

**SC 761 – Second Year Graduate Writing Seminar  
Part I  
Fall 2006**

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Office Hours: T, Th 9-10 a.m.

Classroom and Time: McGuinn Hall 415, T 4:30-700 (every other Tuesday)

This course will focus on writing for a social scientific audience. There are many different styles of social scientific writing. Some approaches resemble the natural sciences while others take a more literary approach; many fall somewhere in between. This course will help you develop your own writing style as you prepare for an academic career. We will focus on key elements of sociological writing such as: devising an argument, relating evidence to theory, and specifying a unit of analysis (see attached worksheet).

This writing and participation intensive course will work more as a workshop than a seminar. All students enrolled in the course must be working on a thesis, comprehensive examination, and/or preparing an article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

**Course Expectations and Evaluation:**

1) This is a *writing* and *participation* intensive course. You will be responsible for:

- a. writing a journal quality paper;
- b. reading, reviewing, and giving constructive feedback to classmates;
- c. presenting your work to the class

2) Your course grade will be evaluated in the three areas above (a final grade, however, will not be given until the Spring semester). Fifty percent of the grade will be based on the final paper, thirty percent on peer reviews, and the remaining fifteen on class presentations.

3) Missing more than two courses in any given semester will constitute failing the course.

***Grading Scale:***

94-100= A	70-73= C
90-93= A-	66-69= C-
86-89= B+	62-65= D+
82-85= B	58-61= D
78-81= B-	54-57= D-
74-77= C+	53-00= F

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is a standard of utmost importance in this class. Guidelines for academic integrity in written work are posted on the Boston College website at:

[www.bc.edu/integrity](http://www.bc.edu/integrity)

If you have any questions pertaining to the academic integrity guidelines, please come and talk with me or with the teaching assistant. If you are caught violating Boston College's policies on academic integrity, you will receive a failing grade for the assignment and the appropriate Dean will be notified in accordance to the rules set forth by Boston College.

### **Course Schedule:**

**Sept. 5:** First Day of Class – Introductions and expectations of the course

### **Sept. 19:**

#### ***Critique the following two articles:***

Sarkisian, Natalia and Naomi Gerstel. 2004. "Kin Support among Blacks and Whites: Race and Family Organization." *American Sociological Review*, v.69 (see "McGuffey" course reserves for SC 596 – Black Families & Society)

Amy C. Wilkins. 2004. "Puerto Rican Wannabees: Sexual Spectacle and the Marking of Race, Class, and Gender Boundaries," *Gender & Society* v.18(1), pp. 103-121. (see "McGuffey" course reserves for SC 038 – Race, Class, and Gender)

Be sure to discuss: the arguments, the evidence they use to support their claims, their unit of analysis, their "audience," and the overall style of the articles. How are they similar? How are they different?

#### ***Bring to class:***

- 1) A detailed list of what you want to accomplish this term and in the Spring semester.
- 2) A list of your strengths and weaknesses as a writer.
- 3) An article that you consider to be a good piece of sociological writing (if possible, please distribute to all classmates via email attachment so we can discuss in class).

### **Oct. 3:**

#### ***Bring to class and distribute:***

- 1) A copy of your introduction, literature review, and methods section.
- 2) A list of "challenges" you encountered while writing.

### **Oct. 17:**

***Bring to class and distribute:***

- 3) A copy of your “findings” section and conclusion.
- 4) A list of “challenges” you encountered while writing.

**Oct. 31: NO CLASS!!!**

***Trade a full, rough draft with the entire class by 11:59 p.m.***

**Nov. 14:** Group discussion about each student’s work.

**Nov. 28:** A presentation of your project (approximately 20 minutes). **(Last day of regularly scheduled courses).**

## ***What is sociology, and what do sociologists write about?***

Sociologists are interested in all sorts of topics. For example, some sociologists focus on the family, addressing issues such as marriage, divorce, child-rearing, and domestic abuse, the ways these things are defined in different cultures and times, and their effect on both individuals and institutions. Others examine larger social organizations such as businesses and governments, looking at their structure and hierarchies. Still others focus on social movements and political protest, such as the American civil rights movement. Finally, sociologists may look at divisions and inequality within society, examining phenomena such as race, gender, and class, and their effect on people's choices and opportunities. As you can see, sociologists study just about everything. Thus, it is not the subject matter that makes a paper sociological, but rather the perspective used in writing it.

