

Chapter One

Introduction

Shaking his head and smirking a little, Carl asked me, “Do you know what I did when I was ready to turn in my paper for your class?”

“What?” I replied, expecting to hear about some superstitious performance ritual, like many of my students have confessed.

“I showed it to my wife.”

“Hmmm. What’s the story there?”

“I’ve always been embarrassed of what a lousy writer I am. I work like crazy on a paper but can never get it to sound right. I never let people read my writing because I know it’s weak. Not even my wife. But after working on this paper, with all the revisions and feedback from everyone, I felt like I should let her read my paper.”

“What did she think of it?”

“She said I sounded confident.”

“Wow. How long have you been married?”

“Five years.”

This conversation is telling. Here’s a married man who I suspect is intimate with his wife in many ways and yet who would not show her his writing. I hope she recognized what a risk he was taking when he finally let her read it.

Carl’s fears about writing betray just how emotional and personal writing can be for us. I suspect there are many who would rather let others see

them naked than let others read their writing. Maybe when we let others read our writing we feel naked. Indeed, writing—and letting others read it—is a risky, revealing act. Senior faculty have handed me draft manuscripts, saying in hushed tones, “Clearly it’s a work in progress” and then have gone on listing qualifications, self-flagellating in an attempt to influence how I will interpret any weaknesses that are in the text.

Ironically, while writing feels like a very personal performance, it is not merely an individual act of self-revelation. When done well, it is a social act too. In the process of letting others read drafts, give feedback, and talk out loud about our work, we can participate in a community of fellow writers or protowriters seeking to improve our craft. In my classes, I tell students to try to think of one another as fellow writers and thinkers, helping one another improve. But for most, it is difficult to quit thinking of writing as the place where there’s no faking it, where others get to see that we don’t know as much as we want them to think we know.

Undergraduates and early career graduate students face similar fears of sounding foolish or utterly failing to do what is expected. As a result, rather than just saying, “Aw, pull it together,” I try in this handbook to empathetically address the concerns that confront us when writing within the discipline of sociology. Based on my reviews of hundreds of student research papers, talking privately and in class about the writing process, and with help from my friends who have read drafts, I try to demystify the process and help students make progress like Carl did. While it is not possible to give you a sufficiently detailed prescription or recipe for constructing the perfect paper, or at least the paper that will satisfy your professor or thesis committee, it is possible to learn to avoid rookie mistakes and to pick up some tips from those who have gone before you.

The book begins with advice about how to create researchable questions and then provides an overview of a typical academic research paper. It then addresses two of the most confounding issues that students face: how to borrow well from existing research literature and how to document the use of that literature. The middle of the book is arranged in two sections. While some of the best research available draws well from both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, most papers we read in journals and most books tend to fall into one of these two styles of research. So the book first focuses on writing a quantitative research paper, recognizing that many of the things said there apply to qualitative papers. Then subsequent chapters turn to qualitative research, including more detail about writing with qualitative data as well as using these techniques in case studies and internship journals. Finally, the handbook includes other kinds of sociological writing

students are asked to complete, including book reviews and theory/content papers. This handbook is not meant to be read front to back like a novel.

But wherever you begin to read, you will find consistency in the advice given and the sense of hope and humility with which it is given.

While a book can provide advice, there is no substitute for reading sociological texts as a way of learning how to write. Most course textbooks themselves don't provide you that insight because they are written for students who are new to the discipline. But reading journals and monographs by sociologists and noting how they say it and what it sounds like when they say it will help you gain an ear for good sociological writing. So I urge you to read a few sociological articles out loud (probably not in the presence of friends or family—they'll think you're nuts) to hear how authors articulate their ideas. And see if the advice given in this book squares up with how published sociologists have constructed their articles and books.

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