

Writing in
Sociology

A Guide for UConn Students

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Hello, I'm Stephen Ostertag. I was a graduate student in the University of Connecticut's sociology department from fall 2000 through spring 2007. As a graduate student I studied culture, media and deviance, and wrote my dissertation on how people balance their news consumption (i.e. viewing, reading, listening) based on the source's reputation. I taught over half a dozen "W" courses, including Introductory Sociology and Deviant Behavior, and was a tutor at the University's Writing Center. I came into the department as a weak writer, but since have learned how to write for sociology as well as broader audiences. I created this writing guide for students who want straightforward assistance with their writing. The content is based on various discussions I had with sociology professors as well as students in sociology courses--some sociology major, some not. This guide is intended for strong and weak writers alike, and can be read as a whole or in parts. I hope you find it useful.

For Starters...

It's always a good idea to keep in contact with your instructors and professors. Let them periodically know about your paper's progress; tell them your ideas; talk through your paper with them; visit during office hours. Plus, don't be afraid to ask them to suggest some sources for your paper. Keep a dialogue with your professors, as it will likely result in both a more rewarding writing process and a higher quality product. Also be sure to take advantage of their office hours.

Also consider visiting the University of Connecticut's Writing Center, where you can discuss your writing at any stage with tutors from a range of disciplines. The Writing Center has three locations: CUE 124, CLAS 159, and 1st floor in Babbidge Library. To find the hours and make an appointment, go to www.writingcenter.uconn.edu

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I. What is Sociology?

Sociology shouldn't be confused with social philosophy. It is not a point of view about the way things ought to be. Rather, sociology deals with the way things are... Sociology is a science of social life and thus has an empirical and logical basis. Sociological assertions must make sense given what's already known and correspond to the facts. Sociology is not an opinion (Babbie, 1994: 7-8).

Writing a strong sociological paper requires that you understand what sociology is. Earl Babbie (1994) offers some general statements on the discipline. Sociology is the study of human beings in groups, more specifically:

- The study of why people behave in certain ways
 - Which conditions encourage which types of behavior?
- The study of human interactions and relationships
 - How do people cooperate, compete, conflict and control each other?
- The study of formal organizations, societies and institutions and their relations
- The study of rules, laws and categories, and how they emerged
 - Whose interests do they reflect and why?
 - Whose interests do they neglect and why?
 - How they are maintained over time?
 - How are they challenged?
- The study of power, knowledge, and control

Why Care about Sociology?

Sociology is useful in generating a deeper understanding of each other and our lives. Sociology helps us understand things such as poverty, inequality, control and manipulation, politics, and human behavior more generally. Sociologists provide a thoroughly analyzed and measured (i.e., scientific) understanding of various social phenomena so as to inform social policies and pave the way for a more just and equitable society.

Sociological Facts and Methods

If sociological assertions are to have a logical and factual basis, then what is sociological knowledge and how do sociologists go about finding it? These questions require that we ask about sociological methods. Sociological methods are ways in which sociologists go about accumulating empirical data, or measurable and/or observable evidence of various phenomena. When researching your paper you will want to take note of the various methods researchers use to ground their research findings. Different methods often reflect different research questions and concerns.

Overall, sociological methods tend to fall into two camps: *quantitative* and *qualitative*.

- Quantitative methods involve large numbers of respondents and use data that can be turned into numerical form. Often sociologists will use computer programs to interpret their data.
- Qualitative methods usually involve speaking with people for extended periods of time; closely analyzing literature, content, or discourses; as well as observing or participating in social groups and/or events.

Both methods are useful for different reasons but are often complimentary; in fact, some of the strongest sociological research is grounded on both. This is called “triangulation.” Triangulation does not necessarily require both qualitative and quantitative methods; however, what matters is that one uses a multi-method approach in collecting sociological data. This yields findings that are more reliable and credible, and it allows for a greater degree of faith in sociological assertions. I will now discuss a handful of common sociological methods.

Quantitative Methods: Good for understanding relationships among people, rates of phenomenon occurring in a given population, and effects of different stimuli on groups of people.

Survey and Questionnaire Data: Sociologists often use surveys and questionnaires to examine and explain various causes and effects, such as *why* some social phenomena (e.g., crime) occurs. Sociologists also use surveys and questionnaires to examine *relationships among* various social phenomena. This may include examining the relationship between crime and unemployment rates, or attitudes towards news content based on the viewers' race, class, and gender. Survey and questionnaire data are also useful in predicting people's attitudes and how they will behave under certain circumstances.

Experimental Data: Much like scientists in the natural sciences, sociologists will use experiments to examine how particular stimuli affect people (i.e., the effects of X on Y). A simple experimental design has three basic components:

- (1) Independent and dependent variables
- (2) Pre-testing and post-testing
- (3) Experimental and control groups.

The goal is to assess the impact of the independent variable(s) on the dependent variable(s), that is, the effects of X on Y. Sociologists begin by first collecting data on people (pre-test) for the dependent variable(s) as well as other factors that they will attempt to keep consistent across the participants. Next, they will randomly place the participants into two different groups: the experimental and control groups. The people in the experimental group are introduced to a certain stimuli (the independent variable(s)), while those in the control group are denied the stimuli. The goal is to have two or more groups of people that are the same in every way except for having experienced the stimuli/independent variable(s). Then, after introducing the independent variable(s) sociologists will take measurements of both groups (post-test) and compare their results to the measurements they took before introducing the stimuli.

If there were multiple experimental groups and independent variables, sociologists will also often compare their post-test measurements across groups. The differences are often attributed to the independent variable(s) or stimuli, thus the "effects" of X on Y.

- Sociologists will sometimes conduct **longitudinal research**. This involves examining the long-term effects of X on Y. To do this, sociologists will continue to introduce stimuli and take measurements over an extended period of time. This often yields findings that are more reliable and trustworthy because of the extended examination.

