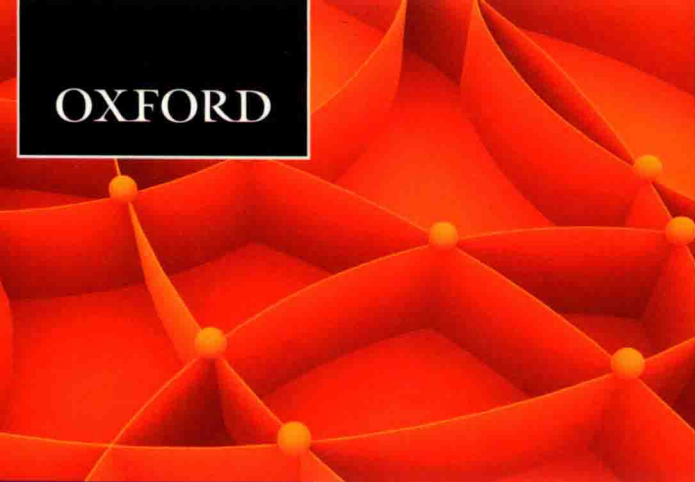




OXFORD



A Student's Guide
to Research and
Writing



Making Sense



Social Sciences

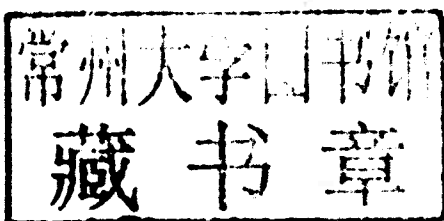
Fifth Edition

MARGOT NORTHEY
LORNE TEPPERMAN
PATRIZIA ALBANESE



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Making Sense



Social Sciences

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Checklist for Written Assignments

CONTENT

- Is your thesis, hypothesis, or goal clearly stated?
- Have you included all relevant details?
- Is your interpretation of the results logical?
- Have you discussed all controversies and contradictory results that could lead to alternative interpretations?
- Does your evidence support your conclusion(s)?

STRUCTURE

- Is each paragraph logically structured?
- Do the paragraphs build to a logical conclusion?
- Have you included all sections in the correct order?
- Have you consistently followed a style of referencing?
- Does the assignment meet length requirements?

STYLE, GRAMMAR, AND SPELLING

- Does your writing style suit the purpose of the assignment?
- Have you proofread the assignment line-by-line to pick up all grammar and spelling mistakes?
- Is your use of scientific and technical terms correct?
- Did you check for commonly misused words and phrases?
- Have you read the assignment aloud to yourself? Have you had a friend read the assignment?
- Is it underwritten (missing details) or overwritten (too wordy) in any particular section?
- Does the assignment have dynamically written passages?

FINAL DETAILS

- Have you included your name, student ID, course number, lab section, etc. on the title page?
- Have you included documentation for all content that is not your own? Is the reference list correctly formatted?
- Have you numbered each page?
- Have you included all necessary components and, when applicable, followed your instructor's marking scheme?

Making Sense

PREFACE

Good writing does not come naturally. It takes time and practice, and it usually follows the old formula of 10 per cent inspiration and 90 per cent perspiration.

Writing in university or college is not fundamentally different from writing elsewhere. But each piece of writing has its own special purposes, and these determine its particular substance, shape, and tone. *Making Sense in the Social Sciences* examines both the general precepts for effective writing and the special requirements of social science research. It also points out some common errors in student composition and suggests ways to avoid or correct them. Written mostly as a set of guidelines rather than strict rules, this book should help you escape the common pitfalls of student writing as you develop confidence through an understanding of basic principles and a mastery of sound techniques.


We intend for this book to teach students how to share their work with others, through clearly written term papers, examinations, presentations, and research reports for social science courses. Writing well in the social sciences demands not only a good writing style, but also a good understanding of research design, theory, measurement, argument, and communication. All of these qualities must be present in order for you to get your ideas across clearly and persuasively.

Much of what appears in the following chapters is written as though you were conducting and describing a research project of your own. Nevertheless, the same principles apply, with equal force, to understanding, describing, and criticizing the work of others.

