# Writing Within Sociology:
# A Guide for Undergraduates

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# Acknowledgments

This writing guide is the product of many months of thinking and discussion about the range of skills and techniques that are essential for good writing within sociology. It draws on the expertise of the members of the Department of Sociology at Oregon State University: Rebecca Warner, Chair; Flaxen Conway, Sheila Cordray, Lori Cramer, Mark Edwards, Sally Gallagher, Lloyd Klemke, Charles Langford, Denise Lach, Rich Mitchell, Dwaine Plaza, and Gary Tiedeman.

While each of us has contributed his or her insights and tips for writing, this handbook would not have been possible without the creative imagination and persistent efforts of Mark Edwards and Dwaine Plaza. Not only did Mark and Dwaine originate the idea for this handbook, but also they were gently persuasive and persistent in coordinating the participation and contributions of other faculty (something that others have likened to trying to herd cats). We are all very grateful for their efforts, because they have led to a useful reference for our students. And in doing so, have provided the faculty with a valuable opportunity to think and write about the craft that is central to our profession.

Not only were Professors Edwards and Plaza responsible for originating and coordinating this handbook, but also they were responsible for writing the grant proposal that supported its development. We would like to acknowledge Vicki Collins and the Writing Intensive Curriculum Program for the grant funding which allowed us to "retreat" a number of times for collective brainstorming and planning.

Writing sociologically is a challenge for all of us. It is a skill we practice and refine throughout our careers. Writing about writing sociologically has likewise been a challenge, but one that we hope will provide useful information for undergraduates: how to begin, refine and polish good writing, as well as how to engage in good sociological thinking.

# Chapter One

# Introduction[1]

Good sociological thinking is a continuous challenge for everyone — from students in Introductory Sociology to emeritus professors of sociology. Experience offers us only the confidence that we've done it before, so we are more likely to be able to do it again! One of the most direct paths to the sociological imagination is through writing. Good writing is connected to reading and thinking in magical ways — we know that the more we do of all three, the better we become at each one.

Working at things we have yet to master is what learning is all about. And, like other skills we have mastered, the better you are at doing something, the easier it seems and the more fun it becomes. You can play with ideas and words; find new ways to combine previously noncombinative concepts; and ultimately convince other people that your ideas are worth listening to.

This handbook is designed to help you understand the expectations, guidelines, and standards for writing sociology. Individual teachers may provide additional criteria for their assignments, but basic information about sociology writing tasks are defined in this handbook. It is a compendium of tutorials, extended handouts, clear instructions, helpful hints and other potentially useful tools for you to use in approaching your assignments. It will not create the magic mentioned above, but it will help clear up the details that we all use as excuses to avoid writing: How do I define my problem? How do I find relevant information about my topic? How many citations (and what kind) do I need? What format should I use? What should I include? How do I present my findings?

So, we encourage you to read and notice what makes texts compelling. Then, write some more. In the process of writing (and re-writing) sociology well, you will improve at thinking sociologically. We can't guarantee that you'll become a good sociologist, but we're sure you'll become a better reader, thinker, and writer for whatever future is yours.

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[1]Contributed by Denise Lach. All comments are welcome: dlach@orst.edu.

# Chapter Two

## Writing that Matters[2]

Whatever you write, give these guidelines your first and repeated attentions.

Say what you mean the first time.

"If I'm right, which is no certain matter, then social scientific reports are, on the one hand, similar to other professional texts, but not simply so, requiring different style of writing than technical discourse."

Stop!

Quit meandering. Write to the point. "Social scientific and technical writings differ," is enough.

"If I'm right, which is no certain matter,..." sounds like proper humility to the novice but is merely wordy confusion. So, too, are other qualifications, shadings, counterpoints and embedded contradictions. These are often ways of covering up ideas that are not yet clearly formulated. Ask yourself if you have said explicitly what you intended. Phrases, sentences and paragraphs that repeat what is found above or below, with only minor changes are probably unnecessary. "It now probably goes without saying...," and "As mentioned earlier...," are dead giveaways. Look for complex sentences divided by "but," "however," "nevertheless," "compared with," and "on the one hand." Watch for adjectives and adverbs in excess; unnecessary uses of "merely," "simply," and "obviously," and the pseudo-specifications of quantity, "often," "usually," "sometimes," "slightly" and "frequently."

Omit contradictions, repetitions, modifiers and hedge-words unless they are essential to understanding. Essential. Leave the dialectic to historians and the quibbling to lawyers. Say what you mean the first time.

The first time is not the first draft.

Crisp, lucid writing takes time, effort and three other things -- revision, revision, and revision. This note was redone several times. It could be improved by more. So can most texts. The object of writing is to communicate ideas, not fill pages. I once studied cinematography. In the movie industry, shooting from script, in a studio, 90% of film exposed is discarded. Written

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[2]Contributed by Richard Mitchell, Jr.. Comments are welcome: rmitchell@orst.edu.

drafts deserve the same ruthless scrutiny, or more. First drafts (and second, third and fourth drafts) often contain kernels, nuggets, catchy phrases and nascent metaphors. They may even contain a line or two usable in the finished form. But remember that social life is a conversation of gestures not a monologue. Listen to those first drafts but don't believe everything they say. Talk back to them. They are not the final word on your topic, only opening comments. You will have more to say in fewer words as you progress.

Books are on hand to help in this process. Donald Murray's Craft of Revision, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanich, 1991, is colleague's favorite. She also recommends Bird by Bird, by Anne Lamont, Anchor Books, 1994. My preference is for David Carroll's, A Manual of Writer's Tricks, and Gary Provost's Make Every Word Count is a best seller. Carroll is accessible one-stop-shopping for writing advice in a single volume. Once the pruning has taken place the tree can produce fruit not foliage.

Once upon a time...

Social life is not a pile of facts and assertions. It is a web of stories. Don't just report your topics. Narrate them. Narration in professional texts takes the form of logical arguments and anecdotes, gedanken experiments and empirical instances, illustrative metaphors and hypothesis testing. All are stories with characters, plot, and hopefully punch lines and drama. Whatever your topic, show, don't just tell. Parched, groundless discussions of "theory," especially other people's theory, or tiresome listing of "findings" without direction or connection, reduce the vitality of social action to a standstill. Bring your principles and processes into the lives of real people and concrete circumstances. Build your theoretical argument from there.

Genesis

First impressions are crucial. Introductory paragraphs and sentences deserve the most work and your best efforts. In the beginning is no place to warm up. Write to your highest standard and showcase your work's most intriguing aspects out front.

Unless you have a compelling reason not to, start with a story, full of interpretive possibilities. Show us data that don't fit, events that contradict everyday assumptions, settings new to the reader that can be unveiled as you work through your project.

# Chapter Three

## Tips on Writing Theory and Content Papers[3]

Two of the types of writing you will be asked to do as a sociology major or minor are "theory papers" and "content" papers. Let's begin by distinguishing between the two-- although you may be asked to write papers that combine the two fairly frequently. A theory paper is one where you are asked to write about or to use some sociological idea or concept to explain or understand some aspect of the social world. In a content paper you would be asked to focus on some particular aspect of the social world. You are probably most familiar with content papers under the label of "library research" papers. For these, you do not necessarily collect data yourself, but you do use information collected by other people interested in the topic.

In a content paper, you might write about topics or "content areas" such as the family, the political institution, deviance, or natural resources. The focus is on the topic -- American family, or the Democratic party, or youth gangs, or sustainable forestry. In content papers you need to demonstrate your understanding of the topic. You will want to find out as much as you can about the topic area. This might mean collecting data from the census or other surveys, reviewing the literature to find articles from both scholarly and popular journals, and, possibly, some research of your own (e.g., interviewing gang members, visiting an industrial forest). You will be expected to describe the topic in sociological terms using concepts such as norms, values, roles, institutions, class, power, or deviance. Content papers are often assigned using terms like the following:

> Describe the current eating habits of the American family.
>
> Review the changes in the American political institution that have made the Democratic Party the minority party.
>
> Compare and contrast delinquent gangs and Greek organizations.
>
> Show the effects of the Endangered Species Act on the timber industry in Oregon.

In a theory paper, the focus is on the sociological ideas that you use to understand what's going on in the social situations rather than on the topic itself. For example, you might use Weber's concept of rationalization to understand the changing American family; Mills' sociological imagination to account for Democratic politics; Durkheim's ideas about social

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[3] Contributed by Sheila Cordray. Comments are welcome: scordray@orst.edu.

solidarity to understand delinquent gangs; and Marx's work on commodities to look at what is going on in industrial forestry. In each one of these cases, the focus is on the theoretical concept or idea and how to use it as an explanatory tool. The topic is often taken for granted or is a given. You do not need to collect more information about it. You just need to answer the question posed from a theoretical perspective. Assignments would pose questions such as:

> Explain why pizza is America's most popular food using Weber's concept of rationalization.
>
> How does the sociological imagination help us understand why there are more Republicans in the Congress than Democrats?
>
> Why do people join social organizations such as gangs or fraternities? Use Durkheim's concept of solidarity to answer.
>
> Use Marx's ideas about commodities to explain why it is difficult to do sustainable forestry in a capitalist system.

As an example, if you were asked to use the concept of rationalization to understand pizza consumption in the United States, you would not spend a lot of time collecting statistics on pizza consumption, the history of pizza, or the best places to get pizza. Rather, you would spend your time reading and thinking about rationalization and how the components of this concept (calculability, efficiency, predictability, and dehumanization) help you to understand why people in the United States eat a lot of pizza.

Clearly you could do both tasks in a single paper. You could describe a given social situation or problem from a sociological perspective and then use a theoretical concept or idea to understand or explain what is going on. Let's keep them separate for now, as you will frequently be asked to do one or the other. However, understanding the difference between the two tasks should help you write a combination paper as well.

Here's a summary of the differences between the two types of papers with some tips on how to proceed with your writing.

| **Elements** | **Content Papers** | **Theoretical Papers** |
|---|---|---|
| **The focus of your paper** | Focus on a social situation, problem, or topic. | Focus on the use of a theoretical concept or idea. |
| **How you start your research** | Identify sources of information: books, articles, websites | Read about theoretical concepts and ideas in assigned reading or other sources |

| Elements | Content Papers | Theoretical Papers |
|---|---|---|
| **The process of writing** | Examine all the information you have collected about the topic; select a congenial and logical method of organizing the information; identify your organizing ideas (norms, values, roles, institutions, etc.) and any supporting ideas; proceed to answer the questions posed in the assignment (adapted from Packer & Timpane, 1989:43). | Begin with a brief discussion of the question so that the reader is familiar with the situation you are explaining; identify the concepts or ideas you will use to answer the question; define all concepts and explain all ideas; use the concepts and ideas to answer the question posed in the assignment. |
| **The process of revision** | Make sure you have used information from a variety of sources and covered the issues posed by the question; identify the sociological ideas you have used to structure your paper; check to see that all sources are appropriately cited and that your bibliography is complete; use an outline of topic sentences from each paragraph to check organizational structure; and read carefully to detect any claims about the situation not supported by the data you have collected. | Use clear and specific conceptual definitions-- ideas should be clearly explained with reference to texts or lectures; identify premises and make sure all assertions are supported; check the structure of the paper by making an outline of topic sentences; and review the logic of your argument to make sure that you have answered the question posed. |

## References

Packer, N. and J. Timpane. 1986. Writing worth reading. New York: St. Martin's.

# Chapter Four

# Overview for Writing a Quantitative Research Paper[4]

Imagine that you are a lawyer in court and you need to demonstrate that an employer has been systematically discriminating against older-than-average applicants for jobs. You have a box of applications from potential employees who have applied for jobs during the past year. Your also have lists of who was hired, and you have 100 completed questionnaires filled out by managers who were involved in hiring for the company. You have noticed that the older applicants were almost never hired, but the younger ones were. Now the older applicants have retained you to challenge the employer in court over this topic. Having accepted the case, you now have to figure out how to communicate to the 12 jurors who know little about the problem (age discrimination in hiring and the law dealing with this topic) that there is good evidence (the box of applications, the lists of people hired and the survey of managers) that unfair hiring practices have been used by the employer. Your lawer-ly task of convincing a jury to reach a certain verdict is very similar to the task you face when you are writing an academic research paper. How do you construct a case that will convince the jury? The answer to this question is analogous to how you develop a convincing argument and make a case within an academic research paper. Let's follow the analogy through from beginning to end.

## The Introduction

When you write a quantitative research paper, you are not just writing for the judge (the teacher). You are writing for an imagined, or real, audience of peers or a public that knows less about the subject than you do. This puts upon you the task of clearly introducing and explaining the issue before proceeding with the evidence. If you were in court, you would not assume that the jury understands the details of the law or the subtle dynamics of employment discrimination. You would introduce to them the fact that such a phenomenon exists, that there are rules that employers are supposed to follow, and that there is now disagreement between the employer and the un-hired applicants regarding whether or not mistreatment occurred in this instance. You would also make it clear from the start that you intend to convince them that the un-hired applicants are right and that the employers are wrong.

Similarly, you begin an academic research paper with an introduction. The introduction

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[4] Contributed by Mark Edwards. Your comments are welcome: medwards@orst.edu.

alerts the reader to the fact that there is an important phenomenon worthy of our attention and that there is some kind of sociological question surrounding that phenomenon. The question may be theoretical (e.g., Why does this occur as it does?) or empirical (e.g., Does such a thing actually exist?) or practical (e.g., Why does such a thing matter to society?). In addition to alerting the reader to the existence and importance of the topic of your paper, you also alert the reader to the nature of your conclusion. For example, "Contrary to existing research, I find that peer relations have more influence on high schoolers' smoking behavior than does the disapproval of their parents."

If the reader had to set down your paper at the end of the introduction, she should be able to complete these sentences:

> This paper is about: _____
>
> The author thinks it's important because: _____
>
> The author will conclude that: _____

This does not steal your thunder because you still have the challenging task of making your case, showing how the evidence leads to a particular conclusion, and showing how the other explanations are not as persuasive as your explanation.

## The Literature Review

Let's return to our courtroom analogy. After introducing to the jury your intentions and your goals for this case, you then have a chance to explain to the jury what they need to know about hiring practices, the law, and about different ways of understanding this issue. For example, you might want them to know that the law is very specific about age discrimination and that earlier jury cases just like this one have found that employers must be held accountable if they fail to hire someone just because of their age. You may want to alert the jury to their own biases, pointing out that they might tend to feel sympathy for the employer because some of them think that employers should be able to hire whoever they want or that the law has no place in telling employers what to do. You might also think they need to know that this employer is very powerful and wealthy and that it would not have been a major hardship for them to have accommodated some of the elderly applicants who applied for jobs. In other words, as the attorney for the un-hired applicants, your job is to inform the jury, review for them the important issues, help them understand what is really the question, and prepare them to carefully judge for themselves.

The literature review of a research paper seeks to accomplish these same tasks. You must have in mind that most of your readers know little or nothing about your topic, and thus you have to review for them the basic features of what is already known and established about this topic. At the same time, some very informed readers (your teacher and your fellow student writers!) will be able to check on your accuracy and your honest portrayal of the current state of knowledge. For a further discussion of how to write a good literature review, you should examine the other chapters in this handbook focused on literature reviews. Remember: the

literature review is not a review of all of the literature. It is a selective but fair treatment of the state of current knowledge about a topic, designed to point out what is known and what remains to be discovered about a particular social phenomena.

## The Methods Section

If you had a box full of applications from the past year, and 50% of them were from older-than-average applicants, but only 2% of the new hires were older-than-average, you could point to the disparity in these percentages as circumstantial evidence that discrimination occurred. But before you could present these findings, you would need to introduce to the jury the fact that you have some data that bears upon this issue. Before showing them the 50% versus 2% gap, you would need to tell the jury about your data. For example, where did you get these records? How reliable are they? Are there missing records that we do not know about? Were these records obtained legally? You also might have to explain how you computed your percentages if you have jurors who do not understand your math.

Similarly, in a research paper you need to tell your readers about your data, about how you gathered it, and sometimes, how you analyzed it. Some of the things that may need to be addressed are:

- What is the source of the data? That is, did you collect it? Was it collected by the Census Bureau, a private government think tank, other academics, etc.?
- What is the nature of the data? Is it derived from telephone surveys, coding of government documents, door-to-door interviews, etc.?
- How valid is this data set for addressing the topic? Does the data actually represent measures of the things you are writing about? Does the data represent the real phenomena occurring "out there" in society (i.e. representativeness of the data.)?
- How reliable is this data in terms of measurement error?
- How are you measuring the variables that are in your study? For example, is "age" measured by "years of age," or as "over 49/under 50"?

To summarize: There are three main issues to cover in the methods section: sample, measures and strategy for analysis. You want to familiarize the reader with "whom," "what," and "how": whom are you including in your study (so that the reader can make a judgement about how much to generalize); what data and information have you received from your sample; and how will you handle these data? These questions must be answered, but the whole time you discuss these issues, you should keep in mind what your hypotheses or research questions are.

## Findings (or Results)

Again, let us return to the courtroom. At some point you introduce to the jury the critical pieces of evidence that demonstrate that the employer engaged in age discrimination. For

example, you might show them a pie chart that shows 50% of the applications were from people over 49 years old and then show a second pie chart that shows that 2% of the new hires were over 49 years old. Then you might introduce to them a table showing that 75% of the managers indicated that they believed that older people would be more difficult to work with than younger ones. In other words, you show the results of your analysis that will convince the jury of your claim.

In academic writing, you also will highlight the critical findings of your analysis to point out that the conclusions you will draw are the most reasonable. However, in contrast to a legal case where you will hope that any conflicting information is suppressed or over-looked, academic ethics require that you present the whole story, or at least as much as you can. This means that when you complete your analysis, you also report unanticipated or contradictory findings. Then do the best that you can to make sense of these as well. Thus you should seek to strike a tone of confident assertion, while at the same time acknowledging the parts of your analysis that do not support your claim or that might support alternative claims. See the section below, titled "Writing About Quantitative Data," for more help.

The results section of your paper will generally be the place where tables and graphs are located, deriving principally from your analysis. Tables and graphs from other researchers' work tends to appear in the literature review section, if at all.

## Conclusions (or Discussion)

In a trial case, the closing argument is the place where you put together the pieces and review for people what it is that you have presented to them. You remind them of the legal questions involved, highlight the most critical evidence, point out why you have demonstrated the alternative claim to be false, and suggest to them that they should now decide to agree with you about the guilt of the employer.

Similarly, the conclusion of a paper is the place where you quickly summarize what you have accomplished in the paper, highlighting the major theoretical question (or questions), reminding the reader of the central findings that help answer the question, and pointing out how your explanation is superior to alternatives. You may also need to make sense of weak or insignificant results, to suggest potential research that should follow your research, and perhaps some of the policy implications of your findings. You need not accomplish all of these things, but at least the restatement and theoretical import of our research must be made clear here. Your conclusion should be concise, but also complete enough that if someone only read your conclusion, they would know what question you tried to answer, what main findings you provide to answer the question, and what you think your answer ultimately means.

For some papers, the discussion and the conclusion section are the same thing. That is, the material does not lend itself to first a discussion of the relevant theoretical issues raised or the surprising findings AND a more lofty and repetitive section which tells us why this research was so important. But for other papers, there really is something different to be said first about interpreting the results (the discussion section) and then making sense of them in more global or expansive terms (the conclusion section). How you choose to construct the paper after the reporting of findings is a judgment call on your part, as the author, and on the part of your editor

(or instructor).

## Citations (or References or Bibliography)

Lawyers always need to be ready to cite where they have found legal precedent for the claims they make. When you argue that the employer is guilty you may need to say to the judge or the jury that in Jones v. Smith, Inc., the judge allowed evidence just like you are providing and the jury found it convincing enough to convict Smith, Inc..

