

CHAPTER 5

WRITING PAPERS FOR SOCIOLOGY CLASS

*Essays, Capstone Papers,
and Literature Reviews*

In the second chapter, we discussed the “Bricks and Mortar” of writing and described general approaches to writing. This chapter builds on that by examining the various ways those skills are used and the different types of papers a student may have to write for different undergraduate sociology courses. These papers range from short reflection papers to longer capstone projects. We will discuss the types of papers as well as give suggestions and tips for how to approach these writing assignments. We will review the various essay assignments, ways to approach writing literature reviews and reports, as well as annotated bibliographies. We conclude with the process of reviewing these assignments as well as a Writing in Practice essay written by a sociology undergraduate student.

APPROACHING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

As described in other chapters in this book, writing is not just about the work that you do but also how you prepare for it. This is also part of completing class assignments. It is not just the paper that you write, it is also ensuring that you are writing the right thing. Before you start writing any of your assignments, you need to prepare for them.

Review Your Syllabus

Within a week of the first class, make sure you review the syllabus from each of your classes to get an overview of your courses and the

requirements to complete them. Create a summary sheet that will act as a quick reference guide for each of your classes. Keep in mind, as you are reviewing the syllabus, that there may be assignments listed that do not include a description of all of the steps to completion or might be adjusted over the course of the semester. The important thing is to have a general idea of when assignments will be due. Once you have made individual review sheets for each class, compile the due dates on to one sheet, organized by month. In this way, you won't be surprised at any point in the semester because you have a lot of assignments due. Instead, you can divide the work over the course of the semester and not become overwhelmed. See Appendix for a sample syllabus review sheet and an assignment summary sheet.

Break Down the Assignment

You should begin all of your writing assignments in the same manner as you did your syllabus: by carefully reviewing the assignment and instructions. You should be able to answer these questions: What am I expected to do in this assignment? How much is this assignment worth? What skills do I need to utilize to complete this assignment? What is the due date? Are there any drafts or outlines required beforehand? Do I need to consult with others (e.g., group members, experts in the field) to complete the assignment? All of these do not necessarily determine the amount of effort involved in completing the assignment, but it does certainly help you think about how and when you should approach it. For example, although you want to put a great deal of effort into all of your course work, if the assignment is worth 50 percent of your overall course grade, you will want to pay special attention to it. Doing poorly on an assignment worth so much means that you will likely perform poorly in the overall course. You may want to extract the information on to a separate sheet or underline it so you can easily find it (see Appendix for a sample assignment worksheet).

Review Instructions

Now specifically focus on the instructions of the assignment. You want to make sure to thoroughly read through the instructions so that you are certain that you understand what you are expected to do along with any particular steps you should take in constructing the assignment. Typically, assignments ask students to constructively analyze and think

about a topic. You might need to do additional research to complete your assignment or you might simply need to reflect on the content of a lecture, film, or reading, and describe your thoughts and analysis. Make sure you understand the assignment, and if there is any aspect of the assignment you do not understand or are unsure of, immediately ask your instructor during her or his next office hours. It is always better to talk with your instructor in person instead of via e-mail as the question can be lost or unclear online. The office hours are there for you to use them, so take advantage. If you are only able to ask your instructor digitally, make sure that your question is clear and directly addresses any confusion or lack of clarity you have with the assignment. Make sure to write down the response to your questions or any additional instructions you may have received. See Chapter 2 for more information about writing an e-mail.

Make Note of the Due Date

Once you understand what you are being asked to do in the assignment, make sure to note the due date and any additional assignment materials (such as rough drafts). Make sure that the due date is added to your calendar. If the paper is due at the end of the semester, giving you a few months to complete it, you should begin work on the assignment soon after receiving it or check your Assignment Due Date sheet to find a good time to work on it. Typically, when faculty gives you an entire semester to complete a writing assignment, that instructor has high expectations for the assignment and would expect you to spend a great deal of time constructing it.

For a longer research paper, it is always wise to try to review the paper with your instructor before the due date. Beyond asking your instructor questions about the assignment, if you have any, you want to make sure that you write multiple drafts of your paper before turning it into your instructor. It is important to remember that your instructor is grading your assignment when you turn it into them. You want to make sure that your papers are always free of spelling and grammatical errors and that you follow all instructions. Many universities have writing centers on campus where writing tutors, who may be graduate or fellow undergraduate students, will review your papers and assignments. You can always have your friends and classmates, particularly the ones in the class with you, review a draft of your paper as well. It is always good to get a second, or third, or better yet, even fourth pair of eyes on your papers before turning them into your instructor. Your instructor's job is

to not only provide guidance but to also evaluate your work and the more time you give yourself to approach the assignment, the more time you will have to be certain that you are submitting a quality paper free of spelling and grammar issues (see Chapter 6 for more information on editing and revising).

COLLEGE PAPERS

Here we will provide a general overview of the types of assignments students can come to expect in college classes. Keep in mind that this is intended to be general information and, again, we suggest you speak with your course instructor and work closely with them to ensure that you are following all instructions for each of your assignments. As mentioned in the second chapter and above, you will need to follow the instructions closely. The most common types of course papers assigned in undergraduate sociology classes include essays, research/term papers, and assignments that require data collection, such as writing up fieldnotes or a capstone paper. These are writing assignments that tend to have a logical progression and begin with an introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction typically states what the paper or essay will address, with the body addressing it. The conclusion reviews what was addressed in the overall essay (see Chapter 2 for more general information on paper structure). The assignment's prompt and instructions will provide you with detail on how exactly to approach and structure the paper. There are a few different types of college papers. We will use the popular terms below but know that your professors may use those words differently. You may want to ask your professor if his assignment fits any of these instructions. Any direction they provide should be prioritized over what we include here.

Essays

These are typically shorter writing assignments (two to five pages) that do not require a lot of additional library research or background information. Essays are often assigned as exams in order to assess your level of knowledge on a particular topic. There are four types of essays that students are often assigned and what these essays require you to do is in their name: analytical, argumentative, compare and contrast, and reflection essays. Remember that with all assignments, particularly essay assignments where you are often not using a lot of additional research to support your claim, you want to make sure that your logic is clear and the

reader can easily follow it. Any evidence that is available to enhance your essay or that the professor asks you to include should be cited, whether it is course material or research that you conducted at the library or online. Just as other writing in this book, each of these essays should begin with an introduction and end with a conclusion. The specifics of those sections and the details of the body is where these pieces differ.

Analytical Essay

The purpose of this essay is to thoroughly think through a particular idea or concept. You will be expected to analyze a given concept and provide your response to it. You will begin with a research question but unlike the argumentative essay below, you will not necessarily have a particular perspective when you begin the essay. Analytical essay assignments often include the word *analyze* but might also use *examine*, *investigate*, *consider*, *explore*, or *dissect*. For example, a professor might ask you to “analyze how race is represented in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.”

You will be expected to explore this topic and, through that exploration, your hypothesis may change. You will need to follow a logical progression so that your readers can understand the points you are making in the paper. The best way to begin is to answer the question to the best of your ability. Then, you will need to find evidence from allowable sources to support that answer. As you delve deeper into this topic, you may decide that your initial answer doesn't hold up or make sense. You will then need to rethink it, return to your hypothesis, and collect evidence again. In an analytic essay, you will likely be graded on your ability to write a hypothesis and support it with evidence in a logical way.

In your introduction, you will need to introduce the paper and your research question or topic. The body will be your analysis where you identify and incorporate evidence that supports your response to the question. This might include direct quotes, paraphrases, or summaries, depending on the assignment. You will then need to appropriately conclude your essay.

Argumentative Essay

This essay is similar to an analytical essay, but it will have a special emphasis on creating and supporting an argument. You will usually need to use course material and additional research to support your argument. Make sure to clearly explain what your argument is in the beginning of the essay and spend time breaking apart and providing evidence for each element of your argument so that it is clear to the reader.