Qualitative Methods: Good for developing a deeper and richer understanding of social phenomena and overcoming superficial "common sense" understandings. In many ways qualitative research resembles extended, investigative journalism with the goal of a comprehensive understanding of an issue.

Interview Data: Sociologists use interviews when they want people to express how they feel or think about a particular issue. The interviewer often lightly guides a conversation with the interviewee, focusing on certain topics but also being flexible enough to follow where the conversation goes. The goal is to talk about a given topic in a way that allows the interviewee to speak freely while providing only minimal direction for the conversation.

- For example, to understand the issues that bi-racial couples encounter in their everyday lives and how they handle them, a sociologist might interview 30 bi-racial couples. The interview would focus on what those involved in a bi-racial relationship encounter in their lives, while allowing the interviewees to direct the conversation where they feel appropriate. This might mean talking about family outings or holiday parties at work, or any number of other events. The goal is to interview couples until the sociologist stops getting new information (i.e., the saturation point), so the number of interviews the sociologist conducts will reflect the demands of the sociological questions.

Ethnographic Data: Ethnography is a method that draws on a variety of data sources. Ethnographic research will use interview data, observations and field notes, perhaps personal experience via one's own participation in some social group/event, various literature analyses, and statistical data all to generate an understanding of a social event, group, or social organization.

- For example, to understand how a public television station operates, how it gets its funding and what this suggests for the programs it airs, a sociologist might volunteer at a public television station, interview various station members, examine various institutional forms and literature that the station uses and then after becoming familiar with the station, draw conclusions from what these data suggest.

These sources of data and their corresponding methods represent some of the methods that sociologists use to understand the social world. Other methods include life histories, content and discourse analyses, participant observation, and institutional ethnography, to name a few. For more sources on sociological methods, consult any of the following:

- *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000) edited by Norman Deznin and Yvonna Lincoln, for a thorough evaluation of various qualitative methods.
- Jane Miller's (2005) *The Chicago Guide to Writing about Multivariate Analysis*
- Herbert Weisberg's (2005) book *The Total Survey Error Approach* for further elaboration on statistical data uses and analyses.
- For a more general approach to understanding sociological methods, check out Arthur Stinchcombe's *The Logic of Social Research* (2005), and Earl Babbie's *The Basics of Social Research* (2004).

II: Key Concepts: Sociological Imagination, Institutions, Structures, and Social Constructions

In this section I discuss some of the major concepts commonly used in sociology. You must know these to do well in your sociology courses. It's important not to think of these concepts as individual, separate ideas—they are related to each other in various ways. In fact, much of sociology involves figuring out the relationships among these concepts.

Sociological Imagination

Consider the following discussion with a UConn sociology professor:

Ostertag: So, can you tell me what you're looking for in your students' sociological writing?

Sociology Professor: I look for them to explain the content in depth and show some creativity with the material, not just a factual report. The strongest papers are those that can implement both, and related to this, show that you can think sociologically. Use your *sociological imagination* and apply it to your work.

Developing and using your sociological imagination is one of the most important aspects of sociology. To do well in your sociology courses, as well as life, exercise your sociological imagination. Doing so will help you understand other key sociological terms such as *institutions*, *social constructions*, and *systems*, as well as your own life conditions.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the term “sociological imagination” and explains what he means by it in the accompanying text box.

C. Wright Mills on the Sociological Imagination

What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhoods...

Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them. (Mills, 1959: 3-4)

The sociological imagination is a state of mind in which people recognize that their own and others' social conditions, experiences, and ways of understanding the world are situated within larger social, cultural, and political forces. Essentially, the sociological imagination requires that we “look up” and recognize how our lives are subject to and affected by large and powerful forces, and not just the result of our individual choices and immediate social circles.

Exercising your sociological imagination should make you realize how your individual choices and social circles are actually conditioned by larger social, cultural and political forces. Good sociological writing demonstrates a high level of familiarity with this concept, and can be recognized by the type(s) of question(s) you use to frame your writing and the ways you go about addressing those question(s).

Using your Sociological Imagination: An Example

Decent paying industrial jobs have been dramatically dwindling in the U.S. for the past few decades, and in their place have grown part-time, lower paying service jobs. This social phenomena reflects larger economic pressures and social and political policies, such as free trade agreements that allow corporations to relocate their production plants abroad and corporate pressures that emphasize profits over all else. Now, you personally might know someone who lost his or her job due to lay-offs or plant closings and relocations, but if you see this phenomenon only as a local issue then you need to develop your sociological imagination. Sociologists will stress the larger economic and political trends and decisions that enabled such employment opportunities and outcomes in the first place. In other words, look at the bigger picture and recognize how yours and the life choices and circumstances of many others are conditioned and structured by larger forces. You will see the world very differently once you develop your sociological imagination.

Institutions

In your sociology courses you will quickly hear and read about institutions. An institution is an abstract concept that refers to how people are socially organized to address the basic needs of a society. Institutions involve collective behavior and constitute the government, religion, the economy, education, and media, as well as other forms of social organization. Institutions make and enforce laws, rules and norms, and suggest how we should categorize and understand each other based on different criteria (e.g., race, gender, religion, sexuality, family).

Since we are born and raised (i.e., socialized) within and among various institutions, we often take them for granted and treat them as constants in human life. However, sociologists often question this assumption and examine the various roles that institutions play in society. Some may question how institutions create and enforce laws, rules, and norms and whose interests they reflect; others may ask about the relationships among institutions in society. Because so many of our institutions were created and are controlled by people

with particular interests and ideas, it's not surprising that sociologists often find inequalities both within and resulting from institutions, even if they're inadvertent or can't be attributed solely to individual attitudes and behaviors. This has resulted in sociologists identifying and exploring phenomena such as institutionalized racism and sexism.