In the same fashion, academic writing requires that you indicate where you see in the literature the theoretical or empirical claims that you are evaluating. This section is not just a legally or ethically required component of a paper, but is essential for convincing the reader that you have some idea of where your paper fits into the conversation that is going on among academics in "the literature." A thorough reference section also allows your readers to go investigate further to see if your paper really does accurately report what other authors have said. Unlike "unnamed sources" in newspapers, academic writers usually must divulge from where they obtained their material. You can learn more about citations and reference section in the chapter devoted to this topic.

# 4.1 Writing Quantitative Research Papers: The Introduction[5]

The introduction to an academic paper is the place where you try to hook the reader with an answer to the question: "Why should I care?" This is also the place where you identify the main issue that you will address in your paper. Introductions are challenging to do well because you must strike the balance of pushing your topic enough to convince the reader that this is really worth reading, while also avoiding over-stating your case.

A common rookie mistake in writing introductions to academic papers is to try to persuade the reader of the importance of the paper by appealing solely to moral arguments--excessively relying on the "heart-tug" element of the issue. Often the drama or tragedy of the issue is overstated. For example, consider this introduction to a paper about mothers and fathers and new children and work:

> "Nearly 60% of mothers of preschoolers are in the labor force. Therefore, millions of families across the country struggle every day with the conflict of work and family, and agonize over whether to let other people raise their kids or stay home and perhaps damage their own careers. Why do they do it?"

Any or all of these claims may be true, but there are lots of loaded, and likely overstated, claims that threaten the author's credibility. Indeed, the "60%"statistic is correct, but whether or not this translates into millions of people struggling with a conflict remains to be determined, and it may be over-dramatizing the issue to say that people are agonizing over letting others raise their kids. Even if it is true, this style of writing comes across as a either preachy or "tabloid-esque." Finally, while a rhetorical question can be useful in some cases, here it strikes a tone of critical incredulity, as if the author were saying, "Holy cow! What were they thinking?"

The writer could still communicate the same issues in a more even-handed way that would invite readers who agree or disagree to continue reading further. For example, try this as a possible improvement:

> "Nearly 60% of mothers of preschoolers are in the labor force. While many families appear to be juggling the work/family conflict adequately, others claim to feel guilty about leaving their kids in the care of other adults and perhaps missing out on important events in the young child's life. Meanwhile, the potential set-backs in their careers make it difficult for young parents to consider taking time out of the labor force."

This revision is not perfect but it avoids some of the inflammatory speculation about "agonizing" and avoids making it sound like the author is accusing people of letting others raise their kids.

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[5] Contributed by Mark Edwards. Comments are welcome: medwards@orst.edu

Even if that's what the author thinks, she or he would need to think carefully about the audience, and ask whether the tone being struck will find the desired hearing.

There may be times when the nature of your writing should provoke response. But make sure that you are choosing this for some other effect than to just get people to read further. If you alienate your readers in the first paragraphs, they may not read further. They may just toss the paper (or be put in a foul mood when grading it.) So, beware of excessively provocative language and tone, and watch out for overstatement that might damage your credibility.

Let's add to this revision with some material about what the paper will do:

> "Nearly 60% of mothers of preschoolers are in the labor force. While many families appear to be juggling the work/family conflict adequately, others claim to feel guilty about leaving their kids in the care of other adults and perhaps missing out on important events in the young child's life. Meanwhile, the potential set-backs in their careers make it difficult for young parents to consider taking time out of the labor force.
>
> "This paper identifies the characteristics of young mothers and fathers which are associated with full- and part-time employment while the first child is still an infant. Unlike earlier studies that rely on cross-sectional data, this analysis follows the early life histories of young families to locate not only how demographic characteristics, but also the timing and order of events influence the likelihood of new mothers and fathers returning quickly to paid work."

Notice that this revision introduces the topic, sets some of the context for why we would care, and then goes on to briefly state what the analysis is about. However, this section needs to be further elaborated, including material about other interested parties (employers) and about other cases (the previous literature). Consider the next revision. The goal has been to show that the topic is important, interesting, and newsworthy, but without asserting these things in a heavy-handed way.

> "Nearly 60% of mothers of preschoolers are in the labor force. Over 90% of fathers of preschoolers are in the labor force. While many families appear to be juggling the work/family conflict adequately, others claim to feel guilty about leaving their kids in the care of other adults and perhaps missing out on important events in the young child's life. Meanwhile, the potential set-backs in their careers make it difficult for young parents to consider taking time out of the labor force. Employers are also concerned about this issue as the state continues to pass and consider new laws providing family leave and as they seek to retain skilled workers.
>
> "Most previous research has emphasized the human capital arguments for new mothers' rapid return to work. However, little effort has been made at understanding how the order of events such as parent's educational attainment, cohabitation, marriage, first job, promotions, and the like are related to the decision of mothers to remain in the labor force. And no research has explored how these characteristics influence the likelihood of new fathers to take time off to be with their new children.
>
> "This paper identifies the characteristics of families and young mothers and fathers which are associated with full- and part-time employment while the first child is still an infant. Unlike earlier studies that rely on cross-sectional data, this analysis follows the early life histories of young families to locate not only how demographic characteristics but also the timing and order of events influences the likelihood of a new mother or father returning quickly to paid work."

The second paragraph has briefly stated how this paper is an improvement on previous work. Your paper may be an improvement, or a replication of previous work – either is fine.

Just specify what you think. The last paragraph also emphasizes how this paper is an improvement and lets the reader know what to expect in the methodology. It also makes clear what the research question really is, namely: "What are the correlates of full- and part-time work for new fathers and new mothers, and how does the order of prior events influence the likelihood of that work?"

To summarize: a good introduction accomplishes the task of introducing the topic and engaging the reader to believe that this is worth learning about, without appealing to over-dramatized importance of the project. And it points out why this research is worth doing and makes it clear that you did not do it just because "it was there." Try reading the introductions to several research journal articles to see how they do it. You will find different strategies, and indeed wide variety in quality of introductions. The introduction is one of the hardest parts of the paper to do well.

Finally, write the introduction of your paper after the paper is done. Papers shift directions as they are being produced, and too much time is often wasted writing the perfect introduction for a paper that never actually turns out to be what was introduced. It is not uncommon to find manuscripts where the introduction and the paper itself do not really match for this very reason.

# 4.2 Writing Quantitative Research Papers: The Literature Review[6]

Writing a literature review seems to be a bit more difficult than first imagined by students. Part of this may be due to the writing experience that students bring with them to the project. What types of papers have you written before? Book reviews? Essays? Critiques? Have you ever tried to synthesize the literature (both theoretical and empirical) regarding some subject before?

Basic tools for writing are the same (such as style), but the goal of a literature review in a research paper is somewhat different from other types of writing. The goal is to bring together what is "known" to sociologists about your research topic in a way that sets up the "need" for your specific research. You will be looking for unanswered questions, or gaps in the knowledge. You might want to test established ideas on new populations or test a theory using variables measured in different ways. But you need to always keep in mind the following question: "How will my research take our understanding a step further?"

There are two basic parts to doing a literature review. One is to collect information on your topic. The other is writing the literature review. You've probably been to the library and looked up sociology journals by now. You've most likely had several courses in general sociology and in specialized courses. Maybe you've even had a course in theory. So you have access to a wealth of information. But how do you go through it and make sense of it "on the whole?" And how do you do this keeping in mind that the end of this review will convince the reader that your research is going to add something new? Below are a set of questions that may help you synthesize the information in a way that will help you write the literature review. These questions are only a guide–some suggestions of issues to keep in mind as you read the texts you've accumulated. You will not need to address ALL of these questions in your literature review.

## A. What is your dependent variable or topic of interest?

How has it been conceptualized and how has it been studied? Some research is done to test theoretically informed hypotheses, while other research is designed to explore relationships. Either way, most research has some basic questions about why something varies: Why do some adolescents use drugs while others do not? Why do some couples get divorced and others do not? What determines the number of children women have? Why do some people earn higher salaries than others? What leads to success in college? The dependent variables in the examples above are (in order): adolescent drug use; divorce; fertility; earnings; and academic success.

The first thing you should consider is what is the current status of the dependent variable? How many adolescents are reported to have used drugs? Have these rates increased lately?

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[6] Contributed by Rebecca Warner. Comments are welcome: rwarner@orst.edu

What is the current divorce rate? Has it changed? Are rates variable across regions of the country? If variations exist, this might provide a case for your research. The first part of your literature review, then, could be a discussion of your dependent variable or topic of interest in terms of its incidence in our society.

The section that discusses the use of the library can give you assistance on where to go to gather information like that discussed above (census, news reports, intro text books, research reports, etc.).

## B. What are the theories used to explain the dependent variable?

This is sometimes the most difficult part for undergraduates, but of course it is the most important question. Most of you have had a course or two that introduced you to the dominant paradigms in the discipline. But you may not have applied them to your specific research question. In this case, you will have to do some searching. You may find that some theories are discussed in the empirical literature, but not always. So you might want to check out the books used in related classes in sociology. For example, if your research paper is on adolescent drug use you could check out the books assigned for the deviance or juvenile delinquency courses. If you are studying divorce, look through the texts assigned for the department's family course(s). Or, you might think about making an appointment with your advisor or a faculty member in the area of your research to ask for help.

## C. What populations have been studied?

When reading through the literature, it is very important to make a note of just who was studied. If you are studying adolescents you'll want to make sure that you try to locate theories and research on appropriate age groups. This doesn't mean that research on adults (or any population that is different than the one you study) is not useful, but you do need to think about how relationships differ across groups of people.

Varying populations is one of the most common reasons for doing additional research on a topic. If sociologists have been studying primarily urban populations, you might want to see if relationships are similar in more rural settings. You might want to see if theories developed on adult populations work for teens. But remember, you really need to think sociologically about this. Why might you expect relationships to vary across regions or age groups?

## D. How have variables been measured?

Another reason for doing research is that you have a new way of looking at your variable(s) of interest. Previous research may focus on attitudes about something (say divorce), and you want to look at a related behavior (whether or not couples actually divorce). Another example comes from research on drug use. Let's say you want to understand why adolescents drink alcohol. There are many ways you can operationalize alcohol use. One way is to know whether or not adolescents have "ever tried" alcohol. Another is "how many times" in the past week or month or year someone has consumed alcohol. Still another way to explore alcohol use is to know "how many drinks are consumed on one occasion?" You must first decide specifically what you want to research (maybe you did this in answering question number one), and then be attentive to how the concept has been measured in previous research.

This will also be true for your independent variables. Let's say you want to see how the division of household labor affects the level of satisfaction that a person has with her/his partner. You will find research that measures the division of household labor by asking: "Who does more–you or your partner?" Other research elicits direct time estimates of domestic activity (how many hours per week spent in cleaning, for example). The first measure will allow a general test of the hypothesis: A person is happier when tasks are shared. The direct time estimates will allow for a couple of assessments. One is the issue of just how much time someone spends doing housework. The more time spent, the more unhappy. But combining estimates of both partners time allows for a more specific test of the first hypothesis: The greater the inequity, the more unhappy a person is. A 60-40 split may not make a difference for some, but an 80-20 split in responsibility seems more unfair.

Pay attention to how authors have explained these variations. The point is that how variables are measured can lead to the testing of very different hypotheses. You'll want to be aware of variation in measurement in the literature you read.

### E Have things changed over time?

You may already have addressed this question somewhat in answering number one above. You may notice that adolescent alcohol use has actually declined, while use of other drugs has increased. This would lead you to doing additional research to understand and explain why these declines in use have occurred.

### F. Could relationships found in previous research be spurious, or vary depending on another (control) variable?

You may recall from discussions of causality in social science that we try to do three things: show a correlation between the independent and dependent variables, establish a time ordering to make sure the independent variable occurs first in time, and control for variables suspected of explaining away our observed correlations. This last condition is very important and is also referred to as a lack of spuriousness. Here is an example. Let's say you want to explain problem behavior in children (acting out, getting in trouble at school). You decide to test whether or not children who live in divorced households are more likely to exhibit problematic behavior than those who live in households that have not experienced divorce. You will probably find that the first two conditions for establishing causality are met. That is, there is a correlation between household structure and problem behavior, and the independent variable (whether a child experienced the divorce of their parents or not) occurred before the problematic behavior. This might lead you to conclude that "divorce causes child behavioral problems." However, sociologists studying this very issue have found that there are factors that would explain both the divorce as well as the problematic behavior in children. One such factor is the relationship between the parents. When parents have a poor relationship, it can lead to divorce as well as cause children to act out in various ways. So in this case, the divorce is not the casual factor -- it is the poor relationship between the parents.

In your literature review, you may want to think about how theories you are familiar with would point you to control for certain variables (gender, social class, ethnicity, education). This will help you to work toward a clearer hypothesis, and a better study because you know what

variables to include.

### G. What's new in your research?

As you read through the literature and think about the questions above, you will start to notice differences between what you intended to do and what has been done. Some of those differences may actually lead you to change your plans. But other differences are what make your research unique or different. They may be small, such as doing your research on a local community instead of a regional one. Or you may be operationalizing some of your variables differently. But small or large, these variations make additions to the literature. The most challenging part will be when you try to theorize what difference it makes.

## An Example of an Outline for a Literature Review

You now have a lot of ideas about what is known on your topic and how your particular research fits in. What's next? There is no set standard for writing up your literature review. Everyone has their own way of getting from point to point. So what follows is one suggested outline. It assumes that you've thought about all seven questions above. See how it works and think about how to make transitions between sections. You will need to find what's most comfortable for you.

I. Description of the dependent variable. What is the incidence of it and what has been the major concern by sociologists in studying it. Why are you interested in studying it?

II. Description of the main sociological theories that address the topic.
   - A. Summary of research done using one theory. This could also be a summary of research finding that X is related to Y. Be sure to group articles together by writing points. If several articles have found that X affects Y, just make the substantive point once and cite all articles.
   - B. Critiques of that theory, or set of relationships, with a discussion of research that differs.
   - C. Summary of research done using another theory or set of variables.
   - D. Critiques of that approach.

III. Summary of what is known and the "problem" with it.

IV. What your research will do to expand our knowledge or fill a gap in the literature.

# 4.3 Writing Quantitative Research Papers: The Methods Section[7]

At the beginning of chapter 4, we suggested that your methods section should address the sample, the measures, and the strategy for analysis. Let's consider each of these issues in turn.

## Sample

Sociologists do not often have access to the entire population of interest. Instead, we only have the time and opportunity to gather data from a subset of that sample. So, in the methods section, we try to tell the reader how you decided to select that subsection of the population. Did you do it in a way that would make it a probability sample (systematic, random, or stratified sampling)? Or did you engage in a nonprobability approach (convenience, snowball, or purposive)? Given the type of sampling used, to whom will you be able to generalize your results?

What is most important is whether the sample used is appropriate for your research. Very often you will be using data collected by someone else. When this is the case, provide the reader with the name of the data set and how the sample was drawn. You may want to explain why this data set was most appropriate for answering the question that you are posing. That is, how does this data help you meet your research goals? For example:

> "The Current Population Survey March files are especially useful for answering this question because the large sample sizes allow us to compare occupational sub-groups."

> "The National Longitudinal Study of Youth provides the necessary information covering each woman's early adult years through the 1980s. The detailed monthly welfare information allows us to construct more precise measures of welfare spells than other available data sets."

In addition, you may have drawn your own subsample from the secondary data. You may be studying "women and men between the ages of 24-50" or "adolescents between the age of 12-17." If you are taking a subsample, be sure to articulate "why" you are selecting this subsample. How does it relate to your research questions? For example:

> "Because we are interested in the kinds of occupations they hold, I limit my focus to mothers, ages 18 to 44, who were employed at the time of the interview. While adolescent mothers and older (45+) mothers are of general interest, I limit the age range to see if my population estimates replicate published Census Bureau findings for this age group."

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[7] Contributed by Rebecca Warner and Mark Edwards. Comments are welcome: rwarner@orst.edu or medwards@orst.edu

"Self-employed men are eliminated from this sample since the focus here is upon men employed by private versus public employers."

Do not defend your data or sample by saying things like:

"The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) was used because it has many variables that might be of interest, and because it is commonly accepted by social scientists as a trustworthy source of information."

"I focused attention on Hispanic men because the data does not include enough Asian men for me to directly answer the questions about education and social mobility."

Indeed, the comments about the PSID data are true: There are lots of variables, and the data set is widely accepted, but these are not good reasons for using it. The reasons must derive from the research you are doing, focusing on why this data is good for answering your question. Meanwhile, you do well to avoid pointing out your good intentions ("I really wanted to study Asian men"), and instead make it clear that the group you are studying is theoretically and substantively defensible as a group to study. If, in this case, it became clear that only Hispanic men would be available in the data, the whole paper should take this into account from the very beginning (and you ought not bring it up here as an after-thought or excuse or complaint about what might have been.)

## Measures

If you are using survey data, this section should include the questions asked of your sample, along with how their responses were categorized. For example, you are interested in how much education respondents have. So you use the question "what is the highest level of education you have received." Then you should say how the responses were organized. For example, you could collapse categories so that responses were: (1)less than high school, (2)high school diploma, (3) some college, (4) college degree, (5) some graduate school, and (6) graduate level degree. And again, think about why you have collapsed categories this way. You could have recoded education as "less than college degree" versus "college degree." Recoding categories depends on a number of things. One is sample variability (whether the data are skewed); another is theoretical relevance (income does not respond linearly to years of schooling but to degrees received); and another may be for statistical procedure requirements (logistic regression versus ordinary least squares regression).

Here are some examples:

" Because of our effort to identify middle-class respondents by their educational attainment, I collapsed those with less than a bachelors degree into one category and all respondents with at least a bachelor's degree into the second category. College completion is widely accepted as an indicator of middle-class identity."

" Because there are so few people with graduate degrees among the blue-collar occupational groups, I combine graduate degree recipients with all other college graduates."

The ordering of your variables should follow the ordering in your literature review. Did you start with a discussion of the dependent variable? Then present your measure for this variable first.

## Strategy for Analysis

This part of the methods section explains how your data will be analyzed. Will you be doing a difference of means test? Chi-square? Regression? You need not explain your statistic at length unless it is particularly unique or unfamiliar. In general, assume the reader is a social scientist and knows that chi-square is a test of independence and the rules for rejecting or not rejecting the null hypothesis.

If your study will instead focus on how recoding a variables results in different findings, you will want to explain that you will run the analysis using the one coding, and then run it using the other. If you are controlling for a variable to see if there is an effect on the initially observed relationship, then you can briefly outline that process. For example:

> "I first establish the relationship between education and occupation, and then control for the "ambition" variable described above to see if the relationship diminishes as predicted.

This part of the methods section is not as long as the other two, in part because you will have implied this method by a well-written literature review.

Incidentally, you do not need to tell the reader whether you used SAS or SPSS or some other package, unless the statistical package is unique and handles the data in a special way. For the new social science researcher, such as yourself, there is a strong temptation to want to highlight the recent success of having mastered the computer software. However, the seasoned social scientist reading your paper will assume that you used appropriate computer software conduct the analysis and will not be impressed by your drawing attention to your recent computer achievements.

# 4.4 Writing Quantitative Research Papers: Presenting Quantitative Results[8]

If you have ever been on a guided tour of a museum, a theater, or some other tourist attraction, you know that the guide can make or break your experience. The excessively detail-oriented guide will put you to sleep, the ill-equipped comic guide will anger or embarrass you, and the overly casual guide will leave you puzzled and frustrated. But a guide that manages to walk you through the attraction, highlighting the most important and interesting features, and weaving a coherent story that links together the parts of the attraction, is the guide that will give you the best possible tour. In the same way, the results section of your research paper is the attraction that readers have come to see. Your task as guide is to walk them through your analysis in a coherent, deft, and efficient manner. This chapter will alert you to some of the issues involved in achieving this level of sophistication in writing about quantitative data.

## The Goal

After you have spent many hours constructing and analyzing a data set, you want to forcefully communicate to your readers that which the data reveal as the result of your analysis. Notice that this goal follows from the goals of your literature review (to establish what needs to be studied and why it is important) and the goals of your data and methods section (to describe the data set and how it was constructed). Meanwhile, communicating what the analyzed data reveal sets you up for the goal of your discussion and conclusion sections (to sum up the big theoretical points raised and resolved by your analysis).