An argumentative essay assignment will generally ask you to take a particular perspective which may be left up to you or may be assigned to you. Words such as *argue*, *debate*, *claim*, or *dispute* might be used in the assignment description. If you are not given a perspective, you will need to first determine your perspective and then use the same skills as above to break down that perspective into the evidence you will need to support it.

Similar to an analytical essay, you will first introduce the essay and topic, then list each piece of your argument and your evidence supporting it. You will likely need to present opposing viewpoints as well and explain why that perspective is not correct, accurate, or valid. Afterward, conclude the essay by restating your thesis and connecting it to the evidence you just shared.

Compare and Contrast Essay

These essays require you to present an argument or topic and then review another topic based on elements of the first. You are comparing (showing how topics in the same or in two separate essays are similar) and contrasting (showing how they are different). You will want to make sure that you dedicate particular portions of the paper to each example and that your comparisons and contrasts are clear and make sense to the reader.

The assignments will likely include the words *compare* and *contrast* but could also ask for *differences* and *similarities*, *associations*, *commonalities*, or a *relationship*. Your professor may ask you to look for a particular theme—such as race, class, or gender—across the two or multiple pieces (studies or time periods), or she might ask you to find one or several similarities or differences across them. Once you know what the common and distinct elements are, you will need to select or identify the ones that you will be focusing on and then collect the evidence that demonstrates it.

You will start by introducing the topic and paper, then present the multiple issues, theories, and so forth, and show how they are similar and how they are different. You can either organize your paper by the issue or theme—including information about each document in the sections—or you can organize it by document—describing all the elements in each document before going on to the next one. Either way, you will need at least a few sentences to connect the different documents before you conclude the essay.

Reflection/Expository Essay

Reflection essays, often known as expository essays, can be of any length, so be certain to ask your instructor if there is a page or word requirement. Often, your professor will give you a specific question or

list of questions to answer, but you may also be assigned a reflection essay with no or limited questions.

Unless given other specific information, your essay should be a reflection on the main points of what you have read, seen, or done, and how it has had an effect on you or what you are doing in the class. Has it changed how you think about anything or what you believe? Does it connect with experiences, assignments, or discussions you have had? Is there anything missing or anything you would like to learn more about? Most reflection essays will use the word *reflect* but could also ask you to *consider, contemplate, ponder, or think about*.

To complete this, you should begin by picking out the main points from whatever you are supposed to reflect on and briefly summarize it. If the professor has not attended the same event, completed the reading, or seen the film that will be written about, you will likely need a significant summary. If she or he has, then it does not have to be as long. Following the description, clearly note how the film, book, or event made you feel, and in particular, how it relates to class lectures and materials. A reflection essay should make you do just that—reflect on the assignment. You will also generally need to provide examples from the material and literature before you conclude the essay.

Annotated Bibliography

Annotated bibliographies were discussed in Chapter 3 as being an integral part of the writing and research process, but they are also written as class assignments and can be published in journals or sometimes on webpages run by social service organizations and agencies. Many of the same rules apply in writing an annotated bibliography as part of your writing process as in writing one for submission to a professor; however, there are some differences. This section will address how annotated bibliographies can be written for an assignment while helping to increase your understanding of a particular topic or area within the field.

Most annotations are very short, typically 150 to 250 words long—about the length of an article abstract. As a result, you will have to be as concise as possible in writing each annotation. Don't forget—the purpose of the annotated bibliography is to summarize, as succinctly as possible, a book or article and to evaluate its relevance to a particular topic. Since the purpose of your annotated bibliography is to find books and articles that pertain to one area of study, you do not need to summarize the work in great detail. Annotated bibliographies that are written for instructors, or for inclusion in scholarly journals or other

publications, should be written in a complete and clear but succinct manner, much like an abstract.

Introduction: Annotated bibliographies typically begin with a paragraph describing the purpose of the annotation. This introductory paragraph provides background information on your topic as well as a discussion explaining the parameters of your literature search and why certain similar topics were omitted from your search.

Citations: Citations are typically written in full American Psychological Association (APA) or American Sociological Association (ASA) format. Similar to ASA and APA reference sections, the citations are listed in alphabetical order, with the annotations following.

Annotations: Again, although overall annotations vary, most annotations contain the same information—a summary of the book or article and its connection to the larger topic. Annotations often answer the following questions:

- What is the author's subject?
- What is the author's main focus?
- What is the author's scope?
- What do you think the author hopes to accomplish by writing this piece?
- What is the author's background?
- What are the author's qualifications? Do you find his work credible?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What relationship, if any, does this work have with any other works in this field of study?
- What conclusions are reached by the author?
- What is your assessment of the reading? How does this book or article compare to the other books and articles included in your bibliography?
- Are there any limitations or biases in this work? If so, what are they?
- What are your overall conclusions concerning this source?

Conclusion: Many annotated bibliographies often contain a paragraph after the annotations with an overall review of all the books and articles discussed in the bibliography.

What to Avoid: It is important to stress that each annotation is very short. To make the most of your word count, avoid the following:

- Generalizations and/or imprecise modifiers (*really, very, bad, good, and excellent*).
- Beginning each annotation with, "This article . . ." or "This book . . ."

- First person (“I”).
- Referring to the article or book by its full name multiple times in the annotation. To save space, refer to the author’s last name instead.
- Repetition of information that can be found in the title. For example, in a review of the book *Gender and the Social Construction of Illness*, you would not need to say, “This book explores the impact that gender has on the social construction of illnesses.” That is implicit in the title, and it is a waste of space to repeat it. Since the topic of the book is already clear in the title, the space in the annotation should instead be used to describe the book and provide an evaluation.

If you use this as a precursor to a literature review, you should put together your research by focusing on relating these articles and books to one another. What do these articles and books have in common? Do they contradict one another? What is missing from the literature? Are there important methodological or theoretical concerns that should be addressed by the literature that aren’t? How will you do it in your research? Make note of *how* this literature supports your argument. Organize your findings by subtopics—as the example below demonstrates with asthma—which can address a particular methodology, theory, or finding.

- I. Subtopic 1 (increasing rates)
 - Article 1
 - Article 2
 - Article 3
 - Article 4
 - Article 5
- II. Subtopic 2 (reducing rates)
 - Article 1
 - Article 2
 - Article 3
 - Article 4
 - Article 5
- III. Subtopic 3 (difficulty reaching subjects)
 - Article 1
 - Article 2
 - Article 3
 - Article 4
 - Article 5

The number of subtopics you include or address in your annotated bibliography will depend on your research project or your assignment requirements. You may address only two or three subtopics, or you may have several. However, be certain that the literature you include in your annotated bibliography informs your assignment, contributes to the discussion on this topic, and explains to the reader how you arrived at your topic. Again, be sure to focus the annotated bibliography you create around the subtopics you find in your literature as opposed to going article by article, summarizing each one. You may find that some of your articles fit several of your subtopics. Check with your professor, but most will let you include them in discussing multiple subtopics. If you find that you are referring to the same article in every subtopic, pick the strongest point or two that the article makes and find other articles for your other subtopics.

Literature Reviews

Annotated bibliographies and literature reviews are similar in that they are both collections of the literature organized around themes and subthemes. However, an annotated bibliography is more organized around the articles while the focus of a literature review is the subthemes. An annotated bibliography is a good way to prepare to write your literature review, but the description of an article in a literature review may only be a sentence long, specifically illustrating how it relates to the theme.

In college, you might come across literature reviews in a couple of places. They are most often found as part of a larger project (such as the capstone project described below), but they can also be assigned as stand-alone assignments. These literature reviews are often referred to as research papers. A literature review is a critical review and analysis of research on a particular topic or area of study. Literature reviews focus on different themes and arguments found within the research and are most frequently used to help the writer formulate a research hypothesis. Literature reviews are typically written as a research paper or included within research reports, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, and scholarly journal manuscripts. Where the literature review is included will often dictate its length and structure, with longer literature reviews found in dissertations and books and shorter ones found in articles. For a class assignment, your professor will likely give you a length for the paper and may also ask that your literature review be a particular length, include a particular number of references, or cover a particular number of subtopics.

