



# A Practical Guide to Sociological Writing

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# The Sociological Perspective

▶ **All things are socially constructed**

- ▶ Categories are not assumed or taken-for-granted
- ▶ Limitations are clear and explicit

▶ **Social relations and structures are fluid at the same time that they are durable**

- ▶ Goal is to create conditional explanations that are flexible
- ▶ Sociological laws are rare, and we often talk about how they can be disrupted

▶ **Agency within constraint**

- ▶ Primacy of constraining conditions directing action
- ▶ Agency is possible within the realm of constraint

# The Basics

- ▶ What is your purpose?
  - ▶ Critical
  - ▶ Analytical
  - ▶ Explicative
- ▶ Who is your audience?
  - ▶ Other sociologists, who are...
  - ▶ Intelligent
  - ▶ Interested
  - ▶ Ignorant of your case/project/perspective (you must teach them!)

# Starting Points: Puzzles vs Questions

## ▶ Puzzles

- ▶ Tensions/contradictions
- ▶ Gaps/Misunderstandings
- ▶ Hard, Soft, Empirical (Mears 2017)

## ▶ Questions

- ▶ A structured inquiry inspired by the puzzle
- ▶ The puzzle provides the backdrop/starting point for the question
- ▶ The answer to the question will help address the puzzle (but likely will not solve the puzzle entirely)

# Strong Sociological Questions

- ▶ About “people doing things together”
  - ▶ Human-Focused
  - ▶ Oriented towards Action and Constraint
  - ▶ Accounts for Relations (between individuals, groups, systems)
- ▶ Are sufficiently **broad** to invite investigation
  - ▶ More than a yes/no answer; multiple plausible answers
- ▶ Are sufficiently **specific** to structure a research design
  - ▶ Question is a “spring board” for a method
  - ▶ Your answer to the question is your argument

# Strong Arguments

- ▶ More than a statement of fact; debatable
- ▶ Specific enough that it anchors the paper
- ▶ Multifaceted enough that it can be unpacked/expanded
- ▶ Stated clearly enough that the reader cannot misunderstand
  
- ▶ Shows up right at the beginning
- ▶ Remains intact throughout
- ▶ Is supported/strengthened throughout

**“‘Getting it right’ means putting the argument so clearly that the paper begins by asserting what it later demonstrates” (Becker 2007; 19)**

# Strong Critiques

- ▶ Good stuff first
  - ▶ Acknowledge what is useful/helpful
- ▶ Higher order concerns over minutiae
  - ▶ Potential Example: method over sample size
- ▶ Anticipate the counterargument/author's defense
  - ▶ Then respond to it and proceed with your critique
- ▶ Think internally
  - ▶ Rather than saying "Author doesn't discuss x," show how "x" is actually crucial to the author's own argument and/or logic (Example: gender in Marx)
- ▶ Don't confuse your opinion of the topic with your opinion of the analysis
  - ▶ Example: "Assimilation is a problematic concept" is not enough. Think internally and show how the problematic concept creates a logical flaw

# Writing Challenges Unique to Sociology: Agency and Passive Voice

## ▶ Problem

- ▶ Sociologists can be uncomfortable with agency.
- ▶ Often difficult to define the “subjects” behind large-scale social forces, which involve everyone and no one simultaneously.

## ▶ Leads to passive voice (no subject) and/or abstract nouns (vague subjects)

- ▶ “Veterans are constructed as deserving in national discourse.” (No subject)
- ▶ “Discourse about veterans constructs them as deserving.” (Vague subject)

## ▶ Instead: Find the Subject

- ▶ Few social theories are fully agentless; Persons, Groups, Organizations, or Systems are all agents
- ▶ Ask: Who has the power to make this happen? Who has an interest in making this happen?
- ▶ Requires deeper knowledge of your case (intimidating but important)

# Writing Challenges Unique to Sociology: Ritual Qualifiers

## ▶ Problem

- ▶ Sociologists recognize that all social relations and outcomes are conditional, and subject to change, so all understanding is mutable
- ▶ There could always (and will always) be an exception to our claims
- ▶ Leads to qualifying your claims to the point that they are not helpful or interesting
  - ▶ “Veteran nonprofits might be related to VA proliferation under certain circumstances.”
- ▶ Instead: Recognize and assert the exceptions
  - ▶ Be clear on the conditions for your claim and state them up front
  - ▶ Rather than relying on “weak associations,” state precise conditions when the association occurs and could be reasonably expected

# Writing Challenges Unique to Sociology: The Problem with Causality

## ▶ Problem

- ▶ Similar to the problem with ritual qualifiers; variance within society is too high and unpredictable; sociologists are generally uncomfortable with prediction.
- ▶ Positivistic orientation – since we cannot control conditions and treatment we cannot claim cause, because we cannot know “with certainty.”

## ▶ Leads to weak associations

- ▶ “VA proliferation of SSVF grants is correlated to the growth in veteran nonprofits.”

## ▶ Instead: Make the relationship clear and explain why it exists

- ▶ Precondition for, facilitates, enables, constricts, limits, necessary but not sufficient, etc.

# Writing Challenges Unique to Sociology: The Rhetoric of “Science”

- ▶ Problem
  - ▶ Sociology wants to be perceived as a “legitimate science,” which assumes a level of impartiality on behalf of the researcher
  - ▶ Varies by sub-field, but there is still a strong trend toward “neutrality” in sociological writing
- ▶ Leads to passive voice or improper subjects; reproduces the façade of impersonal “science” that does not exist (in sociology or anywhere)
  - ▶ “Interviews with veterans were coded.” (No subject)
  - ▶ “My dissertation explores the veteran nonprofit sector in San Diego.” (Improper subject)
  - ▶ For a good start on this topic, see Gusfield (1980) *The Culture of Public Problems*
- ▶ Instead: Be clear about your subjectivity in the research process
  - ▶ Will often depend on your audience, intended journal, advisor’s expectations, etc.

# References

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- ▶ Giarrusso, Roseann; Judith Richlin-Klonsky; William G. Roy; Ellen Strenski. 2013. *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: Worth Publishers.
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**“The first wisdom of sociology  
is this – things are not always  
what they seem.”**

Peter L. Berger

