

A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers

FIFTH EDITION

The Sociology Writing Group

COORDINATORS AND EDITORS

Judith Richlin-Klonsky and Ellen Strenski

AUTHORS

Roseann Giarrusso

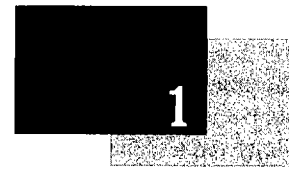
Judith Richlin-Klonsky

William G. Roy

Ellen Strenski

WORTH PUBLISHERS

clarify your ideas. Chapter 3, "Acknowledging Sources," explains when and how to introduce and cite borrowed information, and Chapter 4, "Polishing Your Paper," shows how to edit and format a final draft of your paper.



GETTING STARTED

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

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH
Writing, Typing, and Economics

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

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

Sometimes instructors assign papers by requiring students to respond to a particular question. When that happens make sure you thoroughly understand the question and keep it in mind as you work on the paper. Not answering the instructor's question is one of the most frequent pitfalls of student writing. Even if you have a thoroughly researched, insightfully reasoned, and eloquently written paper, if it does not answer the assigned question, most instructors will find it unsatisfactory. Read the question carefully when you begin your work, reread it as you are doing any reading or research that may be required, reread it when you sit down to write, and reread it as you begin your final draft. People's minds, especially intelligent

people's minds, have a tendency to drift to interesting and related, but not always pertinent, topics.

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

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

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

Sociology is the study of human social behavior. Sociologists investigate how individuals are shaped by their social groups, from families to nations, and how groups are created and maintained by the individuals who compose them. Sociology's basic insight is that who a person is, what she or he thinks and does, is affected by the groups of which that person is a member. To begin thinking sociologically, look around and consider how the world may be experienced differently depending on whether a person is male or female, rich or poor, of one race/ethnicity or another.

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

Finally, sociologists attempt to explain inconsistency as well. How do new social patterns emerge? For instance, what accounts for changes in dating patterns, parent-child relations, or types of college degrees earned?

SOCIOLOGY AND OTHER PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Sometimes new students (and more experienced ones!) are confused about how sociology is distinguished from other disciplines that study people, such

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

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

Sociology and Psychology

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

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

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

Sociology and Political Science

Similarities: Both are concerned with government.

Differences: Political scientists analyze different forms of government and their underlying philosophies and study the political process. A sociologist is more likely to examine the interrelationship between political structure and behavior and other aspects of society, such as the economy, religious institutions, and the attitudes of various social groups.

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

Sociology and History

Similarities: Both look at human life over time.

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

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

Sociology and Philosophy

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

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

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

Sociology and Anthropology

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

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

Studying deviance: Anthropologists might travel to an isolated, nonindustrialized society to study how it defines and treats deviant behavior. Sociologists would study the same processes by focusing on complex, industrial societies.

Sociology and Economics

Similarities: Both are concerned with how society produces and distributes goods and services.

Differences: While an economist concentrates on the economy in its own right, sociologists are more likely to consider how the economy affects and is affected by other social processes.

Studying deviance: An economist might study the contributions and costs of deviance to the gross national product. A sociologist might study how the control of the economy by upper social classes provokes deviant behavior, such as burglary and theft, by those without access to a fair share of goods and services.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

* One way to describe what is distinctive about a sociological point of view is the "sociological imagination," a phrase coined by C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000). Using the sociological imagination means recognizing the connection between individual, private experience and the wider society. Mills calls the

personal level an individual's "biography"; he uses the term "history" to refer to patterns and relationships on the larger scale of society.

As a student, for example, you have followed your own life path to college. Being a college student is part of your personal life story. Your family has its own beliefs about what a college education means. You have your own academic and career goals. You have individual feelings and attitudes about the subjects covered in your classes and your own mixture of college and work schedules. All these things make up your personal, *biographical* experience of your life as a college student.

Applying sociological imagination to your college life expands your perspective. It is like a wide-angle lens that allows you to see yourself in a larger, more complex (and, in many ways, more interesting) picture. Using sociological imagination, you can begin to see where your experience as a college student fits into the social world in which you live, the *history* of which your biography is a part. Perhaps you are part of a trend among your peer group to major in computer science or communication studies. It could be that you are part of an ethnic group whose members are underrepresented in higher education. Perhaps your academic goals have been affected by social values (say, an increasing emphasis on the need for a college degree), or maybe your career choice, combined with many others', will affect the way society's workforce is balanced between producing goods and providing services.

To use sociological imagination, then, is to identify the intersection of biography and history, the ways in which people are affected by social forces and social groups are affected by their members. As Mills ([1959] 2000) himself puts it:

Every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; . . . he [or she] lives out a biography, and . . . he lives it out with some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of his society and its history; even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove. (P. 6)

Mills's deceptively simple insight—that people both affect their own destiny *and* are swept by currents of history—challenges and eludes sociologists from first-year college students just beginning to study the field to seasoned scholars. The key to using sociological imagination is to not lose sight of either side of this relationship.