The discussion that follows has two related goals. One is to show you how to conduct and present your own research—research that makes sense to a reader who may not already be persuaded of your views. The other goal is to show you how to make sense of the work of other researchers, so that you can use and evaluate their findings in essays, book reviews, and examination answers.

Making sense in the social sciences is similar, in many ways, to making sense in the physical sciences and humanities. However, some problems described here are more marked in the social sciences, which use more varied research methods than do the physical sciences and humanities. Some problems are unique to particular disciplines of social science, but others are not.

We discuss some of the common ones here, using examples from across the social sciences.

In writing this edition, we relied on reactions to previous editions and suggestions for change and improvement. We updated examples and material in all chapters, and each chapter now includes learning objectives. We also removed unnecessary overlap across chapters, expanded sections on assessing online resources, inserted a new chapter on presenting your work, and added a new mini-index of hints and pointers on what you will find discussed in the body of this new edition. Finally, we enhanced tips on how to use technologies to streamline the writing process (note the marginal icons). These improvements, we believe, have helped us better reflect the current state of this changing academic field. 

As in the previous edition, we have noted the diminishing importance of the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methodologies; the non-universal nature of all methodologies, each having its particular area of competence and pertinence; and the value of multi(mixed)-method analysis in obtaining stable results and opening up communications between sub-disciplines.

Today, there is no single model of analysis in social science, but rather a set of more or less closely related approaches for exploring data and the links between macro and micro levels of reality. We will discuss some methodological developments of the last few decades and contrast them with older methods. We have provided illustrative examples of how different types of analysis contribute to social science knowledge in several areas, including sociology, anthropology, demography, criminology, women's studies, and political science. However, in the midst of variety, we found a few simple themes that are repeated throughout the book, particularly the connectedness of research methods and the connectedness of the social sciences.

In his fascinating book *Once Upon a Number* (1998), the great popularizer of mathematics John Allen Paulos points out some differences and similarities between stories and statistics. Statistics typically address generalities: the characteristics of large populations and large trends, for example. These generalities are so large that we can scarcely hope to picture individuals who personify them. Largely for this reason, statistics often leave people cold. Yet they capture broad "truths" about a population because they are usually based on scientific sampling of that population.

By contrast, the best stories are particular, not general: they sketch particular people caught in particular dramas at a particular time and place. Yet,

despite their particularity, stories often capture our interest in a way that statistics do not. Stories also tell “truths” about the human condition. In the end, every population is just the sum of the unique stories that make it up. Clearly, statistics and stories are just two sides of the same coin, the forest and the trees respectively. Both are true, but each speaks to a different part of our need to know the truth.

And, just as statistics have a mathematical logic, so too do stories. Stories have logical structures in the same sense that sonatas and symphonies do. Good authors (and composers) know these standard forms and genres of exposition. Their skilful manipulation is largely what makes people respond to them emotionally. It is unclear whether these forms are, in some sense, essential and universal: whether, for example, every successful love story will necessarily have the same structure, wherever and whenever it is written; or whether they merely reflect particular features of a time, culture, or civilization. In either event, successful stories are no more random than the social statistics describing a crime rate or a population of families. There is order in good writing just as there is in society itself. It is our goal to help you better understand and accomplish this through your own work.

Forgive the abstraction, but these points have to be made for two reasons. First, this book is both about good writing and about the analysis of society—the goal of all social science. We hope to show you that these two goals are related and compatible. They fit well in one book, and you can learn about both at the same time. Second, this edition of the book emphasizes—as some earlier editions did not—the essential compatibility of statistical analysis and storytelling, of quantitative and qualitative analysis, and of *scientific* and *interpretive* approaches to reality. More than ever, social scientists in every discipline recognize the need to bring these approaches together in their research enterprises. Students need to be made aware that this important change is taking place; our book makes a small contribution to this change in thinking.

