General Advice and Key Characteristics

Taking a Sociological Perspective
Like other social scientists, sociologists carefully observe human behavior and ask questions about what forces drive certain patterns in this behavior—they seek to understand human interaction in the context of society. In doing so, sociologists look not only at the behavior of individuals and groups but also at the structural systems that influence behavior. **Writing in sociology demands that you take a sociological perspective that views human behavior as "mediated, shaped, channeled, and influenced by social relationships and social systems."[I]**

Argument and Thesis
Most papers in sociology require that you use the sociological perspective defined above to form an argument whose thesis is supported by acceptable evidence. In a sociological argument, you must:
- be clear in stating your thesis.
- form explanations and draw conclusions that are grounded in appropriate evidence (see below). Depending on the type of writing assignment, sometimes this evidence is textual and sometimes this evidence is empirical (observed and collected).

Analysis and Evaluation
Many writing assignments in sociology courses ask you to move beyond summary of texts or data. This means that in defending your thesis, you will be asked to *analyze* and *evaluate* texts or data. For example, you might be asked to critically evaluate a book, article, or set of texts to demonstrate a defensible idea, or you might be asked to analyze data you have collected to demonstrate a defensible conclusion.

Evidence
As an empirical field, sociology accepts documented and carefully collected evidence. Whether you are making a critical argument about a text or set of texts, a theoretical argument, or a data-oriented argument, you must substantiate your argument with evidence that reflects observable examples of patterns in social behavior. *For each claim you make, ask yourself, "how do I know this?"*

In sociology, accepted evidence generally falls into two categories. Even if you are writing a paper whose argument is based on reading of secondary texts, you should be aware of these types of data:

- Quantitative data measure subjects' or objects' behaviors or characteristics that differ in quantity. Quantitative data are expressed numerically and often are based on experiments, content analysis of written documents, surveys, and statistics. For example, you might look at how many couples in a particular group decide not to have children, how many employees in a particular organization use food stamps, or how many people in a particular group commit crimes.

- Qualitative data focus on variables that differ in quality rather than kind. Qualitative data—often based on observation, interviews, and texts—express qualities of behavior and can be used to

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[I] Johnson, William A.; Richard P. Rettig; Gregory M. Scott; and Stephen M. Garrison. 2006. *The Sociology Student Writer's Manual.* 5th ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

understand patterns descriptive of a behavior. For example you may look at gender experience, at employees' attitudes toward their pay, or at gang members' perceptions of gang membership.

Generally, personal opinion or personal anecdotes are not appropriate evidence in a sociological argument; emphasize the research you or others have done, not your own experiences. This varies by assignment, so be sure to check with your professor to learn whether personal experiences count as evidence. Take care to distinguish between your opinion and evidence that is grounded in what a text actually says or in what the data actually tell you. Be rigorous in making this distinction.

Documentation
Writers in sociology use the American Sociological Association (ASA) format for citation. Developed by professionals in the field, this documentation style allows writers to document consistently those aspects of source materials that most matter to the discipline. For example, ASA style places importance on authorship and on time and its passage. Because ASA format for citation is a complex and strict citation system, refer to a style guide such as the *American Sociological Association Style Guide* (4th ed.).

Using proper ASA style for citation allows you to:
- join a community of writers and readers who share certain values and a common citation system.
- build your credibility as a writer and researcher.
- provide readers access to your sources.
- make clear where your ideas end and another's begin. Whether you are quoting, summarizing, or paraphrasing in your own words, you *must* cite your sources. Even if you do not intend to plagiarize, if you do not properly cite your sources, you have plagiarized.

Common Writing Tasks

Critical Review of a Book, an Article, or the Literature
Whether you are reviewing a book, a selected article, or relevant literature on a particular topic, your task is not only to summarize but also to *evaluate* in order to identify the strengths and limitations of book, article, or set of texts. This evaluation will be based on criteria that grow out of the field of sociology and its recognition of the relationship between human behavior and social systems, not on criteria based in personal opinion or value judgments. In the case of a book review or article critique, you must identify the text's thesis, the methods used, the evidence/data presented, and any contributions to the field. Further, you must evaluate how convincingly the book or article accomplishes its purpose. In the case of a review of literature—an assignment that requires you to look at the relationships among texts—you must not only identify, summarize, and compare literature relevant to the topic under consideration, but also synthesize this literature in order to make a point about the current state of knowledge.

Social Research Paper
Identifying a question or problem
A key step in writing a social research paper is identifying a question or problem worth investigating, a step that requires a lot of reading and note taking. You cannot identify methods or data appropriate for answering the question/solving the problem if you do not have a clear understanding of the problem in the first place. For example, through careful reading, you might formulate a question that asks about the relationship between stereotypes and how individuals identify themselves or about the relationship between homelessness and child rearing philosophies. Invest time in formulating a strong research question or problem.

Research based on readings
Some social research papers may invite you to familiarize yourself with the literature and to perform an analysis of this literature in order to argue for a particular perspective on a social issue. For example, a

professor may ask you to present one potential solution to the problem of homelessness. A criminology professor may invite you to investigate and analyze current law with regard to a specific issue. These papers require careful reading and use of textual evidence from acceptable sources.