Mills also recommends a very practical technique for keeping track of your sociological insights. In *The Sociological Imagination*, he describes intellectual work as craftsmanship, implying that doing sociology is like making fine pottery or designing a livable house. It is not just a matter of raw talent, but a disciplined skill honed by careful attention to details. He suggests keeping a set of files on each project you are working on. Keep these files in mind as you go about your daily routines and be ready at any moment to jot down ideas that occur to you. These files can be either paper files that you keep in

a folder or binder, or a file that you keep open on your computer screen. Whenever you come across anything related to the project—newspaper articles, conversations with friends, idle thoughts while walking to class, readings for other classes—put a note in the file.

To develop your sociological imagination, it is important to think about your topics imaginatively and broadly, going beyond the formal terminology of your original question. For example, if you are writing a paper about why the American divorce rate has increased, think about other reasons why marriages end, such as the death or desertion of one partner. Look around you. Consider your parents and their friends. In fact, children were just as likely to grow up without one of their birth parents 100 years ago as they are today because so many parents died before their children were fully grown. If you are writing about why so many young women are anorexic or bulimic, think about all the subcultures that place a high premium on physical appearance, not just those that emphasize slimness. When you are doing a library or Internet search, use your keywords and associated synonyms to help you think about your topic in a new way. For example, when you look up “divorce,” the associated keywords might include “marriage law,” reminding you that changes in the divorce rate depend not only on what happens in families, but on the legal reasons for divorce. When looking up “anorexia,” you might find “men—psychology,” reminding you that it is not just women who suffer from this condition. (See “Taking Notes” on pages 62–63 and “Recording Information: Managing Your Photocopies and Printouts” on pages 101–102 for more information.)

SOCIOLOGY'S FOCUS AND METHODS

One of the major differences between high school and college is that in high school, “learning” usually means learning facts. Those high school students who demonstrate that they have learned the most facts generally earn the highest grades. In college, however, there is greater emphasis on analytical reasoning and thinking. Students are expected to understand entire systems of knowledge. Moreover, college students often find that there is more than one correct way to approach a topic; that is, that there is more than one *perspective* on an issue. A perspective is a way of looking at a topic. For example, think about the various ways of looking at a house. If you view it from the front, you see a door and windows with a roof overhead. If you look at the house from the side, you might see no doors, only windows. If you take your perspective from above, you see neither doors nor windows, only the roof. Although all three perspectives involve the same house, your observations from each perspective result in very different descriptions of that house.

Intellectual perspectives can differ as well. Earlier we saw how a number of disciplines take different perspectives on deviance. They all look at the same behavior, but each discipline paints a different description and develops

a different explanation of it. Even *within* sociology there are several perspectives. Beginning students may find this confusing. For example, by adopting a *conflict perspective*, we can look at society in light of the ever-present conflict that goes on within it; by contrast, taking on a *consensus perspective* points us toward examining society in terms of the enduring ties that produce stable patterns of relationships among people. Likewise, whereas *microsociological perspectives* consider social life in terms of everyday interaction among small groups of people, *macrosociological perspectives* see things from the point of view of long-term change and societies as a whole.

To some extent these perspectives disagree about what we might generally consider the “facts” of society—about whether it is stable or conflicted, about whether it is defined by what occurs on a large scale or in direct interpersonal relations. More often than not, however, different perspectives are simply asking different questions. It’s like looking at the house from different perspectives. A microsociologist might examine the process of becoming deviant from the deviant’s point of view, whereas the macrosociologist might ask how definitions of deviance have changed over time. A sociologist operating from a conflict perspective might examine how deviance is produced as a result of the opposing needs of different social groups, whereas a colleague with a consensus perspective might ask how deviance serves to reinforce the rules of society. All of these perspectives share the features of sociology discussed earlier. All ask different questions—but within a sociological framework.

Some students struggle with the cognitive ambiguity that can arise when different perspectives with very different implications are all considered acceptable. This is one of the great intellectual feats of a college education: to be able to juggle more than one perspective in one’s mind at the same time. As a novice sociologist, your task is to understand these different perspectives and to learn how to support whichever approach *you* take with empirical evidence.

Sociology not only encompasses a range of perspectives, but also allows sociologists to apply these approaches to questions about an innumerable array of topics. Like other disciplines, sociology has several major subdisciplines—variations on a theme, as it were. Some focus on large-scale “macro” phenomena, such as political activities or economic relations. Some focus on “micro” activities that occur on a face-to-face basis, such as in families, small groups, and work settings or among friends. Likewise, sociology may examine events that are as momentary as the eye contact between strangers on a bus or as long-term as the industrialization of society. It may deal with social life in terms of its structure, attempting to uncover stable, underlying patterns, or it may look at the fleeting interactional processes through which individuals relate socially.

In sociology classes, then, you might study anything from the sociology of sports to the sociology of religion. You might learn about how those engaged

in different occupations perceive their work lives, how a thief accomplishes her or his crime, or how children learn table manners. You might study birthrates, medical decision making, or the sex lives of teenagers in the 1930s versus the 1990s. And, for each of these subjects, sociologists may disagree about the kinds of questions to ask and the methods to use in order to answer them.

