to sensitize you to sociology's distinctive features; they are not rigidly observed by theorists or researchers. In fact, many scholars describe themselves explicitly in terms that cross these boundaries (such as social historians, political economists, and social psychologists), often incorporating a sociological perspective into other disciplines.

The following summary compares and contrasts sociology with psychology, political science, history, philosophy, economics, and anthropology. We have illustrated their differences by showing how researchers in each field might approach one aspect of human life—deviant behavior.

Sociology and Psychology

Similarities: Both are concerned with attitudes, beliefs, behavior, emotions, and interpersonal relationships.

Differences: Psychology is more likely to focus on the individual level of human behavior. When sociology considers the individual, it is within the context of social groups.

Studying deviance: Psychologists investigate the categories of mental disorders underlying deviant behavior. A sociologist might try to discover whether members of one socioeconomic class are more likely than members of another class to be labeled "mentally ill."

Sociology and Political Science

Similarities: Both are concerned with government.

Differences: Political scientists analyze different forms of government and their underlying philosophies and study the political process.

A sociologist is more likely to examine the interrelationship between political structure and behavior and other aspects of society, such as the economy, religious institutions, and the attitudes of various social groups.

Studying deviance: A political scientist might analyze laws regulating deviance. A sociologist might examine how such laws change as the members of society adopt different ideological beliefs or how they serve the interests of some classes more than others.

Sociology and History

Similarities: Both look at human life over time.

Differences: Historians are more likely to focus on the influence of individuals and on the causes of specific events. Sociologists concentrate on the causes and effects of changes in patterns of social life, among both famous and ordinary people.

Studying deviance: A historian might interpret the motivations and actions of influential deviant individuals and attempt to explain their influence. A sociologist is more likely to trace changes in society's ways of defining and controlling deviant behavior.

Sociology and Philosophy

Similarities: Both are interested in beliefs about the nature of life.

Differences: Philosophy is a system of abstract reasoning that follows specific rules of logic. Sociology is empirical: it seeks to discover information about the real world by gathering data about what people actually do.

Studying deviance: Philosophers might ask "What is good?" and "What is evil?" or analyze the appropriate uses of the term "deviance." Sociologists stick to what actually goes on in the social world, asking, for instance, "What do members of this particular society or subculture believe is 'right' and 'wrong'?"

Sociology and Anthropology

Similarities: Both are concerned with social life, including culture, beliefs, decision making, relationships, and so on.

Differences: Anthropology is more likely to study societies other than our own, and to compare aspects of society cross-culturally.

Studying deviance: Anthropologists might travel to an isolated, nonindustrialized society to study how it defines and treats deviant behavior, or they might compare differences in rates of deviance in industrialized societies and nonindustrialized societies. Sociologists often study the same processes but are more likely to focus on a single society.