Writing about quantitative results is unlike the writing that we are usually trained to do in school. As opposed to writing an essay with thesis statements and supporting points, you here find yourself alerting the reader to things which you now consider to be obvious, and which you have sought to make obvious in your tables and figures. Yet you now must point these things out to the readers. Additionally, you must allow for readers to verify your claims while at the same time not beating them over the head with endless details that they could get themselves just by reading your tables and figures. So, there is a delicate balancing of your efforts to point out the important points while at the same time respecting your readers' ability to consider the facts for themselves. This is difficult to do well.

## An Extended Example: Redundancy and Voice

Let's follow an example derived from research on the men's incomes in 1996. In Table 1 below,

[8] Contributed by Mark Edwards. Comments are welcome: medwards@orst.edu

we find the descriptive statistics for incomes of older and younger men. The author wants to comment on the difference between the two groups of men.

Table 1: Income for American Men (1996)

| | N | Mean | Median | 25th Percentile | 75th Percentile |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Young Men (18-40) | | | | | |
| Income | 10767 | 36,531 | 30,000 | 19,700 | 43,000 |
| Older Men (41-65) | | | | | |
| Income | 10887 | 48,082 | 37,000 | 24,000 | 55,000 |

Here is the author's first draft describing the data:

> "My analysis shows that the mean earnings for the younger men is $36,531, and for older men it is $48,082. This is a difference of $11,551. There were 10,767 younger men and 10,887 older men in the sub-samples."

## Redundancy

Boring! This example illustrates the first thing NOT to do. Writing about the analysis does not mean that you repeat what is in the tables. The reader can easily see in the table what the author has written in this example.

Typically we do not write about the sample size (N) in the results section. Only rarely is it important for understanding the results. If sample sizes are small (less than 100 as a rule of thumb), it may be important to mention to the reader that the statistics you are using are more vulnerable to the influence of individual cases (outliers). In this example, however, this is not the case and the comment about the sample sizes is redundant and wasteful.

Meanwhile, the author obviously wants to draw attention to differences between the groups. So it may be better to simply point out that there is a difference of "x" dollars between the two groups' average incomes without pointing out the raw values from which this difference was computed. The reader can verify your math if she or he wants to, but at the same time the author efficiently points out a difference that she thinks is important. Another way to do this would be to point to the percentage difference between the two groups, identifying the fact that the older group makes about 30% more than the younger group.

This student's first draft shown above is equivalent to the museum guide pointing to Mona Lisa and saying, "Notice that she has long dark hair and is smiling." Boring, redundant, and almost insulting, huh?

## Voice: Visible or Invisible Authors, Analyses, and Audiences

This first draft also raises the issue of "voice." That is, how visible should the author and the author's analysis be in the presentation of the results? This first draft brings the author onto the stage when the author says "my." The author also highlights that the "analysis" is showing something, as opposed to the data revealing something. These are issues of taste and editorial license, but they are important because at times the author and her analysis can get in the way of what the results and findings. We will address these issues in the following examples.

Here is a revision of the author's first draft:

> "Table 1 demonstrates that mean income is dramatically lower for younger men than for older men. Older men have income about 30% higher than young men's. This is consistent with Oppenheimer's argument regarding the "life-cycle squeeze" (1982) where younger men obtain lower annual earnings at the start of their careers. Meanwhile, the mean is higher than the median for both variables among both groups of men, suggesting that significant outliers are inflating mean earnings and incomes. Even in the upper end of the income brackets the differences are pronounced. The upper quartile of older men make over $55,000 but for younger men, the upper quartile begins at $43,000."

This revision has moved the author and the analysis off of the stage by side-stepping ownership of the analysis ("my"). Now the table of analyzed data is the source of authority and information rather than "my analysis." The author simply makes interpretive comments about the relative size of the numbers in the table and begins to offer some explanation for why they appear as they do. This revision provides the reader the freedom to read the table for herself but to also consider what the author wants him to begin to conclude. The author has pointed out what she believes to be the most significant features of this part of the analysis and has begun to link it to the theoretical concerns raised earlier in the paper.

When the museum guide says "It is believed that Mona Lisa is smiling because her lover just sent her flowers," then the guide is offering interpretation while identifying, in passing, the fact that she is smiling. A much more interesting approach, no? (By the way, experts think she keeps her mouth closed because she had ugly teeth.)

In the next table, the author wants to show that educational level of men has an important effect on their incomes (see Table 2).

Table 2: Income by Age and Education
for American Men (1996)

| | N | Mean | Median |
|---|---|---|---|
| Young Men (18-40) | | | |
| Less than college | 7786 | 30,040 | 26,000 |
| College graduates | 2981 | 53,483 | 42,000 |
| Older Men (41-65) | | | |
| Less than college | 7246 | 37,507 | 32,000 |
| College graduates | 3641 | 69,129 | 51,421 |

Here is a first draft of some text about table 2:

> "From Table 2 you can conclude that educational level is extremely important for increasing the income of all men, regardless of age. Computer analysis of the data also reveals that the effects of college graduation grow over a person's life. While among young men there is a $23,000 difference between college graduates and less educated men, this gap grows to $32,000 for older men."

This text raises two more issues of voice and the visibility of author and reader. The familiar "you" finds no place in formal academic writing. This is because the meaning of "you" is ambiguous. Is the author implying that the reader needed her permission to make this conclusion? Is this a veiled invitation to make this conclusion? A command to do so? Is this conclusion optional, such that some could make such a conclusion and others could not? Hence, the ambiguity. Here is a related case:

> "In looking at the average income of men within different educational categories, we can say education has an important impact on …."

When the writer says "we can say," there is an assumption that the reader will want to say it too. The reader is once again visible but now is being asked to join the writer in saying something. Perhaps the following approach would work better:

> "The observation that income varies so widely with education supports other researchers' claims that education is one of the most important influences on incomes."

This revised text puts the responsibility on the author to assert the meaning of the data. The text does not ask the reader to say it too, but allows the reader to accept or reject the interpretation offered.

Consider again the earlier version of the text focused on table 2, focusing on the second sentence:

"Computer analysis of the data also reveals that the effects of college graduation grow over a person's life."

This text also errs in bringing the computer on to the stage. Generally, this is unwise. The reader does not really care if the author computed these statistics on a computer, an adding machine, an abacus, or on the back of an envelope. Similarly, references to computer software are generally not required (e.g., "analysis of the data with SPSS"), although you may occasionally see published research where the authors believed that the software's unique abilities needed to be highlighted. (Or perhaps these authors want their own statistical prowess to be highlighted!) However, in general, it is best to let the computer be invisible.

Because most computer programs cannot handle names of variables such as "Men's Earnings", they use truncated names like "MENSINC". Do not use these computer generated code names in tables and/or in writing about tables. Readers should not have to learn a new vocabulary to read the results section. Even if the computer prints out attractive tables with "MENSINC" as the heading of a row or column, change this back to its real meaning, and discuss it as such in the text.

A side-point: As mentioned earlier in this handbook, for researchers and students who have struggled with completion of their analysis, it is tempting to want to communicate to the readers how hard they worked to produce this analysis. For example, the author might want to say: "Pain-staking and time-consuming efforts to compute the differences in earnings demonstrate that indeed…." Unfortunately, the readers of academic writing are not interested in the difficulties of research. Indeed, the author's task is to make the results seem so self-evident and self-revealing that the reader will believe that these results effortlessly presented themselves to the her. This observation stands in contrast to the kinds of information that a tour guide would provide where we actually find it interesting that the painter completed the portrait under difficult conditions.

So, who should be visible and invisible in writing about results? For sure, the computer and the readers should be invisible. The data or the analysis can be visible, although the author should beware of putting excessive focus on the analytic process and keep attention on the results. And the author? This remains a point of disagreement among academic writers. In the revision for Table 1 suggested above, the author remains off-stage and simply make statements about the results, letting them be the source of authority and information:

"Table 1 demonstrates that mean income is dramatically lower for younger men than for older men. Older men have income about 30% higher than young men's. This is consistent with Oppenheimer's argument regarding the "life-cycle squeeze" (1982) where younger men obtain lower annual earnings at the start of their careers. Meanwhile, the mean is higher than the median for both variables among both groups of men, suggesting that significant outliers are inflating mean earnings and incomes. Even in the upper end of the income brackets the differences are pronounced. The upper quartile of older men make over $55,000 but for younger men, the upper quartile begins at $43,000."

While the author remains off-stage here, some writers stand on the stage with their analysis, introducing each stage of the analysis, almost like magicians who say: "Next, I pull a rabbit out of a hat". For example, the author above could introduce Table 1 by saying: "I first

compute the mean and median earnings for both groups of men. Table 1 demonstrates that…." Thus the author takes a more central role in the presentation of results and writes in the present tense. However, notice that the table is still the source of authority and information. In large part, the choice of whether or not the author appears in the text, usually as "I," is an editorial choice that will meet with approval by some readers and disapproval by others.

## Tense Yet?

In all of the weak and strong examples provided so far, the author writes in the present tense. For example, "Table 1 demonstrates…," or "Computer analysis reveals…." This may feel somewhat awkward to the author since the results actually have been created over time through a laborious process of data construction and analysis. Many first time researchers are inclined to write something like this:

> "Evaluation of the data revealed that the gap in earnings between the two groups of men was very large."

Most social science journal write in the present tense when discussing quantitative analyses. This is true even when they are writing about aggregated data covering several decades! The rationale is that if the analysis revealed something last week or last year, it reveals the same thing today. So Table 1 did not just say something on the day that the statistical analysis was completed, but the results continue to say the same thing. The reader can recall that the data were collected during a certain time (this information is revealed in the data and methods section), and the date on the paper indicates when the author is making the current claim.

The benefit of writing in the present tense is that it makes the quantitative results more compelling. Writing about results in the past tense makes them feel far away and clinical. However, some social science journals publish articles that are written in this style.

It should be noted that social science research based on participant observation, or face to face interviews, may best be communicated by writing in the past tense. If the research process is integral for understanding the results then this particularly makes sense. For example, if the researcher wants the readers to know that the setting in which the data were collected may have influenced the findings, then it makes sense to say so.

> "Almost 75% of the workers indicated that they were not being paid enough for their work, although when the boss entered the room they quickly changed the subject and hid their questionnaires."

or

> "I pressed the managers for more detail when they evaded my questions about the earnings of workers down on the shop floor."

In these instances, the data and the acquisition of the data require that the author write in the past tense. However, quantitative data is generally treated (perhaps naively so) as timeless and context-independent, and, thus, academic writers talk about it in the present tense.

## Directing Attention to Tables and Graphs

Reconsider being on a tour of a museum and the guide repeatedly drones, "Look at this painting – it is called _____". At some point you would begin to wish that the guide would quit saying "Look here, look there," but instead simply point and start talking about the different paintings:

> "Compared to the Mona Lisa in the other room, the portrait of her sister here looks quite different."

In the same way, it is challenging to point out tables and figures without being heavy handed. Here are a couple examples from some students' writing about tables and figures:

> "Looking at Table 1 for men's earnings and focusing on the mean and median and comparing…, it shows that the mean and the median are...."

> "Consider Table 1 which shows that...."

Both of these examples contain an implicit command to "look" or "consider." However, the author can assume that the reader will look and consider after she makes her claims about what Table 1 says. One or two implicit commands may not be bothersome to the reader, but many of them will make the reader feel like she is being bossed around. The goal is to focus on the findings by either stating what a certain table or figure reveals, or by using the parenthetical maps (e.g., Table 1, Figure 1) to point people in the right direction for confirmation of the claim.

## Earth-Shaking, Surprising, Considerable, and Negligible Results

The results section of the paper is the first place where the author can begin to provide some interpretation about how surprising or expected are the results. Choosing adjectives carefully is important because it sets the tone for the rest of the paper. After many weeks of painstaking work, the temptation is to claim that the results are remarkable or awe-inspiring when in fact they are much more modest. On the other hand, many authors are excessively humble and fail to assert the importance of their finding. This is where reviewers are helpful for determining how big or little, important or trivial, memorable or forgettable are the results of the research.

Without review from others, the author might claim:

> "The average total income (using the mean) was much higher than the median."

or

> " There is a real discrepancy between the average income of higher and less educated men."

Phrases like "much higher" and "real" are all open for argument. Beware the apparently neutral

phrase such as "much higher." There is definitely a place for being persuasive and honest about findings, and if the difference is "huge," or "noteworthy," or "much bigger," then say so. But make sure that you keep in mind the cynical reader who might wonder why you think $3,000 per year difference between the mean and the median is so huge.

In the second example above, the author has indicated the difference between the two groups is "real" (an apparently reasonable and testable assertion of statistical significance). Words like “big,” “real,” and “important” have their place in a results section, but be prepared to defend them. Consider how they might either be misunderstood or might raise red flags for the reader.

## Final Thoughts

Writing about data is one of the least common experiences for most social science majors. It is hard to do well. You have clinical looking numbers and tables that tell an important sociological story. Overcoming the dullness of numbers and tables to appropriately reveal the compelling story behind them is the challenge. The final figures and tables represent hours of hard work, so it is difficult to remain understated and casual enough to keep yourself, your computer and your painful research experiences off of center-stage so that the data can tell the story. And yet, the data do not really tell the story on their own. You are the tour-guide who must help the reader to see the whole story in the data.

# 4.5 Writing Quantitative Research Papers: Discussions and Conclusions[9]

Sometimes the discussion section is separate from the conclusions, and sometimes these are the same section. You will need to consider where you expect to present your paper and find out the structural requirements of the journal or professor or agency that will be reading it.

For now, we'll assume that these are the same section. Let us consider: (a) the content of such a section, and (b) the tone of such a section. To do so, here is a segment of a discussion/conclusion section from a real manuscript submitted to a journal. This paper concerns the effects of education on women -- specifically, when they give birth to their first child. The paper looks only at those who do become mothers. The main idea is that education can delay motherhood for several reasons: one is because most female college students choose to remain childless while completing school; another is because having invested in education, they want to cash in on that investment; and third, they may be in higher prestige occupations that they find difficult to leave or interrupt because of motherhood. The findings are reported earlier in the paper. The author must now recount what has been found and begin to make sense of the findings. Read this, and then consider the comments below about what the author is doing:

> "The importance of role-incompatibility effects, the absence of educational investment effects, and the modest evidence of occupational effects point out the value of focusing attention on mothers and isolating the theoretically distinct components of education's effect on age at first birth. While many things have changed that make later age at first birth a reasonable strategy for American mothers to satisfy parental and occupational ambitions, there is much that remains the same. One year of education generally accounts for one more year of fertility delay.
>
> "Education does not appear to be regarded as an investment which will bring a return, neither in 1969 or in 1987. Other than women in professional, technical, and managerial occupations, employed mothers delay first births about the same length of time within any given year. Meanwhile, very large shifts in the occupational distribution or in educational attainment do not help explain the pervasive trend in post-education fertility delay. Indeed, women in higher prestige occupations delay their first births longer, but they do not comprise a large enough component of the entire occupational structure to significantly affect the overall trend.
>
> "Why might we observe no evidence of educational investment effects while also locating greater fertility delay for women in higher prestige occupations? In spite of a three-fold increase...."

Notice that in the first line the author is trying to sum up the findings (e.g., "importance of," "absence of," and "modest evidence of"). And he is trying to remind the reader that this evidence makes clear that his method ("focusing attention on mothers") and theoretical contribution ("distinct components of education's effect") are something that he has done, and others have not. The author promised this earlier in the paper and now is reminding the reader that he has

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[9] Contributed by Mark Edwards. Comments are welcome: medwards@orst.edu

delivered.

Next, the author acknowledges that there has been a big trend and that he has not explained it all. But he also sets up the reader to see that the findings locate more "sameness" than "difference" over time. He is trying to dramatize that which he has found and that which readers would not have expected. Then, he restates the specific findings that illustrate his point.

The next paragraph draws attention to what was a sub-point in the analysis, yet which the author thinks needs to be reasserted. Notice that he acknowledges what we would have expected ("women in higher prestige occupations delay their first births longer"), but he wants to emphasize his point that this group is not large enough to account for the overall trend.

Finally, he poses a rhetorical question to set him up to theorize (some might say, "speculate") about why his findings turn out how they do. He goes on here to suggest some theoretical possibilities rather than complain about the inadequacy of his measures.

## A Few Words on Tone

As with talking to friends and family, "how" you say something matters as much as "what" you say. (Recall teachers or parents who told you "Don't use that tone of voice with me!".) Your paper will have a 'tone' to it just like your voice does, and it will have a tone whether you attend to it or not.

The arena in which you are writing should influence the tone, or the "style of voice,"with which you write. A U.S. Census Bureau report rarely takes on an aggressive, assertive, or even partisan tone. Such a report tends to be very detached and just reports "the facts". Meanwhile, contrary to what we might think of academic journals being boring and noncommittal, most papers actually assert and press issues near the end of the paper, even though they do so in a diplomatic and restrained way. If you were writing a report for your social service agency and needed to demonstrate that in fact the population of people you are serving really need more attention or funding, then you may press your claims more dramatically and forcefully -- although your decision to do so would depend on your strategy. Sometimes, the facts speak for themselves. Sometimes, you need to highlight, contextualize and dramatize them.

## Some Examples of Tone

In the writing sample considered on the previous page, the author was seeking to establish a tone of quiet confidence, of respectful disagreement, and humble acknowledgment of what this paper did and did not accomplish. He nods in the direction of some critics, ignores others, and tries to keep his attention on the analysis without worrying too much that he did not think of every possible exception to the rule.

Look again at that text. The author has used words such as "importance," and "points out the value," and "distinct" in the first line to emphasize confidence in his findings. He uses words like "modest" to indicate that there is something there, but that it is smaller than we might have thought. When he says, "while many things have changed," he is agreeing with potential critics that there is a lot more to the story. But then he also goes on to make his point about sameness over time.

In the last part of the first paragraph the author somewhat curtly restate his points (just like pointing to the irrefutable evidence such as a smoking gun in a court case.)

Finally, the author uses the rhetorical question to establish a sense of ponderous reflection, calling the reader to join in careful consideration. (There's a risk here of readers feeling manipulated by his saying "we,"but apparently he was willing to take that risk.) The writer is hoping that the reader will be responding by saying, "Yeah, I was wondering about that...." In this case the author is trying to set a tone that he thinks fits with the arena (an academic journal) and that will resonate with his readers (academics and students).

## A Last Example

Let's consider another example of a conclusion from a paper -- this time from a final draft of a student paper. (The student gave us permission to evaluate the paper.) Although it is the final product, it too can use some evaluation and editing to make it even stronger.

> "The findings for this study strongly support the initial hypothesis that among single mothers of preschoolers, the mother's educational level plays a substantial role in shaping her participation in the labor force. It is observed that mothers with at least a minimal amount of education beyond high school are much more likely than those without post-secondary education, to be employed in the labor force (Table 1). For example, among those lacking college experience, nearly 67% are unemployed, while among the mothers with from one to five years of college education, almost the exact reverse is the case with 66.4% of them represented in the paid labor force. In addition, the Pearson's chi-square test result (shown in Table 1) verifies the statistical significance of the observed relationship at the .001 level....
>
> "... When the variable (number of children) was controlled for (Table 4), the positive relationship between educational attainment and labor force participation was not significantly affected. The same pattern that was seen initially in the original observation emerged again in each sub-section (i.e., both "mother with only child" and "mother with 2+ children" replicated the initially observed relationship). Among mothers with only children, college education seemed to have a bit less effect than was shown in the initial relationship, in that there was a greater percentage of mothers with and without college educations in the labor force than the initial table had reflected. ..."

Here are some observations about this text.

(a) The text excessively restates the specific findings. Indeed, we may wonder how this section differs from the findings section. It might be better to focus instead on the presence of an initial relationship, as expected, and the fact that it remains fairly stable even when the control variable is controlled.