It should come as no surprise, then, that just as there is no one “right” way to think sociologically, there is no single “right” way to do sociological research. Sociology’s methods vary considerably. Most sociology texts and many instructors describe sociology as a “science.” By this they mean that sociologists systematically collect information about the social world and then methodically analyze this evidence or “data.” The data may come from any of a number of sources—from controlled laboratory experiments, from written accounts of social life, or from observing, interviewing, or surveying people involved in the phenomenon being investigated. (Part II of this book presents tips on how you can use four types of data sources commonly found in undergraduate sociology papers.)

Many sociologists literally *do* use the scientific method, in much the same way that a botanist or chemist would: they set out to support or reject a prediction, or “hypothesis,” about the relationship among several elements of the social world. To do that, they collect quantifiable data—information that can be transformed into numbers and analyzed statistically. (One example of this method is the survey research described in Chapter 8.) Those who adopt this “positivist” approach to sociology believe that we can observe and quantify the relationship between selected social variables (such as age, race, or gender) and particular social experiences (such as deviant behavior). After collecting and analyzing data on prisoners, for instance, the researcher might generalize about whether a 20-year-old or a 45-year-old is more likely to end up in prison. The generalizations produced by these kinds of methods often form the basis of decisions regarding public policy, social programs, and the like.

However, not all sociologists see sociology as a science in the literal sense. Some sociologists believe that the complexity and subtlety of human experience make understanding social relations a very different endeavor than, say, measuring the effects of gravity on a falling object, as a physicist would do. Instead of quantifying social forces, these “interpretive” or “constructivist” researchers concentrate on probing how aspects of everyday life are constructed—given meaning—through social interactions. In studying deviance, for example, they might ask how (if at all) an individual who breaks the law comes to see him- or herself as a criminal. Or they might explore how social interactions produce different ideas about deviance in different subcultures. To accomplish their goals, these sociologists use qualitative methods, conducting research that is quite different from that done in the biological or physical sciences. Examples of these methods include the participant-

observation method and open-ended interviewing (discussed in Chapter 7). Rather than trying to generalize, interpretive sociologists want to specify in as much detail as possible just *how* the social world is constructed. Despite their different approaches, however, all sociologists base their conclusions on a combination of insight and carefully collected and analyzed evidence.

Although some sociology departments specialize in one perspective, topic, or method, most departments include faculty members who represent a range of sociological concerns and styles. Course curricula, including writing assignments, reflect this variety, and students typically have the opportunity to become familiar with several ways of asking and answering sociological questions. When you are trying to understand what an assignment requires of you, it will help to keep in mind the focus of the course as a whole and the particular approach your instructor is presenting.

Sociology, then, is a diverse field. But across all sociological methods and topics, *a sociological perspective involves seeing individuals interacting as members of social groups*. As you prepare to formulate the question that will underlie your sociology paper, remember that *adopting the sociological perspective is always the first step* in writing a successful paper.

FRAMING A QUESTION

Writing a good sociology paper requires using your sociological imagination to frame an interesting question that then guides your research effort. Asking a sociologically imaginative question is one of the tasks students find most challenging and most difficult to pin down. There is no magic recipe, but here are some tips that might help. Your instructor may feel that some aspects of what we say are more important than others, so remember that these are just suggestions.

Remember the “history” part of the sociological imagination. Avoid overly individualistic or psychological questions, questions that concern only what happens inside a person’s head. For example, asking whether criminals are motivated more by aggression than by greed is more interesting psychologically than sociologically. (We are in no way implying that psychological questions are inferior to sociological questions, but our purpose here is to emphasize the sociological aspects of human life.) A sociologically imaginative question might ask what aspects of social life—such as race, class, or gender—influence people to act out their aggression or greed in socially acceptable or unacceptable ways.

Remember the “biography” part of the sociological imagination. Avoid overly economic questions that drop people out of the picture. (Again, economic questions are often interesting and important, but we want to emphasize the

sociological aspects.) For example, asking how much income is lost to crime each year is less sociologically imaginative than asking what types of crime typically victimize wealthy people as compared to poor people.

Ask a question concerning differences between individuals, groups, roles, relationships, societies, or time periods. Only rarely do sociologists make claims about all people or all societies. They are typically more interested in how and why people or societies differ from each other; that is, they more frequently ask questions about variation than about uniformity. For example, they would probably not ask whether people are by nature aggressive but rather why some people are more aggressive than others. Are highly aggressive people socialized differently, part of a different subculture, vulnerable to different social pressures, or aspiring to different goals than less aggressive people?

The remaining five suggestions apply to questions for any discipline, not just sociology.

Ask a question that requires more than a simple “yes” or “no” answer. A “yes-no” question is a dead end. The case is already closed and there is nothing to investigate or argue. For example, the question “Does socioeconomic status affect marital stability?” can be answered “yes,” and there is no more to say. So, too, with this question: “Can children born with severe language/communication deficits caused by aphasia be socialized to participate in society on a par with nonaphasic persons?” One way to improve such questions is to put the phrase “To what extent . . .” in front of them; for example, “To what extent does socioeconomic status affect marital stability?” Another remedy is to rephrase the question; for example, “What are the most effective ways for primary schools to enhance the normal socialization of children born with severe language/communication deficits caused by aphasia?”

