

WRITING SEMINAR

920:703
Spring 2009

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Course Description

This course will provide advanced graduate students in sociology with a guide to principles of good social scientific writing, with constructive feedback on existing papers, and with an exposure to the process of submitting papers to peer-review journals. While there are many valid methodological approaches to social scientific questions, the principles of good writing apply to them all. As for the thorny subject of whether good writing is an art or a craft, it is the philosophy of this course that it's a good thing that writing is a craft because crafts can be taught (and learned). On the other hand, a little art never hurt anyone.

The goal of the course is to have each student prepare a paper for presentation at professional meetings and for submission to a refereed journal. We will begin with an overview of the process of journal selection, submission, peer review, revision, letters to editors, and publication. The first assignment will be to identify an appropriate set of journals, a "wish list", so to speak. To prepare the paper for submission we will analyze the general principles important for good preparation and writing in each of the parts of a social scientific paper, with a roughly chronological approach, from abstracts to literature reviews, methods, results, discussion, references, tables, and figures. At the end of the semester, each student will present their paper in poster form, as for a poster session at the American Sociological Association meetings, and will give a talk based on the paper. Each student is expected to eventually submit their paper to the peer-reviewed journal they have selected, although this is not required for completion of the course.

Class sessions will include: discussion of student papers that have been read and critiqued by class members; a spotlight on one part of the social scientific paper's anatomy; a "Minute for Grammar", because everyone's writing style can be improved; and a "Minute for Books", because of my practically religious belief that good writing comes from good reading.

Course Requirements and Grading

For those students taking the course for credit, this course has a Pass/Fail grade. Students who have taken the course for credit in a previous semester may audit in order to complete work on a paper. However, auditors wishing the benefit of class attention to their work must be prepared to complete all requirements of the course, namely, participation in class, homework assignments, the revision of their own paper, an oral presentation, and a poster presentation. Auditors may register for 1-3 research credits with the instructor.

Course Objectives

1. To expose the student to print resources available to assist – directly and indirectly -- with good writing
2. To improve writing skills in grammar, structure, and style
3. To familiarize students with the process of selecting journals for paper submission, and peer review
4. To encourage critical thinking about textual and graphical presentation of social scientific research
5. To practice presenting social science findings in a poster session
6. To learn how to give an effective presentation of your work
7. To enjoy talking and thinking about good writing
8. To encourage creativity

Pooh began to feel a little more comfortable, because when you are a Bear of Very Little Brain, and you Think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it.

A.A.Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*, 1928

READING

Required Texts

Martha Davis. 1997. *Scientific Papers and Presentations*. New York: Academic Press.

EITHER Jane Miller. 2004. *The Chicago Guide to Writing about Numbers (“WA#”)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press., OR Jane Miller. 2005. *The Chicago Guide to Writing about Multivariate Analysis (“WAMA”)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reading assignments are given for both books. If you already own WAMA or plan to use multivariate analysis in your qualifying paper(s) or dissertation, use WAMA. If you don't already own WAMA and will not be using multivariate analysis, use WA#.

Eviatar Zerubavel. 1999. *The Clockwork Muse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Optional Texts

In addition, I have a collection of useful guides to various aspects of writing. You may already own some of them, and will certainly want to acquire others. I will keep the books in the following list in my office in Lucy Stone Hall, where you may refer to them or copy pages from them. All of these books are available from amazon.com, should you wish to purchase any.

General Guides for Nonfiction Writing

Claire Kehrwald Cook. 1985. *Line by Line: How to Improve your own Writing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

The work of an expert copy editor, with a heavy dose of traditional grammar and syntax. My choice for the best general guide to writing at the sentence level and below. With chapters on baggy sentences, faulty connections, parallelism, punctuation, and a terrific appendix on usage.

Constance Hale. 1999. *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose*. New York: Broadway Books.

Building up style advice, from words, to sentences, to music, using a motif of sins and pleasures. With many examples, from the King James version of the Bible, to Mark Twain, to email. More useful as inspiration than as a toolkit.

Richard Lanham. 2000. *Revising Prose*, 4th Edition. New York: Longman Publishing.

Using the “Paramedic Method” to reduce the “Lard Factor”, especially in social science writing, with a nice sensitivity to the “art” of giving shape and voice to sentences.

