

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to help you improve your writing, whether it is for essays, dissertations or exams. In turn, learning to write well should help you to get the most out of your university education as well as providing you with a set of skills that will stand you in good stead after you graduate. All this should also help you to enjoy writing, or, if you find it difficult and not so enjoyable, at least make it easier.

This book is for any student taking an undergraduate course in sociology in a UK university, or one based more or less on the UK university system including those in Australasia, Malaysia and the United States.¹ It is not just for those completing a degree in sociology, but also for students who are taking only a few or even just one sociology course or related courses. For those whose main studies lie outside of sociology, it will perhaps be especially useful if you are more accustomed to writing in psychology or other sciences and are now faced with writing sociologically. Our book aims to be readable and clear, written in as direct a style as possible to discuss matters that can be complex, in as practical a fashion as we can.

Time and again we have seen students struggle with some of the basics of writing. Yet such basics are rarely written down and taught in a practical fashion – the reason we have written this book. Indeed, the book is based on much of what we have learned with our students during discussions of their written work. Virtually everything we have included in the book has, at some point, somewhere, turned out to be useful to one or another group of students.

We think that clarity of both argument and style are the most important qualities to be found in your writing, not only now while you are still

¹ It means that throughout this book we also assume British English spelling and conventions for writing, which can vary considerably from those in Australia, the United States and elsewhere where English is a main language.

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an undergraduate but for whatever you do when you graduate. It might be very pleasing if you could write to make people laugh or appreciate your literary turn of phrase, but you can still do very well in your studies without doing either. What you cannot do without is writing as clearly as possible and presenting your argument well.

There are many kinds of writing which you might be required to produce during your studies. For example, you might write essays, critical reviews, term papers, annotated bibliographies, essay plans, reports, blog posts and so on. Each of these forms of writing has its own specific, sometimes subtly different, qualities, some of which are shared and some of which are not. A blog post is not much like a report, for example, since the former adopts an informal style and generally aims to entertain, whereas the latter adopts a formal style and generally aims to summarise concisely the most important findings of an enquiry. We have focused this book on writing essays, for this is the primary form of writing which is required by sociological assessments. Moreover, essay writing requires you to construct an argument, draw together evidence and summarise key points, all of which are core skills that – if mastered – will allow you more easily to turn your hand to other forms of writing.

It will be helpful to see this book as a companion to writing your essays and other assessments. It is designed to be used alongside the actual work of reading and writing during your course, rather than read once and then put onto the bookshelf. Instead, it is a good idea to keep it on your desk or near to hand wherever you are working, so that you can return to it for reference as needed. Referring regularly to the book as you do your work can provide an opportunity to reflect not just on what you are writing (the content of your argument) but also on how you are doing it (the techniques which you are using to produce your argument and provide evidence for your points), so that you develop an appreciation of your own style, strengths and weaknesses and can consciously build upon them.

As we have written the book to support you in completing the assignments which you have been set as part of your education you will find that we have not included additional practice tests nor any exercises through which to work. Instead, we encourage you to experiment with the techniques and advice we review in this book in your non-assessed, formative assignments, and to do so regularly in order to learn them thoroughly for use in your assessed, summative assignments.

THE CRAFT OF WRITING

The book is not called ‘how to improve your essays’ or ‘how to write your dissertation’ but ‘the craft of writing’. To talk of craft may sound a bit old-fashioned or, worse, self-important. But we have used the term because of the way we think writing is best learned. In many ways, the craft of writing is learned by a novice in a similar fashion to learning to make a pot in a studio: creating something subtly unique, learning from a teacher through watching and listening. The process is almost the opposite of producing a standardised product in factories. Cars made on an assembly line, for example, are each identical to the next and all have to measure up to some prescribed set of specifications. Writing is not an industrialised process but a craft practice. Whilst you are at university to study sociology (or a subject closely related to it) you have also become a student of the craft of writing. In order to progress through your studies and to make the most of your time at university, and indeed the most of this book, it is worth thinking of yourself as a novice writer as much as a novice sociologist. Learning to write better is one of the most important things you can do with your time as a student for it will remain with you for the rest of your career.