(b) The references to former tables and particular statistical tests is only rarely appropriate in the discussion/conclusion section. These highlights should have been made in the findings section and now we talk about them a bit more like they are general findings ("higher educated women are more likely than less educated women to...").

Together, “a” & “b” indicate that this student is a bit caught up in the method and what has been

accomplished and is not free enough of the analysis to now tell the story that the data tell. What about tone?

The tone here is certainly not pushy or flamboyant. The author uses passive voice to communicate this (e.g. "It is observed...") He asserts that some relationships are "strongly" supported and that some variables play "a substantial role". The excessive wordiness of the sentences and attention to so much detail ends up making the tone of this heavier and more confusing than it needs to be. Here is a suggested revision:

> "As expected, for single mothers of preschoolers, having any education beyond high school increases the chances that they will be in the labor force. Indeed, while only 1/3 of the single mothers with no college experience are were employed, about 2/3 of those with college experience were employed. This relationship persists among women with only one child and among those with more than one child. However, for mothers of only children, college seems to have slightly less effect than for all mothers combined."

This is not the only way to revise the student's text but notice that the essential elements still appear and leave open the space now to discuss what it is that might help us understand why education plays such an important role for single mothers (as opposed to married mothers).

In sum: when writing your discussion and conclusion section, remember that you can here begin to draw conclusions, directing attention only to the parts of the analysis that really speak to those conclusions.

# Chapter Five

# Literature Reviews for Applied Research[10]

Determining research focus is somewhat different for applied research than in more basic research efforts. In applied settings, the social scientist does not set the agenda, but acts in partnership with a variety of client groups. This is particularly true for the task of defining the problem and deciding on the research questions. Therefore, in many applied studies, the literature review provides background resources rather than the essential starting point for research designs.

While critical to strong applied research, a good understanding of what is already known or established does not have the absolutely central role that it does in fundamental, discipline-developing research. In addition to published results of research, it may be necessary to get relevant background information from persons who have done related work, review program-specific documents and data, and talk with individuals who have participated in the development or implementation of activities. Unfortunately, for many applied topics, the literature and other data tends to be somewhat inaccessible and fragmentary. People refer to this body of work as "gray literature," and it is available primarily from the sponsoring organization (e.g. agency, company, or individual).

The applied literature review serves multiple purposes, including:

- setting your problem in a context in a way that convinces readers of your paper that it is an important issue;
- describing research "questions" that you are pursuing in this effort;
- examining the literature and providing a comprehensive survey;
- identifying important variables; and
- describing the model you're using to explain the relationships among the variables.

Proposals for applied research require a great deal of "up front" discussion that goes beyond classic literature reviews. It is crucial to clarify and refine the scope of research prior to investing significant time and effort. Scoping activities are necessary to provide background about the problem, clarify the specific interests of the research sponsors, and identify any constraints or boundaries that are likely to affect the research. Scoping activities include:

- Discussions with clients to obtain the clearest possible picture of their concerns
- Review of the relevant literature, including research reports, transcripts of legislative hearings, program descriptions, administrative reports, agency statistics, media articles,

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[10] Contributed by Denise Lach. Comments are welcome: dlach@orst.edu.

and policy position papers. This literature should provide some historical context as well as clues for approaches to the research question, or existing data.
- Gathering together current information from experts on the issue and other major parties in order to understand the current context and possible areas of disagreement or debate.
- Information gathering visits to the sites of the program or problem to obtain a real-world sense of the context and to talk with people who are actively involved in the issue.

Much of the information collected through this scoping process, while not typical of basic research, will need to be included in the literature review of an applied research report.

## Literature Review Tips for Applied Research Reports and Proposals

A good literature review should:

- define a problem and its scope;
- ask one or more research questions;
- examine the literature;
- report a survey of the literature (not an exhaustive report);
- identify the important variables that impact the problem;
- develop a model to explain the interaction of the variable; and
- propose the usefulness of the model to the field of study (e.g., Sociology).

Typical writing problems in literature reviews include:

- *Unclear scientific and practical purposes of the paper.*
  *Solution*: Try writing at a more conceptually abstract level when discussing the background to this problem or issue. This will make you more able to generalize and to link your work to other existing research on the topic. *Be cognizant of the differences between generality (comprehensive, wide applicability) and vagueness (imprecision, shallowness).*
- *Items and ideas are misplaced in the presentation.*
  *Solution:* Writers naturally, understandably, and frequently (but *wrongly*) place items in a paper in the order that they think of them rather than where the logic of the paper requires them to be located. *Keep clearly and directly to the subject of your paper's (sub) headings.*

- *Separate sections seem to lack purpose with respect to the paper as a whole.*
  *Solution*: Do more than go through the motions in each section; focus on, and tell your readers what each section accomplishes for the paper. *Make sure that you distinguish between writing a review as a summary (which is incomplete and unacceptable) and a review that serves to integrate or critique (which is what is expected and required of this type of review).*

Some specific tips for good writing include:

- Write in the active voice. Use a grammar checking software package if necessary to find and remove all passive voice.
- Develop a clear purpose statement for each paper. If you cannot finish this sentence: "The purpose of this paper is...," then you are not ready to write.
- Create a title that clearly states what the paper does or who it serves.
- Use subheadings liberally. These guide the reader through the paper.
- Each section should transition into the next section. But make sure that the first and last sentence of each paragraph are on the same topic.

# Chapter Six

# What's Really Happening When I Write a Literature Review? [11]

To get started, I usually do a search on my key variables (such as homelessness, minimum wage, shelters, etc.) to see what I find and also to identify what appears to be other key variables that I may not have been smart enough to identify up front. This search usually happens very quickly as I scan titles, abstracts, etc. (see the chapter in this volume on using resources in the library for more ideas on what and how to search). I also try searching for different combinations of variables, similar words or synonyms, to see if I can find anything close to my problem or topic. Then, I use multiple strategies for extending my search: looking at the bibliographies of articles or books on my topic (or closely related topics) are a good source for finding other references.

It is important to learn how to scan articles or books *very* quickly. If you read every word, you'll be old enough to retire before your literature review is ever finished! One way to keep yourself reading/ scanning quickly is to look at the abstract and introduction (although I know that many people skip the introduction because they think that it repeats the abstract too much). I like the introduction because I can usually find the problem statement clearly stated. If the abstract and /or introduction look good, I retrieve the document. I know that I'm not finished after this first pass, but this is usually a good place to stop before I'm overwhelmed or bogged down.

After I finish copying or requesting books that are already checked out (!), I begin reading. As I read, I highlight and write down important ideas or questions that should remind me of the major arguments and points in the text. And, I *always* write a short note to myself about what purpose the article or book will serve (how it will help the discussion about variable X or relationship Y, for example). Also, as I'm reading, I make notes on other sources of information that might be useful. This is *not* an endless task, but it does take some time. When I'm finished with the first bunch of materials, I go back to the library or the Internet with my list of new sources that was generated in my first pass through the material. Some literature reviews will be massive (as big as a book), and others will be minimal. You have to decide at what point you're satisfied that you have the information that you need to begin writing. After all, you can always go back to the library.

Once I have a number of texts, I start sorting the texts into logical groupings. (Don't wait too long to do this step!) I look at the literature to see where there is agreement or disagreement

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[11] Contributed by Denise Lach. Comment are welcome: dlach@orst.edu.

on the topic. I'm trying to see whether there are holes in the literature that I've collected (and need to go back for more) or holes in the research (areas that I find aren't very well covered). Also, I'm trying to keep my mind open to any new research questions that come up as I read.

Then I begin writing – always the hard part – within these groupings. I start with a summary of findings in one of the groupings, and then review specific articles or lines of argument in some detail. Most literature reviews provide pretty extensive reviews of one or two key pieces of research that exemplify what's going on in the field and then summarize the rest. I also include my own conclusions at the end of each of these sections about what's missing, what's messy, etc.. At the end of the literature review (you'll get there!), I summarize by giving a very general overview of the literature and discussing the problems and opportunities for my own research.

Here are a couple of paragraphs from a literature review from a funded proposal. Look at how we used the literature to frame our problem and suggest that existing research and methods don't work. [I've inserted and highlighted editorial comments in the text in brackets at critical points.]

> The most popular social science model for decision making is the rational choice perspective. This model suggests that resource management choices are (or at lease strive to be) based on a search for information, followed by comparisons and weighing of information, leading to selection of the best alternative. [This model is pretty much common knowledge in the community of people who will read this proposal, so we don't provide any cite, although we could, and maybe even should, do so.] The rational choice approach suggests that ENSO [El Nino Southern Oscillation] forecast information will be readily incorporated in decision making (Beyer and Trice 1982). Although it is based on individualistic assumptions of utility maximization which render it unsuitable for collective decision making (Arrow 1951) [I have to admit that we were showing off a bit here by using this classic economic model to make our argument.], the rational choice model is usually assumed to be applicable at the level of organizational decision making, either by breaking down organizational processes to individual decision points, or by treating each organization as if it were a unitary individual – a person writ large (Jaeger et al., 1998). [This paragraph sets the baseline for our argument and uses other sources pretty sparingly; however, we go in for the "kill" in the next paragraph by citing everything and everyone that contradicts these assumptions.]
>
> However, studies of actual decision making in public and private sector organizations indicate that the rational choice model may not be the appropriate one for institutional decision making (Douglas 1986). In particular, the knowledge use literature suggests that information is not very well used in organizational decision making (Gurvitch 1972; Argyris 1987; Argyris & Schon 1978; Holzner & Fisher 1979; Caplan 1983; Dunn 1983; Averich 1987). [Usually, for empirical results, you want to stick with the most recent sources. But sometimes its possible to build up a "history" of research that supports your argument.] Empirical studies show that institutional decision makers have a generally positive attitude towards the use of scientific information in decision making, but rarely act upon such information directly (Starling 1979; Weiss & Bucuvalas 1980; Whiteman 1985; House & Shull 1988).... [We then go on to discuss a single article in some greater detail.]

This gives you some idea of how I use the literature to frame and support my problem, conceptual framework, and, ultimately, research methods. As I mentioned above, some literature reviews can run to fifty pages. But, in most papers or articles, the literature review will be much shorter. That, in itself, is a problem because you need to think hard about what's important and

how to support those things you think are important through the available literature. It's not enough to just throw in every bit of literature that you come across without thinking about how it supports your purposes in the paper.

# Chapter Seven

## Some Guidelines for Writing Book Reviews[12]

1. Begin review articles by listing the facts of publication. For example:

   > JOHNSON, DANIEL M., AND REX R. CAMPBELL. Black Migration in America: A Social Demographic History. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981. 190 pp.

   Include the complete title, place (city), publisher, year, and number of pages. If the place of publication is not widely known, the abbreviation of the state name should follow it. A comma follows the publisher's name; periods follow the year of publication and pages.

   If a book is published by a subsidiary of a publisher, both names appear: (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1981). Punctuation and spelling of publisher's name must be accurate. For example, there is no comma in Houghton Mifflin Co.; there is a comma in Little, Brown Co.

2. Your book review should include: (a) a brief summary of the book's contents and central thesis; (b) your assessment and appraisal of the book's merits and shortcomings — how it compares with other books on the same subject, whether its conclusions flow from the analysis, what the important findings or conclusions are, and whether there is anything new or different in them; and (c) some judgement as to its relevant audience — in particular, its usefulness to sociology.

3. Your review should minimize: (a) anecdotal information about the author or the history of the book and (b) jargon and technical language.

4. Your review should not: (a) repeat the table of contents chapter by chapter or section by section; (b) go to great lengths to find something "bad" or "good" about the book or something that "should have been included"; or (c) state the obvious.

5. In the case of edited books, place greatest emphasis on the quality of the book as a whole.

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[12]Contributed by Lori Cramer. These guidelines were adapted for Book Reviews in Rural Sociology. Comments are welcome: lcramer@orst.edu.

Limit references to specific articles, except to award special praise or criticism or to illustrate the general points you wish to make.

6. Avoid quoting long passages from the book you are reviewing. Paraphrase when possible. Always give the page number of the quote.

7. Avoid using references and footnotes. If a quotation from another work is absolutely necessary, incorporate the reference into the text. The form of the reference should be:

(Michael Lipton, Why Poor People Stay Poor, 1977, p. 105.)

# Chapter Eight

# The Internship Journal[13]

The internship is intended to provide the student with an opportunity to enhance his or her education through activities performed outside the classroom (paid or voluntary) within a work setting in the "real world." The setting will ordinarily be a social agency or some sort of business establishment, although other varieties of organizational placement are also possible. Details pertinent to selecting a site and arranging for an internship are discussed elsewhere. This section speaks only to one central component of the typical internship experience: **the student journal.**

As a starting point, an important fact should be kept in mind: *internship credits are not awarded simply for participating in the work setting faithfully on a day-to-day basis but* ***for demonstrating creative, analytic, sociological thought and intellectual growth as a consequence of that day-to-day work activity.*** Without this criterion, the academic department would be placed in the awkward position of granting academic credit for a potentially non-academic experience. Therefore, the faculty supervisor must have some means, written and/or oral, of judging the student's academic achievement. Those means might include (depending upon specific arrangements made between each student and her/his faculty supervisor), a research paper, reviews of relevant books or journal articles, periodic face-to-face meetings, or, perhaps most commonly, an internship journal.

What should that journal "be"? How should it be organized and conveyed? What is appropriate content for it? The first trick to becoming a successful academic journal writer is to always think of yourself as a storyteller. Your particular story is a "telling" about the sociological background, social influences, social structure, and social processes which characterize the setting in which you are working. Do not take anything for granted, and do not assume that the reader can grasp the subtleties and relevance and context of the situation without your describing them. Your job is to convey the substance and significance of your topic with the same ample detail that you would appreciate if you were having the same story told to you. "Cinderella," although basically a tale about domestic abuse, about the startling transmutation of mice and pumpkins into horses and carriages, and about romantic dreams come true, is far more captivating in its familiar "once upon a time" form of delivery than as a case entry reading: "Destitute, delusional young female exhibited hallucinatory behavior today." You need not write a fairy tale, a novel, or even a short story depicting every incident at your work site, but take the time and effort to flesh out a few particularly interesting situations in some length and detail. Try

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[13]Contributed by Gary Tiedeman. Comments are welcome: gtiedeman@orst.edu.

it; you'll probably find that you enjoy it - - and learn some things you hadn't thought about before!

It might be easier to visualize what the journal should be by first visualizing what it should **not** be. The journal should **not** be limited to descriptive summaries of what occurred on a given day, no matter how lengthy or detailed. This is where a great deal of confusion arises in terms of the discrepancy between what may come most readily or automatically for the student, on the one hand, and what the faculty supervisor wishes and expects, on the other. It is perfectly fine (in fact, it is proper) to begin each journal entry as a dated, diary-format summarization of what the student has experienced at the internship site. But the premium from the instructor's point of view is upon what the student is learning and applying from those same experiences.

Some students prefer daily entries, but weekly or twice weekly entries may be acceptable depending upon site circumstances. It is important not to let too much time elapse between entries, because important details can be quickly forgotten. Also, it is often during a rigidly scheduled daily (or nightly) write-up that the best insights, applications, and connections come to mind. Brief, general activity descriptions are normally ample; exhaustive detail should be avoided unless it serves a real purpose in making a particular point or in depicting the special, fine-tuned nuances of an unusual problem or situation. **But more important than the descriptive details are the sense the student makes of it; this "making sense of it" sort of discussion is the most vital part of the journal and probably the single greatest key to making the internship a valuable educational experience rather than just a work activity alone.** *Why* did things happen the way they did? *How* does an incident relate to other aspects of the organization, or to particular personnel or personnel functions? Is there a *consistency or inconsistency* between related incidents or situations? How might things have been *handled differently,* if at all? Does the reality experience *agree with, or contradict,* what courses and textbooks have had to say about it? What have you learned today that helps make better sense of a confusing or frustrating occurrence of two weeks ago? How so? Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. A properly compiled journal, in short, confirms that the student is truly learning and that her/his "mind is alive," as opposed to simply moving through mechanical routines unthinkingly.

So let's review, from a slightly different perspective. What you should seek to create is an **analytical** journal, as distinct from a purely **descriptive** journal. A descriptive journal, which many students tend to write and submit, simply records the main events which occur day to day on the job. In extreme form, the reader/evaluator might find just a one sentence or one paragraph mention of a single noteworthy task, event, or activity from a given day on site. (Even at the purely descriptive level, there should be a more lengthy and more detailed account of a broader span of the day's experience.) More important, however, the point is that the academic evaluator needs to be able to see (i.e., to read) what **learning experience(s)** took place. Otherwise, the evaluator finds himself/herself in the awkward and impossible position of attempting to evaluate academic performance solely on the basis of purely physical behaviors. A descriptive journal tells nothing about what is being learned, so as to justify the granting of the academic credit which the student seeks.

An analytical journal, on the other hand, begins with the same reporting of events but then intersperses sections of commentary and discussion, which show the reader that a sociological perspective is being applied. Let's say that the setting is a social agency of some sort and the student is reporting an interesting case contact that occurred on a given day. The

rudimentary, purely descriptive journal entry might simply state: "Dealt with an interesting case." Period! The more expansive entry (of the type desired by the evaluator) first gives added detail about the nature of the case and what makes it particularly interesting. [Important side note: Always use pseudonyms, not actual names, when referring to any client or customer.] Was it the issue itself that made the case interesting and worthy of added thought and discussion? If so, how? Why? Was it the people involved? If so, why? How? What aspects or characteristics were most pertinent? Was it a combination of issue and participants that creates the interest? If so, describe the interaction of the two.

Next, now that you have fleshed out the descriptive basics, go on to **analysis**, **implications**, and/or **applications**. Why do you think things happened the way they did? What is it about the organization, or about the organization's policies or rules or regulations or assumptions or standardized approaches, or about the people involved, that provides an accounting for the incident? What concepts, perspectives, or theories from your academic course work have a possible bearing? Identify them, and talk about how they fit — or, if appropriate, about how they fail to explain what they're supposed to be able to explain. In other words, does the classroom and textbook theory match what you see as being the reality? If not, how does the academic material need to be adjusted or updated in terms of the insufficiencies you have discovered? For example, did the researchers who formulated a particular theory or concluded their article with a set of statistically significant findings fail to note a variable that you consider all-important in your setting? What would you call that variable? How would you describe it? How would you define it operationally and measure it?

As for implications and applications, show some thinking (in print) about such topics as the effect of changes or difficulties in one aspect of the organization upon other aspects of the organization. This is an effort to demonstrate your understanding and appreciation of the total operation as a social system, rather than as a collection of independent features. (Examples: Does low salary cause low morale, which in turn causes low commitment and shoddy work? Are parallel situations handled so differently by various staff members that organizational inconsistency and confusion results? Is training adequate for performance needs? Is there a two-way flow of communication up and down the organizational hierarchy?)

Similarly, experiment with suggestions which you identify for organizational modifications (in either structure or process or both) or for new directions the organization might take — of might find itself forced to take against its real wishes — or current activities/topics/functions that the organization might consider eliminating because of new priorities, expectations, or focuses. These might very well be suggestions or insights that you would *not* necessarily share with organization supervisors, but they can be very helpful in giving the academic evaluator a sense of your trajectory of learning and intellectual growth.

These suggestions outline several of the ways available to you to add depth and substance to your journal content. You won't be expected to cover everything described above, nor should you attempt to go into equivalent depth with every single journal entry. Also, keep in mind that you shouldn't limit yourself to the types of questions and examples illustrated here. Each internship setting has unique features which allow unique observations and interpretations. What you read here is meant as a **guide**, not a mandatory standard. The social universe is highly varied and ever-changing, and part of your job is to discover how to best adapt the academic learning element of the internship to the features of your particular setting. With these guiding

principles and suggestions in mind, proceed and enjoy! It is practically guaranteed that the end result will be to make your internship experience a more meaningful and valued one for you.

