



## NO. 55 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

### Writing for Sociology and Anthropology

*Sociology and Anthropology are social sciences. They seek to examine and interpret 1) human behavior and culture, 2) the structure of and relationships among social institutions, and 3) the nature and consequences of inequality. Writing about these complex issues requires clearly expressing the purpose and conclusions of the analysis. It also requires a logical organization. In reference to a sample assignment, here are some tips on the mechanics and formulation of a social science paper.*

#### Sample Assignment

Using our course readings, analyze the different forms of inequality that exist in the U.S. higher education system. Explain how these forms of inequality persist, and who benefits from them.

#### **Organization & Structure**

- A good paper starts with a focused introduction containing a thesis statement and a description of the organization of the rest of the paper.
- The thesis is a clear statement of the major findings/conclusions/arguments of the paper.

#### Sample Thesis Statement

*“Building on studies of the organization of higher education in the U.S., this essay argues that inequality is a pervasive feature, developing from both personal insecurities and professional territorialism.”*

- Try to avoid these common errors:
  - Don’t just restate the paper assignment (e.g. DON’T just write, “This paper will analyze forms of inequality in higher education and identify the mechanisms by which inequality is maintained”). Although the introduction may include some of this, a good thesis goes farther, by making a claim about the information.
  - Don’t give a broad summary of the topic without making a specific point (e.g. DON’T just write, “Higher Education in the U.S. is characterized by a range of inequalities between and among administrators, faculty, and students”). While the introduction may include some brief summary statements, the thesis must have a larger point.
  - The introduction should also outline the rest of the paper, using a statement like the following: *“This paper opens its examination of hierarchy through a review of literature on educational administrators, followed by a discussion of student-student relationships. In the final section, I will address hierarchical relationships between students and teachers.”*
  - The body of the paper develops and elaborates the thesis. Try to divide your argument into several main points/topics/themes. Unlike some disciplines, social sciences commonly use **section headings** (perhaps 3-5) for these themes. Section headings allow a reader to quickly flip through a paper and understand the main issues discussed. Section headings should be in a larger font and are often bold-faced. This sample assignment could have 3 or more sections including: 1) Hierarchy among Administrators, 2) Hierarchy among Students, and 3) Student-Teacher Hierarchy.
  - Good papers contain a conclusion that mirrors the introduction by reviewing the thesis and the supporting information. The conclusion wraps up the paper and explains the significance of the inferences drawn.

(continued on reverse)



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## Writing for Sociology and Anthropology, continued

### Disciplinary Conventions

Here are a few more tips to clarify expectations for social science writing:

- Social scientists do divulge their conclusions in the introduction. This is how we formulate the thesis.
- Social scientists may use the first person (“*In this paper, I demonstrate how educational hierarchy is a function of personal and professional fears.*”)
- Social science citations within the text should have author’s name, date and page number in parentheses. For example, (Johnson 2003:25). Full references will be placed in a bibliography. Alternatively, footnotes with full citations are acceptable. Although you may choose from among several styles, you might try Chicago Manual of Style or the American Psychological Association style. These styles are explained in the St. Martin’s Handbook. The key is to be consistent.
- Using direct quotations from a source is acceptable but should be done sparingly. Generally, you should paraphrase other people’s words unless it is a phrase or a sentence which is so perfect or memorable that you wouldn’t want to change it.
- Most analytical social science papers call for an objective position regarding the material. You should refrain from inserting your own opinions or moral views unless the assignment asks for that approach.
- Although an engaging writing style is always welcome, your priority should be to write clearly and convincingly **in your own words**. Typical social science assignments aren’t a forum for creative writing.

For more information on writing in Anthropology and Sociology, see:

*Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Second Edition (Paperback) 2007 by Howard S. Becker (Author), Pamela Richards (Contributor).

ASA Style Guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. 1997.

American Anthropological Association. [http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style\\_guide.htm](http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style_guide.htm)