Patricia O’Conner. 2003. *Woe is I: The Grammarphobe’s Guide to Better English in Plain English*. New York: Riverhead Books.

A former New York Times editor’s wise advice, in commonsense language. Great advice on divining the proper use of that or which, one of my own common dilemmas (if you can drop the clause and the sentence still makes sense, use which).

Allan M. Siegal and William G. Connolly. 1999. *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

The entire book is an alphabetical index of all the words and phrases you have a question about. Should “jihad” be capitalized? [no] How do you punctuate if an ellipsis is at the end of the sentence? [after a space after the period] Should one capitalize the “s” in sociology department? [no]

Neither can his mind be in tune, whose words do jarre, nor his reason in frame, whose sentence is preposterous.

Ben Jonson
as quoted in Richard Mitchell, *The Graves of Academe*

William Strunk, Jr. and E.B.White. 2000. *The Elements of Style*, 4th Edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

The masterpiece of and about writing in the English language. A quick look-up for those troublesome rules of grammar, and an inspiration for writing direct, effective prose.

Lynn Truss. 2003. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. New York: Gotham Books.

Although originally aimed at "...the tiny minority of British People 'who love punctuation and don't like to see it mucked about with...'" this book somehow became a bestseller, in the United States no less. It really *is* all about punctuation. The preface alone is worth the price of the book.

Kate Turabian, John Grossman, Alice Bennett. 1996. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 6th Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

You probably already have one of these, but if not, it's the best all-around guide to formats and mechanics for the several types of papers you will write in graduate school. Not required for the course because we'll be formatting our papers for the specific journals we want to send them to.

Bill Walsh. 2000. *Lapsing into a Comma: A Curmudgeon's Guide to the Many Things That Can Go Wrong in Print – and How to Avoid Them*. Chicago: Contemporary Books.

Partly a style book, and partly a commentary. It has short but valuable chapters on writing about numbers, political correctness, and quotations. The alphabetical stylebook is not as detailed or complete as several others here, but it is the funniest.

Joseph M. Williams. 1995. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

More than a rule-book -- a "how-to-follow-the-rule" book. He is implicitly critical of Strunk and White, but lacks their wit and charm. Detailed attention to methods for managing the flow of ideas to achieve cohesion, emphasis, and coherence.

William Zinsser. 1998. *On Writing Well*. 6th Edition. New York: Harper Collins.

Short essays on many aspects of nonfiction writing. More inspirational (it is, I mean it) than instructional.

Specific Guides for Scientific and Social Scientific Writing and Presentations

Robert R. H. Anholt. 1994. *Dazzle 'em with Style: The Art of Oral Scientific Presentation*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.

Apparently simple, but effective and wise instructions on oral presentations, with chapters on preparing slides and posters. Emphasizes the importance of *speaking*, not *reading* to an audience.

Mary Helen Briscoe. 1996. *Preparing Scientific Illustrations: A Guide to Better Posters, Presentations, and Publications*. 2nd Edition. New York: Springer.

Focuses entirely on visual presentation for posters and papers given at meetings. How to make graphs, figures, diagrams, and tables readable for an audience.

Robert A. Day. 1995. *Scientific English: A Guide for Scientists and Other Professionals*. Phoenix: Oryx Press.

Another rule-book, with a focus on some of the perennial troubles of scientific writing (voice, person, and tense). Has a useful appendix of phrases to avoid and their less wordy, sharper substitutes.

We would take turns reading passages aloud, and words literally rose up in the air and descended upon us like a fine mist, touching all five senses. There was such a teasing, playful quality to their words, such joy in the power of language to delight and astonish.

Azar Nafisi
Reading Lolita in Tehran

Arlene Fink. 2005. *Conducting Research Literature Reviews: From the Internet to Paper*, 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

More about the search of the literature, and the integration of findings than about actually writing literature reviews, but has many useful suggestions.

Jose L. Galvan. 1999. *Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Los Angeles: Pyczak Publishing.

Excellent guidelines for organizing, drafting, and revising the literature review section of your paper. Contains a detailed checklist for evaluating what you have written.

Jack P. Hailman and Karen B. Strier. 1997. *Planning, Proposing, and Presenting Science Effectively: A Guide for Graduate Students and Researchers in the Behavioral Sciences and Biology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Covers proposal writing, report writing, presenting research at public meetings, including audiovisual aids, and preparing a C.V.