# Chapter Nine

# Writing a Case Study: An Exercise from Juvenile Delinquency[14]

The goal of this exercise is to develop skills in applying general theories and research patterns to one individual. This exercise should increase one's understanding of the social *processes* and *factors* that are related to deviant involvements. One should also gain a better awareness of the *strengths* and *weaknesses* of the various concepts and theories.

Maximizing Success:

(1) Do a considerable amount of background reading (mainly the assigned readings, but, go to the library if one is focusing on a less typical [arsonist, sex offender etc.] type of deviant) so you know what to be asking and looking for.)
(2) Select your subject carefully: Usually an extremely active deviant or non-deviant is best. I am not concerned with having a "representative" deviant.
(3) Make sure you know or can gain full cooperation from your subject.
(4) Make sure you *protect the identity* of your subject.
(5) Have a set of prepared questions and probe extensively to obtain thorough information about your subject. The more material you have the more potential insight and understanding you will be able to develop. Tape recording is almost essential.

Minimal Basic Requirements: After providing a descriptive introduction to your subject:

(1) Administer and *analyze* the Short-Nye Self-Report Form (insert the form in your paper).
(2) Plot out your subject's deviant activity (by year) as accurately as possible; Is your subject an adolescence-limited or a life-course-persistent type (Moffitt reading).
(3) Place your subject into typology A (see back side) and defend your judgements.
(4) Place your subject into the Lemert typology: individual deviant, situational deviant (cultural, crisis, or systematic) deviant and justify your judgement (on back).
(5) Place your subject into Glueck's three factor family typology and justify your decisions (on back).
(6) Place your subject into West's three factor family typology and justify your decisions (on back).
(7) Place your subject into the adapted Hackler typology and justify your decisions (on back).
(8) This is the *major section* of your paper! Develop how your subject's behavior relates to

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[14]Contributed by Lloyd Klemke. Comments are welcome: lklemke@orst.edu.

the following theories or important components or variations of these theories. Be sure to explore how *each* of these theories *does or does not* fit your subject. Be sure to provide specific examples - interview quotes to support your judgements. Reading #23-Frazier provides excellent help in developing this section.

Differential association; Lower Class Culture theory; Psychological theories; Status Frustration theory; Opportunity theory; Family theories; Social Control theory, Labeling theory; and Neutralization theory.

(9) Are there other theories or concepts (such as Laub and Sampson's "turning points") that are useful to help explain your subject's behavior?

(10) Construct at least one pie graph indicating the importance of the theories.

(11) Discuss the main problems encountered in doing this project and the limitations of your analysis.

# Chapter Ten

# Qualitative Writing I: Ethnographic Interviewing and Story-Telling[15]

## Prologue

This chapter is a conversation between two authors concerned with writing ethnographic tales in interesting ways. Ambivalence, multivocality and give-and-take of perspectives are intended parts of this discussion. To begin, Richard Mitchell writes of his experiences in the field and as an ethnographic storyteller. Then Kathy Charmaz writes about the analysis of stories, beginning with Richard's account and generalizing to other ethnographic tales. Richard responds with an addendum to Kathy's analysis, stressing writing as an experience in its own right. We conclude where we began, in the field, with a second look at phenomena, storytelling and authorship.

Ethnographers and serious writers in other genre rely on similar techniques (e.g. Bickham 1994; Golightly 1970; Noble 1993; Oates 1970; James 1989; Krieger 1984; Provost 1980; Wright 1989; Yolen 1989). They employ five basic strategies: (1) pulling the reader into the story, (2) recreating experiential mood within the writing, (3) adding elements of surprise, (4) reconstructing the experience through written images, and (5) creating closure on the story while simultaneously recognizing it as part of an on-going process.[1] Good writing reflects these strategies: they unify a work and move it toward its conclusion. That is part of our message. The other part is a caveat. Good writing transcends technique. These strategies are sensitizing not prescriptive. Concern for technique alone does not help us understand writing, good or bad. Writing like all forms of knowledge is ultimately intuitive, not methodical (see Sartre [1953] 1966: 240). Consider the following example, "The First Interview," an excerpt from the beginning of fifteen years of study among survivalists. Survivalists are people who take seriously the possibility of imminent social disruption -- economic collapse, foreign invasion, even anti-government violence and internal race war.

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[15]Contributed by Richard G. Mitchell, Jr. & Kathy Charmaz. Comments are welcome: rmitchell@orst.edu. Excerpted from "Telling Tales, Writing Stories: Postmodernist Visions and Realist Images in Ethnographic Writing." Portions of this paper were presented at the 1995 meetings of the American Sociological Association, session on Qualitative Methodology.

## The First Interview

Recalling that first interview brings immediately to mind the March 1983 issue of the white supremacist publication, *The National Vanguard*. It was a gift from my first informant. It came at exactly the right moment.

I had just finished reading "Survival Treasure Chest: Today's Pieces of Eight Make Sterling Investment" (Kogelschatz, 1983:38-39, 41) in *Survive* magazine, to which I had recently subscribed. Gold and silver were the things to have in times of crisis, the article advised. No survivalist should be without a good supply. If this were the case, I reasoned, then my home town precious metals dealer, John Huntley,[2] might be in contact with local area survivalists and, therefore, his shop would perhaps be a good place to start my research. I called him for an appointment. As it turned out, I was right and I was wrong. Huntley knew about survivalists, but not the ones who hoard gold and silver.

I armed myself with a notebook and a list of naive questions ("How many survivalists would you say visit your shop in a typical week?" "Approximately what proportion are males, females?" "What would you estimate the average age of these survivalists to be?"). Feeling a bit insecure about my reception, I concealed my already running tape recorder in a light fabric bag. I had forty-five minutes before the recorder would reveal itself by a loud end-of-tape click. I walked into Huntley's shop, shook his hand, and accepted the chair he offered at one side of his desk. Arranging my papers, and setting the concealed tape recorder on the desk top, I was ready to begin.

I introduced myself. I explained that I was a sociologist working on a book about survivalism, and would like his help. I showed him the Survive article on investments. He had never seen the magazine before. After looking it over he opined, without much interest, that to his knowledge no survivalists of the sort the article described came to his shop. Fifteen minutes passed in unfocused talk. It seemed Huntley thought little of gold and silver stockpiling as a survival strategy, or of my writing project.

Then the conversation took an unexpected turn. Our roles reversed. Huntley began to ask me questions about myself, my wife, and the nationality of our parents and grandparents. When he learned my wife and I were both university faculty, and of German and Norwegian descent, he grew excited. "You talk about survival," he said, "I've made an in-depth study of that....You and your wife would be prime candidates to be taught the realities of the last hundred years of United States civilization, and what's going to happen to us if we don't wake up!" Huntley had his own apocalyptic vision. And he had something else I just then noticed. On the desk top to his right, partially covered by a few sheets of paper, lay a .38 caliber revolver pointed my way.

The future looks grim, Huntley asserted. "We are living in a collapsing civilization. It's like an implosion." The cause of this failure? "The cultural bearing stock, the Anglo-Saxons and northern Europeans that are the problem-solving peoples of our civilization are being displaced." The presumed best of this lot, the Nordics who "fought the Mongol hordes in Europe...(and later) got in covered wagons and came west and survived in the wilderness" are at special risk. According to Huntley's reading of census publications, "Nordics are only having about 1.2 children per family." He added, "White people instinctively know things are wrong, particularly

the Nordic because he is very sensitive to his surroundings. Even though he may not be able to verbalize this distinctive feeling, he stops reproducing, especially in the big cities. It was the Nordics that built New York City, but it's a fact that the ones who live there now have literally stopped having children." His prognosis: "If you project over 150 year period in the United States, the Nordic will be extinct!" And elsewhere, "It's worse, it's worse in Sweden, Luxembourg, in France, even Russia and the white Communist countries, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary." Other hazards are more immediate than extinction, Huntley warned. "We were 90% of the population up until the Civil War, now we are probably only 60%. When we become less than 50% of the population, then, living in a democracy, the other groups are going to completely dispossess us. We will be the dispossessed minority."

Huntley added details, examples, citations from Charles Darwin and George Orwell, from Marx and Hitler. The tone of the conversation changed again. He began to speak of "us" versus "them," to include my wife and me in his cause. He moved his chair closer, leaned forward. His tone became conspiratorial, as if secrets were being shared. "I'm not interested in giving you this information just so you can write a book," he clarified, "but for your own information. Then you can do with it what you will, because you might become a recruit. Then you will go out and want to proselytize." He seemed anxious to incorporate me into this hypothetical fate, to stress the personal seriousness and urgency of the Aryan's problem. At that moment I faced another problem, also serious and urgent. I glanced at my watch. In nine minutes, more or less, Huntley would discover I had been tape recording this conversation. The trust he seemed to imagine existed between us might suddenly end.

Right then I wished I had known more about the man. A few things were apparent: his clear blue-gray eyes, thick dark hair, athletic build, and clean, delicate hands. Some facts about him, had I known them at the time, might have put me at ease. He was 44, married and had two teenage children. He held B.A. and M.A. degrees in music, and had done some work toward a Ph.D. He had been a school teacher, and was once an unsuccessful congressional candidate. However, other information, also obtained later, would probably have made me even less comfortable.

As it turned out, Huntley was well-known to area journalists and local government officials for his frequent, unsolicited essays, phone calls, letters-to-the-editor, and speeches at public meetings.[3] The timing of these expressions of opinion was unpredictable, but the themes were consistent: international Jewish conspiracy, growing government repression, impending 'patriotic' rebellion. Huntley was on record as having claimed, among other things, that: "The Illuminati hired Marx to write the Communist Manifesto"; The United States military is preparing to quell a "nationwide tax rebellion of six million people, maybe more, who aren't even filing any tax returns"; The government has readied Operation Cable Splicer, which will "isolate various areas of the country [by creating] power blackouts and various communications breakdowns, then move the military in,...[confiscate guns and property and] arrest those people they consider dangerous--like myself." But "when they try it," Huntley bragged, "we will kick their butts right out of the country. I don't know what's going to happen but there's going to be bloodshed!"

Huntley predicted that at the head of this "patriotic rebellion" will be the Posse Comitatus, in which he had long been active. The Posse Comitatus, I was to learn, advocates armed resistance to what they view as illegitimate taxation based on personal income or property,

or any governmental authority superordinate to the county sheriff. In retrospect, this would have been relevant background material, and certainly would have helped me understand what was going on, but I knew nothing of it at the time. Instead, I could only continue to listen, unsure of the interview's course, or outcome. The tape recorder kept running.

From a file cabinet next to his desk Huntley brought out the then-latest edition of *The National Vanguard*. He was quiet for a moment, glancing through the issue as if to remind himself of its contents. Then placing the magazine on the desk between us, he continued. "They talk about racism," he said. "Well I'm a racist. I believe in preserving all the races, but not mixing them together." Huntley believed some social science, wittingly or not, contributes to the denigration of racial purity.

He continued: "One of the great misconceptions that the American civilization has been under since World War I has been the egalitarian or the equalitarian philosophy which is spread through the Franz Boas and Margaret Mead school of anthropology....When he [Boas] came to the United States, he was thoroughly imbued with Marxism, and the whole basis of Marxism is egalitarianism. In other words, you cannot admit to racial or individual differences if you are a Communist."

Huntley argued that this ideology of egalitarianism, while not part of the Constitution, has come to permeate educational curricula and governmental policy. "What you have here is Marxism. It goes from the very highest echelons of our federal establishment right into the school system." Marxism is only a symptom; it is not an end in itself, Huntley explained, but the means by which international Jewry seek to gain control. "What the Jews want to do is reduce us to the lowest common denominator, not just socially but biologically. They want to destroy the cultural bearing stock." Current social policies further this end, Huntley argued. "That's what integration does, it mixes the gene pool. It destroys the cultural bearing stock. And look at the manipulation in this zero population growth. The only people that have cut back on their population are the Europeans, especially the Nordics. Your Blacks and Mexicans and Vietnamese and other ethnic groups keep right on breeding."

Both Huntley and I had become agitated. Huntley seemed to care very much about the issues at hand. As he had told an earlier interviewer, "Once you get into this, if it piques your interest, you'll never get out of it. You just dig and dig and dig until it consumes you."[4] But Huntley seemed to be enjoying himself. Here he had, at once, an apparently receptive audience, perhaps a potential recruit, and the chance to unveil what he saw as a fundamental but overlooked principle of social science to a credentialed sociologist. In contrast, I felt confused and disoriented. Huntley was an obviously intelligent, widely read, articulate individual, a resident of my own community, yet he espoused racism of a sort I believed would be found only among bucolic bumpkins or the genuinely demented. The interview had drifted far from my intentions or control, my liberal sentiments had been summarily rejected, and my ability to withhold judgment was growing frail. Fieldwork was proving more than I was prepared for. In my uncertainty, I said little. While Huntley was anxious to reveal what he knew, I was trying to keep a secret. And frankly, I was frightened. If another's ideas could be so contrary to my expectations, what then of his behavior? How would my dishonesty regarding the tape recording be received?

As Huntley spoke I thought of the time, and of his impending discovery, now no more than a minute or two away. Huntley grew even more animated. Leaning forward again, forearms

on the desk, his right hand strayed toward the revolver, brushing the papers away. Like an engrossed thinker stroking his chin he began idly to rub his palm back and forth across the gun's cylinder. A sliver of afternoon sunlight breached the shutters and glinted off the gently swaying barrel. From my muzzle-on vantage point, and in this direct light, I could see the chambered bullets were a copper-jacketed, hollow point design.

It ended as T. S. Eliot predicted the world will, not with a bang, but a whimper. As a final punctuation to his discourse on yet another topic, the misrepresentations of "Black History Month," Huntley picked up *The National Vanguard*. "If you want to find out what is really going on, read this!" he enthused, slapping the publication down on top of the concealed recorder. The "whap" of the descending magazine and the "click" of the ending tape coincided. Almost exactly. The whimper was mine, a partially suppressed, involuntary cry of fear and relief. Puzzled by my utterance, Huntley offered reassurance. "You can keep it if you want," he said, tapping the journal. I thanked him, assured him I would look it over carefully and consider what he had said, and gathered my things to leave. The first survivalist interview was over. I had come confident of my will and skill to "win" respect and "acquire" information (these were the terms I used in preparatory notes to myself). My presented self, or so I imagined, was that of the competent, objective, purpose-filled researcher. I left in ambivalent confusion--titillated by flirting with apparent danger, befuddled by my naiveté, and frightened by my potential new identity, by what I had been taken for, and might become, if this study continued--a racist.

## Kathy Charmaz' Writing Critique

What can we learn about writing ethnographic tales from Richard's story? Through studying his story, I offer some practical guidelines for turning research tales into written stories. These guidelines are for qualitative researchers to consider, to play with, and, perhaps, to adopt or revise. Analyzing a story reveals most clearly how the guidelines work. However, they can be used to enliven less dramatic ethnographic description and more explicitly analytic works (Charmaz 1991). Although my analysis emphasizes finished stories, I recommend adopting these guidelines as observational and writing strategies from the beginning of the research process. The guidelines are tools. Nothing more, or less. They may help us observe more closely, write more gracefully, and, thus, state our ideas more artfully.

### Pulling the Reader In

What induces us to read a story, article, or book? The opening paragraphs or the opening chapter should pull us into the story and convince us to continue. Hence, the writer invites, entices, and involves the reader to stay with the story and to remain in the scene (see Hubbard 1988; Noble 1994). In order to bring us into the story, the writer needs to provide its context, or to imply what might follow. Often qualitative researchers use a telling anecdote, case material, or interview excerpt to do just that. A telling opener piques our interest and curiosity. In my own writing, I often focus on a concrete person or specific incident to stimulate reader involvement in more general themes.

A carefully selected opener allows the writer to make implicit or explicit claims from the

beginning. Writers who retell their intense experience, rather than recount someone else's, recreate its power through their written images. In more formal writing, I look for a clear, spare opener in the first paragraph or two that states concretely and specifically what research or analytic "story" this work will tell. When the author's thesis is general, the problem common, or the argument unclear, I lose interest. You probably do too.

In "The First Interview" Richard accomplishes four writer's objectives in his first short paragraph. He (1) identifies the viewpoint of the story, (2) persuades the reader to become intrigued and emotionally involved, (3) sets the mood, and (4) hints of suspense and conflict. From the start, we know that the story proceeds from his viewpoint. Told from any other viewpoint, it would not be the same story. Richard brings his readers, especially other social scientists, right into the scene with images of the white supremacist magazine. By mentioning that it was a gift from his first informant, he taps others' images and memories of initiating field work. Thus, he establishes a common ground with us, his readers. But he pulls readers into the story and keeps them reading and wanting to know more when he states (about the magazine): "It came at exactly the right moment." Why was it the right moment? In this brief cue, Richard sets the stage for telling his tale. Similarly, he develops the scene when he talks about starting his research and making contact with Huntley. He arouses our curiosity further when he says, "As it turned out, I was right and I was wrong." What happened next? How did being wrong shape later events?

We want to know what happened. Richard's writing style establishes a personal connection with us.[5] Through his use of language, imagery, rhythm, order, and authentic voice we imagine a whole human being who lived the story, rather than hear an anonymous reporter of it. His informal style and judicious self-disclosure allows our intimacy with him to grow. I say "judicious self-disclosure" intentionally.[6] Otherwise the writer intrudes and the writing grates. Neither gratuitous inclusion nor intentional omission of the writer's presence (as the positivists would have it) leads to good writing. I find a built-in tension here: the writer is at once the source of meaning and the source of its obfuscation. The extent to which the writer's presence should be central and explicit depends upon the nature of the research tale. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the writing partly turns on how the writer handles this tension.

Richard's story presents an interesting case of the writer's subjectivity because he is central to the drama. Yet his voice in telling the tale allows us to understand the emerging events. As Richard tells us what he thinks, feels, and does, he brings us into a jointly felt scene and prompts us to empathize with him (see Nash 1989). Even though the story is Richard's tale, he does not dominate it unnecessarily. He brings himself into the story when needed to move the story along.

Richard's place in the story becomes layered and complex. More than being the narrator who provides the viewpoint, he acts within the scene. He becomes the narrator with a secret, the actor who takes his readers into the plot. Two sharp edges frame this plot: His precipitous plunge into an unexpected scrape and his expected downfall upon discovery of the tape recorder. Richard's immersion in the story fits the tale told.

## Recreating Experiential Mood

Recreating the mood of an experience through the writing keeps the reader engaged. In addition, it unifies the scene and tightens the story. Cheney (1983) describes a pure scene as all action with minimal distractions. Only those narrative details are included that enliven the scene.

As a writer, I think about what kind of mood an experience, event, or encounter reflects and then I write it into the description. If I'm working with a more abstract idea, I ponder about how I want to cast it within the analysis. When writing a story, a unified portrayal of characters similarly furthers recreating the mood of the experience and lessens distractions. To do so, a writer may sacrifice efficient writing, that is, narrative description, for an effective story. Thus Richard uses direct quotes from Huntley's diatribe, offers his internal monologue, and provides reflections about the scene while in it.

Richard takes us through the shifts in mood as the story progresses. Our involvement intensifies and our suspense increases. His imagery and candor place us in the scene with him. "I armed myself with a notebook and a list of naive questions." We can all imagine doing this. We identify with Richard as he sets out to play the role of social scientist to a respondent in an unfamiliar setting from whom he expects only preliminary information. As events proceed, we sense growing ambiguity and his waning morale. "Feeling a bit insecure about my reception, I concealed my already running tape recorder in a light fabric bag." The mood deepens. We feel Richard losing ground, "Fifteen minutes passed in unfocused talk. It seemed Huntley thought little of gold and silver stockpiling as a survival strategy, or of my writing project."

