

Writing Guide for Term Paper
Sociology 125
October, 2004

This guide for the paper has three main sections:

- A. The Formal Requirements for the paper
- B. A set of suggestions about format
- C. A suggested set of sections for the paper

A. Requirements

Regular assignment (i.e. for students not taking the course for honors credit)

1. Topic: For some theme on American society, compare what it was like when your parents were more or less your age and what it is like now.

2. Length: 1500-2000 words. (or about 6-8 pages, 1 page = approx. 250 words).

3. Interviews: You need to interview your parents or someone of their generation about “what it was like” when they were your age. The paper should contain material including some quotes that come from this interview. You can interview more than one person for this purpose if you like.

4. Contemporary materials: You need to use some material on the subject matter from a newspaper or popular magazine or other such source *from the earlier time period*. If it is appropriate it might be good to use the same sort of material for the present period.

5. Other bibliography: Use at least two academic sources for information in writing your paper. These can be books or articles.

Additional Requirements for honors credit

1. Length. 3000-4000 words (or about 12-16 pages)

2. Interviews. In addition to interviewing your parents or someone from their generation, you need to interview some expert (or sort-of-expert) on the subject. A professor from the University is fine. You can also use email responses to questions you ask for this purpose.

3. Bibliography. In the honors paper there needs to be a more thorough and extended discussion of scholarly discussions of the topic you choose. There is no set number of pieces you need to read, but the expectation would be something like a couple of books and five or six articles. The part of the paper in which you discuss this literature should probably be something like 3-4 pages long.

B. Suggestions on Format

The following is meant to be only a suggestion for how to organize your term paper. Many other strategies could work well, but I recommend this unless you have a specific reason for developing your paper along different lines.

The title:

The title for your paper should clearly define the core subject matter you will discuss. Sometimes poetic, suggestive titles can be effective, but generally a straightforward, informative title is best. The central idea of the assignment is to compare some aspect of American Society “Then” and “Now”, where “then” = the period when your parents were more or less your current age. A simple way of doing your title then is something like this: “Drugs and Youth in the 1960s and 1990s” or “Images of the Female Body in the early 1970s and 2000”.

Format of paper organization

In many term papers it is very useful to have explicitly identified and *labeled* sections of the paper rather than to write the paper as continuous uninterrupted text. Section headings provide the reader with a simple guide to what you are doing. It is also quite useful to you as a writer since it helps to discipline what you are saying. Having labeled sections of a paper makes it less likely that you will wander off the topic of a particular discussion.

In some papers it is also useful to have labeled *subsections*, but in this assignment I doubt if this will be needed in most papers.

Other issues of format

1. **References.** There should be a reference list at the end of the paper. You should include only references you actually cite in the body of the paper. This would include newspaper articles and the like. Any bibliographic format is acceptable so long as you are consistent. One conventional way of doing this is:

Jones, Mortimer. 1997. The Idiocy of Term Papers (New York: Whatsamatau Press)

Jones, Mortimer. 1998. “Sociology as Bad Poetry,” *American Sociological Review*. vol 67:5, pp. 134-66.

2. **footnotes/endnotes:** You can use either footnotes or endnotes as you prefer. I personally like the use of footnotes/endnotes as a place to discuss digressions and secondary interesting points which, if those points were included in the text, would break up the flow of the discussion.

3. **double-space the paper**

4. **page numbers:** Be sure to paginate the paper!

5. **Citations.** The easiest way to do citations is what is called “scientific citations”. In this format you include the name of the author and the date and page number in parentheses in the text and the full reference at the end in the reference list. An example would be: (Jones, 1997: 33).

C. Suggested sections of your paper

I. Introduction

Whatever else you do, you do need to have a clear, to-the-point introduction to the paper. Sometimes people write long-winded introductions to papers in which the reader doesn't really find out what the paper is about until after a couple of pages. This can be OK sometimes, but usually it just makes it harder to figure out what's going on. I think it is best in the first paragraph to make a very clear, crisp statement about what the paper is about, what its central themes are going to be. It is often also very good to state in some summary manner what your central conclusion is (I like to think of this as the “punchline” of the paper). Remember: an academic paper is not like a mystery novel in which you do not want to give away the “whodunit” until the very end.

