

## What's Distinctive about Teaching Writing to Sociology Students?

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Sociology faculty have long and persistently lamented the allegedly dismal quality of student writing. We have long compared our students today invidiously with our own generation, despairing of their inability to write simple sentences, much less paragraphs and sustained reasoning. Those held responsible are many—primary and secondary teachers, television and video games, Twitter and Facebook, politicians and voters who starve schools, our colleagues who assign too little writing, and of course the students themselves.

The pervasiveness of grumbling about writing is matched by pessimism about improvement. Too many of us treat student writing like weather—something that we talk about but that we cannot do anything about. On the contrary, writing is something that we can teach—a skill that we can foster. I have been asked to share a few of the lessons I've learned from decades of teaching and through my involvement in seven editions of *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers*.

### *Focus on Sociological Thinking*

I believe that sociology teachers can best facilitate student writing skills by focusing on the facets of writing that are directly related to sociological thinking. Contrary to the way many of us were taught, it is not necessary to master writing at the sentence level before addressing the paragraph level, section level, or full paper level. Writing specialists have long known that students do not learn in this fashion. Sociologists in general do not have the training (and for many the aptitude) to teach writing at the sentence level. We can leave teaching the sentence level up to the specialists at our university's writing center, and instead teach students how to reason sociologically. In fact, it may be counter-productive for us to hammer away at the sentence level. Studies have shown that when students receive papers back covered in ink (especially red ink), it is more disheartening and intimidating than educational. Students do not learn correct grammar from having a sentence corrected on a paper. They need labor-intensive tutoring, which writing specialists do much more effectively than we do.

That is not to say that we should ignore wretched grammar (and spelling). Instead, we might apply some sociology to the situation. Writing and grading is a form of social interaction. Professors are authority figures. When we merely criticize bad writing, the relationship is analogous to labeling a deviant. The student is less likely to invest the time and energy into learning how to write well than to accept the identity of "poor writer." But when we discuss with students the social factors that have deprived them of writing skills and facilitate finding help, we can more effectively motivate change. Moreover, as sociologists we can talk about how writing, as a form of interaction, gives off (in a Goffmanian sense) an inaccurate picture of the student's true intelligence. Or invoke a different theory, good writing is a form of cultural capital that a student needs to invest in.

Above the sentence level, good writing is inseparable from sociological reasoning. How one sentence follows another, how paragraphs fit into sections, and how a paper is divided into sections are all matters of how arguments develop, how concepts are defined and applied, and how evidence fits theory. Different frameworks of sociology require different holistic structures of papers. Format captures theory.

### *Format and Structure*

The conventional journal format is appropriate when there are explicit independent and dependent variables. The structure of the paper maps the way the argument is built. It requires an introduction and posing of a research question, the introduction and definition of concepts, the description of methods, the reporting of results, the linking of results to theory, and a conclusion about "so what?"

In contrast, the conventional three-part essay format involves a different mode of sociological reasoning. Because this format is probably more familiar to most students, it is easier for them to grasp as a format. But because the format is familiar it is easy for them to fall back into familiar non-sociological thinking. They are often inclined to slip into individualistic voluntaristic thinking, equating causation only with motivation. I have found it useful to ask students to use the three "points" in this traditional essay format to examine different levels of analysis (individual, group, society/globe). Or one could build a causal argument around three different factors that explain something of sociological interest.

Ethnographic accounts and historical approaches can take a narrative format, with a beginning, middle, and end. Here the student can be taught to make sociological sense of each step. They can self-consciously consider how and why the "protagonist" acts, whether an individual, organization, or

society. Teaching how to make the paper follow a narrative arc requires a sociological understanding of how individuals, organizations, or societies move through time.

Textual analysis papers (typically theory papers) can follow different formats depending on the logic followed. A comparison/contrast paper can follow a point-by-point comparison or a case-by-case format. Teaching students how to structure the paper should be inseparable from thinking about how we do theoretical thinking. Or a paper can be structured around a critical reading of a text, first summarizing the text, then unpacking the author's assumptions, then evaluating how well the author achieves his or her goals.

For all these formats and modes of sociological thinking, we should teach the student that each sentence must follow logically from the previous sentence. "Logically follow" is the meat of sociological thinking. How sentences add up to a paragraph is equally sociological and involves such analytical principles as defining concepts, elaborating theses, providing evidence for generalizations, generalizing from specifics, setting boundary conditions, offering caveats, etc. An especially effective way of teaching this sort of logic/writing is with sample papers from other students.

While many will continue to gripe about student writing, strategic thinking about how inseparable the teaching of writing and the teaching of sociology are can also result in deep gratification that our efforts are not always fruitless.

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