Your literature review should be written as an essay in which you explain to the reader how you came to your research topic and hypothesis. Just like any essay, your literature review should contain an introduction, body, and conclusion. We suggest creating an outline first, similar to the ones discussed in Chapter 3, with a focus on the literature. This outline should trace the development of your argument based on the literature you found. If you are hypothesis testing, the annotated bibliography you compiled to prepare for your study will greatly help you in writing an outline and, ultimately, your literature review. As the annotated bibliography doesn't just provide a summary of relevant articles and books, but also contains your review of each individual article and how it relates to the other articles you collected, it can be the foundation for any argument you are making. In your annotated bibliography, you should have made note of what theories or methodologies may be problematic or missing in previous research. Again, this can help give you possible ideas for research projects. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this saves you from having to go back and read the articles again to decide what to include in your assignment.

We mentioned in Chapter 3 that you should concentrate on scholarly articles and books, and this is also what you should include in your literature review. From the annotated bibliography, select the articles and books that informed your research. What omissions from the literature inspired your research? Is there something in the literature that your study refutes? How could the literature be combined in a new way to support your theory? Again, the purpose of your study should determine which literature you select to include in the review.

Once you have selected the literature from your annotated bibliography, think about how you plan to structure the body of the review. The structure of the review will likely be determined by your research question(s) or assignment. Reviews are typically structured in one of three ways: chronologically, methodologically, or thematically.

1. *Chronological Review*: As the name suggests, chronological reviews are arranged in chronological order by either date of publication, time period analyzed, or how a topic or area of study has changed over a given time. For example, articles and books published during a particular time period would be grouped and discussed together in different subsections of the body of the review. If you were examining the history of education reform, you could categorize the changes according to time period, such as examining changes in access to education before and after the 1954 *Brown et al. v. Board of Education* ruling.

2. *Methodological Review*: A methodological review is organized not by the research topic but by the methods used to conduct the research. For example, if the literature review examined the different approaches to studying religiosity in the United States, research that utilizes a quantitative approach would be grouped separately from research that utilizes qualitative methods.
3. *Thematic Review*: Thematic literature reviews are usually organized by the themes or concepts found within the literature on a given topic. How is the topic discussed or analyzed within the literature? What ideas or themes do you find emerging from the literature? For instance, a project studying literature on civic engagement might focus on the various forms of civic engagement and then on the demographics of those who would most likely participate in these activities.

Regardless of whether the literature review is thematic, methodological, or chronological, reviews should be organized by like concepts presented in the literature, such as trends in time periods or themes found in the literature on your topic. Do the articles or the research on your topic have a similar methodology, theory, or population type? What work do you feel is relevant to your project? Are there studies that you want to refute or support with your research? What research enhances your theoretical framework? You don't want to select too many different themes or subtopics, as it will confuse the reader. Instead, stick to the ones that most informed your research.

Keep in mind that the purpose of the literature review is to give the reader an idea of the journey you took through the literature that helped you develop your research project and hypothesis. If your research project explores the rates of asthma among the urban poor, for instance, you will probably find many articles and books on that topic. These articles and books address a number of issues or subtopics, also known as themes, within the literature that tackle this issue from a variety of perspectives. These subtopics, as described above, range from what causes asthma within this group, such as secondhand smoke or pollution, to the increasing rates of asthma within this population. Research may examine the work done to reduce these rates. Research may also explore the difficulty in reaching subjects to participate in studies on asthma rates. You might find articles that focus on a particular age demographic, such as children or the elderly. You will also find articles that will address how the rates influence a particular racial/ethnic group within urban populations. As mentioned above, one article could cover several themes and different articles will address the same themes. Once subtopics are

identified, organize the literature or sections of the literature into those subtopics. Remove the annotations you did not use.

As described above, a next step could be to reorganize your annotated bibliography into one that selects and summarizes the pieces of literature most relevant to your work and explains how these selected articles relate to one another and what is missing from the literature. After your subtopics have been identified and the literature has been arranged by subtopic, you can then begin the process of fleshing out your annotated bibliography and molding it into a literature review essay.

You will begin the literature review essay by introducing the reader to the review. In the introduction of your literature review, just like in the introduction to an essay, you should provide the reader with an overview of the types of literature you examined for your research, the way the review will be structured, and, importantly, the themes or reoccurring issues you found in the literature that pertain to your topic. You can also provide any definitions for terms found and examined in the literature you will present. For example:

This research concerns how a social problem is framed (Spector and Kitsuse 1987) and how issues relating to health and health care can be framed based on themes and ideas that resonate with its target population (Kolker 2005). The idea of “framing a problem” is quite relevant to the social sciences. This concept can be applied when addressing a number of social issues, such as missing children (Best 1987), labor disputes (Babb 1996), and even understandings of White separatism (Berbrier 1998); furthermore, it holds great relevance to the development of health social movements. The use of frames is especially important in the case of the Black Church, whose congregants were not targeted by mainstream AIDS awareness campaigns (Harris 2010).¹

Once you introduce the literature review to readers, you should then move into the body of the review. Regardless of whether you organize the body of your review chronologically, methodologically, or thematically, you will have to present your literature in an organized manner based on concepts or subtopics found in the literature. To make your literature review more organized, we suggest providing subheadings for some of the larger subtopics you found in the literature that informed your project. These subheadings provide a very clear visual breakdown of the literature review and the topics you will cover in the review. If you do not want to use subheadings, you should still be sure that you have constructed clear transition sentences so your readers can follow your discussion as you move from one topic to the next.

After your introductory paragraph, you will present the research in order of subtopic. Again, you are writing a literature review, not an annotated bibliography, so you do not want to go article by article in your analysis and summation of the literature. You are going one step further in your literature review than you would if you were writing an annotated bibliography. Explain how these articles relate to one another and *omit* the summary of each article. If a number of articles make the same point, you should summarize or put their overall point or argument into your own words and cite the authors whose points were included in this summation. In the example on pollution provided above, the author could state under the “Increasing Rates” subheading:

Rates of asthma have been increasing among the urban poor (Jones, Collins, and Smith 2009; Martin 2006; Williams 2005).

The rest of that section of the literature review should examine what the literature says about increasing asthma rates. As opposed to describing what each of the three articles says about pollution, this example summarized a common point about asthma rates among the poor. Since they all provided the same overall finding, you can cite the works together. You can break your subtopics up by paragraph or you can provide separate subheadings within your literature review. If your paper is on pollution, your subheadings could be race, class, increasing rates, for example—whatever subtopics informed your project. Again, your literature review is based on what you learned from the overall literature, not necessarily what each piece of literature says. As a result, you do not go source by source but, instead, write an essay and use the literature to support your claim or argument. There will be a lot of citations throughout your literature review. Don't be worried if it seems as though every other sentence has a citation. This section is called a literature review for a reason. Ultimately, the argument you present in your review of the literature demonstrates to your readers, professors, and yourself the need for and importance of your research.

After you have gone through your various subtopics and referenced the pertinent literature, you will inform your audience of how it led you to your research topic. This is where you will discuss your hypothesis. Again, the purpose of the literature review is to place your research into a particular research area. You should use this section to talk about the ways the holes in the research that has been conducted directed you to take on your project the way you did. What was missing from previous work? What subtopics did you synthesize to develop your hypothesis? This discussion of your hypothesis also serves as a conclusion to your

literature review. You want to be certain that you provide enough information in your literature review so that the reader can clearly see how you arrived at your hypothesis.