The mood shifts ominously as Huntley takes control of the interview and Richard notices the gun. Huntley's excitement quickens. We feel it in the short, stark sentences. Tension builds through Richard's comments, not solely through the Huntley excerpts: "However, other information, also obtained later, would probably have made me even less comfortable." Richard's hint makes Huntley more menacing. The twists and turns in the encounter keep us riveted. "Huntley seemed to be enjoying himself....In contrast, I felt confused and disoriented." Urgency mounts as Richard fears he cannot escape before the tape clicks off. "Fieldwork was proving more than I was prepared for. In my uncertainty, I said little. While Huntley was anxious to reveal what he knew, I was trying to keep a secret. And frankly, I was frightened."

## Adding Surprise

Throughout the story, unforeseen events pile swiftly upon each other. We enter a scene with Richard where ordinary rules and values are discarded. Expectations dissolve. Uncertainty increases. Roles reverse. Stereotypes collapse. Potential threat heightens...Fear escalates. Richard's initial insecurity sets the mood for his later predicament. The story begins with an ambiguous scene with an unexpected opportunity to probe an unknown character's views. Yet the story does not dissolve into a routine event or a mundane tale of the field. The formidable topic, Richard's apprehensiveness, and Huntley's astonishing adeptness in controlling the interview all preclude that. The momentum quickens, suspense thickens. Early in the tale, Richard warns us of dangers to come, "Huntley had his own apocalyptic vision. And he had something else I just then noticed. On the desk top to his right, partially covered by a few sheets

of paper, lay a .38 caliber revolver pointed my way."

Consistent with principles of writing fiction (Carroll 1990; Frank and Wall 1994; Giovannoni 1972; Provost 1980), Richard creates tension and adds surprise by recounting a predicament. In less gripping ethnographic stories, we add elements of surprise by revealing implicit meanings and rules, showing taken for granted assumptions, defining world views, and explicating hidden processes. In Richard's story, the tape recorder, an instrument for enhancing interview recall and, by extension, the thoroughness of the report, paradoxically is transformed into an obstacle and a liability, threatening to destroy trust, create enmity, diminish access to other respondents, and even damage professional prestige. Already Richard feels uneasy and stuck in an alarming encounter. Then, beyond that, Huntley's imminent discovery of the hidden tape recorder spells disaster. Richard works the drama of his tale deep into his sentences, "At that moment I faced another problem, also serious and urgent. I glanced at my watch. In nine minutes more or less, Huntley would discover I had been tape recording this conversation." The tape recorder turns into a time bomb ticking toward an explosive confrontation.

Like most writers, Richard does not allow the events to be a total surprise. He foreshadows the surprises. Foreshadowing limits the surprise and defines the obstacle to overcome. "The conversation took an unexpected turn." Richard warns us here that the predictable interviewer and respondent roles had changed. Writers also foreshadow and limit surprises by planting questions. "If another's ideas could be so contrary to my expectations, what then of his behavior? How would my dishonesty regarding the tape recording be received?"

## Reconstructing Ethnographic Experience

Why should readers accept the writer's viewpoint? What prompts anyone to trust an ethnographer's rendering of an experience? I contend the writer's presented images must resemble the experience. Though only evocative of the shared experience, ethnographers must strive to represent their subjects' understandings as well as their own (see Mitchell 1993:41, 54-55; Prus 1995). Richard's tale may portray an extraordinary experience, a world alien to his readers. Other works address experiences that readers may share (Charmaz 1991; Denzin 1986a; 1986b). Readers will compare their experiences to the ethnographer's portrayed images. What helps writers to create works that seem real and true? How can we reconstruct and represent lived experience through our written images of it?

We must <u>show</u> our readers what we want them to know. We cannot simply tell them. Nor can we persuade through mere assertion. Richard shows us Huntley's character as well as his own. He produces Huntley as he forms the tale. Huntley's identity emerges through using his statements such as, "'[The government will] arrest those people they consider dangerous--like myself.' But 'When they try it,' Huntley bragged, 'we will kick their butts right out of the country.'" Quoting Huntley reveals his viewpoint, builds another narrative voice into the story and, simultaneously, dramatizes Richard's predicament.

Richard's statements about Huntley further reveal Huntley's character. He reports that Huntley "bragged." Huntley didn't state, suggest, or hope--he bragged. Richard underscores Huntley's agenda when he writes, "He moved his chair closer, leaned forward. His tone became conspiratorial, as if secrets were being shared." Richard also produces Huntley's emerging

identity as he simultaneously chronicles the unfolding events. "Like an engrossed thinker stroking his chin, he began idly to rub his palm back and forth across the gun's cylinder." The blend of ethnographic commentary and direct statements all contribute to the veracity of the scene. Everything in the story serves a purpose.

Throughout the tale, Richard's tone is consistent. His words and images fit the story. We can imagine the scene. He provides sufficient description for us to surmise his predicament and to feel his trepidation. Richard builds on his vulnerability, the uncertainty, the growing ominousness--his urgency. Like a creative writer, he puts feelings together, rather than taking them apart. As Hale (1972) observes, the writer's feeling is a method of perceiving. It renders the writer open to his or her subjectivity. Feeling is concerned with secrets, hiding-places, and imagined scenes. Richard's feeling forecasts his precarious position and foreshadows the emerging drama. Even his description fits the twists and turns in mood and thus makes the story powerful. No discrepancies in tone exist. He has calibrated his tone and shaped images to mirror the unfolding events.

Effective word choice contributes to Richard's presented image resembling his experience. His writing gives the impression of natural speech (Packer and Timpane 1986; Provost 1980). It is only an impression, an image. Richard talks with us--so it seems. He reproduces the informality and intimacy of natural speech. He does so through describing actors and events in a conversational style. He also reveals his thoughts and feelings: "the whimper was mine, a partially suppressed, involuntary cry of fear and relief." Richard describes the moment as though recounting it to a close friend. He does not replicate natural speech with all its hesitancy, irrelevancy, redundancy, and inadequacy, yet his words read as if spoken. Giving the impression of natural speech echoes the experience and imbues it with verisimilitude.

Richard's interview excerpts are pointed; they distill the experience. We certainly do not receive forty-five minutes of dialogue in this story. Nor do we view all the images that Richard saw during his foreboding encounter. He creates a painting for us, rather than a photograph (Charmaz 1995). Writers need to give us the shape, color, tone, order, and form of their stories; they do not need to provide the entire experience. Instead they stress some events, minimize others and ignore still others. Extraneous detail clutters the story and obscures the point. Writers supply sufficient content in distilled form to make their intentions and interpretations understandable and persuasive. Then readers can imagine the action and, likely, empathize with the writer or main character, but they may not be persuaded. To persuade, writers have to offer sufficient evidence to support the credibility of their claims. The best writers balance the least content with the most powerful persuasion.

The rhythm of the words should be consistent with the described experience. Richard's images are lucid and forceful. For example, he creates emphasis and rhythm through the parallel construction of "titillated by flirting with apparent danger, befuddled by my naiveté, and frightened by my potential new identity." Throughout his tale, the flow of sentences echoes the progression of events. The words sound right. Their length, sound, and cadence create movement and forewarn of impending action.

As Huntley spoke, I thought of the time and of his impending discovery, now no more than a minute or two away. Huntley grew even more animated. Leaning forward again, forearms on the desk, his right hand strayed toward the revolver, brushing the papers away.

### Creating Closure

Richard's ending is at once compelling and haunting. He does not offer the standard closure. No resolution of the conflict. No heroic overcoming of the obstacle. No ingenious solution to the predicament. Rather, a fortuitous coincidence allowed him to leave unscathed. The coincidence stops the immediate suspense but does not end the story. Instead, Richard's reflection closes this story forcefully--the entire piece coheres. His final revelation opens the possibility of another more powerful drama. This tale is but one chapter in a evolving saga (see Ellis 1995).

Like a novel, Richard's closure is implicit from the beginning. He hints. He reconstructs the foreboding mood. He juxtaposes Huntley's expanding persona against his own shrinking identity. His style, imagery, and voice all move us toward the conclusion.
The meaning of the tale comes through in the last twist, the final surprise: We ourselves are vulnerable to the worlds we enter.

## Richard Mitchell's Addendum

There you have it. A story, and a story about story-telling, both neat, pat, finished and quite misleading if taken at face value. Let's consider the development of "The First Interview." It was certainly not begun as a project intended to illustrate principles of writing. I knew little or nothing of the succinct and useful writing guidelines Kathy pointed out and explained with such care in the preceding paragraphs. Had I known of them in advance, Huntley's story might have taken other forms. Instead the Huntley tale began, like most other ethnographic writing, as an mundane list of observations and notes, nearly formless, entirely fragmented. For direction I had only a vague personal sense of the word tone and cadence it would be nice but not necessary to achieve. Drama did not assert itself from the field but was sifted, organized and built up out of a confused mass of quotidian detail and ambiguous feelings over successive drafts and considerable time.

Feelings have been mentioned and writing is an affect-filled experience to be sure. As a would-be author I had feelings in these times. But far from fear, trepidation, and existential angst, this writing period was one of growing personal satisfaction, reassurance, and fulfillment. The memory of clumsy, faltering fieldwork was set aside and in its places came the adventure of tale-telling. Quiet, safe at my desk or in my favorite seat at the local coffee house, I luxuriated in creating with words and recreating in fantasy my own dual characters, the clever writer and the fieldworker to whom exciting things might happen. I reveled in temporary enchantments. Life was mine to transform, idealize, simplify. My pen drew imaginary sides, set rules, made action consequent and lasting. At the heart of writing experience are moments of the intense imaginative actualization I've elsewhere called "flow" (Mitchell, 1983:153-192). Fleetingly, action and awareness merge, the spontaneous "I" joins the socialized "me" in concerted and complimentary effort. Like mountain climbing, chess competition, delicate surgery and other forms of cathected action, writing at its best demands the full focus of our creativity and skill. In return, we get what we give. Unequivocal commitment yields a full measure of intrinsic reward.

In these comments, neither Kathy nor I imply support for a distinction between so-called

realist and impressionist reportage. There is none. No worthy author's writings derive entirely from empirically ungrounded figments of fantasy. All ethnographic stories are stories of some portion of human lived experience, experience that is eminently real, immediate, concrete and meaningful to those who live it. Sartre put it bluntly: human lived experience "is, it is what it is, and it is as it is" (quoted in Solomon, 1988: 180). That's clear enough. All ethnographic stories, too, are stories, more or less imaginative, nuanced and stylistic interpretations of the worlds we study. Quibbles over the ontological status of the truly-true and debates over the primacy of one discourse over another serve no useful purpose. The problem of perception, of obtaining consciousness of the world is not an issue here. Our concern is finding ways for individual consciousness to join the intersubjective, ways to report experience to others and to ourselves.

All stories including accounts of scientific knowledge are relative and provisional. All are but temporary waypoints in the ongoing construction of meaning. William Pierce, the editor of *National Vanguard*, publishes facts of human character and history upon which Huntley performs his own analysis. Huntley's account of history and current events is the grist for Mitchell's story telling. Mitchell's tale provides Charmaz with material upon which yet other sorts of analyses are performed. And so it goes. Facts call out interpretations; interpretations become facts. Realities and impressions answer each other, reciprocate. Last one up claims expertise, authorship, but only until the next telling.

However crafty and complete our stories are they can be no more than tentative offerings, possible ways of telling from among many. In the field the people we study talk back, resist, bend, reinterpret, and even reject the images, pictures and conceptions we and others create of them. We can, of course, insulate our accounts from the risk of empirical disconfirmation. We can shift our studies away from the holistic complexity of human social life to the analysis of symptoms and parts--rate-data, written texts, audio or videotapes and other ephemera. These stand-ins don't talk back but obligingly lend themselves to passive and noncontradictory analysis. Simplifications of this sort may be done in the name of dispassionate reason, as with uncritical positivism, as ungrounded literary or cultural criticism, or as ameliorative moral projects such as found in "soul saving rescue ethnography from the mission station or soup kitchen" (Van Maanen 1993), or as urged by so-called standpoint epistemologies. In all cases, the yeasty, ambivalent, amorphous experience of social life is set straight, held at arm's length, narrowed and sanitized in the names of procedural or political propriety.

Postmodernism's strength is the encouragement it lends to varieties of aesthetic and critical writings that together may add usefully to the social sciences. But merely claiming postmodern allegiance is not enough. We must rid ourselves at once of the intellectual sclerosis of positivism and works in the name of science that are merely methodical in other ways, that are without art or craft. To borrow from Feyerabend, we do not wish to exchange the professional incompetence of modernism for an equally inconsequential incompetent professionalism, a self-satisfied postmodernism without human roots.

## Epilogue

A few weeks before sending this article to press I visited Huntley again. This time, the advantage of surprise was mine. I used a different magazine to start our conversation. After

neutral greetings I gave him a copy of the lead article from the May 1995 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*--"The Diversity Myth: America's Leading Export." There was a message in this gift: I was not an ordinary coin shop customer. He could tell I knew something about him, but what? Was I friend or foe? (I was not sure either.) The twelve years had dimmed recollections for both of us. As Huntley leafed through the article, he probed, "Uh, do you live around here? Have we talked before?" I affirmed both questions with a few details and, like the proud parent I am, I showed him a picture of my blond, blue-eyed, smiling three-and-a- half-year-old daughter. That was enough. Friend.

Huntley became amiable and, as before, instructive. The years had done nothing to diminish his eclectic literacy and eccentric zeal. He was soon launched into an impromptu lecture full of new facts and familiar themes. He warned again of the Franz Boaz legacy and the "spreading tentacles" of egalitarianism. He spoke of Shakespeare's disdainful view of blacks, of the "abhorred union" of Othello and Desdemona, the ineptness of Portia's one black suitor in The *Merchant of Venice*, and the villainy of Aaron from *Titus Andronicus*, the Bard's "Devil incarnate." Next, Huntley turned to the Rockefeller dynasty, starting with the patriarch, John D.'s father, "a bigamist and a charlatan," who traveled the byways of Pennsylvania and the East "fathering at least ten illegitimate children" and peddling raw petroleum as an elixir. The Rockefeller's interest in oil had its roots in this crude patent medicine he told me, for "this stuff was just bubbling out of the ground...and nobody knew what to do with it...so they developed pharmaceuticals" and as a result "ninety percent of pharmaceuticals are petro-based." He spoke of recent scholarship, of Edward O. Wilson's work in sociobiology, of *The Bell Curve*, even a recent article from *Society*, "The Seeds of Racial Explosion," by U.S.C. economics professor, Timur Kuran. Huntley continued for ten more minutes. As before, he seemed enthused by his topics and pleased with his audience.

There was something different about this visit. I felt more at ease, in control. Huntley's ideas were indeed strange but not unprecedented. In the past dozen years I'd heard the likes of them more than once. I was on familiar ground. Half-attention was all I needed to follow his arguments. I listened, but also looked around the shop. Things had changed. A few years ago Huntley had moved his business downtown, across from the county courthouse where he could "keep an eye on things better." (The police chief later told me this surveillance works both ways.) Huntley was visibly older. His hair was still thick but near white. His waist was still thin but now so were his arms. The furniture had been rearranged. Huntley's desk--and his gun--were now in an adjacent room, nearly out of sight, nearly out of reach. We talked standing at the counter this time and I noticed I was three or four inches taller than he. Judging from the posters on the walls and windows, Huntley is more active in community theater and music than politics these days.

It was late afternoon, time to close. The comforting institutional shadow of the courthouse crept up Huntley's storefront. Bidding him goodbye I walked toward home, calm and satisfied with the results of the day. All had gone well. I found new data and no real danger. Yet my composure was not full depth. It never is these days. Then and now I wonder about the other ways this interview might have gone. I've been face to face with a good deal of extremism in the past twelve years, at meetings of the Klan and the Aryan Nations, at clandestine training camps and public conferences, among anti-government militias, messianic zealots, and would-be revolutionaries. Not all these encounters have been so serene or civil, but I'm always lucky, I tell

myself. Just be prepared and know what to expect--that's how to stay out of trouble. I was not surprised by Alan Berg's assassination or the Oklahoma City bombing. I've heard plans for similar events being discussed often enough. Mostly talk, I tell myself. Yet, lately I've grown uncertain, apprehensive. I wonder, have I done everything necessary for the next interview? New tape recorders run silently. And with a permit, I could carry a gun.

**Notes**

1. In keeping with grounded theory methods, Kathy Charmaz developed these guidelines before reviewing the literature on fiction writing. They derive from her earlier work but strikingly echo strategies of fiction writers (see esp. Carroll 1990; Frank and Wall 1994; Giovannoni 1972; Hale 1972; Noble 1994).2
2. Huntley is a pseudonym. All quoted material in this discussion of the first interview, unless otherwise identified, is from transcripts.
3. The sources of material attributed to Huntley in this paragraph are intentionally omitted. They derive from public documents which identify Huntley by his proper name.
4. The source of these comments is again deliberately omitted.
5. Style means the presence of the writer in the writing and reflects how the writer conveys his or her thoughts (see Barzun 1975; Lambuth 1976; Strunk and White 1959). Tone, an element of style, reveals ambiance and the writer's attitude (see Parker and Timpane 1986).
6. Postmodernist writers commonly err by attending too much to themselves and too little to the worlds of human lived experience. Gary Provost (1980) contends that writer intrusion only works when the writer was a participant or possesses special expertise. Self-aggrandizing narcissism is not expertise but is often used as an excuse for the absence of expertise. Telling "mystory," invariably tales of extraordinary "oppression," "disadvantage," or other flaunted suffering, is substituted for knowledge of the obdurate social world at large. Generalization is based on simplistic categorical commonalities. "I have suffered as all people of my [age, sex, race, religion, socio-economic status, etc.] suffer. Therefore listen to mystory." Sociology moves from the drawing room to the dressing room, from arm chair theorizing to mirror gazing.

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# Chapter Eleven

# Qualitative Writing II: Keeping Your Data and Your Writing Organized[16]

The analytic task of interpreting and making sense out of collected materials, appears monumental when one is involved in their first qualitative research project. For those who have never undertaken it, analysis looms large at first glance -- something one can avoid by remaining in the field collecting more data. While analysis and writing up the findings is complicated, it is also a process that can be broken down into stages. The purpose of this chapter is to help you learn how to manage qualitative data and how to do an analytical write up of this data.

There are two major steps in the interpretation of qualitative data: transcribing and interpreting the data. What you are trying to do after the data has been collected is to work with the data by organizing it: breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and, ultimately, deciding on what you will tell others about it.

## Transcription

The most time consuming part of the whole process is the transcription of the data. There are different ways of making the information on the tape useful. Some researchers make final transcripts from the tapes, others only make a bare outline, and others make a complete catalog.

Making a complete transcript is not necessarily an easy matter. The transcript you end up with all depends on your research purposes and the use you have for the transcript. If your purpose is linguistic, you would not want to leave out the "ums" or even the pauses and certainly not the dialect used. Language usage and every other verbal idiosyncracy would be important to keep intact in the transcript. If, however, your task is looking for a particular theme you can be more selective of what you transcribe. Your single task in transcribing is to tell the person's story in the words he/she has already used. The only other editing would be for ease in readability, such as adding a word or phrase if an answer to a question is in complete.

Because the idea is to end up with a flowing narrative in the words of the person telling the story, it might be advisable to transcribe by skipping over your own questions and comments and transcribing only their words, and these you would put in typical sentences and paragraph form. The editing you do may also consist of a minimal amount of shifting sections of the

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[16] Contributed by Dwaine Plaza. Comments are welcome: dplaza@orst.edu.

interview to keep similar content together, giving the flow of their story increased clarity, and more sense. You end up, then, with a fairly polished narrative that consists of clear concise, and complete sentences that are easy to read, rather than a verbatim transcription that is broken up so much so with every "uh," "well," false start, and grammatical inconsistency that it would take forever to read anyway.

## Interpretation

As you read through your data certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, the subjects way of thinking, and events repeat and stand out. Developing a coding system involves several steps. You search through your data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics your data cover, and then you write down words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns. These words and phrases are *coding categories*. They are a means of sorting the descriptive data you have collected so that the material bearing a given topic can be physically separated from other data. Developing a list of coding categories after the data has been collected is a crucial step in data analysis.