Ask a question that has more than one plausible answer. The paper’s task is to demonstrate why your answer is more valid than other plausible answers. You must argue why your answer is more correct and convincing than alternative answers. The question “What are the four crucial elements in the process of diffusion and adoption according to Everett Rogers?” has only one correct answer that can be checked by consulting what Rogers claimed. Nothing is left to argue. One way to improve this question would inject an element of interpretation by applying Rogers’s model to a specific organization; for example, “How well does MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) fit the four-part process of diffusion and adoption identified by Everett Rogers?” So, too, belaboring the obvious wastes both your time and your reader’s. For example, whether there is widespread public opinion against violent crime can only have one plausible answer. No one would seriously claim otherwise. Before starting the research, specify different plausible answers to your question. Can you imagine anyone seriously taking the other side? If not, you need to reformulate the question.

Unless your assignment specifies otherwise, ask a question that draws relationships between two or more concepts. (Some exceptions are a definition paper, a “feeling” or reaction paper, and a story or narrative paper.) Typically, assigned questions concern the relationship between concepts. Are two concepts (for example, deviance and socialization) empirically associated or not? That is, are deviants likely to be socialized differently from nondeviants? Are two concepts (for example, social prestige and deviance) negatively associated; that is, when one is high, is the other low? For example, are people with high prestige less likely to engage in crime than people with low prestige? Unless specifically instructed, avoid questions that address only one concept, such as “What is deviance?”

Make sure you have access to the information to answer your question. Although some paper assignments do not require any research outside assigned readings and lectures, many do require you to document your points with evidence. For these papers, you must consider, when you ask your question, whether you can realistically get the necessary documentation. For example, “Has deviance always existed?” is an interesting question with important consequences for sociological theory. But it would be difficult to document adequately whether prehistoric societies had deviance or not. On the other hand, students are sometimes surprised to discover what information does exist and can be tracked down with a little work, so it is best to check with your instructor if you are unsure.

Make sure your question is answerable in the space allowed. This may be the most elusive of our tips and the one students falter on most frequently. Part of the difficulty is that some instructors expect finer detail of documentation or a more fully developed argument than others. Another problem is that students often don’t know how much information they will find until they have done their research. Here are two guidelines. First, ask middle-range questions that are neither grand, monumental, deep-truth questions nor minutely exacting, picky-detail questions. Second, check out your question with your instructor before you begin your research.

To sum up this section, then, we want to stress that a good paper should not just be *about* some topic (such as mental health, race, gender, or occupations). For example, rather than a paper about social mobility, you might frame and address the question “Is there more opportunity for upward mobility in America today than there was a hundred years ago?” Notice that this question concerns differences between two fairly specific time periods. And it has more than one plausible answer; reasonable people could disagree about whether there is now more opportunity for mobility or less. Framing an answerable but debatable question is a fundamental, and sometimes the most demanding, part of writing a paper.

TERMS AND STRATEGIES IN ESSAY AND EXAM ASSIGNMENTS

When students are given a paper or essay assignment, they naturally want to know what the instructor wants, but asking "What do you want us to do on this assignment?" usually annoys the instructor. From the instructor's point of view, the instructions already indicate what students are expected to do with the information. Knowing the course content is not enough to do well on a paper assignment; knowing *what to do* with this content and having a strategy for selecting and presenting this information are essential. The way to determine such an appropriate strategy is to scrutinize the wording of the assignment, to clarify for yourself what is expected, and then to use a suitable strategy to produce the paper.

Instructors deliberately design assignments to get you to work with—and think about—course concepts and data in various ways. For example, writing about deviance could involve defining it, illustrating it, analyzing it, comparing it to other behavior, evaluating its effects, summarizing someone's theories about it, and so on. Sometimes instructors will provide you with a well-framed, unambiguous question to start with. At the other extreme, you may be given a very vague assignment ("Discuss deviance") that will require you to create and frame your own question. In the middle of this range are the following common commands that cue you to appropriate questions that can be framed concerning the course information and that tell you what the instructor wants you to do with this information.

Note that sometimes an assignment calls for more than one question because the instructor deliberately combines these commands, thereby requiring you to work with the material in several ways, applying several different strategies. At other times, instructors provide several different versions of essentially the same question but repeat it in different words to help you understand what you are supposed to do. If your assignment seems to call for several questions, first determine whether they are the same single question in different words or whether they involve separate strategies.

Analyze: Break something down into its parts; for example, a theory into its components, a process into its stages, an event into its causes. Analysis involves characterizing the whole, identifying the parts, and showing how the parts relate to each other to make the whole. Corresponding question: "What is the relationship between anomie and frustration in the functionalist theory of deviance?"

Assess/Criticize/Evaluate: Determine the importance or value of something. Assessing requires you to develop clearly stated criteria of judgment and to comment on the elements that meet or fail to meet those criteria. Corresponding question: "How useful is labeling theory for explaining why people join gangs?"

Classify: Sort something into main categories and thereby pigeonhole its parts. Corresponding question: "If someone cheats on an examination to get a better grade, which of Merton's forms of deviance does the behavior belong to?"