CAPSTONE PROJECTS

Projects are increasingly becoming popular as the final assignment in a number of master's programs, most often in applied sociology graduate programs. However, capstones are also used in undergraduate classes as the culmination of a college career. All the research and courses you took while in your program becomes a project that serves as the capstone of your education. Projects vary based on program requirements and student research interests, but in sociology, they are typically the application of theory to fix or provide advice on a problem or issue within an organization, institution, community, or some other social setting. Capstone projects are those that encapsulate your whole sociology education. You will want to show that you can understand and incorporate sociological theory as well as use sociological methods (qualitative or quantitative) in your work. It serves as a way for the department to know that you have learned as a sociology major in the department.

Capstone projects can take a number of different forms, depending on your department's requirements. Some capstone projects consist of oral presentations while others are written. Capstone projects might take the form of papers that consist of large literature reviews or they might require you to collect original data or analyze data provided to you. The following will provide instruction on writing a capstone paper based on original data collected. The suggestions in this section will also be applicable to a capstone paper written from secondary data (or data collected by another researcher). As described several times in this book, papers typically have different sections: introduction, literature review/background, methods, findings/results, discussion, and conclusion, and may also include an abstract and reference page. We will review each section in detail below.

Introduction

For a capstone paper, the introductory section is typically only a few paragraphs long, as the primary purpose of this section is to provide the framework for your paper. Here the author introduces the reader to the paper and the topic. In your introduction, you want to make sure you clearly state what your paper will address and how you will go about

exploring the topic. The introduction to your research has three main functions: setting the stage, stating the problem, and responding to the problem.

Setting the Stage

Introduce your topic and your reason for analyzing the topic. Although it is safe to assume that your instructor will be somewhat knowledgeable about your topic and the issues surrounding it, you shouldn't build your paper on that assumption. You could start with a striking opening line. Think of a good book or an interesting magazine article you have read. They often start with an opening line or phrase that captures the audience's attention. Below, you will find illustrations of some well-known opening lines from books you may have read:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*²

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*³

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.

—George Orwell, 1984⁴

I am an invisible man.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*⁵

Some of these lines are long and descriptive, while others are straightforward and to the point. Either way, these opening lines draw in the reader and set up the story. You want your opening line to do the same. Your introduction should grab the reader's attention. You may want to begin your paper with an interesting fact or statistic about the issue you

plan to examine. A researcher exploring diabetes within Latino communities could start his introduction with the following:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention⁶ estimates that the rates of diabetes among Latinos in the United States have increased dramatically in recent years.

Although not enormously striking, an opening sentence such as this not only would let the reader know what the paper will be about but also would highlight the importance of the issue you plan to address, as well as the importance of your paper.

You can also begin with a quote from a notable scholar or theorist. For instance, if you were conducting research on the response of a sample of residents to the high unemployment rates in their city, you could begin your paper with the following line:

More than 50 years ago, C. Wright Mills (1959)⁷ wrote, “Nowadays people often feel that their private lives are a series of traps” (3); it would appear that today, very little has changed. Unemployment rates are increasing in both urban and rural areas throughout the country.

You can even begin with an interesting anecdote or story about your experience with the subject. This could be particularly helpful if your project is based on ethnographic research or some other firsthand account. For example, if you are writing about your experiences observing student–teacher interactions in a classroom, you could use a passage from your fieldnotes, or notes taken during ethnographic field study, to start the paper.

Mr. Smith beamed as the students in his fourth-grade class raised their hands, both anxious and eager to answer his question: When did Columbus arrive in the Americas? Students jumped in their seats and called, “Oh, oh,” as they frantically waved their hands back and forth, hoping they would be the one chosen to answer.

The author could then put this scene into context and explain to the audience how it is important to the work or representative of the issues pertaining to the research question.

These are just a few ideas for how you can start off your paper. The primary goal is to make sure you set the stage and provide enough

background information about the issue for your readers. An opening sentence that is straight to the point not only informs your reader about the paper and topic but keeps you on track.

Stating the Problem:

Once you set the background or let the reader know a little about the overall topic, your next goal will be to state the problem. Be clear for your readers (and reviewers) when you explain what the social problem is. Again, the purpose of writing the paper is to address a particular social issue or problem. You need to clearly define for the reader what this issue is and why it is important. You should be able to articulate clearly, in one sentence, the overall point of your paper. In fact, you can simply write:

This paper will address . . .

The nature of your project will determine how you state the problem. For example, if your manuscript is based on empirical research where one or more independent variables were manipulated, clearly explain to the reader which variable you tested. You could write:

This study explores the influence that the [independent variable] has on the [dependent variable].

Let's say you are studying the influence of fast-food consumption on the body mass index, or BMI, of teens. The independent variable in this case would be food consumption. The participants' BMI would be the dependent variable. The dependent variable is the variable influenced by (dependent on) the independent variable. For example:

This study explores the influence fast-food consumption has on the BMI of a sample of youth between the ages of 13 and 17.

The above example clearly explains to the reader the issue that the paper will address.

Responding to the Problem:

Now that you have set up the background, provided the context for your reader, and described the problem, you are ready to explain how your research explores or responds to the problem. You are not

necessarily explaining what the large-scale response to the problem *should be*, just how *you* respond to the problem with your research. This is the point in the introduction where you explain to the reader what your paper is about. In this last part of your introduction, you tell the reader why your paper is worth reading. In essence, you should be able to explain your theoretical premise and how your paper will address it. What do you think is contributing to this problem? How do you go about explaining it in the research you present in this paper? This is typically where the author would describe and introduce readers to her hypothesis if she were hypothesis testing. If your paper were to explore the influence of fast-food consumption on the BMI of teens, you would first want to notify the reader of the relationship being examined:

This study explores the influence fast-food consumption has on the BMI of a sample of youth between the ages of 13 and 17.

You could then tell the reader what you expect to find.

This project posits that increased levels of fast-food consumption will be positively correlated to higher BMIs among teens.

Some authors include in the introduction whether or not their hypothesis was supported by the research, while others wait until later in the paper to inform the readers of this. Don't worry about spoiling the surprise, as the reader already knows what you will find—you already identified your findings in your abstract (discussed later in this chapter).

You could also begin with a question and answer the question in your paper. For example:

How does fast-food consumption influence the BMI of a sample of youth between the ages of 13 and 17?

Then inform your readers that your paper will explore the response to the proposed question.

Again, these are basic ideas about writing the introductory section of your paper. You could also seek out examples of introductions (for example articles in the journals from which you collected references) for ideas on how to organize and structure your introduction. It's important to remember, your introduction does not need to be too detailed, as you will explain your literature, methodology, findings, and analysis in the body of the paper.

Literature Review

Literature reviews, as complete research papers, were discussed in great detail earlier in this chapter but we will focus here on how they are often written as just a part of a research paper. Research studies and empirical research typically require that your paper contain a review of the literature on your topic. Sometimes, a literature review can also be included in the introduction of the paper or within a background or context section (a brief section often found within the introduction that provides the historical framework for the study). Either way, you need to show that you reviewed the relevant literature on your topic.

The purpose of this section of your paper is to discuss what previous research has said about your research topic. It also describes the literature used to develop your research hypothesis or questions. The literature review explains to the reader what literature informed your argument. Literature reviews are usually found in the beginning of the paper and should be written as an essay (as described above), with an introduction, body, and conclusion. The literature you present should be a review of the most pertinent literature on your research topic, and it should help you organize and justify your research project.

A majority of literature reviews for research papers typically utilize the thematic literature review format. In this case, you will organize your literature review section by themes found in the literature. Each theme should be discussed separately, with effective transitioning sentences or subheadings separating each theme. Most literature reviews cover several different themes found within the literature. Remember not to go article by article but, rather, theme by theme, and focus on the links found between the books and articles. Since the literature review for capstone papers are relatively short—these types of papers are usually around 20 pages long—the literature review should be focused and straight to the point.