So, just what is a sociological perspective? At its most basic, sociology is an attempt to understand and explain the way that individuals and groups interact within a society. How exactly does one approach this goal? C. Wright Mills, in his book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), writes that "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both." Why? Well, as Karl Marx observes at the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), humans "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." Thus, a good sociological argument needs to balance both individual agency and structural constraints. That is certainly a tall order, but it is the basis of all effective sociological writing. Keep it in mind as you think about your own writing.

## ***Key assumptions and characteristics of sociological writing***

What are the most important things to keep in mind as you write in sociology? Pay special attention to the following issues:

### **Argument**

The first thing to remember in writing a sociological argument is to be as clear as possible in stating your thesis. Of course, that is true in all papers, but there are a couple of pitfalls common to sociology that you should be aware of and avoid at all cost. As previously defined, sociology is the study of the interaction between individuals and larger social forces. Different traditions within sociology tend to favor one side of the equation over the other, with some focusing on the agency of individual actors and others on structural factors. The danger is that you may go too far in either of these directions and thus lose the complexity of sociological thinking. Although this mistake can manifest

itself in any number of ways, three types of flawed arguments are particularly common: the "individual argument," the "human nature argument," and the "society argument."

- The "individual argument" generally takes this form: "The individual is free to make choices, and any outcomes can be explained exclusively through the study of his or her ideas and decisions." While it is of course true that we all make our own choices, we must also keep in mind that, to paraphrase Marx, we make these choices under circumstances given to us by the structures of society. Therefore, it is important to investigate what conditions made these choices possible in the first place, as well as what allows some individuals to successfully act on their choices while others cannot.
- The "human nature argument" seeks to explain social behavior through a quasi-biological argument about humans, and often takes a form such as: "Humans are by nature X, therefore it is not surprising that Y." While sociologists disagree over whether a universal human nature even exists, they all agree that it is not an acceptable basis of explanation. Instead, sociology demands that you question why we call some behavior natural, and to look into the social factors which have constructed this "natural" state.
- The "society argument" often arises in response to critiques of the above styles of argumentation, and tends to appear in a form such as: "Society made me do it." Students often think that this is a good sociological argument, since it uses society as the basis for explanation. However, the problem is that the use of the broad concept "society" masks the real workings of the situation, making it next to impossible to build a strong case. This is an example of reification, which is when we turn processes into things. Society is really a process, made up of ongoing interactions at multiple levels of size and complexity, and to turn it into a monolithic thing is to lose all that complexity. People make decisions and choices. Some groups and individuals benefit, while others do not. Identifying these intermediate levels is the basis of sociological analysis.

Although each of these three arguments seems quite different, they all share one common feature: they assume exactly what they need to be explaining. They are excellent starting points, but lousy conclusions.

## **Evidence**

Once you have developed a working argument, you will next need to find evidence to support your claim. What counts as evidence in a sociology paper? First and foremost, sociology is an empirical discipline. Empiricism in sociology means basing your conclusions on evidence that is documented and collected with as much rigor as possible. This evidence usually draws upon observed patterns and information from collected cases and experiences, not just from isolated, anecdotal reports. Just because your second cousin was able to climb the ladder from poverty to the executive boardroom does not prove that the American class system is open. You will need more systematic evidence to make your claim convincing. Above all else, remember that your opinion alone is not

sufficient support for a sociological argument. Even if you are making a theoretical argument, you must be able to point to documented instances of social phenomena that fit your argument. Logic is necessary for making the argument, but is not sufficient support by itself.

Sociological evidence falls into two main groups: quantitative and qualitative.