Writing and reading are inextricably linked elements of the craft. The point of writing anything is to make it available for reading; even secret codes are meant to be read by someone. Improving your own writing will be greatly improved if you read widely and, as you do so, think about the way authors have crafted the books and articles you study. Reading and reflecting on how you read is integral to continuing to develop the craft of writing. On this note, it is primarily for convenience that we have organised the majority of the first part of this book according to what, at first sight, is the sequence of an essay: starting with reading and making notes, then exploring how to construct an argument based on your understandings of and critical reflections on these readings, before journeying through the construction of the beginning, middle and end of the essay, and concluding with the process of redrafting, editing and proof-reading.

In practice, however, this sequence commonly comes apart, with a good deal of doubling back along what initially seems like a logical, linear chain of events. In any case, thinking too rigidly in terms of this sequence risks reinforcing the idea that writing does not happen until very near the end of the process. On the contrary, writing starts – or

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should start – almost as soon as you first read the essay title. After all, looking at the title is bound to prompt some thoughts. It will do no harm and could end up being very useful to make a note of those thoughts right away. One thing on which we lay considerable stress is that you should be writing much of the time, at the very least a couple of pages once a week. As the American sociologist C. Wright Mills observed:

You cannot ‘keep your hand in’ if you do not write something at least every week. (1959: 197)

You will have to acquire the habit of taking a large volume of notes from any worth-while book you read – although, I have to say, *you may get better work out of yourself when you read really bad books*. (1959: 199; emphasis added)

As Mills obviously assumes, reading academic articles and books does not mean accepting what they have to say or copying the ways in which they have said it. When you read academic sociological work you will find that you agree with some of the arguments and disagree with others. This is an important part of *critical* reading because it opens up routes to crafting your own arguments. You will also find that some sociological writing is pleasing to read, but some is turgid or incomprehensible. This could be because the argument is opaque and difficult to understand, but it could just as well be that the work is badly written. Keeping this in mind as you read is important in developing your own writing.

On the face of it, critical reading is the beginning and writing the end of producing an essay – but only on the face of it. Academic reading should almost always involve writing. Even before deciding to make notes on something, a written record of the full bibliographic details needs to be made for future reference – and stored in the appropriate place, whether you choose to use bibliographic software such as Endnote or Reference Manager, or a plain Word document. And in creating this important record, it is often very useful to add a note to yourself in the process – maybe a reminder that this is an article that outlines an important concept for your essay or that the book has only one chapter to which you will want to return. Even such easy, quick remarks at a very early stage may be valuable as the work unfolds and may even find their way into the final essay itself.

As we have implied so far, writing has various uses. It helps create a record of something without having to memorise it. Making notes in

a lecture helps remind you of what was covered and where it all fits into the course syllabus. Not only are your notes a record for future reference, the very act of writing them during the lecture can help you remember what was said. Writing is also extremely useful for working out what you are thinking or helping weigh up the pros and cons to help you to decide what you think of a debate. For all three of these uses of writing, you are the reader. You are your own audience, writing for yourself.

The writing which comes at the end of producing the essay is writing for a different audience, when the reader switches from being you to being your tutor or supervisor. By then, all the writing for yourself must be complete. You will, with luck, have kept the list of complete references in the right place, brought together what you need from your lecture notes that is relevant and, above all, have assembled the relevant parts of the notes you made on all you have read. With all those to hand, you will be able to arrange them into written plans for what you want to say in your essay, before going on to prepare a first draft, which, by the end, will have helped you to sort out more clearly and decisively what you think and the kind of argument you want to present. At this point it is time to redraft the essay and finally to write it for your ultimate audience – your tutor or dissertation examiners.

In just the same way that writing has various uses, so too does reading. There are obviously different types of academic reading, ranging from general background reading, studying textbooks, reading as a basis for a tutorial or class discussion as well as the reading dedicated to preparing an essay or a dissertation's literature review. Equally, in just the same way that academic reading should always involve writing, so writing should always involve reading. Reading through what you have just written is the only way of checking that it makes sense and that you have put down what you wanted. This will also help to reduce the number of times you write something you did not mean and to avoid repeating yourself.