Developing coding systems in qualitative research is a subjective matter. Certain theoretical approaches and academic disciplines suggest particular coding schemes. It is beyond the scope of this writing guide to lay out all the coding categories and theoretical approaches that might be used to develop coding systems. What we will do is to provide a short list of families of codes to suggest some ways coding can be accomplished.

- ***Setting/Context Codes***
  This term refers to codes under which the most general information on the setting, topic, or subjects can be sorted. Material that allows you to place your study in a larger context is found under such codes. In addition, general statements that people make describing the subject, the setting, and how the setting fits can be coded here.

- ***Definition of the Situation Codes***
  Under this type of code your aim is to place units of data that tell you how the subjects define the setting or particular topics. You are interested in their world view and how they see themselves in relation to the setting or your topic. What do they hope to accomplish? How do they define what they do? What is important to them? Do they have a particular orientation that affects how they define participation (religious, political, social class, feminist etc.).

- ***Perspectives Held by Subjects***
  This family includes codes oriented toward ways of thinking that subjects share that are not as general as their overall definition of the situation but indicate orientations toward particular aspects of a setting. They include shared rules and norms as well as some general points of view.

- ***Subjects Ways of Thinking about People and Objects***
  This family points to codes that get at the subjects' understanding of each other, of outsiders, and of the objects that make up their world.

- ***Process Codes***
  Process codes refer to coding words and phrases that facilitate categorizing sequences of events, changes over time, passages from one type or kind of status to another. Typical process codes point to time periods, stages, phases, steps, careers, and chronology.

- ***Activity Codes***
  Activity codes are directed at regularly occurring kinds of behavior. These behaviors can be relatively informal and lead to codes which are regular occurring and a formal part of a setting.

- ***Event Codes***
  These kinds of codes are directed at units of data that are related to specific activities that occur in the setting or in the lives of the subjects. Event codes point to particular happenings that occur infrequently, or only once.

- ***Strategy Codes***
  Strategies refer to tactics, methods, ways, techniques, maneuvers, ploys, and other conscious ways people accomplish various things. It is important not to impute motives to people's behavior.

## The Mechanics of Working with Data

The mechanical handling of data requires that you either use a computer to sort the transcribed materials into electronic files or you physically cut and sort paragraphs and sentences into separate manila folders. You need to organize your data so that you can retrieve the data as you figure out where you want to put it.

Some researchers do little in terms of physically sorting their data. They use the transcribed text and "eye ball" it, which means look over the data and write from memory. This technique can be effective if there is a small amount of data and if you have limited goals. It is difficult, if not impossible to think deeply about your data unless you have the data sorted in front of you.

The first step in sorting the data involves a relatively simple task-- going through all the pages of transcription and numbering them sequentially. The data is usually numbered in chronological order depending on when it was collected, but if you have different types of data (from interviews, field notes, official documents) you may want to number them in such a way as to keep similar kinds of material together.

After the transcribed data is numerically ordered by page, take some time and read over your data at least two times. You can get a better sense of the totality of your data. While you are reading you should begin developing a preliminary list of coding categories. Keep a pad of paper next to you so that you can write down codes as they come to you. You should also write down notes to yourself which might include lists of ideas and diagrams which sketch out relationships you begin to notice.

After generating preliminary coding categories, assign them numbers and then read through your data once again, assigning the coding category numbers to units of data (paragraphs or sentences) as you do so. Your first attempt to assign coding categories to the data is really a test to discover the work ability of the categories you have created. The coding categories can be

modified, new categories can be developed, and old ones discarded during this initial step. It is important to realize that you are not attempting to come up with the "right" coding system, just one that suits your research the best.

Try to develop a coding system with a limited number of codes. The codes should encompass topics for which you have most substantiation as well as topics you want to explore. Play with different coding possibilities.

Now you are ready to go through all the data and mark each unit (paragraphs or sentences) with the appropriate coding category number. This involves careful subjective judgement as to what codes the material pertains to. It also involves making decisions concerning when one unit of data ends and another begins.

## The Cut-up and Put in Folders Method

One approach to handing the data after this point is to take scissors and cut up the transcribed notes so that the units of data (paragraphs or sentences) can be placed into separate manila folders which have each been labeled with one code. The other approach which is also commonly used is to create separate files in a word processing program like MS Word or WordPerfect. Using the key word search or the cut and paste function available in either word processor you can move blocks of text into separate electronic files. This is an efficient and inexpensive way to manage a small data set. A more expensive option to this method is to use one of the purpose-built software packages like NUDIST or Ethnograph which are designed to manage large qualitative data sets. Ethnograph is superior to NUDIST; the latter does not permit multiple coding of the same content, yet in real life we often do mean several things in distinct utterances. NUDIST, also seems to place excess emphasis on word counting and other quasi-positivist practices.

As we carry on with this example we will put our emphasis on describing how to do qualitative data analysis using either a word processor or low tech manila envelopes. If you can understand the principle of sorting your data in this manner, learning to use NUDIST or Ethnograph in the future will be a synch. Once you have the coding categories that you want to use, you need to either create new electronic files in your word processor (create blank pages on a second document and toggle back and forth from your original file). Or you can label each manila folder with coding numbers and the corresponding words and phrases. Find a box or some other type of container to hold the manila folders (this will certainly make sorting and filing much easier). Once you have everything in place, go to it, cutting and filing.

With all the units of data sorted into their respective electronic files or manilla folders, you may want to regroup them according to some new scheme. As you work with your filing system it will become obvious that certain patterns and themes begin to appear. At this point you might even create sub-categories by introducing additional electronic files or manilla envelopes. While you do this, you can be simultaneously penciling/typing out different ways of putting things together, writing memos to yourself, or drawing diagrams about relationships.

## Writing Up and Disseminating the Findings

When it comes time to write up your qualitative research, there are many different ways to go about it. In fact, sitting before the computer, it may seem as if you are facing too many choices. What is most frightening is feeling out of control; that is, you do not know how to choose vocabulary, construct sentences, moderate active and passive voices, or organize your presentation so that the written product reflects your intentions. You can gain control, however, if you think about the task of writing up your research as a series of discrete decisions rather than one enormous undertaking which must be accomplished all at once.

Writing from qualitative data is somewhat easier than writing, say, a quantitative research paper. The fieldwork and analysis produce piles of coded description which provide a starting point (some words on paper). Not only do you have the descriptive data in front of you, you have a host of observer's comments and analytic memos that may serve as rough drafts for sections of your paper. You have a foundation you can revise and expand as you work toward the production of your paper.

What you plan to produce with your data will affect what you write and how you organize your writing. If you are dong a dissertation, for example, you need to attend to certain conventions. Articles and research papers usually offer more stylistic freedom, but you always need to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning tells what you will do in the paper; it lays out the contents. The middle section develops, argues, and presents your points. You also need to discuss your insights: marshaling your data to convince the reader with evidence for what you claim. The conclusion may summarize what you have said, it may draw a few disparate points together, or it may suggest the implications of your findings for more research or practice.

### Getting Started

Where do you start? Well you have already started to write if you have followed the previous advice and narrowed your focus, looked for themes, or if you have mechanically sorted out the data into categories. You are on your way.

A good piece of writing has a clear focus. It states a purpose and then fulfills the promise. Coming up with a focus as the writer means deciding what you want to tell your reader. You should be able to state that in a sentence or two. While a good paper has a single focus, there are three main types of foci. One kind is a *thesis*, a proposition put forth and then argued. The thesis can be born out of a comparison of what your research has revealed and what the professional literature says about the subject.

A *theme* can also serve as a focus. It lacks the overtly argumentative tone of a thesis. A theme is some concept or theory that emerges from your data. Themes can be formulated at different levels of abstraction from statements about particular kinds of settings to universal statements about human beings, their behavior, and situations.

A *topic* provides a third type of focus. Like the theme, the topic will be found pervasively in your notes, but it is more of a particular aspect of what you were studying than an idea about it. A theme is conceptual while a topic is descriptive.

In qualitative writing however, it is often difficult to distinguish between thesis, theme, and topic as an example of foci. These words seldom can be applied definitively to focus in a given paper. Often the focus will be hybrid, having elements of all three. Making a decision of what type will work for your material will depend on what type of data you have collected, analyzed and coded. You should not choose to focus your paper in an area your data is thin.

**Title**

The title of your paper should reveal your focus. Although titles are decided after you finished your writing, the attempt to come up with a good title before you start writing can facilitate your search for a focus.

**Introduction**

The introduction usually starts by providing the general background needed to understand the importance of the focus. Placing the paper in the context of the literature or some current debate is one strategy; stating the assignment that you are fulfilling is another. Often the introduction concludes with a description of the design of the rest of the paper. The discussion of the research methods belongs in the introduction, but its length and specific location vary. It is imperative that you tell the reader such things as the techniques you used, the time and length of the study, the number of settings and subjects, the nature of the data, researcher-subject relations, checks on data, and other information that might help them evaluate the soundness of your procedures and the nature of your subject.

**Main Body**

The main body of the paper makes up the bulk of the analysis and gets its direction from the focus. You proceed to do what you stated: argue your thesis, present your theme, illuminate your topic. The test of your focus is your ability to carry it through in the middle. In writing the middle, the focus keeps you on track. Everything that is included should be directly related to it. The nature of the sections, what you include in them and how they relate to each other, grows out of further analysis of your coded data. After you have singled out a few coding categories embodied in your focus, you should begin working with them, reading them over, and looking for patterns, or elements.

Writing up the main body is really like doing a translation. You take what you have heard and seen and put it down on paper so that it makes sense to your readers as it made sense to you. As a “translator” you take the words of one language and transpose them rather literally into the words of another. Translators must understand nuances of meaning in both languages.

A good qualitative paper is well-documented with description taken from the data to illustrate and substantiate the assertions made. Quoting your subjects and presenting short sections from the field notes and other data helps convince the reader; it also helps your reader get closer to the people you have studied. The quotations not only tell what they said, but how they said it and what they are like. The quotations and the author’s interpretations should intertwine to form a flowing paragraph which nicely modulates the particular with the general.

Another way to present data is to incorporate it directly into the text, so that it almost becomes part of a story you are telling. In this technique, you incorporate dialogue and description directly into the narrative. To the reader it appears as if you are telling a story; you are much less distanced from the material you are presenting. Using this method the quotations and descriptions gained in the interviews are not so isolated and presented separately in the narrative; they flow together with the story line to create an atmosphere of informality of presentation.

It is important that you raise questions that the reader might have and address them in your paper. Present alternative points of view and discuss why the one you chose was more consistent with the data. If there are subjects with a minority point of view that you did not discuss, then mention them. You should pretend you are your paper's worst critic— raise all the tough questions and then deal with them one by one. Whatever style you choose make sure that it permits you to confront alternative explanations for your findings.

**The Conclusion**

You can do a number of things in the conclusion of your paper. Often the focus is incisively restated and your argument reviewed. The implications of what you have presented can also be elaborated. Many research reports end with a call for further research.

# Chapter Twelve

## Citing Sources: When and How[17]

Academic writing requires that you indicate where in the literature you see the theoretical or empirical claims that you are evaluating. This is not just a legally or ethically required component of a paper, but is essential for convincing the reader that you have some idea of where your paper fits into the conversation that is going on among academics in "the literature."

A thorough reference section also allows your readers to investigate the degree to which your paper accurately reports what other authors have said. Unlike "unnamed sources" that occasionally appear in newspaper articles, academic writers must divulge the source of their material. In a quantitative paper, this means that the author should include citations for the papers and books that have provided concepts, claims, or data that are relevant to the paper you are working on. You may not realize that seasoned academics often skim the bibliography of a paper before they read the paper itself!

When are citations needed?

- *Theoretical claims.*
- *Empirical findings.*
- *Other efforts to address the same topic.*
- *Methodological ideas.*

*Question*: Can I cite someone else's citation?

- *Yes!* And you should. If possible, you should try to locate and read the original, just in case the other author has mis-quoted or mis-represented the ideas of the author that you would like to cite. When locating the original article isn't possible, you should cite the ideas as they were represented in the secondary source (e.g., article X, in book Y).

*Question*: Do I have to find citations to support common sense and conventional wisdom?

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[17] Contributed by Sally Gallagher and Mark Edwards. Comments are welcome: sgallagher@orst.edu or medwards@orst.edu

- *No*. Common sense or conventional wisdom need not be cited.

*Question*: Should I cite as many references as I possibly can?

- *No*. More is not always better. Select the ones that are central to your topic, such that if someone goes to look it up, they will clearly be able to see why you cited it where you did.

*Question*: What are the most common citation formats?

- There are three main citation styles; each varies slightly from the other.

  APA (American Psychological Association)

  Chicago Manual of Style

  ASA (American Sociological Association)

  Each of these formats have slightly different rules, for example, for dealing with multiple authors, or including the author's first name or just their first initial. All, on the other hand, require that authors be listed in the citation in the order that they appear on the article or book.

What do these formats look like for books, articles or chapters in edited collections?

- *Citing a book with multiple authors:*

  An example using the APA format:

  Bowen, D. L., & Early, E. A. (1993). *Everyday Life in the Middle East* (D. L. Bowen & E. A. Early, Eds.). Indiana Series in Arab and Islamic Studies. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

  An example using the Chicago format

  Bowen, Donna Lee, and Evelyn A. Early. 1993. *Everyday Life in the Middle East*. Ed. Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early. Indiana Series in Arab and Islamic Studies. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

  An example using the ASA format

  Bowen, Donna Lee and Evelyn A. Early. 1993. *Everyday Life in the Middle East*. Edited by Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early. Indiana Series in Arab and Islamic Studies. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

- *Citing an article with multiple authors*:

  An example using the APA format

  Green, P., Jr., Goldberg, S. M., & Montemayor, M. (1982). Private meaning and shared experience. *American Anthropologist, 84,* 551-582.

An example using the Chicago format

Green, Paul, Jr., Stephen M. Goldberg, and Mila Montemayor. 1982. Private meaning and shared experience. *American Anthropologist* 84:551-82.

An example using the ASA format

Green, Paul, Jr., Stephen M. Goldberg, and Mila Montemayor. 1982. "Private Meaning and Shared Experience." *American Anthropologist* 84:551-82.

- *Citing a chapter in an edited collection:*

An example using the APA format

Doctor, K., & Khoury, N. (1991). Arab Women's Education and Employment Profiles and Prospects: An Overview. In N. F. Khoury & K. C. Doctor (Eds.), *Education and Employment Issues of Women in Development in the Middle East* (pp. 13-45). Nicosia, Cyprus: IMPRINTA Publishers.

An example using the Chicago format

Doctor, Kailas, and Nabil Khoury. 1991. Arab Women's Education and Employment Profiles and Prospects: An Overview. In *Education and Employment Issues of Women in Development in the Middle East*, ed. Nabil F. Khoury and Kailas C. Doctor, 13-45. Nicosia, Cyprus: IMPRINTA Publishers.

An example using the ASA format

Doctor, Kailas and Nabil Khoury. 1991. "Arab Women's Education and Employment Profiles and Prospects: An Overview." Pp. 13-45 in *Education and Employment Issues of Women in Development in the Middle East*, edited by Nabil F. Khoury and Kailas C. Doctor. Nicosia, Cyprus: IMPRINTA Publishers.

The important thing to remember when it comes to citation style is that you should *pick one style and stick with it!* Never, never, never switch citation styles in the middle of a bibliography. Be consistent, and by all means, if your professor requires that you use a certain citation style in your writing, be consistent in using that format, not another.

# Chapter Thirteen

# Research and Resources:
# Strategies for Finding and Using Library Resources

The library is a very different place today than it was even a couple of years ago. Therefore, the best resource we can provide in this guide would be to the library's website Sociology. It is continually updated with the most recent information on available materials for faculty and students in sociology. We have placed the link to this page below, along with the brief description from the front page and contact information for our reference librarian.

http://osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/research/srg/soc.htm

## Sociology

This is a general research guide for the undergraduate and graduate courses in OSU's Sociology program. You'll find suggestions for locating books, articles, topical overviews, research tools, and factual information. If further assistance is needed, please contact the subject librarian for Sociology to arrange an appointment:

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# Appendices

# Appendix A

# Important Journals by Sociological Subject Area[18]

Sociology represents a broad area of study. As a result, a wide (and growing) number of journals are published -- some which are broad or general and cover all areas of the discipline, and others which are more narrow or topical in focus.

The most influential and most frequently referenced broad Sociology journals are:

| | |
|---|---|
| American Journal of Sociology. 1985- | HM1.A5 |
| American Sociological Review. 1936- | HM1.A7 |
| Journal of Social Issues. 1945- | HN51.J6 |
| Sociological Quarterly. 1960- | HM1.S68 |

Often, however, it is easier to find material related to your topic of study by looking at journals which are more specialized in content. Within the Sociology Department, we have found it convenient to group our courses into five interest areas. The journals that are most relevant to each of those areas are listed below.

Social Change, Technology & Modernization

- *Demography*
- *Economic Development & Cultural Change*
- *Human Ecology Review*
- *Population & Development Review*
- *Rural Sociology*
- *Science, Technology & Human Values*
- *Society & Natural Resources*
- *Sociological Theory*

Interpersonal and Group Relations

- *Gender & Society*
- *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*
- *Journal of Social Psychology*
- *Social Problems*
- *Symbolic Interactionism*
- *Qualitative Sociology*

Deviance & Social Control

- *Criminology*
- *Deviant Behavior*
- *Law & Society Review*

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[18]Contributed by Sally Gallagher. Comments are welcome: sgallagher@orst.edu.

*Social Problems*

Contemporary Society

*American Journal of Public Health*
*Family Relations*
*Journal of Family Issues*
*Journal of Health and Social Behavior*
*Journal of Marriage and the Family*
*Law & Society Review*
*Medical Sociology*

Social Policy

*Gender & Society*
*Journals of Gerontology*
*Journal of Health and Social Behavior*
*Journal of Marriage and the Family*
*The Gerontologist*
*Race*
*Social Forces*
*Social Problems*

# Appendix B

# Word Use & Misuse[19]

We all have trouble with certain words in the amazingly complex system known as the English language. What we have here is a partial catalogue of some of the most common stumbling blocks encountered in exams and papers written by students at OSU. If you don't find your own favorite nemesis, please tell someone in the department about it and we'll add it to the list. The items are in alphabetical order rather than in any particular order of importance.

accept,
except: To accept is to take willingly. To except is to skip or reject. Hence, both of the following are **correct:**

> "I am very pleased to accept your offer of employment for a base salary of $100,000 per year."
>
> "I like everything about him except his looks, his personality, and his behavior."

adverse,
averse: Here's one that even college professors mix up. The main problem seems to be that most people aren't aware that there *is* such a word as "averse" (even though, interestingly enough, they might be perfectly at ease speaking about "aversion therapy"). In any case, "averse" describes a person's sensation of distaste or opposition to something:

> "I am averse to having my nipples pierced, thank you."

"Adverse" is a word used to refer to something that hinders or opposes progress, as in "adverse conditions."

> **Wrong**, but common: "I'm not adverse to that approach."

affect,
effect: This is a tricky one, and even the best of writers sometimes have difficulty with it. Try to remember the difference by thinking of "effect" as *consequence* (a noun) and of "affect" as an *action* (a verb):

> "His unusual sensitivity has had a profound effect upon me."
> and
> "His unusual sensitivity affects my own view of the world."

To confuse things a bit further, the word "affect" can also be used in a psychological context to refer to a feeling or emotion. But this usage stands apart from the area of confusion cited above

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[19]Contributed by Gary Tiedeman. Comments are welcome: GTiedeman@orst.edu.

and usually presents no difficulty.

allowed,
aloud: Easy. Just remember that the word "allow" never loses its "w" when it takes longer forms, such as allowance, allowable - - or allowed. It always has to do with whether or not something is *permitted*. "Aloud," on the other hand, pertains only to vocalizing a sound that is audible to others. So both of the following are **correct:**

"I'm sorry, but smoking is not allowed on school property."

