WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINE

SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENT: INTRODUCTION TO WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINE

The Sociology Department offers two majors:
Sociology and Justice Studies.
(Many students complete both majors.)

The two majors share a common two semester research sequence: Sociology 302 and Sociology 404.

Two additional specific Sociology courses are required for Justice Studies majors. These are: Sociology 207 (Crime and Criminal Justice); and Sociology 309 (Sociology of Delinquency and Crime).

Nine 300-level Sociology courses also meet requirements for Justice Studies majors. These are: Sociology 318, 333, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346.

Below we specify separately for each major the required courses in which students are led to focus on Writing in the Discipline.

SOCIOLOGY MAJOR

Checklist for Writing in the Discipline – Minimum Requirements

Specific course(s) identified: List:

Course(s) are at sophomore level or above: Sociology 300, 302, 404, 460

Written Communication Learning Outcome

One of our program goals is “ability to articulate sociological analyses in oral and written form.” As such, we introduce students to the different styles employed in sociology, concentrating on the scholarly research paper. Examples of scholarly articles are introduced and discussed in the 200 and 300 level courses as well as practice (e.g., writing assignments and papers) so students can learn how to write like a sociologist, including statement of research question and/or hypotheses, presenting a literature review, presenting one’s findings, writing a discussion section and a conclusion. We stress the difference between an opinion essay and a critical research paper. In the 200 level courses we concentrate more on the substantive course topic and introducing students to examples of scholarly work. In the 300 level courses students are expected to produce more formal writing that conform to the style of our field.

Writing instruction is explicitly included in course requirements:

Course(s) required for major:
In Sociology 300, our classical theory course, students undertake a variety of writing assignments to demonstrate their mastery of the major theoretical concepts and their ability to apply them. Assignments include, but are not limited to, analyses of contemporary research and events through the lens of theoretical perspectives; comparing and contrasting the diverse concepts; linking theories to competing sociological paradigms (functionalist, conflict, interactionist), methodological approaches (positivist versus interpretive) and political viewpoints (capitalist versus socialist). For shorter reflection papers (4-
5-page) and longer term papers alike, students are expected to consult our term paper guide so that they employ American Sociological Association formatting and citations.

In Sociology 302, our first research methods course, students are given explicit instruction in the disciplinary requirements for research proposals and literature reviews. Students learn to properly document sources, to synthesize the findings of sources into a coherent literature review, and to describe research methods. They integrate a revised draft of their literature review into a research proposal that they work on throughout the semester. In addition, they complete a variety of informal writing exercises designed to give them practice writing about research methods and research findings.

In Sociology 404, students build on their experience in writing a research proposal as they learn to draft full research papers according to disciplinary standards. Students write two research papers, one drawing on qualitative data and one drawing on large-scale quantitative data. In each, they write abstracts, literature reviews, discussions of their methodology, and discussions of their findings. Students also complete informal writing assignments throughout the semester which require them to pose hypotheses, describe data, and summarize research findings.

In Sociology 460, our capstone course, students design, implement, and report on an original research project. The project is completed in stages, with drafts of each stage reviewed and revisions made in response to instructor feedback. The components comprising the project include a statement of the research problem, a review of the literature (utilizing correct social science referencing style), a description of the project’s theoretical foundation (also correctly referenced), an overview of the methodology, an analysis of the data collected, a discussion of the conclusions (e.g. confirmation or refutation of hypotheses) and limitations of the research, a reference page, and an Appendix with the research instrument utilized. Students also serve as discussants for other students’ projects, writing a critique of the work.

**Statement of the role of writing in the discipline for students**

The above courses are required as part of the major and, as such, we focus on writing in the field of sociology as well as the substantive topic areas. However, as noted above we introduce students to the scholarly literature and writing in our 200 level courses as well. We see these as a good place to introduce the writing conventions in sociology. Students are referred to our Term Paper Guide (see attached) and are required to submit papers using the ASA citation style. Often our 300 level classes use a combination of “low stakes” and “high stakes” writing assignments daily in this class. In sociology 345, for example, students submit journal writing and discussion board comments (“low stakes”), which they are to do daily. They also submit five formal (4-6 pages) papers due every two weeks. These formal writing assignments are theory driven and use a variety of books on victimization. Students are expected to use citations and references to document their work (“High stakes”). The low stakes assignments are often graded pass/fail, while the formal papers are graded on rubrics that increase with more requirements as the semester progresses.

**Desired writing outcomes and Statement about the progressive nature of learning to write in this discipline**

We see these two issues as linked. A desired outcome is for our students is to develop their writing over the course of their studies. Our goal is that their work in sociology 460 reflects their enhanced ability and comfort with writing formal research papers. We hope that the low and high stakes writing they have done in their 200 and 300 level courses will prepare them for their senior project and help them
understand that writing is an iterative process—we get better at writing the more we do it; our writing improves as our reading increases, etc. We stress the fact that few “get it right” the first time; rather, good writing comes from revisions, willingness to be open to constructive criticism, suggestions and feedback.

I should also note that our department discusses the role of writing and the quality of our students writing quite a bit and are committed to improving it. As part of these discussions, we have not ruled out a required writing in the discipline course. The exact nature of that course and mechanics of such a course, however, would require time and further discussions, including the impact on the major. Thus, we intend to reassess this issue and remain open to other ways to meet both our department and the general education goal of strengthening our students’ writing.

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