As we mentioned before, the nature of your capstone paper, the instructions from your professor, and the methodology employed may determine the structure and placement of your literature review. Grounded theorists collect and analyze their data before the literature is examined and look for the theory to emerge from the data. The idea is that this reduces researcher bias when it comes to data analysis. The researcher lets the data speak to her before consulting the literature to explain the observed behavior. If you are taking a grounded approach in your project, you should look for themes to emerge from your data in a similar fashion as you would in looking for subtopics in your review of the literature. Once you have identified these themes in your data, conduct a review of the literature to see how previous research has addressed what you

observed in your findings. The more literature you examine, the easier it will be for you to present your explanation and theoretical analysis, which should be incorporated within your literature review.

As explained above, your literature review will likely be organized by subtopics that address particular aspects of your research project. The way the articles are presented in a literature review will depend on the purpose that the piece of literature serves for your larger project and the type of literature review you are writing. When an article makes multiple points related to the research you are doing or you are focused on something that requires more space to discuss, you might have to use a paragraph to describe an article. See the sample breakdown below of the organization of a literature review on the promise of education leading to social mobility.

I. Subtopic 1 (Cultural Explanations)

- Point 1/Reference 1

Cultural explanations often center on aspects of the culture of minorities and low income people. John Ogbu and Signithia Fordam have produced well-known examples of this focus on individual or group culture. Based on their fieldwork, they conclude that Black students are faced with “the conflict inherent in the unique relationship of Black people with the dominant institution: the struggle to achieve success while retaining group support and approval” (Ogbu and Fordham 1986). Ogbu’s thesis, often referred to as “the burden of acting white” posits that Black students underachieve because of the stigma they face embracing the norms, which in this case is productive participation in schools, of the dominant group.⁸

- Point 2/Reference 2

Based on research in low-income communities in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and New York, Oscar Lewis (1966) described a “culture of poverty” in which poor people are trapped and it produces conditions where after the age of four or five, regardless of changes in the environment, individuals are unable to change their behavior. This might lead to an interpretation of his work which would preclude the investment of funds into poverty areas for basic social infrastructure such as neighborhood schools, commercial areas, parks, or housing.

As demonstrated in this example, often there are several related points in an article which would encourage using an entire paragraph to discuss it. However, the relationship is still maintained between the points and there is a connection to an overall theme. There will likely be a few articles in your literature review that will be organized in this way. What is more likely is that you will be pulling from a variety of different sources to support a

particular point. In this case, each paragraph will include multiple references. In fact, even a sentence might be supported by different authors.

I. Subtopic 1 (Cultural Explanations)

- Point 3/References 4-8
- The Moynihan Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), named for its author, former New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, is an example of this type of reasoning. According to Moynihan, the African American family, marked by the prevalence of female-headed households, shows “an unmistakable influence” on the underachievement, dropout rates, and general “pathology” of the African American community. In contrast to the theories described above, Juan Battle and others have demonstrated that the effect of family structure on education and cognitive ability varies and can be influenced by additional variables such as income, mother’s mental health, and multigenerational households (Battle 1997; Carlson and Corcoran 2001, Deleire and Kalil 2002; Ginther and Pollak 2004). For example, Battle found that among African American families at lower socioeconomic status (SES) levels, students with divorced parents “scored significantly higher on standardized achievement tests than did their counterparts from married households” (Battle 1997:37).

The second to last sentence is an example of what much of your literature review will look like. Though it doesn’t specify which reference refers to which point in the sentence, together they support the point that there are other variables that influence the relationship between family structure and education.

In contrast, Juan Battle and others have demonstrated that the effect of family structure on education and cognitive ability varies and can be influenced by additional variables such as income, mother’s mental health, and multigenerational households (Battle 1997; Carlson and Corcoran 2001, Deleire and Kalil 2002; Ginther and Pollak 2004).

As shown in these examples, the literature review is not summaries of the different articles but references to particular points emphasizing the ways the articles connect to each other and the subtopic. Incorporating theory is also an important part of the literature review and is often required in capstone papers, as it explains to the instructor how you developed the theoretical framework for your study. In incorporating theoretical perspectives, you want to make certain that you not only

understand the theory but also can explain how it relates your research. Through the process of reading the research and theories presented in the literature, you will then be able to develop the theoretical framework you will use to test your hypothesis. This framework can either be incorporated into the literature review or can be a separate section presented after the literature review. However, the purpose of this framework is to explain how you came about the theory used to dictate your project.

Pay special attention to the following:

Be selective. You should be as thorough and exhaustive as possible in your initial review of the literature. However, when you write your paper, you should include only the literature that informed your project.

Focus on scholarly journal articles and books. Scholarly journal articles and books offer the best resources to help you develop your hypothesis, as they have been reviewed by other scholars in the field and have been deemed an important contribution to the field. Also, if you do not use any scholarly articles and books, you have not performed a proper review of the literature, and this may reflect negatively on your overall grade. We advise against including too many references to webpages, magazines, newspapers, and encyclopedia entries, but if you do include these sources, use them with caution. See Chapter 3 for more information on conducting research.

Don't go article by article; go subtopic by subtopic. As described in detail above, your literature review should be written as an essay. Do not move from one article to another, evaluating each one. Instead, present the literature based on the subtopics and analyze the articles found within those subtopics.

Focus on recent literature. While you may have begun the research project with a collection of resources, we suggest that you continue to examine current research during the entire research and writing process. In fact, you should keep looking until you write your final draft. You will also need to show your instructor that your paper is timely and fits within the current dialogue on the topic. Don't forget, new papers are published every day.

Don't quote too much. Try to use your own words in defining something or providing a description. Your instructor wants to read your voice and your interpretation of the readings. You will provide a list of all the books and articles you used for your project in your reference section, so if your instructor wants to know exactly what

other authors said about a topic, she or he can find that particular article. Keep in mind that if a student quotes too often throughout his literature review, it is often a signal that he didn't understand the material well enough to put it into his own words. See Chapters 2 and 3 for more information about quotes and research.

Do not cite citations. Use primary literature. If you find an article or book that directly quotes or cites another source—a source that defines a particular sociological term, for example—and you want to incorporate that term or definition into your paper, do not cite another researcher's citation. Instead, seek out the original article and cite that instead.

Make sure you cite the proper article. Keep track of the different articles and books you use throughout your review of the literature. Be organized so you don't mix up research, forget to attribute a theory to the correct person, or mistakenly leave out a citation. While many students and professionals wait until they have completed their paper before they organize their references, the process always takes longer than you think it will and it is best to add references as you use them. See below for more information about the reference section.

Methodology

Now that you have introduced the instructor to your topic and project, reviewed the literature, and explained your hypothesis, you must inform her of how you went about proving or disproving your hypothesis or answering your research questions. Here, we will explain how research methods are most frequently described in research papers. The methods section explains the what, who, why, when, where, and how of your data collection process.

- *What* methodologies were used to collect the data?
- *Who* is included in the data? Who was spoken to? Observed? Surveyed?
- *Why* were these data used or these respondents chosen?
- *When* were the data collected?
- *Where* were the data collected?
- *How* were the data collected?

The purpose of the methods section is to describe to your instructor the methods used to address your research question and, importantly, to justify your methodology. The methods section also usually explains

how data were analyzed. However, you can sometimes opt to include this in the results section of the paper instead. Remember, your methods section should provide enough information that another social scientist following your methodology would find similar results. This makes your research stand up to scientific inquiry.

The structure of your methods section will be determined by the project itself and the instructions provided by and approved by your capstone instructor. The methods section describes your research plan as well as your data, including the data collection process and analysis. There is usually a difference in how qualitative and quantitative researchers present their methodology. However, the write-up of both methodologies describes the research plan and the study participants and materials used as data. Either way, you will need to present your methodology in a clear and organized manner.

Research Process

Describe the data and briefly discuss your research plan or the process by which you identified and gathered the data. What specific methodology did you employ to gather your data? Did you conduct a content analysis, ethnography, or interviews? Did you distribute surveys or questionnaires? Here you will describe your unit of analysis (what you are actually studying) and identify the study variables and how they were measured. You will also want to explain what your research design is and, importantly, *why* this methodology was chosen.