Structure (or Social Structure)

Structure essentially refers to the enduring relationships among various groups. Structures are lasting patterns of behavior and social organization that maintain, inform, condition, and constrain other behavior.

You will often hear sociologists say that X structures Y. This is often another way of saying that the enduring relations between X and Y are such that X maintains, informs, conditions and/or constrains Y. For example, gender structures employment. This refers to the way one's gender often informs and limits the employment opportunities of men and women, hence the existence of jobs traditionally dominated by women, such as nurses and elementary school teachers, and those dominated by men such as construction workers and business leaders. Although it is possible to step outside these relations, it's often seen as odd and worthy of ridicule and punishment. In fact, some sociologists attempt to understand how people challenge and change social structures.

To read up on social structure, check out William H. Sewell Jr's "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation" in the *American Journal of Sociology* (July 1992), 98(1): 1-29.

Social Construction

Understanding social constructionism requires that you ask yourself, to what extent is the world made and invented rather than given and natural?

Imagine if humanity started over from scratch. To what extent would our new future follow the same path as our old? Would Canada still be called Canada and would it have the same boundaries as it does today? Would the United States even exist? Sociologically speaking, would we group people into the same social categories that we do now? To what extent are social categories such as race,

gender, sexuality, evil and good, normal, deviant, and the meanings we associate with them reflective of human nature? To the extent that they're not inherent in human nature, they're social constructions.

Having historical and cross-cultural insight often illuminates some of the social constructions that many of us take as natural. For example, race is a social construction, as are gender and sexuality. If you were to travel from Iceland to Sub Saharan Africa at no point would you be able to identify a specific geographical place where one race begins and another ends. Also, if you look historically at places like Japan and Ancient Greece, you will find widely held beliefs about homosexuality that are very different from those many hold today in the U.S. The social categories we've created to understand each other are often based on socially and culturally created characteristics and their meanings are not inherent in biological human nature.

Critical scholars will often ask how social constructions developed, why they exist as they do, and how they are maintained over time. For example, regarding homosexuality, critical scholars might investigate the role of religion in constructing an understanding of sexuality that is still powerful today. If studying crime, we might ask why are some drugs, such as pot or opium, are socially constructed as evil while others are presented as acceptable or even life-saving, or how is crack cocaine and powder cocaine are socially constructed as different drugs, deserving different sanctions and punishments.

Social constructionism can be traced back to early Chicago Interactionists, but the movement really took off in the 1960s with the work of Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966) and the work on deviance, or more specifically labeling theory, done by the second generation of Chicago Interactionists (see Howard Becker's *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* [1963]).

III. The Writing Process

Most good academic writing goes through several drafts and most successful academic writers invite others to comment on their work in process. If you want to write a good sociology paper, be sure to start thinking and writing early in the semester, to let your friends read and comment on your work, and to take your time. It's obvious to instructors when students hand in rushed work. The concepts are often theoretically simple, and grammatical errors and wordiness annoy the reader. Plus, there are often few uses of acceptable sources because the writer didn't take enough time to hunt for quality sources. Most good academic writing demands time and hard work.

Getting Started: Find a Good Question

Successful academic writing begins with a good question. Think of something you want to research or about which you want to learn more. Then frame your topic in the form of a sociological question (explained below), if the instructor hasn't provided one. Take your time thinking of a question; a clear and concise—but still intellectually ambitious—question will be easier and more rewarding to address than a vague and sloppy one.

- Your paper should revolve around your major question(s) (and sub-questions if you have them).
 - Asking a good question will serve as a focal point for your writing and will keep you from straying and confusing the reader.

When formulating a good sociological question you will want to consider the following:

- Does your question reflect an active sociological imagination?
 - You'll want to avoid questions that lead you towards individual, psychological issues and instead keep your focus on larger issues of society, social groups, and social context.
 - You'll also want to avoid questions that focus heavily on non-social issues such as the amount of money a federal welfare system costs.
 - Remember what sociology's terrain is and the key concepts discussed in the last chapter. You'll want to keep this in mind when you construct your guiding question(s).
- Don't restrict yourself to a simple "yes" or "no" question.
 - You can usually reframe such questions by asking "how," "why" and "to what extent" something occurs. Moreover, if you do ask a "yes" or "no" question you'll want to ask additional questions about why, how, and so what.
- Do you have access to the data you'll need?
 - Not having access to the data you'll need to carry out your writing project can lead to major problems. Ask your professor if you're unsure.

Some suggestions and guiding ideas for good sociological research questions include:

- Compare the differences in X, Y, or Z among or between different social groups (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, age/generation, religion affiliation, education, historical period, etc.)
- Ask questions that have more than one possible answer
- Use multiple sociological concepts

You'll also want to make sure you can answer your question in the time and space you're allotted. For example, if you ask how deviance is a social construction, you may have trouble thoroughly answering this question in a 10 or 15-page paper. Instead, think of a question that's more specific, but not a "yes" or "no" question. For example,

a more manageable question for a 10-page paper would be to ask something such as how a drug law is socially constructed. Your instructor could provide you some guidance on what constitutes an apt sociological question.

Audience

When writing, keep your audience in mind. You'll want to analyze your assignment for your implied audience. Often you are writing for an academic audience, and so you must demonstrate that you know the material. However, knowing the material is just one part of quality writing. You must also thoroughly and clearly convey your thoughts. You'll want to demonstrate that you know the concepts you're using and can creatively and convincingly apply them for your specific purposes. Be thorough and concise in your writing.