Research based on readings and collected data
Other research papers may invite you to apply sociological research methods to answer a particular question/test a hypothesis. These assignments may involve collecting and analyzing data. For example, a professor may invite you to pick a topic related to inequality and social justice, to define a problem/question related to that issue, to formulate a hypothesis, to test this hypothesis, and to report and discuss your findings. These research papers reflect the scientific method, which involves developing and testing a hypothesis in order to explain reality. The practice of scientific inquiry usually involves taking a number of steps, many of which require doing some informal writing before you put together your research paper:[I]
1. Define a problem and formulate a research question.
2. Conduct a literature review to determine what is known about the research problem.
3. Formulate a meaningful hypothesis.
4. Identify dependent, independent, and intervening variables.
5. Formulate a research design.
6. Conduct the study.
7. Analyze and interpret the results.

These thinking and analyzing steps eventually will be reflected in the main parts of a data-oriented sociological research paper: Title page, Abstract, Introduction, Literature review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, and References.

Application or Testing of a Theory
Some sociology writing assignments ask you to apply a theory (sometimes called an argument or perspective) to a particular case. For example, you may be asked to apply Karl Marx's theory of class conflict. Before you successfully can *apply a theory* to a case study, it is imperative that you have a good understanding of the theory, under what conditions it originally was constructed (e.g., is it only supposed to apply to economic transactions?), and what it attempts to explain. Once you have a good understanding of the theory, you can apply the theory to a specific case study that focuses on a particular unit of analysis (i.e. social group). When applying a theory to a particular example, keep in mind that you must analyze the example as it compares to the theory. That is, what does the theory help you to understand about the example? What does the theory fail to help you understand (where is it not a good fit)?

The *testing a theory* paper is similar to the applying a theory paper except that your purpose in testing a theory is to determine the veracity and usefulness of the theory. Do particular case studies confirm, disconfirm, or partially confirm the theory? You are therefore taking an evaluative approach in both types of papers: application papers evaluate a case study through the lens of a particular theory; testing papers evaluate a theory by trying it out on case studies to determine whether or not the theory's hypothesis holds.

Some Tips

Questions to Ask of Your Draft
As you write and receive feedback on your papers, consider asking the following questions (not all questions are applicable to all types of assignments):

- Does my paper present an argument in which I support a certain perspective, claim, or conclusion? Do I make my thesis clear?
- Does my paper demonstrate that I did the necessary reading?

[I] List adapted from the *The Sociology Student Writer's Manual.*

- How do I know my claims are true? Do I use evidence that is grounded in the reading or collected data rather than in personal experience?
- Does my essay have a meaningful organization that purposefully moves a reader from one idea to the next rather than from one example or piece of evidence to the next?
- Do I waste space on excessive summary of sources? Do I make purposeful choices about when to summarize, paraphrase, and quote primary and secondary sources?
- Do I distinguish my ideas from those of the authors/theories/articles I discuss? Do I make it clear where other's ideas end and where my ideas begin?
- Do I use proper ASA format for my paper and in documenting sources?
- If I am writing a data-oriented research paper, does my paper follow the accepted format for a sociological research paper: Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, References?
- Do I use subject headers in longer papers to help my reader organize the argument?

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

When writing a paper for a sociology course, take care to avoid the following common pitfalls:

- *Flawed arguments* – Avoid three common flawed sociological arguments: arguing only from the perspective of the individual while ignoring social conditions, attributing patterns in behavior to "human nature," and explaining behavior as caused by "society" in general without looking at the societal processes at work.
- *Excessive summarizing/lack of analysis* – Your task is to move beyond mere summary to help a reader understand your evaluation and analysis of the texts or data.
- *Lack of an adequately complex thesis* – A good thesis moves your reader beyond a simple observation. It asserts an arguable perspective that requires some work on your part to demonstrate its validity.
- *Lack of adequate support* – A well-crafted thesis requires substantiation in the form of acceptable evidence. Often, if your thesis doesn't make a complex, arguable claim, the act of substantiation becomes difficult. Take care to develop a thesis that will require purposeful use of evidence.
- *Plagiarism* – Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work or ideas, in any form, without proper acknowledgement. Whether you are quoting, summarize, or paraphrasing in your own words, you *must* cite your sources. Even if you do not intend to plagiarize, if you do not properly cite your sources, you have plagiarized.
- *Use of unreliable electronic sources* – Take care to rigorously evaluate your sources, particularly ones from the Internet. Ask who authored the information, who published or sponsored the information, how well the information reflects the author's knowledge of the field, and whether the information is accurate and timely.
- *Use of personal opinion or anecdotes* – Personal opinions or anecdotes generally do not qualify as rigorous and appropriate sociological evidence in support of a claim. Your opinion does not qualify as data.
- *Improper use of a theory* – If you are applying or testing a particular theory, be sure you have a good understanding of this theory.
- *Excessive quoting* – When quoting a source in order to provide evidence, use only the relevant part of the quotation. When you establish a claim/assertion and provide textual support, be sure to explain the relationship between the quotation and the assertion. Your reader can't read your mind.
- *Shifting verb tense* – Take care to shift verb tense only when necessary. Science's strong sense of timing requires that you accurately reflect that research was performed in that past and that certain knowledge is current.
- *Passive voice* – Use active voice as often as possible. Active voice generally is more concise and lively than passive voice.

- *Reference to the author by his/her first name* – It is customary and respectful to refer to the author using his/her last name.