Compare/Contrast: Identify the important similarities and differences between two elements in order to reveal something significant about them. Emphasize similarities if the command is to compare and differences if it is to contrast. Corresponding question: "What are the similarities and differences in labeling theory and functionalist theories of deviance?"

Define/Identify: Give the special characteristics by which a concept, thing, or event can be recognized; that is, what it is and what it is not. Place it in its general class and then differentiate it from other members of that class. Corresponding questions: "What is anomie? What behaviors or attitudes indicate that a person or group is anomic?"

Describe: Present the characteristics by which an object, action, person, or concept can be recognized or an event or process can be visualized. Corresponding question: "What is Durkheim's theory of deviance?"

Discuss/Examine: Analyze and/or evaluate a particular topic. You must decide on your own question concerning the things to be discussed. Instructors usually expect you to go beyond summary. Corresponding question: "What can sociological theories tell us about why gangs exist and why individuals join them?"

Explain/Justify: Make clear the reasons for or the basic principles of something; make it intelligible. Explanation may involve relating the unfamiliar to the more familiar. Corresponding questions: "Why do people break rules that they believe in? What theories do you think give the best explanation of this kind of behavior? What evidence can you present to support this theory?"

Illustrate: Use a concrete example to explain or clarify the essential attributes of a problem or concept. Corresponding question: "Give a concrete example of 'innovative deviance.' How does this example show the defining features of the concept?"

Interpret: Explain what the author of a quotation means (not what you mean). Corresponding question: "What does Durkheim mean by stating that animals cannot commit suicide?"

List/Enumerate: Give essential points one by one in a logical order. Corresponding question: "What are the forms of deviance in Merton's theory of deviance?"

Outline/Trace/Review/State: Organize a description under main points and subordinate points, omitting minor details and stressing the classification of the elements of the problem or the main points in the development of an event or issue. Corresponding questions: "What have been the major debates over deviance in the past quarter century? How has the resolution of one debate led into the next? Highlight these debates with reference to leading theories and pathbreaking studies."

Prove/Validate: Establish that something is true by citing factual evidence or giving clear, logical reasons for believing it is true. Corresponding question: "Make a case on behalf of or opposed to labeling theory. What are the strongest justification and best evidence you can present to support your point of view?"

ANSWERING AN ESSAY EXAM QUESTION

Because essay exams test thinking, not ability to memorize details, understanding the directions represented by the terms just listed is especially important. This is particularly true when you are writing under time pressure. What instructors want to see in your exam essay is the big picture—meaningful generalizations. They want you to demonstrate quickly what all the details covered in class add up to. To put it another way, they want you to show that you can see the forest for the trees! Therefore, answering an instructor's ready-made question requires a special approach.

Begin by reading through the exam sheet(s) **twice** in order to make choices if they are available and to ration your time. Otherwise, especially if you are nervous, you may confuse the number of questions or not understand important directions. Start with the question you feel most confident about answering, even if it's not in the first section of the exam. (Be sure to **label clearly** the number of each question as you answer it.) Other ideas will come to you as you write, and your relatively easy answer will build your confidence for tackling the others.

Underline or circle the key terms like "analyze," "evaluate," "how (in what way)," and "how much (to what extent)." If the instructions simply say "discuss," you're on your own. Are there several theorists, institutions, concepts, or example? Try a *comparison*. Does the question require demonstrated understanding of key terms? Try *defining* and *illustrating*. Is a process important? Try *analyzing* its different stages. Would grouping help? Try *classification*.

One common essay exam strategy is to begin by cannibalizing the words in the question and using them as a ready-made part of your thesis answer, for example:

Question: "In what ways has the subsequent development of the West confirmed or disconfirmed Marx's theory about class conflict in capitalism?"

Answer: "The subsequent development of the West has disconfirmed Marx's theory about class conflict in capitalism in at least three ways. First, the class structure did not polarize into two unbridgeable classes, but instead gave rise

to a very large middle class. Second, life chances for wealth and prestige now depend at least as much on education and occupation as on class background. Third, the revolutions Marx predicted in advanced capitalist societies did not occur, but instead Marxist-inspired revolutions have developed primarily in peasant-based societies."

Such a bald statement might be too obvious for a polished *paper*, but for an exam *essay*, an announcement like this can help you outline your answer and then stick to it.

Focusing on the question is essential. The object of your essay is **not** to demonstrate all the facts you know, but to answer the question as clearly and concisely as possible.

DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT: LOGIC AND STRUCTURE

In writing, logic refers to the relationship between the paper's assertions and its evidence. Structure concerns how the parts of the paper fit together. If sentences are the "trees" of the paper, then logic and structure are the "forest." According to one faculty survey, structure and logic are among the most important criteria instructors weigh in grading papers.

Logic demands that a good paper go beyond mere assertion ("This statement is true because I say it is"). The answer to your question, which is your thesis, must be supported by evidence and reasoning. One way to accomplish this is to assume that the reader is naive (a Martian, for example) or skeptical. Try to imagine actively what a naive reader might not understand about what you are saying and explain your points to her or him. Try to imagine the kinds of doubts a skeptic might hold and attempt to convince her or him, just like a debater would.

