

Sociology

What this handout is about

This handout introduces you to the wonderful world of writing sociology. Before you can write a clear and coherent sociology paper, you need a firm understanding of the assumptions and expectations of the discipline. You need to know your audience, the way they view the world and how they order and evaluate information. So, without further ado, let's figure out just what sociology is, and how one goes about writing it.

What is sociology, and what do sociologists write about?

Unlike many of the other subjects here at UNC, such as history or English, sociology is a new subject for many students. Therefore, it may be helpful to give a quick introduction to what sociologists do. 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"** 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 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.

Some sociologists 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. But 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. Check with your instructor if you are concerned about this happening in your paper

Typical writing assignments in sociology

So how does all of this apply to an actual writing assignment? Undergraduate writing assignments in sociology may take a number of forms, but they typically involve reviewing sociological literature on a subject; applying or testing a particular concept, theory, or perspective; or producing a small-scale research report, which usually involves a synthesis of both the literature review and application.

The critical review

The review involves investigating the research that has been done on a particular topic and then summarizing and evaluating what you have found. The important task in this kind of assignment is to organize your material clearly and synthesize it for your reader. A good review does not just summarize the literature, but looks for patterns and connections in the literature and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of what others have written on your topic. You want to help your reader see how the information you have gathered fits together, what information can be most trusted (and why), what implications you can derive from it, and what further research may need to be done to fill in gaps. Doing so requires considerable thought and organization on your part, as well as thinking of yourself as an expert on the topic. You need to assume that, even though you are new to the material, you can judge the merits of the arguments you have read and offer an informed opinion of which evidence is strongest and why.

Application or testing of a theory or concept

The application assignment asks you to apply a concept or theoretical perspective to a specific example. In other words, it tests your practical understanding of theories and ideas by asking you to explain how well they apply to actual social phenomena. **In order to successfully apply a theory to a new case, you must include the following steps:**

1. First you need to have a very clear understanding of the theory itself: not only what the theorist argues, but also why he or she argues that point, and how he or she justifies it. That is, you have to understand how the world works according to this theory and how one thing leads to another.
2. Next you should choose an appropriate case study. This is a crucial step, one that can make or break your paper. If you choose a case that is too similar to the one used in constructing the theory in the first place, then your paper will be uninteresting as an application, since it will not give you the opportunity to show off your theoretical brilliance. On the other hand, do not choose a case that is so far out in left field that the applicability is only superficial and trivial. In some ways theory application is like making an analogy. The last thing you want is a weak analogy, or one that is so obvious that it does not give any added insight. Instead, you will want to choose a happy medium, one that is not obvious but that allows you to give a developed analysis of the case using the theory you chose.
3. This leads to the last point, which is the analysis. A strong analysis will go beyond the surface and explore the processes at work, both in the theory and in the case you have chosen. Just like making an analogy, you are arguing that these two things (the theory and the example) are similar. Be specific and detailed in telling the reader how they are similar. In the course of looking for similarities, however, you are likely to find points at which the theory does not seem to be a good fit. Do not sweep this discovery under the rug, since the differences can be just as important as the similarities, supplying insight into both the applicability of the theory and the uniqueness of the case you are using.

You may also be asked to test a theory. Whereas the application paper assumes that the theory you are using is true, the testing paper does not make this assumption, but rather asks you to try out the theory to determine whether it works. Here you need to think about what initial conditions inform the theory and what sort of hypothesis or prediction the theory would make based on those conditions. This is another way of saying that you need to determine which cases the theory could be applied to (see above) and what sort of evidence would be needed to either confirm or disconfirm the theory's hypothesis. In many ways, this is similar to the application paper, with added emphasis on the veracity of the theory being used.

The research paper

Finally, we reach the mighty research paper. Although the thought of doing a research paper can be intimidating, it is actually little more than the combination of many of the parts of the papers we have already discussed. You will begin with a critical review of the literature and use this review as a basis for forming your research question. The question will often take the form of an application ("These ideas will help us to explain Z.") or of hypothesis testing ("If these ideas are correct, we should find X when we investigate Y."). The skills you have already used in writing the other types of papers will help you immensely as you write your research papers.

And so we reach the end of this all-too-brief glimpse into the world of sociological writing. Sociologists can be an idiosyncratic bunch, so paper guidelines and expectations will no doubt vary from class to class, from instructor to instructor. However, these basic guidelines will help you get started.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

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