

# 1. INTRODUCTION TO WRITING IN SOCIOLOGY

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“Writing is a struggle against silence.”

–Carlos Fuentes, Mexican writer

I used to hate writing. When I was an undergraduate student I often struggled to complete writing assignments. If the assignment required 10 pages, I would write 8 pages and run out of words to put on the paper. When the assignment required 8 pages, I would write 6 pages and run out of words. It was probably psychological.

But I did love writing in my journal every day, letters to my friends, and fictional stories I used to exchange with my best friend in Mexico. There was just something about academic assignments that made the writing difficult.

Over the years, through my college and graduate school years, I gradually came to enjoy the process of writing as a sociologist. Now, I take any opportunity to write—even if I only have 15 minutes. Writing continues to be a struggle! And I know I am not the best writer in the world. But today I have a lot I want to write, and I have come to really enjoy writing for two reasons. First, putting my thoughts down on paper allows me to build on them, to make better arguments, to develop more complex ideas, and to better explain my ideas. Second, it allows me to address issues that are important to me, to “break silences” and have a voice.

This writing manual emerged from thinking about myself as an undergraduate student—who often did not know what it meant to “write” in the context of academia. It also sprang from thinking about myself as the teacher who often does not know what or how much to teach about the process of writing in the classroom.

I have put this writing manual together so that colleagues and I could address writing more explicitly—engage in the taken-for-granted expectations and rules of writing generally, and as sociologists in particular. I also sought to address the power of language, and the power embedded in language. We use language to communicate. But verbal and written language differ in important ways. Verbal language allows us to communicate with each other. It is fluid, imperfect, and somewhat easy to share—that is, even when someone speaks few words in our own language, they can probably communicate with us. For example, I think about my parents who are not fluent in English but are able to communicate with people in English (even if it is with difficulties).

Written language, on the other hand, is more formal, with many specific rules. These rules, of spelling, grammar, and syntax, are more rigid and not following them in written

communication becomes apparent in the flow of the written word. For example, do you understand the following sentence? “Left the book at the table and it is hard.” With no context, we don’t know who left the book, and the position of the book is *on* the table, and it is not clear how the first part (of leaving the book) is connected to the second part (being hard).

Rules apply to both oral and written language. But people expect written language to be more formal and hence to follow the rules. In addition, written language, unlike verbal language, must stand alone. There is no other component like facial expressions or gestures to complement the words. Paragraph breaks and punctuation must take the place of these. Hence, not following the rules of standard English will stand out in written communication. It used to make me angry that my instructors demanded I focus on this. I used to think that teachers should focus on *what* I wanted to share (the content), not on *how* I was sharing (the grammar and punctuation)—focus on the meaning not the writing. What if my English was imperfect? I used to think the ideas were all that mattered, not the mechanics. But now, as the teacher, I understand that it is difficult focus on the ideas when there are too many mechanical errors. Ideas do not come through clearly without the mechanics.

When you write in the field of sociology, in addition to communicating ideas, you are communicating that you are part of a community of sociologists. Thus writing in sociology is much like regular writing, but it also has its particularities. Like any other writing, it should be engaging, grammatically sound, organized, and coherent. However, it should also follow American Sociological Association (ASA) guidelines, and address the

particularities in the field—such as providing a sociological perspective and analysis.

This manual has five parts that cover a range of topics from how to think about language and writing when (Standard) English is your second language, to what to think about when you write an introduction to make it interesting, to how to write the results of a research paper, to how to put together a personal statement. These five sections are for learners. This manual also has an appendix that is more focused on faculty. Thus it provides examples of writing assignments and instructions on how to assess writing in general (based on university and department expectations at Sac State) and more specifically based on assignments in specific courses.

I hope that as readers, you can take the chapters—all, or some, or one—and develop your skills and voice as a writer, both as a writer in general and as a sociologist in particular. After all, in any job you take after you graduate, you will likely be required to write. So I hope you begin to enjoy the process of writing as an undergraduate student—much earlier than I did.

I also hope this manual supports you and provides some added guidance as you develop your own voice in the struggle against silence!

—Heidy Sarabia