- *Quantitative data* are based on surveys, censuses, and statistics. These provide large numbers of data points, which is particularly useful for studying large-scale social processes, such as income inequality, population changes, changes in social attitudes, etc.
- *Qualitative data*, on the other hand, comes from participant observation, in-depth interviews, data and texts, as well as from the researcher's own impressions and reactions. Qualitative research gives insight into the way people actively construct and find meaning in their world.

Quantitative data produces a *measurement* of subjects' characteristics and behavior, while qualitative research generates information on their *meanings* and practices. Thus, the methods you choose will reflect the type of evidence most appropriate to the questions you ask. If you wanted to look at the importance of race in an organization, a quantitative study might use information on the percentage of different races in the organization, what positions they hold, as well as survey results on people's attitudes on race. This would measure the distribution of race and racial beliefs in the organization. A qualitative study would go about this differently, perhaps hanging around the office studying people's interactions, or doing in-depth interviews with some of the subjects. The qualitative researcher would see how people act out their beliefs, and how these beliefs interact with the beliefs of others as well as the constraints of the organization.

Unfortunately, much of sociology has split into two armed camps over methodological questions. Many tend to exclusively favor qualitative over quantitative data, or vice versa, and it is perfectly reasonable to rely on only one method in your own work. However, since each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, combining methods can be a particularly effective way to bolster your argument. Do not be too quick to limit yourself to only one approach.

These distinctions are not just important if you have to collect your own data for your paper. You also need to be aware of them even when you are relying on secondary sources for your research. In order to critically evaluate the research and data you are reading, you should have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the different methods.

## **Units of analysis**

Given that social life is so complex, you need to have a point of entry into studying this world. In sociological jargon, you need a unit of analysis. The unit of analysis is exactly

that: it is the unit that you have chosen to analyze in your study. Again, this is only a question of emphasis and focus, and not of precedence and importance. You will find a variety of units of analysis in sociological writing, ranging from the individual up to groups or organizations. You should choose yours based on the interests and theoretical assumptions driving your research. The unit of analysis will determine much of what will qualify as relevant evidence in your work. Thus you must not only clearly identify that unit, but also consistently use it throughout your paper.

Let's look at an example to see just how changing the units of analysis will change the face of research. What if you wanted to study globalization? That's a big topic, so you will need to focus your attention. Where would you start?

You might focus on *individual human actors*, studying the way that people are affected by the globalizing world. This approach could possibly include a study of Asian sweatshop workers' experiences, or perhaps how consumers' decisions shape the overall system.

Or you might choose to focus on *social structures or organizations*. This approach might involve looking at the decisions being made at the national or international level, such as the free-trade agreements that change the relationships between governments and corporations. Or you might look into the *organizational structures of corporations* and measure how they are changing under globalization. Another structural approach would be to focus on the *social networks* linking subjects together. That could lead you to look at how migrants rely on social contacts to make their way to other countries, as well as to help them find work upon their arrival.

Finally, you might want to focus on *cultural objects or social artifacts* as your unit of analysis. One fine example would be to look at the production of those tennis shoes the kids seem to like so much. You could look at either the material production of the shoe (tracing it from its sweatshop origins to its arrival on the showroom floor of malls across America) or its cultural production (attempting to understand how advertising and celebrities have turned such shoes into necessities and cultural icons).

Whichever unit of analysis you choose, be careful not to commit the dreaded *ecological fallacy*. An ecological fallacy is when you assume that something that you learned about the group level of analysis also applies to the individuals that make up that group. So, to continue the globalization example, if you were to compare its effects on the poorest 20% and the richest 20% of countries, you would need to be careful not to apply your results to the poorest and richest individuals.

These are just general examples of how sociological study of a single topic can vary. Because you can approach a subject from several different perspectives, it is important to decide early how you plan to focus your analysis and then stick with that perspective throughout your paper. Avoid mixing units of analysis without strong justification. Different units of analysis generally demand different kinds of evidence for building your

argument. You can reconcile the varying levels of analysis, but doing so may require a complex, sophisticated theory, no small feat within the confines of a short paper.

Excerpt from: [www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/sociology.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/sociology.html)