Zealure C. Holcomb. 2002. *Interpreting Basic Statistics: A Guide and Workbook Based on Excerpts from Journal Articles*. Los Angeles: Pyczak Publishing.

An unusual book entirely devoted to the written presentation of statistical results in the social and behavioral sciences. It proceeds by example, with self-study questions, and little in the way of instruction.

Janice Matthews, John Bowen, and Robert Matthews. *Successful Scientific Writing: A Step-by-Step Guide for the Biological and Medical Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scientific report-writing, from organizing for a first draft to correcting proofs on accepted manuscripts. Begins with a very useful section on thinking about audience and selecting a journal, and has a strong section on grammar and usage in the scientific paper.

Adelheid Nicol and Penny Pexman. 1999. *Presenting Your Findings: A Practical Guide for Creating Tables*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

A whole work devoted to the construction of tables for research reports, organized by the statistical method used.

Fred Pyczak and Randall R. Bruce. 2000. *Writing Empirical Research Reports: A Basic Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 3rd Edition. Los Angeles: Pyczak Publishing.

Good advice in short chapters on every section of the paper from titles and abstracts to discussions. Devotes a chapter to presenting qualitative research.

As for my experience with articles by experts in anthropology and sociology, it has led me to conclude that the requirement, in my ideal university, of having the papers in every department passed by a professor of English might result in revolutionizing these subjects – if indeed the second of them survived at all.

Edmund Wilson, *A Piece of My Mind*, 1956

COURSE OVERVIEW

January 23	Introductions and Course overview
January 30	The peer review process Titles and Abstracts
February 6	Literature reviews
February 13	Methods
February 20	Tables and Figures
February 27	Results
March 6	Discussion
March 13	Reference formats
March 20	(Spring break)
March 25	Poster Session (Wednesday)
March 27	Making time for writing
April 3	Submission and review
April 10	Preparing a poster
April 17	Writing your own reviews
April 24	Paper presentations
May 1	Paper presentations

++ All classes meet in Lucy Stone Hall Room A256 unless noted otherwise above ++

The least suspected fact of the intellectual life...is that thinking is a haphazard, fitful, incoherent activity. If you peer in and see thinking going on, it would not look like that trimmed and barbered result, A THOUGHT. Thinking is messy, repetitious, silly, obtuse, subject to explosions that shatter the crucible and leave darkness behind. Then comes another flash, a new path is seen, trod, lost, broken off, and blazed anew. It leaves the thinker dizzy as well as doubtful; he does not know what he thinks until he has thought it, or better, until he has written and riddled it with a persistence akin to obsession.

Young scholars should believe this in order to overcome their too frequent discouragement at the sight of their first thoughts or their first drafts.

Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America*, 1955

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Date	Topic	Reading to discuss that day	Assignment due that day
1-23-09	Introductions Course overview How do you write?		
1-30-09	Peer review process Writing Titles and Abstracts Minute for grammar Minute for books	Davis Chapters 1,2,7,10 Appendices 6,7	Choose a paper for revision Select two journals for submission
2-6-09	Writing Literature reviews Discuss critiques of Titles/Abstracts Minute for grammar Minute for books	David Chapters 3,4 Appendix 2 Miller Chapters 1,2 (WA# or WAMA) AND pp. 226-227 (WA#) OR pp. 260-262 (WAMA)	Pair-critiques of Titles/Abstracts
2-13-09	Writing Methods sections Discuss critiques of Literature reviews Minute for grammar Minute for books	Davis Chapter 5 Miller Chapters 3,4 (WA# or WAMA) AND Ch.10 (WA#) OR Ch. 12 (WAMA)	Pair-critiques of Literature reviews
2-20-09	Preparing Tables and Figures Discuss critiques of Methods sections Minute for grammar Minute for books	Davis Chapter 11 Appendix 8 Miller Chapters 6,7 (WA#) OR Chapters 5, 6 (WAMA)	Pair-critiques of Methods sections
2-27-09	Writing Results sections Guest speaker: Jane Miller Discuss critiques of Tables and Figures Minute for grammar Minute for books	Miller Chapters 5,8,9,11 (WA#) OR Chapters 7,8, 9, 14 (WAMA)	Pair-critiques of Tables and Figures
3-6-09	Writing Discussion sections Discuss critiques of Results Minute for grammar Minute for books		Pair-critiques of Results

The research literature identifies many factors said to be sadistically associated with morale.