Sample

Describe your data and your reason for selecting these particular subjects or materials to obtain your data. If it is quantitative data, you may also have to explain your sampling procedure.

Study Participants

Explain who your study participants are, why they were selected, and how you were able to access them. Essentially, what criteria were used to select your study participants? How are these participants representative of the issue you want to examine? How many participants do you have? You can opt to include demographic information, such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or religion, for the subjects in the methods section of the paper. Other writers opt to include this in the results section, as any findings concerning demographic information are a result of data analysis, which is usually discussed in the results section.

Materials

Explain what materials (such as books, newspapers, magazines, films, diaries/journals, pictures, artwork, etc.) were used, how they were selected, and how you were able to access them. List and describe the materials you used. If you performed a content analysis of Western films of the 1950s, you will need to list each film and explain why these films were selected. You may also want to provide more information about these movies, for example, in the endnotes or appendix of the manuscript (we provide a more detailed discussion of the appendices and endnotes at the end of this chapter). If you analyzed brochures, you will need to let the audience know what you looked for and how this will help you explore your hypothesis.

Data Collection

Once you have described your sample, you will need to describe your process of obtaining the data from the study participants or materials. You will not just describe how you collected data but the specific procedures for data collection. Do your data consist of an analysis of the transcripts collected in a focus group? Do they consist of a historical narrative? Whether you used secondary data (data collected by someone else) or have collected your own data, you will need to describe your data in detail to your readers. Did you conduct interviews? What were the interview questions? How long were the interviews? Consider providing sample interview questions in the text of the manuscript or even providing the whole instrument in the appendix of the paper.

Location

Describe your research site. Where did you go to find your study participants and collect your data? Did you conduct an ethnography? Depending on the nature of your project, you may want to provide a description of the neighborhood or community in which your study participants reside. Did you conduct phone interviews? Did you interview people in your office? Did you interview them in their homes, churches, or places of employment? Where did you go to distribute surveys? Did you try a location that didn't work? You have to describe where your study participants came from.

Time Frame

Identify the time frame for data collection. Identify the number of weeks or months it took you to gather the data. You may also want to explain how long it took for your participants to complete the surveys

or interviews. If you conducted an ethnography, how long were you in the field?

Response Rate

The response rate is the percentage of people who actually responded to the request to participate in the study. Discuss how many people were initially approached, how many agreed to participate, how many people were actually interviewed, surveyed, and so on. Response rate is very important to a research study.

Analysis

The discussion of your data analysis can appear either in the methods section or the results section. However, it is typically found in the methods section of your paper, as data analysis is part of your research methods. What method did you employ to analyze the relationship between the variables? Explain how you will analyze your data. Was your project quantitative? Which statistical software package (e.g., SPSS, SAS) did you use to analyze your surveys? What statistical tests did you use? Did you perform a simple bivariate analysis or a multivariate analysis? Was your project qualitative? Which qualitative software package (e.g., ATLAS.ti, NVivo) was used to analyze your interview data? Did you analyze your qualitative data by hand?

It is also appropriate here to explain what the unit of analysis is. What were you looking for? Did you explore certain themes or concepts? Let your instructor know what these are so they know what to expect when you present your findings and your analysis of the findings. Keep in mind that you are writing about how you conducted your analysis here, not what you found after conducting it. See Chapter 4 for more information about the writing involved in research projects.

Results

This section, also often labeled “Findings,” explains the results of your study that are relevant to your research hypothesis and questions. This section should be written in a straightforward manner. To start off this section of your paper, you will want to restate your hypothesis to remind the audience, or your instructor, what you planned to look for and what you expected to find. You will then proceed to discuss your findings. It is important to emphasize that this section is where you present your

findings to your audience, not where you interpret or discuss your findings. Save that for the discussion section of your paper. You will, however, report your results and explain whether or not your hypothesis was supported. Here you will also describe how the descriptive variables, such as race, age, and gender, influence your findings. You should present your findings organized around the various codes or themes you used to analyze data, keeping all like information together. As it is possible that your research might reveal an unexpected but important relationship, you can also include that here. You could also provide separate subheadings for each section. It is important to present your work in a clear and organized manner. If you used a mixed-methods approach (both quantitative and qualitative) in the data collection, you should try to present the results yielded from your qualitative analysis in a different section from the results yielded from your quantitative research. Scholars typically write and present the results of their quantitative and qualitative research differently. However, the incorporation of quantitative and qualitative research will vary depending on the nature of your project and the assignment.

Quantitative Research

For quantitative researchers, it is very important that the results section be written in a way that clearly explains the statistical procedures and measures conducted. You will want to remind the audience, or your instructor, of the statistical tests you performed and report the results. Explain the direction of the results and/or levels of significance. You may also need to explain the critical values and degrees of freedom. The purpose of conducting a statistical analysis is to ascertain the probability that the variance between the items in your data is a result of actual differences between people, rather than errors in your findings.

In your description of your statistical procedure and results, it is important to word your findings properly. Present the results of your test in sentence format. Explain in words what is being evaluated and what kind of effect those factors have. What was the significance level of the interaction? If an item is statistically significant, it means there is a higher probability that your findings are the result of the independent variable rather than random error. You should also inform your audience of the alpha level at which your data were statistically significant. For example:

Data were statistically significant at the alpha level of .001.

As you may remember from your research methods class, the lower the alpha level in your results, the less likely that some random error caused the findings. To illustrate:

Gender was statistically significant at the .05 level in predicting one's perception of household chores.

This example would demonstrate that the relationship between gender and household chores was likely not a result of an error in the data or the particular sample that you selected but that women and men actually perceive chores differently. Make sure to include your major findings in the results section. Include any descriptive and/or inferential statistics you may have found. How did the respondents' demographic characteristics influence the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable? If it is important to your research, you will want to explain this in detail.

Qualitative Research

Papers based on data gathered by qualitative research methods (e.g., focus groups, interviews) tend to allow for a bit more freedom in how work can be presented compared with the way quantitative researchers write their reports. Qualitative papers often blend the methods and results sections, as often the way researchers gather data *is* the data.

Another major difference between presenting qualitative vs. quantitative research is the rich description often used in explaining research settings or sites. Data collected through qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, tend to describe the subjects individually and in much more detail. This is done in part because qualitative researchers may not have as many respondents as quantitative researchers do. More respondents decrease the probability that the findings were influenced by error or sample selection alone.

Qualitative research is more exploratory and, as such, provides the audience with a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of the study participants. Here, description is critical. You should include demographic information about the respondents, such as their age, race, and gender. You may want to describe what your study participants were wearing, the settings in which you interviewed them, and their professions, for example. This is especially helpful the first time you introduce a respondent to the reader. Knowing more information about study participants may provide some context for their responses to your questions or for your analysis of the social issue(s) being examined. The following is a quote one might find in a qualitative paper on the influence of small-classroom size on student learning:

One respondent, Ms. Simmons, stated: "The more time I spent with students, the better they read!"

This example provides a deeper description of the participant:

Ms. Simmons, a second-grade teacher who has been teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District for more than 45 years, believed that spending one-on-one time with students helped improve their reading skills. After one particularly busy class, Ms. Simmons exclaimed: "The more time I spent with students, the better they read!"

This description helps put the quote in context. The fact that Ms. Simmons has been teaching for 45 years may add some authority to what she said. Would you think differently of her quote if she had taught for two years? Providing more of a description of the participant helps provide legitimacy to both the participant's quote and your analysis of it.

In qualitative projects, interview quotes or descriptions of the data (for content analysis, for example) should be presented as data. Taking the above example, you could write:

A majority of the respondents in my sample indicated that the more time teachers and staff spent with students, the better they did in school. Ms. Simmons, a second-grade teacher who has been teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District for more than 45 years, believed that spending one-on-one time with students helped improve their reading skills. After one particularly busy class, Ms. Simmons stated: "The more time I spent with students, the better they read!"