Organizing Your Ideas

Remember Legos? Well, writing is like constructing something made of Legos, where your sociological concepts, theories, and data are all different Legos. Before you build something with Legos though, it's a good idea to figure out what you have. The same goes with writing. Write down all the concepts and ideas that you plan on using in your paper. Then, think about how they relate to each other. You'll find that some concepts encompass larger ideas while others are more specific and exact. Next, think about how you can combine these concepts and theories in different ways to make different points or statements. Finally, organize a rough outline according to the concepts you're using and how they relate to each other. Make sure you can justify why you're putting your concepts in their respective order. In other words, don't just string together or pile up related items; intentionally organize your ideas and subordinate minor elements to major categories.

For new sociological writers, it's best to think of an hourglass when organizing your ideas for writing. The top is broad with larger ideas and concepts; the middle is narrow and where you can discuss your more specific ideas; and the bottom is broad again and links your specific ideas to your larger ideas. Once you organize your outline, begin to write. Don't worry about grammar and style in early drafts; focus on getting your thoughts on paper and make revisions and

adjustments later. Remember, writing is a process. You should go through many drafts.

Arrangement

How you organize your paper will depend on the assignment, but there are a few things you should keep in mind. In the paragraph above I explained that one way to organize a sociology paper is by the hourglass method. If you look at an hourglass you'll see that the top is wide and open, it narrows in the middle, and then grows wide again at the bottom. You may want to structure your writing in a similar manner.

Using your sociological imagination, ask yourself about the broadest, largest, most significant ideas with which you're working (for example, social constructionism, a very broad concept). Also identify other *key words* that will unify your analysis. Think of them and place them at the top of your outline. Then work your way down the hourglass outline to the next significant point until you reach your most specific and exact points (for example, drug laws as social constructions). You'll want to be able to justify why you're putting your thoughts together in their respective ways, so be sure to organize your ideas intentionally and to guide the reader with transitions. If stuck, pretend you're talking to someone about your topic, and then write what you say. You should read through your drafts several times so you can refine and tighten your argument.

Consider how the ideas are arranged and discussed in the first couple paragraphs below. The introductory paragraph tells the reader what the paper is about and the concepts. The *key words* include *panopticon*, *social control/discipline*, *surveillance/observation*, *mass media*, *television* and (using a fat positive vocabulary) *fat women*. Organizationally, the writers first discuss the larger concepts of panopticon, social control and surveillance. They then discuss the mass media (as panopticon), and finally television and its representations (in this case of fat women) and their relation to panopticon. You should notice the "so what?" in the second paragraph (it's underlined).

As I'll discuss shortly, the "so what?" is where you tell readers why they should care about your particular topic. In this paper it has to do with practical implications, but other papers may require your "so what?" to focus on something else. Again, this is all in the first few

paragraphs, where you want to make sure the reader knows exactly what your paper is about and why your question is important:

Many of us feel compelled to look and act certain ways. In fact, we've all been in social settings where we've managed our appearance and personality to best fit the situation. We might pause to ask why we feel this need to present ourselves in specific ways. The concept of panopticism provides one answer to this question. The term "panopticon" refers to surveillance and social control where power works not through threats of physical force, but through coercion and voluntary self-control. People control their behavior because they feel as if others are constantly observing and judging them. People's every possible aspect is subject to other's evaluation, commentary, and treatment. With panopticism power saturates the self and invades every minutia of existence. Initially, the term "panopticon" referred to either crime or sexuality—the two topics that Foucault (1977, 1978) considered when he coined the term, more recently though, it has evolved to encompass the mass media (Bartky, 1988; Ewen, 1988).

Like Foucault's (1977, p. 201) analysis and elaboration on Bentham's prison, the media serve to "induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." We're going to argue that "panopticism" has become so pervasive in contemporary societies that the mass media now engage in the surveillance and social control of women's bodies. Television in particular announces that to be a fat woman is a symbolic crime. Television, as panopticon, provides both surveillance and social control services in that it suggests how viewers should judge and value each other. This is done through the discourses and images that television makes widely available. According to a media panopticon, viewers will then voluntarily discipline their bodies and behaviors in ways that correspond to these discourses and their implied value judgments. We question the relationship between the media panopticon and the estimated 10 million U.S. women diagnosed with eating disorders (NEDA, 2006).

Recall the Lego analogy. Like Legos, concepts, theories and evidence come in various sizes and are put to various uses. Don't just toss related elements together and hope for the best; construct your writing strategically and deliberately.

The Introduction

Your introduction will tell the reader exactly what to expect in your paper; in it you will forecast the concepts you will use and how they fit together. For most of the writing you will be doing you will not want your introduction to be longer than a few paragraphs. Keep it simple. Remember that you don't want to confuse the reader, especially in the very beginning.

The best introductions are usually written last, or at the very least *rewritten* after you have completed a full draft. This is because the introduction contains information about your entire paper. If you haven't completed exploring your key question and composing your main ideas, how can you expect to write a clear and concise introduction? Write your draft and then write or revisit your introduction.

Hypotheses: If you're writing a paper in which you offer hypotheses, or claims about the results of an experiment or research, you will want to include them in your introduction. It's also a good idea to restate your hypotheses before you discuss your research methods and the people involved, and then again when you discuss your findings and conclude your paper. Some papers don't use hypotheses in the traditional sense, but to the extent that hypotheses are simply predictions about research findings before the research begins, you're more likely to find them in writing based on experiments and other forms of quantitative research. Research that asks questions about *why* people behave in certain ways tends to use hypotheses frequently. If you offer hypotheses, tell the reader what you expect to find with the experiment and why. When you discuss your data and conclude your paper tell the reader what you thought you were going to find, what you actually found, and why your hypotheses were correct or incorrect.

The "So What?"