"I'll whisper to you what I think about him, but I sure don't want to say it aloud."

all ready,
already: A common confusion, but an easy one to correct. "Already" is used to indicate that something has happened previously or before, as in:

"I already told you three times where I want to go to dinner."

Making two words out of it is simply a way of saying that all of those who are involved are ready. It refers to a group's preparedness for something yet to come, and it has nothing to do with what has happened previously:

"We're all ready to leave as soon as you finish packing the car."

allude,
elude: "Allude" = to make a reference to; "elude" = to attempt avoidance of or escape from:

"I believe I alluded to that in my earlier comments."
and
"I think we're being followed by FBI agents. Let's try to elude them."

a lot: Not a word! If you're talking about "distribution," as in an "allotment of resources," then the correct word to use is "allot." But you probably mean "a great many" of something. So either say exactly that, or say "a lot," with a proper space separation between the two words. That's what it has to be: two separate words.

[The writer of this section of the handbook had trouble, as well as embarrassment and confusion, making this item come out right. The culprit was his computer, which insisted on being over helpful. The discovery came upon proofreading this very item and finding that it began: "a lot: Not a word!" Well, that doesn't make any sense at all. So what happened? The SpellCheck function did its work automatically at a point where the writer *didn't want* it to do anything. That's what happened. What had been typed was "a lot," but the computer recognized that as an illegal word *and automatically corrected it!* Now apart from the extra labor involved in understanding and repairing such a silly mess in text where one *wants* to show the wrong word, this is a good thing - - in a way. But it's a bad thing, too, because it removes the opportunity for the writer to become aware of a writing failure and to learn how to do it properly. In effect, it rewards and encourages poor usage by refusing to divulge that poor usage to us. Since there may be countless other examples of computers over assisting us in our writing, it is worthy of mention here - - and worthy of our diligence as we genuinely seek to become better writers.]

anecdote,
antidote: Far too often, we hear people who should know better say something like: "Let me tell you a little antidote about Sam." These folks must not realize that what they are actually saying is: "Let me

tell you a little remedy that counteracts the effects of a poison about Sam." Because that is precisely what an "antidote" is: a remedy that counteracts the effects of a poison. What they *mean* to say, no doubt, is: "Let me tell you a little *anecdote* about Sam," an anecdote being an account of an interesting (and often humorous) incident. The distinction should be easy to remember, because the prefix "anti" *always* means "against," or "in opposition to," e.g., antiaircraft, antibiotic, anticlimax. In this case, we aren't generally against humorous stories, but we *are* generally against the various effects of poisoning. So, **correctly:**

"I'd sure like to hear one of your clever anecdotes about classroom experiences."

"My God! The dog just drank some of the weed killer. Does the label say whether there's an antidote?"

(But if someone says, "Here's an antidote I think you'll enjoy," it's a little hard to tell which meaning they intend.)

anotherhand: This one has only turned up on a couple of papers, but it's a very interesting example of how we are able to manufacture our own words by combining the *sounds* that have come to us in phrases spoken by others. This person created an original word after repeatedly hearing people say "On the other hand."

appraise,
apprize: "Appraise" means to evaluate. "Apprize" means to notify. Many people use the former when what they really mean is the latter. Helpful hint: just remember that "apprize" rhymes with "advise." To advise someone is to apprize someone. (Well, not exactly, but close enough to work as a memory device.)

**Wrong:** "I'll appraise him of our progress."

**Right:** "The tax collector wants to appraise our house again!"
"Please allow me to apprize you of our condition."

bare,
bear: One is naked. The other is a large animal that you usually don't want to fool around with. If you stripped the hair off of a grizzly, you'd have a bare bear. But "bear" can also mean "carry," so watch out. If someone asked you to haul away the animal we just described, they would be asking you to bear bare bear. And, to continue this silliness just a step further, if you were very tired that day and felt that you could "hardly" do it, you could answer: "I'm afraid I can barely bear bare bear." Next?

capital,
capitol: No wonder this distinction is confusing. But it's pretty easy, once you learn the trick. "Capitol" applies **only** to the building in which a legislature meets. **All** other meanings (*including* the city that is the seat of government for a state or a country!) fall under "capital." So:

"Oregon's **capitol** building is located in Salem, the state **capital.**"

Also within the "tal" spelling comes:

1. money, wealth, assets
   "Once you acquire enough capital, you can start your own business."
2. involving death or calling for the death penalty
   "In most states, a first-degree murder conviction can result in capital punishment."
3. description of an upper-case letter of the alphabet

"Generally speaking, the first word in a sentence should be capitalized."

choose,
chose: This looks like it might be a relative of "loose" and "lose" (see below), so that the same rules and guidelines would apply. But, thanks to the never-ending confusion and inconsistency of the English language, it's really entirely different. Maybe that's why people get a little mixed up. What is especially confusing is that the two that rhyme are "choose" and "lose," which look like they shouldn't. Meanwhile, "chose" and "loose" don't rhyme with each other but *do* rhyme, respectively, with "nose" and "noose." Go figure! Anyway, the main thing to know is that "choose" is for present and future tenses, while "chose" is for past tense.

**Correct:** "I choose to ignore the comparison to 'loose' and 'lose'; what a dumb thing to tell us!"

**and**

"I believe you chose the noose instead of the nose, you dummy. You'd better hope they tie it loose."

complement,
compliment: "Complement" = to supplement; to fit harmoniously with.
"Compliment" = to say something nice, or an expression of praise, admiration, or congratulation.

**Correct:** "She complimented him on his fine abilities as a seamstress."
"Your attention is the finest compliment I could possibly receive."
"This white wine would be the perfect complement to such a delicious dinner."

could/ couldn't
care less: In a strange but common speaking and writing error, people try to indicate extreme lack of interest or concern about something by saying "I could care less." Ironically, this phrasing communicates exactly the **opposite** of the intent, almost like saying "Yes" when you really mean "No." Because if you *could* care less, that implies that you *do* care currently and have a big range of lesser caring that you have not yet tapped into. So the right expression is "**couldn't** care less," meaning "I have reached the lowest limit of my caring anything at all about it."

So: "I couldn't care less what you think of my writing abilities" is **correct.**

But: "I could care less about whether I communicate well" is **incorrect** (unless the speaker is trying to indicate that they do care quite a lot).

desert,
dessert: One you eat after the main course has been completed. The other you die in if there's no water available because conditions are so insufferably hot and dry. (Well, my mother actually once made something to eat after the main course that was insufferably hot and dry. But that's another story.) Which is which, and how can a person remember? "Desert," with the first syllable emphasized, is the hot, dry place. "Dessert," with the *second* syllable emphasized, is the cake or pie or ice cream you eat after your meal. So that's one way to remember: the one with the *first* syllable emphasized has *one* "s," and the one with the *second* syllable emphasized has *two*. If that isn't enough, remember that *one* time lost on the desert is enough, but *seconds* are sometimes nice for dessert.

**Correct:** "I want to finish eating my dessert before we continue our drive across the desert."

e.g. and i.e.: Another frequently confused distinction. "I.e." is an abbreviation for the Latin "id est," meaning "that is." "E.g." is an abbreviation for the Latin "exempli gratia," meaning "for example." Use

"i.e." when you're trying to rephrase the same idea in different words. Use "e.g." when you want to list one or more examples of whatever it was you just mentioned.

e.g. and i.e:

**Proper** usage examples:

"Her message was succinct, i.e., brief and to the point."
and
"The package contained a variety of documents, e.g., notes, photographs, maps."

**Improper:**

"Her message was succinct, e.g., brief and to the point."
and
"The package contained a variety of documents, i.e., notes, photographs, maps."

Note also that a period follows *each* letter in both abbreviations and that a comma always precedes the abbreviation *and* follows it (after the second period).

elicit,
illicit:

There's a big difference here, so be careful. To elicit something is to bring it out or call it forth, as in:

"The detective attempted to elicit details from the victim."

Something that is illicit, on the other hand, is improper, or not sanctioned by custom or law as being proper or lawful, as in:

"The President and Ms. Lewinsky are alleged to have engaged in illicit sexual activity."

If it helps, "illicit" is an adjective (a modifier), while "elicit" is a form of verb.

imminent,
eminent:

Lots of people must not realize that these are two separate words. The most frequent error is in using "eminent" when what the writer/speaker really means is "imminent," as in:

"The long awaited meeting is now eminent." **Wrong**

This *should* be:

"The long awaited meeting is now **imminent**,"

because "imminent" means that something is about to happen, whereas "eminent" usually refers to a person who is of special distinction of some sort. Hence:

"He is one of the most eminent geologists in the world." **Right**

ensure,
insure:

Good news. These two mean pretty much the same thing. Feel free to use them interchangeably, although "insure" has become the more commonly used of the pair. Both words mean "to make secure or certain." So does a third word: *assure*. The only difference perhaps worth noting for those who want to be completely correct is that "assure" is the most appropriate when referring to a *person*, as in the context of putting their mind at ease:

"I can assure you that I feel perfectly fine now."

The other two would most likely be found in a sentence such as:

"Putting some money aside now will help insure [or ensure] that we can pay the IRS when income tax time rolls around."

etc.: "Etc.," not "ect.," as commonly written. An abbreviation for the Latin "et cetera" (two words), meaning "and so forth."

formally,
formerly: "Formerly" indicates something that happened in the past, whereas "formally" pertains to the opposite of casual or relaxed, whether the context is style of dress, furniture arrangement, structure of a term paper, etc.

**Correct:** "I was formerly crude, rude, lewd, and unenlightened, but now I'm a Sociology major."

"The Honors Banquet is tomorrow night, and I would strongly advise you to dress formally for the occasion."

idle,
idol: "Idle" = unoccupied, not busy, not in use. An "idol," on the other hand, is an image of some sort that is used as an object of worship. In contemporary usage, "idol" has lost much of its original religious tone and is often used to refer to a person who is strongly admired. Hence, the following sentences are both **correct:**

"Michael Jordan is my idol."

"Since he retired from the NBA, Michael Jordan spends more of his time just being idle."

imply,
infer: Very tricky. Often misused. Often used interchangeably, and they shouldn't be. Be careful here. To *infer* is to draw a conclusion, usually based upon logical reasoning. To *imply* is to suggest, or to express indirectly rather than directly. So implication lies within the speaker's remark, while inference is a conclusion made by someone else **about** the speaker's remark. Clear as mud? Try to sense the difference in the form of the following sentences, both of which are **correct.**

"Do you mean to imply that my cooking is inferior?" [Focus is on the content of the other person's remark, who has just said something like "I haven't eaten this well since my last trip to McDonald's".]

"I infer from your comment that you don't care for my cooking." [Focus is on the cook's/speaker's *interpretation of* the crack about McDonald's.]

its and it's: There is considerable confusion about this distinction. The best way to remember the difference is to remember that "it's" is a contraction for "it is." Although we almost always put an apostrophe before the "s" to indicate possession, that is a no-no in the case of these two words; when intended as a possessive, "its" does *not* contain an apostrophe. Hence, the following sentences are **correct:**

"It's about time we did something about improving student word usage."
and
"The paper suffered from its poor choice of word usage."

And the following sentences are **not** correct:

"The movement reached it's climax in 1983."

and

"Its very clear to me that this sentence is wrong."

lead,
led: Here's another one that is commonly misused by college professors and others who should know better. If you're talking about the act of guiding someone or something in either the present or future tense, then "lead" (rhymes with "seed") is the proper choice:

"The Pope will now lead us in prayer."

or

"Who's leading this group, anyway?"

If you're still talking about guidance but the guidance has already happened (past tense), then the correct word is "**led**" (rhymes with "bed"), not "lead":

"She led us to the brink of disaster"

The confusion, of course, is that the stuff that makes a pencil write is pronounced the same way as "led" is pronounced.

**Wrong**, but common: "She lead us directly to our intended destination."

lose,
loose: A mnemonic might help with this one. (Mnemonic: a device used as an aid to memory.) Q: What do you use to hang somebody? A: A noose. Q: What is it if it isn't tight? A: It's loose. So "loose" sounds like "noose" and means the opposite of "tight." Meanwhile, "lose" (as in "If you don't stop with these silly examples, I'm afraid I'll lose my mind") rhymes with "accuse," "abuse," "dues," "moos," "sues," and "twos." Make up your own mnemonic!

nuclear,
nucular: Not very many people actually *spell* this word wrong. It's just that a whole lot of otherwise fairly intelligent folks for some reason mispronounce it regularly - - as "nucular," which isn't a real word and doesn't mean anything. The English language is a strange one, and it does contain a number of words that are pronounced differently than might appear proper. But this isn't one of them. When someone says "nucular," one response might be to tell them that it's "uncular" to you exactly what they mean. When they express puzzlement, explain that you're just trying to help them out and be consistent. After all, shouldn't the "clear" part that follows "un" be pronounced the same way as the "clear" part that follows "nu"?

peace,
piece: Not too difficult, but confused by some. "Piece" is a portion of something, as in "I sure would like a piece of that apple pie." "Peace" is the condition of the absence of conflict. (There are many examples of how people who like to play with words have had fun with bumper stickers. "Visualize World Peace" has become, for the fun-with-words addict, "Visualize Whirled Peas.")

personal,
personnel: Something that is "personal" is something that relates to a particular individual, i.e., a particular *person*. "Personnel" refers to the group of individuals employed by a particular organization; it always pertains to the context of employment. **Correct:**

"That score is a personal best for her."

"Your question strikes me as being far too personal."

"Most people conduct their personal hygiene rituals in the morning rather than in the evening."

"This new rule applies to all personnel in the billing department of the company. Personnel in other divisions may ignore it."

plain,
plane: Not too difficult, but occasionally confused. "Plain" = ordinary; "plane" = something you ride in up in the sky.

principal,
principle: Some of us learned in childhood that the person who runs the school is the "princi**pal**" because he/she is your "pal." OK, so what about the several other meanings? For the most part, "principle" has to do with things that are *basic* (including basic truths), and "principal" has to do with things that are *supreme,* or *first,* or *foremost.*

**Correct:**

"This handbook is based upon the principle that improvement in writing is a good thing."

"The principal goal of this handbook is to improve the student's writing skills."

The Smith's,
the Smiths,
the Smiths': We could use almost any last name, not just Smith, to make the point. Also, this is an error we're more likely to see on the name signs people put on their houses than in written documents. Nevertheless, a plural is constructed, in most cases, by simply adding an "s" to the word. So more than one Smith becomes "Smiths."
If the sign on the house is intended to convey that more than one Smith lives here, it should say "The Smiths." If the intent is to show that the property is owned by two or more members of the Smith family (possessive usage), the proper signage would be "The Smiths'" (with the apostrophe *following* the "s" which indicates plural). Only if one Smith lives there alone and he/she wants to indicate ownership would the sign say "Smith's," and it would not have the word "the" in front of it.

But what you'll often see up and down the street is the incorrect "The Smith's."

stationary,
stationery: The one with an "e" is the one we write letters on. The one with an "a" means "not moving," or "incapable of being moved." We can think of no simple tricks for remembering which is which, so please let us know if you come up with something that works. Meanwhile, **correct:**

"It will be difficult to have discussion groups in this classroom, because the seats are all stationary."
"I received your note in the mail, and I must ask where you purchased such beautiful stationery."

tack,
tact: An amazing number of professionals (including college professors, once again) misuse this one frequently also. "Tack," at least in this context, derives from the nautical setting and pertains to

changing the course, or direction, of a vessel. Transferred to the interpersonal situation, the reference is still to changing course or direction, as in:

"Well, that argument didn't work, so I think I'll take another tack."

"Tact," on the other hand, refers to sensitivity to what is appropriate. It means much the same thing as "diplomacy":

"This is a very delicate situation. I'm going to have to use a great deal of tact."

**Wrong**, but common: "Let's try a different tact."

their,
there,
& they're: This is another pretty basic one, but a great many students (i.e., "a lot" of them) trip and fall over it all too frequently. "Their" is possessive:

"Many students failed to visit with their advisors prior to registration."

"There" designates place,

"We go there often."

or is used to introduce a clause or sentence

"There were several excellent points made during the meeting."

See your dictionary for still other uses of "there."

Finally, "they're" is a contraction of "they are":

"They're going to arrive in just a few minutes."

To, two, too: Pretty obvious, but be careful. Actually, the main problem seems to be with "to" versus "too." "Too" means "also" or "in excess," while "to" directs an action or destination. A mixed example of proper usage: "I have already expressed this **to** you **too** many times. You, **too**, should understand it by now."

weather,
whether: *Whether* you use "weather" or "whether" depends on *whether* you want to focus on atmospheric conditions or on alternative possibilities. So the following sentence is **correct** in both respects:

"I think today's weather is unbearably hot and humid, and I don't care whether you agree with me or not."

who's,
whose: As usual, one is a contraction for something *is* (in this case, "who is") and the other is a possessive. Which is which? One of the following pairs of sentences is right. The other is wrong. Can you tell which?

A: "I forgot who's turn it is."
"She's the one whose going to get us out of this mess."

B: "Who's sorry now?"
"Are you the person whose car is blocking mine?"

with (or in) "regards" to: Very common, and very irritating to those who know better. Some very esteemed people of lofty stature are guilty of this one. Whenever there's an "s" on the end of the word, it can refer *only* to two things. One of those is plural sentiments which are being expressed:

"Ken sends his kindest regards."

The other is as the present tense of "to regard," as in:

"He regards murder as a case of very bad manners."

Whenever the intended use of the word is as a synonym for "in reference to" or "in connection with," *it carries no letter "s" at the end.*

**Right:** "With regard to your appearance, I find it beautiful."
or
"I am writing in regard to your recent advertisement."

**Wrong:** "With regards to this handbook, I find it worthless."
or
"I'd like to speak to you in regards to a raise in pay."

your, you're: Finally, this pair causes confusion with amazing frequency, including in such surprising places as newspaper headlines. Nine times out of ten, it is a case of the writer using "your" when "you're" would actually be the proper choice. The apostrophe in "you're," as usual, signals a contraction of two words into one; in this case, "you are" becomes "you're." So if the statement could be made with equal accuracy by saying "you are," that means that "you're" is the proper choice. "Your," on the other hand, refers to *possession*, e.g., your book, your house, your relationship, your career. And it *cannot* (or shall we say *should* not) ever be used to mean "you are."

**Wrong:**
"Your going to regret this tomorrow."
"Your my favorite professor."
"Please leave you're shoes by the door."

**Right:**
"I think you're going to like what I have to tell you."
"You may use your own pencil, if you wish."

## Other Tidbits

**Syntax: the arrangement of words within a sentence.** How we put the very same words together in a sentence can make a big difference in the clarity and the accuracy of what we are trying to express. Here's a three-word sentence with the three words arranged in all possible combinations. See which ones make sense and which ones don't. And (very important) see what totally different meanings can be discovered by comparing the ones that do make sense.

1. I here am.
2. I am here.

3. Am here I.
4. Am I here.
5. Here am I.
6. Here I am.

You should have found two that make no sense (1 and 3), one that makes sense but sounds oddly old-fashioned (5), one that *would* make sense if it had a different punctuation mark at the end (4), and two that are perfectly fine but that carry substantially different meaning from one another (2 and 6). If we can find such disparity in a sentence made up of only three words (which we don't run into very often), imagine the confusion we can generate by sloppy, inattentive syntax in the longer sentences we write.

Try to think of examples of misuse of syntax. A fairly common one pertains to the context of whether or not all members of a category are alike (often heard in product commercials and everyday conversation):

**Wrong**: All students are not alike.

**Right**: Not all students are alike.
or
Students are not all alike.

**Punctuation.** Correct punctuation can be far more vitally important than most students realize. It is important not just because of tradition or because of some arbitrary academic standard of what is proper but because it can radically alter the meaning that the words convey. Here's an all-time favorite example. Note that the words are identical and even the syntax is identical. All that is changed is the punctuation. Are the two sentences equivalent in meaning?

Version A: "Woman, without her man, is nothing."

Version B: "Woman! Without her, man is nothing."