

Many students work—campus jobs, service jobs, or gig work like DoorDash. It can feel straightforward: you do tasks, you get paid. Sociologists ask a deeper question: **how do the structures of work shape what the job feels like?** Do you have control over how you work? Do you feel connected to what you produce? Do you feel like yourself while doing it?

Karl Marx called these disconnects **alienation**—when workers lose connection to their labor, to other people, or to themselves. In this research application, you’ll use an interview to examine whether and how alienation shows up in contemporary student work.

This exercise develops three essential sociological skills:

1. Understanding how work structures shape workers’ experiences and identities
2. Applying Marxist concepts to analyze contemporary capitalism
3. Recognizing how social forces (not individual personality) explain workplace experiences

Assignment Overview

In this research application, you will conduct one semi-structured interview (20-30 minutes) with a peer who works: a campus job, a service job, a gig/platform job, or treats school as their “work.” Using an interview protocol focused on Marx’s concept of alienation, you’ll ask about their experience across four dimensions: alienation from the product (what they create), from the process (control over how they work), from others (relationships at work), and from self (whether work reflects their identity). Through careful analysis of their responses, you’ll explore how job structure—not personality—shapes whether and how workers experience alienation in contemporary capitalism.

The specific requirements for what you need to do vary depending on what grade you would like to earn: Basic (75), Proficient (87), or Advanced (100). Students who come close but do not satisfactorily complete the requirements for a level will be allowed to revise and resubmit their application.

Before you begin: - Review Chapter 11’s discussion of **Marx, capitalism, and alienation**

Ethics and confidentiality:

- Do **not** record audio or video
- Do **not** collect real names in your notes or paper
- Your interviewee may skip any question or stop the interview at any time
- Avoid sensitive topics (illegal activity, harassment, medical information). If something sensitive comes up, do not probe—move on to the next question

Report Structure

Use the standard [research report template]. Below are the specific requirements for each section:

In your submission, clearly state which level you are attempting: “Basic,” “Proficient,” or “Advanced.” You must complete all components of that level to earn the grade.

Rubric: Assignment Components by Level

Basic (250 words minimum)

Introduction: Project Overview - Explain what alienation means (Marx’s concept) - Identify the worker you interviewed and their job type - Present your research question: Which forms of alienation shape this person’s work experience?

Methods: Analytical Roadmap - Describe the worker (job type, hours, context) without using their real name - Explain your interview approach: How did you conduct it? Where? How long? - List the four alienation domains you explored - Note: “I took detailed notes during/immediately after the interview. Interview notes are included in appendix, anonymized with job title only (e.g., ‘Campus Job Worker’)”

Findings: Trends and Significance - Identify **at least two forms of alienation** present in this person’s work - Provide specific quotes or examples from the interview - Explain which alienation dimension is strongest and why - When explaining patterns, focus on **job features** (scripting, monitoring, customer power, schedule control, pay uncertainty), not traits (shy, lazy, anxious) - Connect to **at least one course concept** (bold it, e.g., **alienation, bureaucracy, capitalism**)

Conclusion: Sociological Synthesis - Reflect on how job structure (not personality) explains the patterns you found - Discuss limitations: What didn’t you ask? How might this person’s background shape their answers? What would you do differently?

Appendix - Your interview notes (bullet points are fine) or short transcript-style summary (not verbatim required) - The question list you used, with any follow-ups you added

Proficient (400 words minimum)

Includes all Basic requirements plus:

Methods: Analytical Roadmap - Provide more detail on job context: pay, hours, degree of monitoring/control, customer/supervisor interaction - Explain how you ensured confidentiality in your notes

Findings: Trends and Significance - Analyze **all four alienation dimensions**: - Alienation from product: Does this person feel connection to what they produce? - Alienation from process: How much control do they have over how they work? - Alienation from others: How do relationships at work operate (cooperation vs. competition)? - Alienation from self: Does this work reflect their identity? - For each dimension, explain whether it's present and how strong - Provide **3+ specific examples or quotes** from the interview - When explaining patterns, focus on **job features** (scripting, monitoring, customer power, schedule control, pay uncertainty), not traits - Connect to **two course concepts** (bold them, e.g., **alienation, service work, gig economy, labor**)

Conclusion: Sociological Synthesis - Explain how **job structure** (scripting, monitoring, compensation, relationship to product) creates alienation - Discuss whether **resistance** appears: Does the worker joke, bend rules, or disengage to cope? - Reflect on limitations: How might your relationship to this person (peer, friend) have shaped their answers? What aspects of alienation might they have held back? What would you do differently?

Advanced (600 words minimum)

Includes all Proficient requirements plus:

Research Design Enhancement - Develop and state a specific **hypothesis** before analyzing your data. Example hypotheses: - "Workers with less control over their process experience stronger alienation from self" - "Service work creates stronger alienation from the product than campus work" - "Gig workers feel alienated from others more than campus workers do"

Findings: Trends and Significance - Analyze all four alienation dimensions with nuance - Include **5+ specific examples/quotes** - Add **one comparison** (choose one): 1. **Prediction vs. findings:** Does your data support or contradict your hypothesis? Explain 2. **Marx's era vs. today:** What would Marx notice about contemporary student/service work? What would surprise him about this person's experience? 3. **Job-type contrast:** Compare your interviewee's alienation to how you think peers in different job types (campus vs. service vs. gig) experience alienation - Connect to **three course concepts** (bold them)

Conclusion: Sociological Synthesis - If you made a comparison: Evaluate it. Was your hypothesis supported? Complicated? Contradicted? - Analyze **resistance strategies** in detail: How does this worker actively or passively resist alienation (humor, rule-bending, disengagement, seeking meaning)? - Reflect deeply on limitations: How does **your own position** (student, class background,

work experience) shape what you noticed or what your interviewee shared? What biases might you have brought to the interview?

Appendix - Interview notes (bullet points are fine) or short transcript-style summary - The question list you used with follow-ups - Brief analysis of your hypothesis (if applicable)

Interview Protocol

Use this structure, but feel free to adapt based on conversation flow:

Opening: “I’m doing research for my sociology class about how people experience their work. Would you be willing to answer some questions about your job? This is just for class—nothing will be public, and I won’t use your name.”

Alienation from the Product

- What do you produce or accomplish at work? (What’s the output or outcome?)
- Do you feel like what you do matters? Do you care about it?
- Do you feel any ownership over the outcome, or does it feel distant from you?

Alienation from the Process

- How much say do you have in *how* you do your work?
- Are your tasks scripted, timed, monitored, or evaluated?
- Can you make decisions, or do you just follow instructions?

Alienation from Others

- How do you interact with coworkers, supervisors, or customers?
- Do people cooperate, or is there competition?
- Do you feel like part of a team, or isolated?

Alienation from Self

- Do you feel this work is something “you” would do if you chose?
- Does it reflect who you are, or does it feel like a role you’re playing?
- Does work drain you or develop you?

Optional: Resistance

- Do you or others ever bend rules, slow down, joke, or disengage to cope with stress?
- How do you survive the boring or frustrating parts?