Your paper's "So What?" will require that you discuss the social and intellectual consequences and implications of your topic. Basically, *you should be able to tell readers why they should care about what it is you're writing.* This is usually the place where you thoroughly discuss your "larger" ideas and their implications for people or scholarship. If you collect any data, you'll want to link your discussion of your data

to the larger “so what?” as well. It’s also a good idea to include your “so what?” in the beginning and end of your data analysis section (just a couple sentences).

Make sure your “so what?” discussion doesn’t appear out of the blue. You’ll want to gradually bring the reader to your main points, and usually you need to detail the background for your guiding question, as in good academic writing you are always entering an *existing and ongoing conversation*. You need to show that you’re at least familiar with that conversation.

Look at the two following excerpts for some examples of how to incorporate a “so what?” discussion into your paper. The first example demonstrates one way to incorporate your “so what?” into the introduction. The underlined sentence is where the writer suggests the paper’s larger sociological implications. So, why should the reader care about the role of the viewer in public television broadcasting? The answer lies in public television’s financial pressures and their implications for public television’s service to the public.

Sample Introduction: Since the mid 1990s media scholars have shown how corporate and federal funding determines and limits public television programming (Hoynes, 1994; Bennett, 1997; Dornfeld, 1998; Stavitsky, 1998; Witherspoon, et al., 2000). By threatening to remove future funding or by choosing not to fund program proposals, federal and corporate funding sources successfully deter public television stations from producing or airing programs that are politically, socially, and economically controversial. However, public television stations also generate a substantial amount of their annual funds from viewers during pledge drives. Indeed, pledge drives have become increasingly important as corporate support has dwindled over the past decade, and federal appropriations have come under attack (Witherspoon, et al., 2000; Hoynes, 2003). To date, research examining the public television viewer’s role in determining and informing public television programming is rather underdeveloped. Given the decline in corporate and federal funding, this research is overdue. By examining the viewers’ position in public television, scholarship can more accurately explain pressures and trends that lead to programming that stations deem “safe” while considering public television’s position and services in the larger social and cultural environments.

The second example (after discussing public television’s programming) addresses the conclusion and develops the “so what?” (underlined) further:

Conclusions: Public television’s culturally elitist discourses serve as a source of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and can be exchanged for privileges of which many people are either unaware or denied. This is one way public television plays an important role in cultural and social evolution. Public television’s role as a source of cultural knowledge and value through its promotion of culturally elitist discourses gives viewers the vocabulary, emotions, and appreciation of culture that is required to pass among those in the upper echelons of the cultural hierarchy.

Public television also aids in social and cultural evolution and inequality through its inability to produce, fund, and broadcast programming that identifies, analyzes, and critiques systemic sources of inequality and social problems. Instead, the types of programming that receive funding are often culturally elitist, artistic, or of the natural sciences, and within these genres, viewer donations and stations’ reliance on pledge drives pressures them to favor broadcasting programs that reflect the interests of those most likely to donate generously.

The growing importance of pledge drives within the whole public television system suggests that public television will have no choice but to favor culturally elitist programming even more in the future. This is especially true since such programming is exactly the type of “safe” programming that corporate sponsors are willing to support. This has real consequences in terms of the audience that public television serves, the form and shape of its services, and how valuable public television’s “services” are for the “public” as a whole.

Writing About Your Data

If you collected data for your paper, whether primary research that you collected or secondary research culled from others’ publications, you will want to use it to support your main points. *Be sure to tell readers how they should understand your data.* In other words, don’t just throw some quotes on your paper and expect the reader to know why you’re using them.

The same can be said for statistics. If you gathered statistics from a source such as the U.S. Census, be sure to tell readers what they mean and how you’re using them. Your goal is to *use* your data to

support or demonstrate your points, not just to stuff in data to prove that you consulted sources. Notice how I used examples from various papers to demonstrate some of the points I made about sociological writing, such as understanding and using one's sociological imagination, arranging your writing, and so forth. Make your point and use your data to support what you're saying.

Acceptable Sources of Data

Different disciplines rely on different data sources. They also may have different ideas of what's considered acceptable data. For your sociology papers, the most qualified and acceptable sources of data often come from peer-reviewed journals and books written by social scientists with Ph.D.s. You will want to rely on similar sources to make your major claims in your writing.

Homer Babbidge Library has many acceptable sociology journals and books (journals are on the 3rd floor), and the University subscribes to various Internet services that provide access to online journal articles (e.g., jstor.org).

Internet: Sociology professors are constantly asked if students can use the Internet for data. This is a tricky question because of its vagueness. People can use the Internet to get useful and reliable data from various websites but there is also a lot of questionable data out there. Your best bet is to use Internet sources sparingly, and don't use them to base your major claims. Some universities and research centers have websites that make available their scholarly research. These web sources are frequently reliable because their research is often also published in peer-reviewed journals.

Some students ask about Wikipedia as a source of data. The jury is still out on Wikipedia; some people see promise in its usefulness for scholarship, but it's still too early to be sure. It's best to ask your professor and to keep your use of it to a minimum.

Newspapers, Television, Magazines: As for newspaper articles, television documentaries, and magazines, you will want to be careful with how you use these as well. For minor claims, such as supporting the claim that President Bush's job approval ratings are at 30%, a *New York Times* article or an article from *Time* magazine is fine. However, you don't want to rely on these sources too frequently, nor do you want to support your major arguments and

claims with these sources. Social science involves a conversation that's been going on for a long time. There are methods for substantiating various claims of truth and scholars are constantly building off of each other's work. This is not so much the case for newspapers and popular magazines. For your major claims, you'll want to make sure you use sources that are involved in this conversation.

See the following example taken from my dissertation. Here I use the mainstream press only to demonstrate that a particular topic was of some public importance.