The value of what is presented here is not limited to writing good term papers, exams, and research projects. More sensible communication in the social sciences is useful outside of school as well: in education, government, business, even in analyzing the events of everyday life. We hope you will use the principles learned from this book long after you have stopped writing papers that only a professor or teaching assistant will read. Dip into the book as a quick reference, or read it through, then e-mail us (via palbanes@ryerson.ca or lorne.tepperman@utoronto.ca) to tell us what you think.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's not easy to update a text that has been put together and reworked by highly skilled and conscientious colleagues. Their profound understanding of the social sciences and of undergraduate students' fears, struggles, and needs made this task both very simple and very difficult. It was simple because the base upon which we worked was solid. It was difficult for the same reason; what more, if anything, could be done to improve and update this textbook, which has been popular with students and instructors alike for over twenty years? Much of the work on this edition involved making general edits; updating examples and references; trimming down sections where material overlapped across chapters; adding new sections on plagiarism, writing thesis statements, and using Internet sources; crafting chapter objectives; and writing a new chapter on presenting your work. In the process, we have enjoyed working with Tamara Capar, the Oxford University Press editor who advised us on changes the book needed and supported our efforts along the way. Your quick and friendly responses were invaluable—thank you. Finally, we were guided through a smooth and speedy copy edit by Dana Hopkins, who made everything (seem) effortless; thank you, Dana.

The book is dedicated to all of the undergraduates who struggle daily to understand how social science is different from common sense and armchair speculation on the one hand, and jargon-filled data juggling on the other. We hope this book will make sense of it for them.

We would like to acknowledge the use of the following diagrams: "The Research Cycle," from Peter Li; "Factors Affecting Technology Integration in K-12 Classrooms: A Path Model," from Fethi Inan and Deborah Lowther in *Technology Research & Development*; "Making Sense of Voluntary Participation: A Theoretical Synthesis," from Vernon Ryan, Kerry Agnitsch, Lijun Zhao, and Rehan Mullick in *Rural Sociology*; "Early Universal Marriage and Polygyny among Women in Traditional Economy and a Stationary Population: A Schematic Framework," from Helen Chojnacka; "Early marriage and polygyny: Feature characteristics of nuptiality in Africa," in *Genus*; and "The Qualitative and Quantitative Paradigms Compared," from Charles S. Reichardt and Thomas D. Cook, "Beyond Qualitative versus Quantitative Methods," in *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Evaluation Research*, edited by Thomas D. Cook and Charles S. Reichardt. A portion of Chapter 1 was adapted from *Macro/Micro: A Brief Introduction to Sociology*, by Lorne

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We dedicate this book to Patrizia Albanese's late husband and Lorne Tepperman's colleague and friend, Slobodan Drakulic (29 November, 1947–27 September, 2010).

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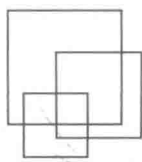
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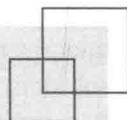
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CHAPTER 1

Writing and Thinking

LEARNING OBJECTIVES



In this chapter we will examine

- strategies you can use first to think and then to write about your research topic;
- pre-writing tactics to help you consider the purpose of your writing, its intended reader, and its tone;
- the thesis statement; and
- the rule of equal thirds when managing your thinking and your writing time.

INTRODUCTION

While you may not think of sending e-mails or text messages as writing, writing is something you do all the time. It is a powerful tool for demonstrating what we know and sharing our ideas with others. It's about using information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose. Formal, academic writing is no different. Fear and anxiety about academic or other formal writing is common and can create significant barriers to success at school, at work, and in other aspects of everyday life. The good news is that writing gets easier with training and practice (Price, 2010). Nobody is born a good writer, but you can pick up many strategies and skills along the way to make writing easier and even enjoyable.

Good, formal writing requires solid research. Research is a game—with players, rules, and goals—played largely in people's heads. It is a game of thinking and then transferring those thoughts onto paper or onto a screen.

Winning is accomplished by producing superior thoughts and writing them in a clear and persuasive manner; this requires planning and training. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the writing of essays, tests, research papers, and books, where writing and thinking are everything.