Structure demands that in a good paper each sentence should be well written and make sense; each sentence should also be logically connected to the sentences around it, each paragraph to the paragraphs around it, each section to the sections around it, and all of them to the overall theme of the paper. Whether you write sentence by sentence or begin with a general plan and work down to the level of the sentence, by the time you submit the paper, you should be able to conceptualize the structure of the whole paper in your head (and, if necessary, to explain that structure to the instructor). This means being able to say in one or two sentences what the paper's main thesis is and how you go about arguing that thesis. Imagine your roommate or a friend asking "What's the point of the paper?" and "Why should the reader believe you?" If you can't answer those questions, you still have work to do before turning in the final draft.

The next step after framing your question is constructing a logical defense of your thesis—why your answer is more correct than alternative answers. This defense requires pieces of evidence that support your thesis. The

evidence must be logically connected to the thesis so that you can make the statement (either in your head or in the paper) "If the evidence is true, the thesis is true." Many student papers (and some professional papers) falter here, presenting interesting and important evidence in narrative form, or in a controlled study, or sometimes through reasoned reflection, but then drawing a conclusion that is less than warranted by the evidence presented. So be sure to put aside the actual paper and think through the first three items on the checklist presented in Part III: "What is my thesis? Does my thesis remain evident and central throughout the paper? Have I supported my thesis with adequate evidence?"

Finally, the structure of the paper should reflect the logical connection of the evidence to the thesis. It is the writer's job, not the reader's, to draw the connections between evidence and conclusions and to show how the paper logically proceeds. Thus the paper's introduction, transitions, and conclusions are essential, not just incidental, parts of the paper. The *introduction* should state the question that is being answered and specify the plan for answering it. As the paper unfolds, provide guideposts for the reader telling where the paper has gone and where it is going. These *transitions* indicate how sentences, paragraphs, and sections logically fit together. Transitions can be accomplished by including transitional words and phrases, such as "on the other hand" and "furthermore." (See Chapter 2 for a list of transitions.) Or they can be stated in sentences: "The last section discussed Durkheim's basic presuppositions; this section will show how those presuppositions influenced his theory of religion." A common writing error is the *non sequitur*, a Latin phrase for sentences or paragraphs that have no apparent connection. This often results from a connection that is in the writer's mind but that she or he fails to demonstrate to the reader. A *conclusion* should remind readers where they have been and why you think the thesis has been demonstrated. Try to summarize the paper without repeating specific sentences. This is also the appropriate place to reflect upon the larger implications of your thesis—to answer the question "So what?" But it is not appropriate to present new evidence in the conclusion.

LOGICAL FALLACIES

Logical fallacies are errors in reasoning. Even if facts are accurate, errors in logic can lead writers to inappropriate conclusions, often with the best of intentions. Try not to make any of the following typical errors:

ad hominem (attacking the person, not the issue), for example, "They believe that they [animals] have 'inherent moral rights.' Some of the people who most vigorously support animal rights are cruel to their own family members."

begging the question (circular reasoning), for example, "Because they have nowhere to stay, the homeless must live on the streets."

either/or (also called "false dilemma"), for example, "If school reforms in the last several decades have not created high-quality education for everyone, it is time for school vouchers."

false analogy (assuming that because people or objects share one characteristic, they share all characteristics), for example, "Many Americans hire private investigators to spy for them and gain information about someone else. Just as the CIA violated the rights of citizens in poor countries around the world, private investigators violate the rights of anyone they spy on."

false cause (also called *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, assuming that just because one thing happened after another, it is caused by the first event), for example, "After people lost respect for government authority in the 1960s, violent crime rose all across the country."

hasty generalization (also called "sweeping generalization"), for example, "Americans will never accept a single-payer medical insurance system."

non sequitur (making no apparent logical connection), for example, "If other stress factors lead to the weakening of their willpower causing binge eating, all of the diet centers have counseling sessions."

reverse reasoning (confusing cause for effect), for example, "The more knowledge teenagers have about sex, the more likely they are to engage in premarital sexual activities."

slippery slope (inaccurately predicting a causal chain), for example, "If human cloning research is permitted, the next steps will be designer human beings and then the elimination of handicaps, and end with the killing of people who aren't perfect or whom we don't like."

spurious causation (treating things with a common cause as though they cause each other), for example, "Poor people with bad nutrition commit more violent crime than those with healthy diets."

For a fuller description of logical errors, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (1970. New York: Harper & Row). Even though written specifically for historians, it is very useful for all writers.

TWO FORMATS OF LOGIC AND STRUCTURE

We suggest here two formats of logic and structure that are common in sociology papers. There are, of course, other formats that may be appropriate for specific assignments. If the paper assignment does not specify an explicit format requirement, it is often helpful to talk over your format ideas with the instructor.

The Three-Part Essay Format

This type of paper is most commonly structured in terms of a major thesis (that answers a question) and three supporting “points.”

There is nothing magical about the number three; it is a convenient number of points for the length and scope of papers typically written for course assignments. Each of the three points should logically support the thesis. You should be able to say “If point A (or B, or C) is true, the thesis is true.” More precisely, in terms of formal logic, you need to be able to maintain that “if point A (or B, or C) were *not* true, the thesis would probably not be true.”

