FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ) ABOUT WRITING SOCIOLOGY PAPERS

This document is intended as an additional resource for undergraduate students taking sociology courses at UW. It is not intended to replace instructions from your professors and TAs. In all cases follow course-specific assignment instructions, and consult your TA or professor if you have questions.

WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON ERROR THAT STUDENTS MAKE IN THEIR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS?

Although this varies by assignment, instructors frequently complain that students do not read and follow assignment instructions. Many writing assignments are complex, asking students to consider and address a number of points. I recommend that students make themselves a check-list of items the assignment asks them to complete, and frequently consult the list to be sure they have executed each. In many ways, you can read the assignment as a grading rubric--if you fail to do what is asked of you, it is likely that your grade will suffer.

HOW ARE SOCIOLOGY PAPERS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF PAPERS I'VE WRITTEN AT UW?

Most sociology papers ask you to evaluate (critique) arguments. Rarely is it sufficient to simply summarize an argument or describe a phenomenon. Instead, we want you to critically consider the explanatory value and real-world relevance of different theoretical arguments or perspectives. Sociology as a discipline seeks to explain social phenomena, such as social trends or events, institutions, or group properties. Therefore, your papers will generally focus on social rather than individual-level outcomes. Since sociology is aimed at explaining the social world, our assignments tend to emphasize empirical evidence (data on social processes and outcomes) rather than opinion. If you are asked to argue for or against a particular perspective or theory, this generally means your opinion should be grounded in evidence and logic, rather than personal values or beliefs. Assignments vary, so check with your instructor if you are confused.

HOW SHOULD I STRUCTURE MY PAPER?

One way to think about writing an analytical paper is to imagine you are a lawyer making a case. A lawyer begins by making an opening argument in which she makes a clear claim (e.g., "the defendant did not commit the crime") with reference to specific evidence (e.g., "I will show the jury that my client did not have motive, was otherwise occupied during the time the crime was committed, etc."). The lawyer will frequently provide a "roadmap" to her argument, telling the jury how she will prove her case (I will show you this evidence first, then present an alternative argument of the crime, etc.). The body of your paper should be clearly organized and each part should relate to the main argument. A good lawyer presents only that information which helps her make her case. A good writer ties every paragraph into the main argument, and clearly transitions from one point to another. Finally, the conclusion of your paper is akin to a lawyer's closing argument. A lawyer will restate her case and remind the jury of the evidence she brought to bear to support it. Your conclusion should restate your main argument and reference the evidence you used in the body of the paper. The conclusion can also reference broader themes or questions, as long as it does not present new information that is critical to your argument; and it does not contradict your thesis.

SHOULD I START MY PAPER WITH A PROVOCATIVE STORY OR QUOTE?

Starting your paper with a provocative, thought-provoking question, quote, or anecdote can be an effective
strategy when used appropriately. Be sure to ask yourself whether the quote/question/story directly relates to your thesis statement. It should highlight the issue or problem or question you are addressing in your paper. If you fail to connect the quote/question/anecdote to your thesis, it is at best confusing, and at worst, actually detracts from your argument.

I WANT MY PAPER TO BE INTERESTING AND CREATIVE. HOW DO I DO THIS IN SOCIOLOGY?

In analytical, argumentative papers, one way to be creative is to use well thought out, interesting examples, or to provide original critiques of the theories or perspectives you discuss. Remember that creativity is not a substitute for accurate depiction and analysis of the theory, perspective, or social outcome you are addressing.

WHAT CITATION STYLE SHOULD I USE?

If your instructor does not indicate a preference, we often recommend using the ASA (American Sociological Association) style, since that is most familiar to your professors. Here is a link to an abbreviated version of the ASA Style Guide. While the specific style you use may not matter to professors, it is very important that you use a standardized style of citation correctly and consistently. This enables your reader to verify your source materials, and will help you avoid plagiarism.