The quote simply provides an example of what other study participants have indicated. As qualitative researchers typically analyze written documents, such as fieldnotes, diaries, and journals, as data, incorporating the text into the results section is customary. It is common to see passages from a researcher's fieldnotes used as data to describe a location or respondent. This helps add depth and give the reader a better understanding of the data.

Tables, Diagrams, Graphs, and Charts

Tables, diagrams, graphs, and charts that can better illustrate your findings are typically included in the methods or results section. Including these graphics allows others to visualize the relationships between the variables. A variety of charts and tables can be created, and the type of visual you create, as well as the format, will vary depending on the research method performed, type of analysis, software program, and even paper assignment. The visual most frequently used within are tables. As such, we will focus here on how to incorporate the discussion of tables into your writing.

Tables are most frequently found in papers that utilize quantitative methods and are used to provide a visual of the statistical information and findings. Tables are often used to chart information such as independent and dependent variables, demographic information, percentages, mean, standard deviation, significance tests, alpha, and regression coefficients (see the example below in Table 1). A well-constructed table allows for the reader to visualize information easily in a compact presentation. Tables can be constructed from the output of statistical software packages such as SPSS or manually created in programs such as Microsoft Excel. As mentioned above, the structure and format of the table vary depending on the nature of the project and what you are trying to convey through the table. The sample table below illustrates statistical findings explaining on- and off-campus community involvement among a sample of college students.

Be sure to label the chart appropriately so it corresponds to how you refer to it in the text. Check with your instructor about inclusion and

Table 1 Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for On- and Off-Campus Community Involvement Among College Students

	Dependent Variables On-Campus Community Involvement (N = 453)		Dependent Variables Off-Campus Community Involvement (N = 453)	
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
<i>Independent Variables Community</i>				
Connected to college campus	.284*** (.335)	.278*** (.328)	.230*** (.252)	.225*** (.246)
Connected to off-campus community	.130*** (.037)	.123*** (.131)	.072† (.071)	.073† (.072)
University faculty/staff support	.006 (.009)	.009 (.013)	.038 (.053)	.026 (.902)
Comfort in campus communities		.112*** (-.024)		-.124*** (-.164)
Comfort in off-campus communities		.017 (.025)		.078* (.107)
Constant	1.285***	1.273***	1.536***	1.460***
Adjusted R	.160	.158	.088	.091

Notes: † p ≤ .10 * p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001; (betas in parentheses)

placement of tables, charts, and other figures before including one in your paper. For example:

As illustrated in Table 5.1, the rates of obesity have declined among . . .

Wording of Findings

Be sure to word your findings properly. Your findings are based on a sample of people, books, films, for example—samples you hope are representative of the general population with those same characteristics. As such, you cannot use sweeping generalizations to describe your subjects or results. For example, in reporting your survey findings on perceptions of race in the United States, you cannot say:

Despite Barack Obama's presidential victories, Black people believe they are still oppressed in the United States.

Although all the Black people in your sample may have reported that, it is important to clarify that you are referring only to the Black people in your survey, not to all Black people. If you are not precise in your language, it reads as though all Black people believe this, which is clearly not the case, as you did not survey all Black people in the United States. This could be rewritten more accurately:

Despite Barack Obama's presidential victories, the Black people in my survey believed that they are still oppressed in the United States.

Thus far, we have written up the important literature on the topic and the research hypothesis. We have discussed how you need to explain to your audience the methods you used to prove or disprove your hypothesis. You learned how to present your results and inform your audience whether or not your hypothesis was supported. Now it is time to talk about the analysis and interpretation of your results, and this leads us to the discussion section.

Discussion

After you present your findings and explain whether your hypothesis was supported or not, you will want to analyze your findings. You will need to support your summation based not only on data but also on where the data are positioned in the literature you reviewed for your

paper. The discussion section is the most important section of a research paper. As we mentioned above, the focus in your results section is on presenting your results to the reader, without interpreting their meanings. The discussion section is where that interpretation occurs. There are a few key parts of discussion sections that, regardless of the methodology used to gather the data, you may want to include.

Restate Hypothesis

To begin, restate your hypothesis and what you expected to find as a result of your project. It may feel as though you keep repeating your hypothesis, but it is important to remind your reader of your hypothesis, and the repetition also helps keep you on track and focuses your paper. If your hypothesis was supported by your research, explain how it was supported and what factors you think influenced this. Similarly, be sure to explain why and how you think you obtained these results if your hypothesis was not supported. Inform your reader of what these results mean and what the larger implications may be, not just for your research but also for the field of sociology. Again, the purpose of good research is to contribute to a particular area of study, so you want to clearly explain *how* it contributes to the field.

Connect to the Literature

After you discuss your hypothesis, you should then discuss the important results of your project. Inform the reader of what these results mean and the implications for your research. The same way you broke down various topics, subtopics, and library findings in the literature review may be helpful here. You can provide subheadings to keep yourself organized so you go topic by topic. It is also important here to tie your findings back to the literature and the theories you discussed in your literature review. Was the literature supported, or did your findings refute a previous study? Here you will have a dialogue with the literature and explain how your findings/research contribute to field.

Larger Implications

As sociologists, much of our research addresses some kind of social problem or ill. Many of us write with the intent of influencing public policy or the community in which we study. For instance, our findings can be used to reduce health disparities or increase the quality of education, not only for our respondents but also for others in need. In your discussion section,

you should explain what public policy and even practical implications your research has. Explain why people should care about your findings.

Areas for Improvement: Flaws and Future Research

No research project is perfect. How would you improve your study? Many papers that you've likely examined include a description of the "flaws" in their research and even label them as such. We, on the other hand, encourage you to think of them as "areas of future research." View any "flaws" you may find in your research design or methodologies as an opportunity for you or someone else to replicate the study. If your project explores the relationship between fathers and their children and you obtained your sample of 15 fathers from a list of fathers active in the Boy Scouts, this could be problematic. Even though you may think you have a really good sample based on race, class, and education level, your project is still biased. Who is to say that the opinions and behaviors of the 15 men are really representative of the typical father? Does the typical father participate in the Boy Scouts? While there will always be sampling bias with most forms of data collection, it is important to realize what these biases are and honestly report them in your paper. It is part of the research process. While addressing flaws may seem discouraging, this is how we keep conversations going within our field.

Conclusion

As with the literature review and the introduction, we often combine the discussion and conclusion sections of a paper. Much of the information you can include in the conclusion of your paper you could also include in the discussion section; yet for the purposes of clarity, we will examine the conclusion separately.

Your conclusion is where you do just that, conclude the paper. Just as you introduced your research to your audience in the introduction, you will conclude the discussion on your research in this section. Start off by restating your main point and the overall purpose of your paper. Was your hypothesis supported? If so, briefly explain why and how. Remind your reader (or your instructor) why your project is important. Additionally, some researchers opt to include policy implications and areas for future research here, instead of in the discussion section. You should end your paper by answering the question, "So what?" This question explains why your research was important and the contributions it can make, not only to our field of study but to the larger social picture.

ADDITIONAL PAPER SECTIONS

Abstracts

Abstracts are short, one-paragraph (or so) summaries of the various sections of your paper. Abstracts are typically 100 to 300 words in length. Most research papers within the social sciences contain the following summarized information in their abstracts: the research question/problem, the methods used, the results, and a sentence or so explaining the study's larger implications. In writing the abstract, be sure to provide a thorough summation of your important findings and conclusions. Think of the abstract as a brief synopsis of your paper (see Chapter 2 for more information about abstracts).