THE VALUE TO SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS OF LEARNING ABOUT WRITING

Just possibly, what distinguishes academic reading and writing from many other types of either activity is the importance of pairing reading and writing so that each repeatedly informs the other. Yet writing is a transferable skill which is bound to be useful after you graduate, no

matter what you do in your work or leisure time. It is not merely a set of techniques useful for writing good essays and passing exams. It is a fundamental and enduring way of communicating. The written word is unlikely to become obsolete, even if all kinds of as yet unimagined means of communication are invented. Indeed, the American cognitive scientist, Steven Pinker, claims that ‘more than ever before, the currency of our social and cultural lives is the written word’ (Pinker, 2014: 8). It is often claimed in sociological circles that, in the West, we live in a communication or media culture due to a proliferation in recent decades of communication technologies and social media. Whatever the effects may be on the way we read and write, it is highly likely that reading critically and writing clearly will be at least as valuable in twenty years’ time as they are now, if not more. Developing methods of learning to read and write more effectively needs to be taken seriously – something you should truly value. Do not, then, be shy about telling future employers, for example, that sociology – like history or philosophy – is a discipline in which the skills of learning to write and to read critically are honed and prized.

In the meantime, writing is the main way you will demonstrate that you have successfully grasped what is needed to be awarded your degree. Remembering who you are writing for at which stage, and why, will be invaluable when ensuring that you do not fall into the common trap of thinking that because (presumably) your tutor or examiner knows the material you are presenting, you do not need to spell things out. The reverse is the case. Reflecting on why your tutors are the readers will remind you that although they already know the material, their task is to check how well *you* know it. The sooner they can breathe a sigh of relief on discovering that you have shown that you know it well and have marshalled your points appropriately to support a carefully thought-through argument clearly and coherently, the happier they will be with your work.

Despite its being one of the social sciences, writing in sociology is more like writing in the arts and humanities than in the life and natural sciences. Although undergraduates taking sociology courses are not writing novels or journalism, they are studying a discipline in which the style is literary – more like a book, less like a set of notes, bullet points or list of procedures. For instance, the natural or life sciences are liable to require using the passive voice – ‘an experiment was designed to control three variables’ not ‘I designed an experiment to control three variables’. In sociology it is common to write in the first person – ‘I conducted

ten open-ended interviews'. This might imply that the distinction is to do with methods. It is true that the image of a discipline such as physics is that it uses numerical data whereas an image of sociology is that it uses textual data, but this does not reflect the reality in either subject. Both natural and social scientists use qualitative and quantitative data to varying degrees and with sometimes different purposes. Sociologists must learn to write about both. Writing sociology essays requires you not only to cope with these different forms of data and to understand to some degree the techniques of their collection and analysis, but also to discuss debates, different theories or contrasting methodologies and to develop arguments. You need to deploy these skills together to address the essay title.

FINDING YOUR WAY ROUND THE BOOK

We have written the book so that it can be used in more than one way. First we would suggest you read it all the way through. That will give you a good idea of where to find what you will need to look at again. Part I is organised according to stages of the essay-writing process, which should mean you can easily return to particular chapters to help you whilst you are working on an essay without having to read through the whole book again. Part II then deals with common issues experienced or questions that students ask about essay writing which do not directly relate to a particular section of an essay. Finally, Part III introduces some of the basics of grammar to help you to write good sentences and to use punctuation appropriately. Certainly you can easily find whole books on grammar. But we have included some material at the end for the convenience of having everything you may need to hand in just one book. We have pitched the level at which we present grammar, spelling and punctuation at that which our own work with undergraduates indicates is best suited to their essay and dissertation writing in sociology. Our selection of problems for detailed attention is based on the range of problems our students have trouble with.

So, whether you are someone who relishes essay writing or can find it a little daunting, this book is intended to be useful and to be used. If you are just beginning your studies in sociology, beginning with 'Beginnings' (Chapter 3) along with 'Reading critically' (Chapter 1) could be most useful to start with. If you have been studying sociology for longer, then focusing on 'Making an argument' (Chapter 2) and 'Making use of feedback' (Chapter 14) could be particularly useful. For in much the same

way that essays do not get written in a linear fashion, beginning to end, a book that aims to help you write them will be most useful, after a swift skim through to learn what is on offer, when you pick out the most relevant sections for the essay you are currently working on. To help you to pick out the most relevant sections, we have included very brief summaries of the key topics covered at the end of each chapter in Part I. These can also be used as a reminder of the main things you need to be doing or to bear in mind when you are writing essays. Come back to these section summaries regularly, whenever you are required to write a piece, to point you towards the key parts of the book which might assist you with whatever it is you are currently writing.