Take as an example the thesis “Over the last hundred years, educational opportunities in America have opened up the American social structure to more upward mobility.”

Point A could be: Educational achievement is more closely connected to high-status jobs than it was a hundred years ago.

Point B could be: Education is more equally accessible to all members of the society than were earlier means of determining people’s status.

Point C could be: The content of education relates more to job skills than it did a hundred years ago.

The paper itself is structured around an introduction, discussion of point A, discussion of point B, discussion of point C, and a conclusion. The introduction presents the question that is being answered, the general thesis, and usually a plan of the body of the paper. Each point is discussed in turn. Each section usually starts with a claim—a statement of its main point. Often the next sentence is an example of this claim, followed by an explanation of how the example illustrates the point. Then you can elaborate on this point, identify its implications, take issue with some aspects, or provide other types of evidence. Finally, you need to tie it back in with your general thesis and with the argument so far.

You will need at least one paragraph for each discussion section, because that’s what a paragraph is—a logical section with one main point. You may need more than one paragraph to deal with each main point, especially if the point is complicated or if you are presenting elaborate evidence. If you do, allocate separate paragraphs to each subpoint or aspect. This often happens when you want to analyze a particularly revealing example and explain to what extent it does, but also does *not*, illustrate a point you want to make. In other words, the discussion gives evidence and reasoning for why the point is true; the discussion also explains the logical connection between that point and the general thesis.

The conclusion then summarizes the overall argument and often offers your personal thoughts about the issue you have discussed.

A modified version of the essay format is also appropriate for a paper based on ethnographic research. If that is the kind of paper you’re preparing, follow the structure described in this section, replacing the thesis and supporting claims with three major themes, or three points about a single

theme, gleaned from your data. See Chapter 7 for details on this modified application.

The Journal Format

This is the format often found in articles in major academic journals such as the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*. The journal format is not the same as “journalistic style.” The term “journalistic style” is sometimes used to describe the easy and fluid style of writing in popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. The journal format refers to a particular way that a paper or article can be organized. One would almost never use the journalistic style of writing in a paper organized according to the journal format. The journal format follows the procedural logic of the “hypothesis testing” mode of conducting research, in which you formally test a specific hypothesis through systematic research. The journal format, although usable for projects other than formal hypothesis testing, is best suited to projects that include some sort of systematic data collection and analysis. Its structure follows this order: introduction (including the literature review and the statement of hypothesis), methods, results, and discussion. (See Chapter 8, on the quantitative research paper, for more detail.)

The introduction specifies the question that is being answered in your paper and your general thesis. In this section, a “review of the literature” summarizes what other people have written about the topic, explaining why it is an important issue to study and what their answers are. This section should also formally state your hypothesis (for example, “A greater proportion of men today hold higher-status jobs than their fathers did a hundred years ago”) and justify why you expect it to be true.

The methods section reports your research procedure, detailing where you got the data, how the variables were measured, and what sort of analysis you conducted on the data. A reader should be able to replicate your study by following the “cookbook” of your methods section.

The results section reports in literal terms what the study shows. For instance, “30 percent of men a hundred years ago were in higher-status jobs than their fathers, while 29 percent of men today are in higher-status jobs than their fathers,” which is virtually no change. (These numbers are made up for this book. They are not accurate.)

The discussion section draws the conclusions and reflects upon the result—for example: “The hypothesis must be rejected. The occupational structure has not opened up. The American promise of an equal chance for all is not yet fulfilled.”

The essay and journal formats are illustrated by sample student papers in this book. The paper on quantitative research (Chapter 8) follows the journal format. The remaining two sample papers—one based on ethnographic field research (Chapter 7) and one demonstrating a textual analysis (Chapter 5)—are modified versions of the essay format. See the relevant chapters for details on organizing your paper.

THE PROPOSAL

A *proposal* (sometimes called a “statement of intent” or even, misleadingly, an “abstract”) is a preview of your paper. Instructors assign a proposal to get you started on your paper by framing a question and making a commitment to answering it. Obviously, your proposal can’t describe your intended paper in much detail because at this stage you often don’t know much about the topic. However, you can frame your question and provide a context for it. As such, the proposal is a quick introduction, usually only one or two pages long, to what you want to do. On the basis of this information your instructor can advise you about possible leads to follow up or alert you to problems that may snowball as you prepare your paper.