Rutgers University undergraduate research paper

Week	Topic	Reading to discuss that day	Assignment due that day
3-13-09	Preparing posters for presentation Discuss critiques of Discussions Minute for grammar Minute for books	Davis Chapter 8,17 Appendix 13 Miller 2007 paper and online lectures	Pair-critiques of Discussions
3-25-09	Poster session		
3-27-09	Making time for writing Guest speaker: Eviatar Zerubavel Minute for grammar Minute for books	Zerubavel Chapters 1-5 Davis Appendix 4	
4-3-09	Submission and review Discuss Papers 1-2 Minute for grammar Minute for books	Davis Appendix 5	Class-critique of Student Papers 1-2
4-10-09	Preparing slides for presentation Guest speaker Discuss Papers 3-4 Minute for grammar Minute for books	Davis Chapters 13-16 Appendix 10,12	Class-critique of Student Papers 3-4
4-17-09	Writing your own reviews Discuss Papers 5-6 Minute for grammar Minute for books	Davis Chapter 9 Appendix 11	Class-critique of Student Paper 5-6
4-24-09	Paper presentations Minute for grammar Minute for books		Paper presentations 1-3
5-1-09	Paper presentations		Paper presentations 4-5 Cover letter Final draft ready for submission

To overcome the academic *prose* you have first to overcome the academic *pose*. It is much less important to study grammar and Anglo-Saxon roots than to clarify your own answers to these three questions: (1) How difficult and complex after all is my subject? (2) When I write, what status am I claiming for myself? (3) For whom am I trying to write?

(1) The usual answer to the first question is: Not so difficult and complex as the way in which you are writing about it. Proof of that is everywhere available: it is revealed by the ease with which 95 per cent of the books of social science can be translated into English.

C.Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959

DETAILS FOR WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Due	Assignment	Instructions
Varies	Minute for books	Tell us what you're reading (fiction or nonfiction) and how it is influencing your writing. We'll take one volunteer each week.
Varies	Minute for grammar	Tell us about a grammatical pet peeve (that drives you crazy in other people's writing) or <i>bête noire</i> (that you can never seem to get right yourself). Bring some examples of things we all ought to be improving in our writing. We'll have a sign-up sheet, and I'll bring one myself each week.
1-30-09	Choose a paper to revise	It must be a complete draft of a paper you are committed to revising, suitable for submitting to a peer-reviewed journal in the field of sociology. The paper must be in electronic form so that you can send it by attachment to other members of the class.
1-30-09	Select two journals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Identify your first and second choice journals for publishing the paper you have chosen. Write a brief account of your decision-making process, including <ol style="list-style-type: none"> how you identified candidate journals; your perception of the chosen journal's audience; your perception of the chosen journal's prestige/impact; the suitability of your paper's topic/approach for this journal. Make a copy of the "Instructions to Authors" page from each of the journals.
Varies	Pair-critiques	<p>We will pair up with someone new for each section. Read the whole paper, but critique only the assigned section.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Post your paper to your folder on Sakai Resources "Track changes" directly on your partner's manuscript Save file with your initials, post to your partner's folder Discuss in pairs during class Next week, use the initialed file

3-25-09	Poster session	Prepare a poster version of your paper as for an ASA poster session. We will display the posters at the annual department poster session.
4-3/4-10/4-17-09	Class critiques	We will all read and critique the papers of the week. <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Post your revised paper to your folder on Sakai Resources2. "Track changes" directly on manuscript3. Save file with your initials, post to the author's folder4. Discuss with the class
4-24/5-1-09	Paper presentations	Prepare and deliver a 12-15 minute presentation of your paper as you might for ASA or a job interview. Speak from notes; do not read your paper. Use visual aids to organize the material and present findings. Be prepared for questions.
5-1-09	Final draft	Submit the final draft of your paper that you have been revising during the semester. It should be in the format of your first-choice journal.
5-1-09	Cover letter	Submit the cover letter that will accompany the paper to the journal.