With respect to public broadcasting, heated debate in Congress and with the Bush administration over the past two years has brought it to national attention via the United States' mainstream media¹. National newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, as well as reporting agencies like the *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, and *Knight Ridder* have publicized the turmoil within the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Much of the attention revolved around arguments about political "bias" in public television programs, PBS's president, and fighting among CPB board members, bringing questions about public television's "fairness" to national attention. The past two years have reminded many in this nation of public broadcasting, including its messages and its position in the media system and the U.S. in general.

Play it safe and stick with peer-reviewed scholarship for your major claims, and if you have to, use other publications for minor statements.

Concluding Your Paper

Conclusions can be difficult. A basic rule of thumb, however, is not to begin your concluding paragraph with the words "In conclusion." Instead, just tell the reader what you discussed in your paper and why it's important. Reread the concluding paragraph from the example above for some ideas. Your conclusion may be similar to

¹ See "Lobbyists' Role for Public TV Is Investigated" by Stephen Labaton, *The New York Times*, June 16, 2005; "Republican Chairman Exerts Pressure on PBS, Alleging Biases" by Stephen Labaton, Lorne Manly, and Elizabeth Jensen, *The New York Times*, May 02, 2005; "On Public TV, a Repeat of Conservative Pressure" by Michael Hill, *Baltimore Sun*, May 22, 2005; "Public Broadcasting Names New President" by Jennifer Kerr, *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2005.

your introduction in that it recall your research question, the “so what,” and your main points, but it should also demonstrate that you now understand these *in light of your findings*.

Citations and Plagiarism

Plagiarism involves using someone else’s words or ideas without giving that person his or her due credit. It’s commonly believed that most cases of plagiarism are a result of misunderstanding how and when to properly cite other’s work. A basic rule of thumb, though, is if that you are using an idea that someone else developed or coined—even if you are changing the phrasing—then you must cite the person who coined it. If you’re using an idea that everyone knows, like the earth travels around the sun, then you don’t necessarily have to cite anyone. When in doubt, cite the source.

Students frequently ask how they should properly cite their work. Most sociologists follow the American Sociological Association’s model. You can access it on their website (www.asanet.org), under the ‘students’ section. At the bottom right side of the page is a link to the “quick style guide.” You can also pick up any ASA journal such as the *American Sociological Review* (available in Babbidge Library) and follow the way works are cited in those journals. Here are a couple examples from different sources:

Book:

Becker, Howard. 1986. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Edited Book:

DiMaggio, Paul. 1991. “Constructing an Organizational Field as Professional Project.” Pp. 267-92 in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, edited by W. W. Powell and P. J. DiMaggio. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Journal Article:

Kuipers, Giseline. 2006. “Television and Taste Hierarchy: The Case of Dutch Television Comedy.” *Media, Culture and Society*. 28(3): 359-378.

Internet:

From an Organization:

Billings, Charles. 1998. *Incident Reporting Systems in Medicine and Experience with the Aviation Safety Reporting System*. Report from NPSF Workshop on Assembling the Scientific Basis for Progress on Patient Safety. Chicago, IL: American Medical Association. Retrieved June 5, 2005 (<http://www.npsf.org/exec/billings.html>).

From a University Research Center:

Bosk, Charles L. 2005. “Continuity and Change in the Study of Medical Error: The Culture of Safety on the Shop Floor.” Occasional Paper, School of Social Science. Princeton, NJ: Institute for Advanced Study. Retrieved June 15, 2005 (<http://www.sss.ias.edu/publications/papers/paper20.pdf>).

Generally, you will place an article’s title or a chapter title in quotes and a journal title or book title in *italics*.

You will obviously have to cite your sources within the text too. It’s best to follow the ASA guide for citing within the text. Here are a couple examples; below I show how they’re used in a sentence:

- Bourdieu (1991)
- (Feagin, 2000)
- (Altheide and Coyle, 2006)

If you’re citing scholarship that has three authors, you should include all their names the first time you cite them. After that, just include the first author followed by “et al.” If you’re citing scholarship that has four or more authors, then just cite the first author’s name followed by “et al.” every time you cite that source, even for the first time.

If you’re citing an organization or institution, then you can name the source in the text, followed by the date the text was published. Treat it like a book or article, and offer the full information in the works cited section. For example:

- In Connecticut, for every 100,000 people incarcerated 190 of them are white while 2,427 are black, a ratio of 1:12.77 (The Sentencing Project, 2004).

If you directly quote, or come pretty close to directly quoting someone else's scholarship, you will also have to give the page number in your citation. For example:

- “The impact of the postmodern turn on American social science has generated much controversy” (Dotter, 2001: 420)
- As Dotter (2001: 420) states, “The impact of the postmodern turn on American social science has generated much controversy.”

The purpose of citing works is not only to give people their due credit, but also to give readers a pathway back to material so that they can check your claims or use your sources for their own purposes.

Can I Use First Person Pronouns in my Writing?

*“You mean I can use ‘I’ in my paper?”
(UConn sociology student)*

Many of us have been taught not to use the pronoun “I” in our writing. It’s OK to use “I” in sociological writing, especially in your paper’s introduction. It’s also just as acceptable to use the third person instead. For example, in many of the journal articles and books you’ll read for your writing assignments you’ll see introductory paragraphs that state something to the effect of “In this paper, I examine the relationship between health care use and trust in the medical establishment. I then discuss the ramifications for this relationship and offer some suggestions on how health care practitioners can better serve those who question medical establishment motives.” Now, if this paper had two or more authors they would use “we” rather than “I”, which is fine as well.

It’s also common to see sociological writers use the third person. To use the same example, it’s common to find writers who begin with introductory sentences such as the following: “This paper examines the relationship between health care use and trust in the medical establishment. It then discusses the ramifications for this relationship and offers some suggestions on how health care

practitioners can better serve those who question medical establishment motives.”