You are not likely to produce clear, persuasive writing unless you have first done some clear thinking, and thinking cannot be hurried. You have to leave yourself enough time to think. Psychologists have shown that you can't always solve a difficult problem by simply putting your mind to it—by determined reasoning alone. Sometimes, when you're stuck, it's best to take a break, sleep on it, and let the unconscious or creative part of your brain take over for a while. Relaxation may help you produce a new approach or solution. Keep the research in mind and keep your eyes open for new ideas. Remember that leaving time for creative reflection isn't the same as sitting around listening to music, hoping inspiration will strike out of the blue.

STARTING STRATEGIES

Writing is about making choices: about the ideas you want to present and how you want to present them. Practice makes these decisions easier to come by, but no matter how fluent you become, with each piece of writing you still have to make choices.

You can narrow the field of choice if you realize that you are *not* writing for anybody, anywhere, without any particular reason. Whenever you write, it's always sound strategy to ask yourself three basic questions:

- What is the purpose of this piece of writing?
- Who am I writing for?
- What does the reader expect?

Your first reaction may be, "Well, I'm writing an essay for my instructor to satisfy a course requirement," but obviously this won't help. To be useful, your answers have to be precise. Thus, a better answer might be, "I want to study X using research method Y to prove Z for course A." Here are some suggestions for finding precise answers to questions about your purpose and your reader.

Think about your purpose

Your purpose may be one (or more) of several possibilities:

- to show that you understand certain terms or theories;
- to show that you can do independent research;
- to apply a specific theory to new material;
- to provide information;
- to show your knowledge of a topic or text;
- to demonstrate your ability to evaluate secondary sources; and/or
- to show that you can think critically or creatively.

An assignment designed to see if you have read and understood specific material calls for a different approach than one meant to test your critical thinking or research skills. If you don't figure out the exact purpose of your assignment, you may find that you are wasting time.

Think about your reader

Thinking about the reader does *not* mean playing up to the instructor. To convince a person that your views are sound, you have to consider his or her way of thinking. If you are writing a paper on Israeli communes for a sociology professor, your analysis will be different from the analysis you would use if you were writing for an economics or history professor. You will have to decide which terms you should explain and what background information you should supply. In the same way, if your reader does not support the idea of a common currency between Canada and the United States, and you intend to propose that Canadians use American money, you should anticipate any arguments that your reader may raise so you can address them in advance.

If you do not know who will be reading your paper—your professor, your tutorial leader, or a marker—just imagine someone intelligent and interested who is skeptical enough to question your ideas, but flexible enough to adopt them if your evidence is convincing.

Think about the tone

When writing to friends, including e-mails or text messages, you probably use a casual tone, but academic writing is more formal. Just how formal you need to be will depend on the assignment and instruction you have been given. If your anthropology professor asks you to express yourself freely and personally in a journal, you may be able to use an informal style. Essays and reports, however, require a formal tone. Here are some examples that may be too informal for academic work.

USE OF SLANG

Although the occasional use of slang may achieve a special effect, frequent use is not acceptable in academic writing. Slang expressions are usually regional and short-lived: they may mean different things to different groups at different times. (Just think of how widely the meanings of *hot*, *cool*, and *sick* can vary, depending on the circumstances.)

FREQUENT USE OF CONTRACTIONS

Generally speaking, contractions such as *can't* and *isn't* are not suitable for academic writing, although they may be fine for e-mails or other informal kinds of writing—for example, this handbook. This is not to say that you should avoid using contractions altogether: even the most serious academic writing can sound too stiff or unnatural without any contractions at all. Just be sure that when you use contractions in a college or university essay you use them *sparingly*, since excessive use makes formal writing sound chatty and informal.

Finding a suitable tone for academic writing can be a challenge. The problem with trying to avoid informality is that you may be tempted to become excessively formal. If your writing sounds stiff or pompous, you may be using too many high-flown phrases, long words, or passive constructions (see Chapter 7). For example, it is better to say “a growing number of women are becoming self-employed” than “an escalating quantity of women are entering more flexible arrangements in the form of entrepreneurial endeavours.” When in doubt, a more formal but simple style will always be acceptable.