It is often the case that the introduction to a paper is both the first thing you write *and* the last thing you write. Many times it isn't possible to know exactly what your paper is *really* about until you have written it. Writing is often an act of discovery and invention: you think it has one central point when you start only to discover the most interesting ideas in the paper lead to a different destination. In that case you would need to rewrite the introduction after you complete the analysis in the paper.

The introduction should also contain a brief statement of your “strategy of analysis” for the paper (this is sometimes called the “method” of a paper, especially if it involves more elaborate research). You may want this to be a separate labeled section, or it can be the end of the introduction. In this discussion you tell the reader what kind of research you did to write the paper. This discussion can begin something like this:

“In order to explore X, I have relied on four main sources of information: 1. An interview with Joe Blow, an expert on X; 2. interviews with my parents and with ZZZ about what X was like in 1970; 3. newspaper articles from the New York Times in 19xx and 19yy; 4. a number of secondary sources.” (A “secondary source” is a book or article which discusses the issues you are writing about; a “primary source” is any direct data about the problem under discussion – a document, a newspaper article from the time, an interview).

You do not have to number things this way as a list, but sometimes this makes it easier to keep

track of the different things you did.

There is no fixed length for the Introduction. My expectation in these papers is that this will be in the 1-2 page range.

II. Then

This section could have a more substantive label, like: “Women in Television in the mid-1960s”. This section should involve very detailed descriptions of the problem under consideration. It should be mainly descriptive – that is, the goal should be to lay out as systematically as possible descriptions of what it was like in the past. You should probably include direct quotes from your interviews, and direct citations from other sources. The important thing is for this to be focused with clear, relevant details of the case in question.

This section will probably be about 2 pages long.

III. Now

This section could also have a more substantive label, like: “Women in Television today”.

This section should parallel the previous one: good, systematic details describing the issues. It should be more or less the same length, about 2 pages.

IV. Analysis

This is the section of the paper where you explicitly compare the two periods and provide some kind of analysis. It should begin with a clear, succinct statement of what you feel are the most salient differences and/or similarities in the two periods. Since you will have just described these two periods you do not need to go on and on about this; this should be quite focused and to the point. This is needed to set the stage for the analysis which follows: what you are doing here, basically, is telling the reader precisely what it is in the two descriptive sections that you are going to deal with here.

Now, the word “analysis” is a pretty loose expression and covers many possibilities. This could include any of the following:

- A discussion of possible *explanations* of the difference between then and now
- a discussion of the what the changes might *reflect* about the broader changes in American society.
- A discussion of *ramifications* or *broader implications* of the differences
- A discussion of *policy implications* or *what should be done* about the problem under discussion

I really don't care what you do here. The point is to treat the previous two sections as your “data” and then develop some sort of systematic *argument* about the contrast. This is where you

develop your “punchline” – a clear statement of some interesting point about the two periods.

This analysis can, if you wish, take the form of an engagement with some debate on the issues. On some of the topics there are conflicting explanations among scholars or among “pundits”. On some of the topics there may be deep debates about “what should be done”. One way of organizing your analysis discussion is to enter into these kinds of debates. (You do not have to do this, but it may be an interesting way of organizing your analysis).

The paper should end with a clear concluding, wrap-up statement. Sometimes it is best for this to be a separately designed section of the paper, labeled “Conclusion,” but in a short paper like this I think it is fine for this to be just the end of the Analysis section.

This Analysis part of the paper will usually be about 2-3 pages.

Suggestions for students writing the paper for honors credit

The standard paper is 6-8 pages long. The honors credit papers are expected to be 12-16 pages long. Much of the additional length will be absorbed in the more extended extended discussion of scholarly literature – perhaps 3-5 pages long. The rest would be contained in somewhat more extended introduction and, perhaps, descriptive sections.

There are several different ways to organize the discussion of the academic publications you read for your paper:

1. You could organize this as a completely separate section of the paper called something like “Review of the literature” or “Current discussions of X”. This could come after the introduction and before your descriptive section “Then”, or it could come after your Then & Now sections.
2. You could integrate some of this material into the Then & Now descriptive sections if it turns out that the main academic sources you use serve the purpose of amplifying your descriptions.
3. You can integrate the discussion of academic sources into your analysis section if, for example, your analysis takes the form of entering into a debate with some of these sources.