Here’s another example from a paper I wrote with a colleague. We begin with an opening paragraph that discusses the concept panopticon. Then we tell the reader what we’re doing in our paper:

We treat television as panopticon and examine how often and in what ways fat women are depicted in television. Are images of fat women common and easy to view, or are they relatively rare? When fat women are represented on television, how are they depicted (i.e., are they portrayed with pride and self-respect or are they stigmatized)? And how are they represented compared to other women, particularly thin women? We ask these questions because we’re concerned with television’s panoptic power and its implications for women’s self-control. With this paper we offer a small contribution to this complex relationship.

It’s OK to use first or third person to discuss your data if you’ve collected any, and to explain to the reader what your paper is about and why it’s important. Usually this is more appropriate in your paper’s introduction and summary sections.

As I explained when I discussed organizing your paper, you’ll also want to periodically remind the reader what you’re doing in your paper and why it’s important. These places are also appropriate times to use first or third person writing. You’ll also take note of the questions we asked. Notice how they’re somewhat specific and not overly broad like say, the relationship between panopticonism and people.

Proofreading and Revising

Proofreading is an essential part of any writing and you should plan on reading through and editing your paper several times before handing it in. Note that *revising* and *editing* are different, even if complementary, activities. Early in your writing process focus on revising; as you get closer to handing in your work, focus on editing.

You will likely find many easily avoidable mistakes if you read through your paper a few times. Plus, reading through your paper allows you to insert additional sentences and ideas in appropriate areas and thus make your paper and writing stronger.

It's a good idea to read your paper out loud to yourself. This way you can listen to your writing and pick up on things you would have missed if you didn't actually hear them. Try having a friend read your paper too (so long as this is OK with your professor). Having an extra set of eyes on your paper, especially if the person is not familiar with the topic, will be useful in clarifying your ideas and writing.

Submitting Your Paper: Simple Things to Remember

There are a few things that most professors and instructors expect when students hand in their writing assignments. *You will want to staple your paper, number your pages, and have a concise, engaging title that indicates your paper's topic and features its key words.*

IV: Different Types of Sociological Papers

Literature Review

Literature Reviews ask that you read and discuss the research that sociologists or social scientist have done on a given issue or question. Your goal is to increase your, as well as your audience's, understanding of a particular issue. Plus, a literature review allows you to situate your research question(s) into the appropriate scholarly conversation (when appropriate for the assignment).

You will want to first narrow down your ideas to the specific topics you wish to explore. For example, say I want to review the literature on media representations, specifically of race, class and gender. I would use the database, *Sociological Abstracts*, and do a keyword search using terms such as race and television, or gender and media. This should provide sociologically acceptable articles and books on the topic. Then you will want to read a handful of the articles (sometimes your professor will tell you how many sources you must consult), keeping focused on the following questions: what are the main ideas/concepts, research questions, methods used to address the questions, research finding, and finally, the larger implications. You may need to skim 20 or 30 articles to find the 5 or 6 most relevant to your particular question and issue.

You will want to thoroughly discuss each of the sources and be able to summarize the overall literature. So, back to the media representations example: after discussing the relevant concerns I discussed what people who research media representations of race, class and gender generally agree on and which key issues remain open to debate.

Most literature reviews will require that you go beyond summarizing the available scholarship. They will also demand that you *critically assess* the sources individually and as a group. Ask your professor how much summary and how much critical evaluation are expected.

Research Paper Based on Primary Data

Papers based on data will include a small literature review in the beginning, where you tell the reader what others have done so far on a given topic. Then you will want to discuss how your research relates to what others have done. You will describe your specific research question(s) (in the introduction, and usually on the first page) and how you went about addressing them. This is where your methods section comes in. In your methods section you will briefly discuss the sociological methods you used to answer your research question(s) and why they are appropriate for addressing your research question(s). For example, "I interviewed 8 UConn students about their attitudes towards campus dining." Follow a similar format as that used in the works you discuss in your literature review. See how they discuss their methods and follow their lead.

Next, discuss your data. You will want to first look through all your data and identify the trends and findings that you feel warrant mentioning and that relate to your research question(s). Then figure out how you want to organize your data for your discussion. In other words, what are you going to write about and when? When using data you will want to be careful not to let the data speak for you; *it's your job to tell the reader how your data relates to your main points.*

Don't expect the reader to interpret your data the exact same way you did. Be sure to thoroughly describe your data, whether they are in the form of statistics, quotes from interviews, findings from experiments, or observations from ethnography.

Make sure that when you describe the data you relate your discussion to the sociological concepts and claims you are making in your paper. Remember, you collected data for a reason: to answer a sociological question on a given issue. Make sure you remind the reader how and why your data address that question(s).

V: Finding Sources

Using Homer Babbidge Library

Homer Babbidge library has many acceptable sources that may help you research and write your sociology paper. Using Babbidge library to search for sources is easy and fast. Plus, the university subscribes to several online collections that make many of the journals not physically housed in Babbidge available to UConn students.

To start, go to the University of Connecticut Library home page at www.lib.uconn.edu. From there you can either click the “Homer” link in the upper menu bar on the right side of the page, or you can click the “Collections” link in the middle of the page. The “Homer” link will take you directly to the search location. If you click the “Collections” link you will be taken to an intermediate page where you’ll have to click the “Homer” link under the “Library Collections” section. Now you will be directed to the search page. Once you’re on the search page you can search under several different options such as title, subject, keyword and author.

Sociological Abstracts and Web of Science

Sociologists commonly use *Sociological Abstracts* and *Web of Science* to find information and gather data on a given topic. Both are accessible through the University’s Library website at www.lib.uconn.edu

From there you’ll want to click on the “Online Resources” link which will take you to a list of resources. Here you can click on either *Sociological Abstracts* or *Web of Science*. Once you have clicked the link you will be taken to a webpage where you’ll have to click “access this dataset” which will take you to the webpage where you can search for sources.