Titles and Subtitles

Ideally, your title will accurately represent your project and jump out at the reader. Be creative. Your title can be a play on words, a famous saying, or even a quote from a subject. It is customary for social scientists to create subtitles as well. A subtitle is often used to describe the actual issue being addressed in the text. Providing a subtitle that clearly explains the project to the reader can be especially helpful if the main title is catchy but vague. This can also be reversed, where the subtitle is catchy and the title explains the topic. In your title, you want to provide as much information as possible without creating an extremely long title. Ideally, you should include information related to your hypothesis or conclusion and your sample (Chapter 7 also includes information on titles). Examples of titles and subtitles from some well-known sociological texts include the following:

- “There She Is, Miss America”: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant
- Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class
- Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity

References

Your reference section is based on the literature you actually referenced throughout your paper and should be included with every paper written where literature was cited. This section comes at the end of your paper.

Be sure to check the formatting guidelines dictating the proper citation style. As previously mentioned, most sociology faculty require references in ASA or APA format. The citations should be listed in alphabetical order by the first author's last name. Be sure not to change the order of the names for each article or book. The names should be listed in the exact order they were presented in the original work, as they are either in alphabetical order or positioned to indicate who did a majority of the work on the project or who the primary investigator is. As a result, they get first billing.

The reference section should include only the literature you referenced in your paper. Make sure you check with your professor to find out how they want the reference section formatted (see Chapter 3 for more information on formatting the reference section appropriately).

Footnotes/Endnotes

Footnotes and endnotes are also used to cite information or to include a little note or background information on a topic that, although it relates to the issue, does not fit in the main text. The primary difference between endnotes and footnotes is their placement within the text. Footnotes are found at the end of the page on which the related citations appear. Endnotes, more frequently found within journals and books, are placed at the end of the paper, article, chapter (in an anthology), or book. Do not try to create your own footnotes or endnotes by using a superscript. Most word processors have a function that will do that for you. Often foot- and endnotes are separated from the rest of the text by a line and they are sometimes in a smaller font

Use footnotes/endnotes sparingly, as you should try to include only pertinent information on your topic in your paper. Footnotes and endnotes should be used only if you think they will provide context or additional information for some readers that does not necessarily fit within the actual text. Ask for professor which, if any, they prefer.

REVIEW YOUR WORK

There are a few steps you want to take before you submit your paper. Remember, make sure to follow all instructions and review them before submitting your paper to your instructor. Presentation is everything! When you review your work, do not look only for grammatical errors (although you do want to check for those) but also check for the soundness of your argument. As usual, thoroughly review and revise before submitting

anything for evaluation. Ideally, your work should be extensively reviewed by at least two other people (see Chapter 6 for more about editing and revising). Review the following aspects of your paper in particular.

Argument. You should be able to identify your thesis quickly. Is your argument sound? Do you support your thesis with adequate evidence from your data? Do you provide a clear and logical argument concerning your analysis of your findings? Make sure your paper is focused and that you stick to the subject and examine only what is relevant to your thesis.

Terminology. Be certain your wording and use of terminology is correct.

Transitions. Make sure the paragraphs flow together and that you have proper transition sentences or subheadings in your text.

Grammar/spelling. Check for errors in sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, passive voice, and citations. You should avoid contractions when using your own words and are not quoting someone who used contractions in his work.

Format. Check for margins, font size and style, spacing, indents, structure, charts, citation style, in-text citations, and end-text citations.

Word count. Be sure to stick to the word count or paper length. If you feel as though your paper will go over this range, contact your instructor and ask if it will be acceptable. Sometimes instructors will allow you to submit a longer piece, while others will stop reading once you reach the limit. Be sure to check if the reference section is often included in the final word count or page limit.

Tense. Methods sections are typically written in the past tense; however, fieldnotes are written in the present tense. Literature reviews can be written in both past and present tense, but much of that depends on the literature you are describing. The discussion section is typically written in the present tense. The conclusion section can be written in the past or present tense. If you are unsure as to which tense to use, ask your instructor for suggestions.

First person. Debate exists concerning how much professional distance should be maintained in your work. Some writers argue that writing in the first person is unprofessional and that you should maintain a professional distance from your research. Others argue that placing the

researcher into the work grounds the project and allows for the researcher's perspective to come through in the writing. Typically, qualitative researchers write in the first person (*I, me, and we*) and quantitative researchers write in the third person (*he, she, and it*). In qualitative research, particularly ethnographic work, the researcher is often an active participant in the data collection process. As such, it makes sense that she writes in the first person. Again, make sure to review this with your instructor if you have questions concerning this in your paper.

SUMMARY

Course papers are often the first forms of writing that sociologists compose. Different types of course papers were discussed in this chapter, including

- different types of essays,
- annotated bibliographies,
- literature reviews, and
- capstone/research papers.

The “Writing in Practice” piece for this chapter is written by Daniel Balcazar. Daniel is a recent graduate of Marquette University who majored in sociology. In this essay, Daniel explains how he approaches researching and writing his course papers.

WRITING IN PRACTICE

By Daniel Balcazar

Before tackling any sociology writing assignment, you have to first learn sociology. Learning and understanding comes before writing, much like how you learn to walk before you learn to run. This may sound rudimentary, but it is imperative. *Sociology* is, by definition, a discipline about the world around us; therefore, as “sociologists,” it is not only important to read the mandated course materials, but it is also vital to learn about the world and attempt to understand it. This includes reading about history, staying up to date on international and local news, and learning and getting involved in the your community. I am a community organizer as well as a student. I am on the board of an immigrant rights organization and would argue the experience has benefited me as much as my classes this semester have. Firsthand experience is invaluable and cannot be achieved solely through books. It is one thing to

read about oppressed communities and use Max Weber's theories to analyze oppressed powerless communities; it is another and far more holistic approach to include direct experience working alongside community members to empower communities. When writing a research paper on health disparities for Latinos in my city for an upper level sociology course, I decided to include in the portion on a social innovation program design, a health clinic at the headquarters of the organization I am part of. I reasoned that the location was optimal and that the organization already had the infrastructural capacity, social capital, and community trust to adequately reach the most vulnerable of the community, including undocumented immigrants who tend to have the worst health outcomes among Latinos. Without my firsthand experience in the community, my ideas would have been superficial. Understanding and learning about the world and your communities are vital steps needed to successfully write well before you even write down any words.

It is also important to find your comfort zone and infuse writing with personal interests. This being said, when beginning to write sociology assignments for introductory courses, you must break out of your initial comfort zone and uncover find your interests. Few career sociologists come into introductory sociology courses knowing what will ultimately be their lifelong passion. So, as undergraduate students, we should use the sociology assignments in our courses to test the waters and uncover what area we love writing about. If I have a four-page paper to write on Pierre Bourdieu's forms of capital and their application to social media for a sociological theory course, as someone who gravitates toward conflict theory, I will shape the thesis to accommodate my perspective and intertwine Bourdieu's notions of the forms of capital with Karl Marx's economic notion of capital. As an emerging sociologist, try and find your comfort area; this can be done by exploring perspectives, theories, and topics. You may find that you have already developed one—it may be the perspective you find yourself most referring to in your papers, reading about in your free time, or experiencing in your life. What drew me to critical theory was that when I was younger, I loved when my father told me stories about growing up in Colombia in a dangerous political era and the history of guerrillas and socialism throughout Latin America. When I began taking sociology courses at the university level, I found myself most comfortable writing using a critical perspective.

Tackling sociology assignments can be difficult. Whether you are writing an analytic paper dissecting the arguments of George Mead's symbolic interactionism, or writing a literature review on prominent Black feminists during the 1960s, juggling the myriad of different theories,

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concepts, and theorists can be cumbersome. But reading critically, learning about your community, staying up to date with the world, and writing toward your personal interests have made the task manageable for me. As undergraduate students, we are constantly juggling many courses, and often different areas of study; we strive for clarity during the time of exploration and growth in our lives that is college. Taking the above suggested steps should hopefully aid you in that endeavor, as they have worked greatly for me.

—Daniel Balcazar, BA, is currently a graduate student in the Masters of Public Health Program at Emory University and has his undergraduate degree in sociology from Marquette University.

NOTES

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