Your proposal should feature your question; for example, “To what extent is homelessness in Los Angeles attributable to mental illness?” In addition, it may include any of the following, depending on what you already know or hope to find out:

- ♦ **related questions** triggered by your main question, such as: “What counts as ‘mental illness?’”; “Who counts as ‘homeless?’”; “Which comes first: the illness or the homelessness?”; “What drives people onto the streets?”; “How do people survive in these conditions?”; “Where do homeless people go for help?”; “Why do some people get off the street while others don’t?”
- ♦ **a provisional answer** to your question; in other words, your thesis. An example of this might be: “Many older homeless people behave eccentrically, but increasingly children and families are being made homeless and they are not necessarily mentally ill, at least not before becoming homeless.” This provisional answer may be just a hunch or an “educated guess” based on course materials. You will definitely refine it as you learn more about your topic, and in the process you may change it entirely.
- ♦ **a brief statement of the personal reasons this question interests you**; for example, you can’t help noticing more and more homeless people, you find their presence disturbing and frightening, and you are alarmed that not enough is being done to help them.
- ♦ **an academic justification for studying this topic**; that is, why it interests other researchers; for example, the increasing problem of urban homelessness for policymakers, for providers of social services, for public health and recreation, for tourism, and for others in addition to the homeless people themselves.
- ♦ **a sense of direction**: what you need to find out first and where you will start looking for it; for example, statistics on how many homeless people live in Los Angeles. Depending on how detailed a proposal your instructor requires, you may need to specify the steps you will take to answer the question. Some instructors want only a sense of direction indicating, for example, that you will be reading popular magazines and academic journals. Others want a more detailed methodological blueprint

with a step-by-step plan listing variables or ethnographic site. In any case, you need to demonstrate that what you plan to do will provide an adequate answer to your question. This sometimes will also require acknowledging limitations on your answer; for example, we really don’t know exactly how many homeless people there are because they are so difficult to identify. Moreover, some types of mental illness, such as paranoid schizophrenia, are easier to detect than other equally debilitating forms, such as severe depression. What all this means is that you need to do some preliminary reading and thinking before you write your proposal.

A SAMPLE STUDENT PROPOSAL

Here is a sample proposal that student Daryl Williams wrote for a class on “Organizations and Society.” The instructions for the paper were simply to “Write on an organization that relates to a concept discussed in class and on a topic that interests you.” A two-page proposal was assigned at the end of the first week of the quarter. Because Daryl did not yet know much about the organization he had selected, his proposal is understandably rather vague. Other proposal assignments could require considerably more detail.

OUR COMMENTS

Daryl begins by accounting for his interest in his chosen organization.

Daryl's instructor liked the informal tone and word choice of his proposal; for example, the word "indulge." Another instructor might have preferred more formality.

Daryl's question is a good start, but it needs to be refined. His instructor pointed out two initial problems here. First, the concept of an organization's motivation is very slippery, elusive, and hard to establish. What evidence establishes motivation: constitutions, public pronouncements, leaders, members, or actions of the organization? Organizations usually have a complex assortment of motivations, if they can be said to have motivations at all. Daryl's instructor suggested instead that he might study a particular instance, such as the AMA's position on various health insurance schemes, and modify his question accordingly.

Second, Daryl's question assumes that all professional associations attempt to control and regulate entire industries. This generalization is itself debatable. Another possibility, if it appealed to Daryl, would be to use the example of the AMA to *test*—not just *illustrate*—this assumption.

Here Daryl justifies the importance of studying this organization.

Daryl Williams
Sociology 168
7/16/90

PROPOSAL

Choosing an organization that interests me is hard because there are so many possibilities. Last quarter, though, I took a class on the sociology of medicine. This was a completely new and fascinating area of sociology to me, and my interest in it has been piqued ever since. In that class, we learned a little about the American Medical Association (AMA) which I found intriguing. Now, as the focus of my term paper on organizations, I have the perfect opportunity to further explore this group (as well as indulge in a bit more medical sociology).

I think that what I find most interesting about the AMA is that it is not necessarily the do-good organization that most people think it is. There is a popular misconception that the medical profession is in some ways more virtuous than other organizations. This is not true. Rather, the AMA, like other large and powerful organizations, has its own goals and interests, and acts primarily to defend or perpetuate them. In fact, I've learned that the AMA was specifically developed to keep a tight-fisted reign over the medical profession in such a way as to monopolize the medical industry. Hence, using the AMA as a case study from which I can generalize to include other organizations, my research question will be this: In what ways does the American Medical Association (AMA) exemplify an organization's attempt to control and regulate an entire industry?

I think this is a particularly important question to examine because it seems that large and powerful organizations everywhere are increasingly coming to dominate their respective industries. In other words, what the AMA is doing is not unique; rather, it represents an existing and growing trend. In addition, the AMA is a particularly useful model because it shows that all types of organizations—even the ones that we thought were more exceptional, professional, or noble than the rest—can behave in this manner.

Here Daryl identifies related questions triggered by his main question.

Daryl does not provide even a provisional answer to his question. He should have made some attempt at articulating a hunch.

Here Daryl identifies a sense of direction, but he should have offered more information about his sources of data. At the least he could have copied from his textbook some possible titles that he intended to consult in the library.

The content and tone of my research question raises several other questions: Why does the AMA wish to obtain such professional hegemony? At whose expense is this done? How is the AMA organized? What resistance does the AMA face? How is the AMA similar to other organizations? How is it different? I think these questions, and this research topic in general, merit study and attention. While my intentions are not to "expose" the AMA in any way, I think it is vitally important to assess the motives and actions of large organizations such as the AMA, because these groups play such a large and important part of both our social and personal lives.

I plan to begin by reviewing my notes from last quarter. My textbook for that class has some references about books and articles on the AMA that I can check in the library.