WRITING FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

HOW TO START AND FINISH YOUR THESIS, BOOK, OR ARTICLE

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HOW DO YOU WRITE?

- Turn and Talk (2-3 mins) - Explain your process of writing to an elbow partner. (How do your start? Do you need certain writing materials? Is it during a particular time of day? Are there any quirky writing habits that must take place?) Be prepared to share out
CHPT 1: FRESHMAN ENGLISH FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

• Give up the one-draft method of producing papers

• An insistence on clarity and polish appropriate to a late version is entirely inappropriate to earlier ones meant to get the ideas on paper. Worrying about rules of writing too early in the process could keep you from saying what you actually had to say. The only version that matters is the last one.

• If you start writing early in your research -- before you have all your data, for instance -- you can begin cleaning up your thinking sooner. Writing a draft without data makes clearer what you would like to discuss and, therefore, what data you will have to get. “We decided that authors tried to give substance and weight to what they wrote by sounding academic, even at the expense of their real meaning.”
WHY DO YOU WRITE THE WAY YOU WRITE?

• Highschool habits
• Undergraduate term papers
• Graduate school writing
BOTTOM LINE

- Start writing early
- Gather a circle of people to review your work
• Write introductions last. "Introductions are supposed to introduce. How can you introduce something you haven't written yet? You don't know what it is. Get it written and then you can introduce it."

• Put your last paragraph first, telling readers where the argument is going and what all this material will finally demonstrate.

• Write whatever comes into your head, as fast as you can type, without reference to outlines, notes, data, books or any other aids. The object is to find out what you would like to say, what all your earlier work on the topic or project has already led you to believe. Do 'freewriting.'

• For students who get hung up trying to frame a dissertation topic, I ask them to write down, in no more than one or two sentences, one hundred different thesis ideas. Few people get past twenty or twenty-five before they see that they only have two or three ideas, which are almost always variations on a common theme.
THINKING ABOUT YOUR CURRENT TOPIC

• Take 15 note cards
• Jot down 10 things you want to say about the topic (things you know, things you believe, things in the literature)
• Organize them by things that seem to go together
• Make a card that generalizes the piles.
• Take cards that cannot be generalized and create a new pile. (Create a card that generalizes these pile(s))
Some useful tips for style:

• Active/ passive - Substitute active verbs for passive ones when you can. Sentences that name active agents make our representations of social life more understandable and believable.

• Fewer words - An unnecessary word does no work. It doesn't further an argument, state an important qualification, or add a compelling detail. I find unnecessary words by a simple test. As I read through my draft, I check each word and phrase to see what happens if I remove it.

• Repetition - Don't repeat the same word within so-and-so many sentences. You may have to repeat words, but you shouldn't repeat words when you can get the same result without doing it.
• **Structure/content:** The thoughts conveyed in a sentence usually have a logical structure, stating or implying some sort of connection between the things it discusses. We can make our point more forcefully by going from one to the next in a way that shows how they are connected other than by following one another in a list.

• **Concrete/abstract:** Scholars have favorite abstract words which act as placeholders. Meaning nothing in themselves, they mark a place that needs a real idea. We also use abstractions to indicate the general application of our thought. When we squeeze long, windy phrases into more compact phrases, we make diffuse ideas sharply specific. When we use concrete details to give body to abstractions, however, we should choose the details and examples carefully.

• **Metaphors:** Using a metaphor is a serious theoretical exercise in which you assert that two different empirical phenomena belong to the same general class, and general classes always imply a theory. But metaphors work that way only if they are fresh enough to attract attention. If they have been used repeatedly enough to be clichés, you don’t see anything new.
CHPT 5: LEARNING TO WRITE AS A PROFESSIONAL

- No one learns to write all at once
- Becoming an editor improved Becker’s writing
• I like to get it out the door. Although I like to rewrite and tinker with organization and wording, I soon either put work aside as not ready to be written or get it into a form fit to go out the door. Your research project isn't done until you have written it up and launched it into the conversation by publishing it.

• But equating time spent and quality [of final product] may in fact be empirically false. More work may not produce a better product.
• The most important benefit of writing on a computer: how much easier it would be to think by writing. I habitually write an
almost deliberately disorganized first draft -- whatever comes into my head -- hoping to discover the main themes I want to
work on by seeing what comes out in that uncensored flow. I continue to write the second draft which puts those themes
together in some more-or-less logical order. In the third draft, I cut words, combine sentences, rephrase ideas, and in the course
of that get an even clearer idea of what I mean to say.

• For me, it’s meant learning to think modularly, learning to deal more than I ever did with small units of material I can put
together and take apart in several ways to see how the result looks. Similarly, I edit extensively on the screen, skipping the stage
of printing out a version and working on the paper copy that many people hang on to. That allows me to look at five different
ways of saying the same thing before I decide on one. I may even line them up one under the other to compare them.

• Sociological writers keep data around in various forms: notes on reading, field notes, summaries of results, ideas about how to
organize materials, bibliographies, memos on this and that. Every scholar needs a system for organizing all this paper, and
computer programs called "file managers" or "data bases" do something like that. (Becker, Gordon, and LeBilly 1984 discuss the
criteria for computer systems to handle field notes and similar materials.)
IDENTIFY YOUR WORD PROCESSOR USE

• Use this time to jot down how you use technology to edit and prepare your writing. (consider any programs you use and explain why).
REFERENCES