Develop a thesis statement

Some have argued that what a novice writer lacks most is focus or unity of thought, and what is required to keep a writer on track is a *thesis statement* (Raymer, 2010; Haluska, 2006; Jortner, 2003). A thesis statement is typically a single sentence that expresses what your essay or paper is about—a big idea boiled down to one thought (Frank, 2005). But good thesis statements not only set out what your piece of writing is about, they indicate your views on the topic and the direction you will take in your work (Raymer, 2010). The thesis statement drives the structure and content of your paper (Montante, 2004). It should show what the work will say on a topic but also what you, the writer, think that it means (Duxbury, 2008). For example, Haluska (2006: 52) gives the following example: imagine that you have been asked to write a short report on one journal article. Judging by each of these thesis statements, which would produce the most effective essay?

- A. The article talks about _____ and _____.
- B. This is an excellent article because of how clearly it explains _____ and _____.
- C. This article seems pretty uneven; although the author explains _____ well enough, his main points, _____ and _____, are presented in such a confusing way that I could hardly keep track of them.

If you selected either B or C above, you would agree with Haluska (2006: 52), who explains that in both cases, the student has “read the article with enough mental vigour to have formed an intelligent opinion about it.” The essay will be focused and unified if the writer then gives specific details demonstrating the validity of each claim.

Budget your time

THINK ABOUT THE LENGTH AND VALUE

Before you start writing, or even researching, you will need to think about the assignment in relation to the time you have to spend on it. If your instructor has assigned a particular topic and length, it should be easy for you to assess the level of detail needed and the amount of research you will need to do. If only the length is prescribed, that limit will help you decide how broad or narrow the topic you choose should be (see Chapter 8 for more on this). You should also think about how important the assignment is in relation to the rest of your work for the course. A piece of work worth 10 per cent of your final grade will not demand as much attention as one worth 30 per cent.

How long will it take? The rule of thirds

Any question can be answered in the time you have available, whether that's three minutes, three hours, or three months. There is no such thing as a question that *must* take a week, a month, or a year. Any essay, book report, or exam answer can be written in the time you have available.

Other things being equal, however, an intelligent answer that takes three hours to complete will be better than an intelligent answer that takes three minutes. If you have only three minutes to answer, do your best in the time available and you will be respected for the result. However, if you have three hours to answer, by all means use that three-hour period to its fullest. Your instructor will be expecting more from a three-hour answer than from a three-minute one.

Many students who struggle with their writing do so not because they have too little time to complete an assignment, but because they do not make effective use of their time. For example, research by Levy and Ransdell (1995) shows that students tend to overestimate how much time and effort they devote to reviewing their work; as a result, they often spend too little time revising. This research also finds that what most distinguishes writers of the highest- and lowest-quality is the amount of time they devote to revising: writers who revise the most get the highest grades.

If you have trouble budgeting your time for an assignment, consider the “rule of equal thirds” strategy, suggested by Sanford Kaye in his book *Writing under Pressure* (1998). He recommends that whatever you’re writing, an essay, book report, or exam answer, you should always spend about one-third of your time thinking, reading, and preparing to answer; another third of your time writing the first draft; and the final third cleaning up and revising. So, for example, if you have three months to write an essay, spend one month thinking about the problem and collecting information and whatever other data you may need. Spend your second month writing a first draft of the essay, and spend your final month rereading, reorganizing, and revising, checking it for errors and typos. Let’s consider each step in more detail.

The first third

You should spend the first third of your allotted time applying everything you know about methods of research to your topic. This is the time for background reading, designing your research, measuring your variables, and collecting and analyzing your data.

Before you can start writing, you need to find out what you don’t know. You also have to develop strategies for limiting what you need to know. If, for example, you decide to write something on modern family life, you will find hundreds of books and thousands of articles on that topic at the library. You cannot read all that material; you need a strategy to narrow the question you are going to answer and a way to decide which things you have to read and which you can ignore. (We discuss ways of limiting your topic in Chapter 8.)

The second third

Once you have narrowed your question, and read and thought about your topic, you are ready to start writing your three-month essay. Force yourself to obey the *equal thirds* rule: if you look at your calendar and it’s the first day of the second month, put aside your research and start writing. Eventually,