Both datasets allow you to search by keyword, subject, title, author’s name, and cited reference search. Cited reference searchers are useful because they allow you to search articles and published works that are cited by a particular source or author. Therefore, if you read an article that you found particularly useful you can search for other published works that also cited that article.

Document Delivery and Interlibrary Loan

Document Delivery/Interlibrary loan is a very useful tool to access sources that would otherwise be inaccessible or take much longer to get.

To start, you’ll need to have your NetID and your password handy. Then, from the Babbidge Library webpage (www.lib.uconn.edu) click on the “Document Delivery/Interlibrary Loan” link under the “Quick Links” section on the left hand side of the page. Next, you’ll have to enter your NetID and password. From here you’ll be taken to a page where you can enter the information on the source that you want to retrieve.

For articles and book chapters you can choose to have an electronic file (pdf) sent to your UConn email account. This is often the fastest way to retrieve sources that Babbidge does not have, it may take about a week. If the source is being mailed to Babbidge or any of the branches it will take longer, so be sure to plan ahead.

Using the Library Liaison and Customized Site

From the library home page (www.lib.uconn.edu) you have options to customize the site for specific disciplines, one of which is sociology. You’ll notice on the library home page a section that states “Customize this site for...”

Click on the menu bar and scroll down to sociology. Click on the “sociology” link and you’ll be taken to the customized sociology webpage. This is useful because it offers Internet data collection sites to which the university subscribes, information on citations, campus resources, data sources, as well as other material. The university is currently in the process of hiring a library liaison for sociology. Once one is hired, that person’s name will be on the customized site and you can contact them if you have questions or need help.

VI: Two Style Points

“Grammar and style are often the first barrier to doing well on sociology papers.” (UConn Sociology Professor)

“I’m looking for a well organized paper, not the 5-paragraph type, and no passive voice and dangling modifiers.” (UConn Sociology Professor)

Active and Passive Voice

Active voice emphasizes the subject of the sentence as the actor who is *doing* the verb, while passive voice emphasizes the subject receiving the verb, or the verb is *being done by* the actor. The words that receive the most attention from readers are often expressed with the sentence’s subject and the verb. It’s a good idea to choose a precise, active verb and link it with a subject that names the person or thing doing the action. Active verbs energize your prose. Diana Hacker explains:

Active verbs express meaning more emphatically and vigorously than their weaker counterparts – forms of the verb *be* or verbs in the passive voice. Forms of the verb *be* (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been) lack vigor because they convey no action (Hacker, 1998: 231).

Use the passive voice when you want to emphasize the receiver of action and minimize the importance of the actor.

Example:

Passive Voice: The *Sociological Imagination* is a term that was coined by C. Wright Mills.

Active Voice: C. Wright Mills coined the term *sociological imagination*.

Properly Placed Modifiers and Qualifiers

Qualifiers modify the meaning of another word. People use qualifiers to help clarify their ideas. However, sometimes they result in a confused readings of your work or give the impression that the writer is unsure or hesitant about what they’re writing. You will want to avoid words like *sort of*, *kind of*, *more or less*. These are called “lazy qualifiers” and they don’t add much to one’s writing.

Also, when you describe and explain phenomena in your writing make sure the descriptive words you use are clearly linked to what they’re meant to describe. For example, if you’re using an adverb, or a word that ends in “ly,” make sure it’s clearly linked to the verb it modifies. For example:

Correct placement of modifier: Patricia Hill Collins (2000) *clearly* demonstrates the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding inequality, discrimination, and prejudice for the social sciences.

Sloppy placement: Patricia Hill Collins (2000) demonstrates the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding inequality, discrimination, and prejudice *clearly* for the social sciences.

You’ll see that the adverb is “clearly” and it’s used to modify the verb “demonstrated”. In the first example this relationship is much more obvious than in the second example. Make sure your modifiers are linked to the words and ideas they’re supposed to modify.

VII: Other Writing Resources

What follows are several useful writing guides and websites that you can turn to if you want additional information on writing.

Print Sources on Writing in Sociology

Howard Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. University of Chicago press (1986).

Ali Kamali's article "Writing a Sociological Student Paper: Steps and Scheduling" in *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 19, pages 506-9 (1991).

Kenneth Stoddart's article "Writing Sociologically: A Note on the Construction of a Qualitative Report" in *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 19, pages 243-8 (1991).

The Sociology Writing Group's *A Guide To Writing Sociology Papers* (5th ed.) Worth Publishers (2001).

Christopher Prendergast's article "The Typical Outline of an Ethnographic Research Publication" in *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 32, pages 322-327 (2004).

William A. Johnson, Jr., Richard Rettig, Gregory Scott, and Stephen Garrison's *The Sociology Student Writers Manual* (5th ed.). Pearson Publishers (2006).

Sociology-Specific Writing Advice on the Internet

The following websites also provide solid information on sociological writing. Plus, they're easy to navigate.

CUNY: Queens College:

<http://soc.qc.cuny.edu/robin/writesoc/index.html>

Dartmouth University

https://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/soc_science/s/sociology.shtml

Monash University

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/arts/sociology/2.xml>

Skidmore College

<http://www.skidmore.edu/academics/sociology/resources.html>

The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/sociology.html>

General Academic Writing Resources on the Internet

The University of Connecticut

<http://www.writingcenter.uconn.edu>

Note especially the "Useful Links to Writing Resources" link that will take you to websites on a range of topics: style, grammar and usage, documentation of sources, critical reading, building arguments, and more.

Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/>

The University of Wisconsin – Madison

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/>

Capital Community College

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>

A useful and comprehensive grammar guide.

VIII: Works Cited

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