

# REGARD YOURSELF AS A WRITER

## Unconventional Advice for New Sociology Graduate Students

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### *1. Master Your Craft*

Becoming a good writer is a shrewd career move. Because of the highly competitive market for PhD's, a successful career as an academic or professional researcher requires being a publishable and moderately productive writer. "Publish or perish" still accurately names the academic game. Researchers in all fields who write well find it easier to attract readers, editors, publishers and job offers. Poor and tedious writers find it much harder to generate interest in their work. Despite this economic reality, only a small minority of college students and almost no graduate students in any field receive serious training in writing skillfully. Most successful professors learn to write well on their own. You will too.

As sociologists, writing is our job, our craft. Good writers think of themselves as writers. Too few students understand this when they begin graduate school. If you regard yourself as a writer and work on mastering your craft, you will be way ahead of the pack.

Writing sociology well requires the skills of story tellers and great teachers in all fields. Read as much good writing as you possibly can. Collect and regularly reread classic writing guides, especially *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser and *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E. B. White. Successful professional writers are always learning more about their craft, even when they only relearn what they once knew and forgot.

Good writers take notes. Take good notes if possible, but messy, incomplete notes will do in a pinch. Take notes on what you learn, copy passages from things you read, and write down memorable lines your friends say.

Good writers write frequently. Write letters and emails with whole sentences and paragraphs. Write essays, reading and field notes, journalism, poetry, and detailed descriptions of personal adventures. Get a bunch of active email relationships going and write often. Write, write, write.

The first principle of good writing is: Write clearly. Make it easy for readers to understand what you are saying. Make your message your most important priority and get out of the reader's way. Use many short sentences, vary the length of sentences in a paragraph, and use fancy words sparingly. To some extent the writer needs to disappear. By writing clearly we help readers accept that what we say is true. Science is in part a rhetorical strategy.

The second principle of good writing is: Write in the active voice. Or do what most of us do: write in the passive voice and then methodically edit yourself back into the active voice. Sociologists tend to focus on large forces and trends while neglecting to mention (or even think about) the organizations and human beings making things happen. For example: "the policy was ended," "the style was invented," and "Ford Motor Company was sued." All three statements leave wide open who did the ending, inventing and suing. Rewriting into the active voice requires identifying the actors. Instead say: "the Defense Department ended the policy," "the Beatles invented the style," and "the relatives of people who died in flaming Pintos sued Ford Motor Company." If we cannot clearly identify the social actors, we probably need additional information. Consistently using the active voice produces livelier, more readable prose *and* better sociology.

The third principle of good writing is: Rewrite everything. Even great writers say their first drafts are not good enough. Lucid, fluid prose comes from rewriting. Professional writers I know usually write *at least* three to six drafts of anything more important than a letter, and sometimes they do that for letters. Much rewriting means even more rereading, looking for the unnecessary and inadequate words, phrases, and sentences. Mark Twain said: "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Will Strunk said: "Omit needless words." Both statements call for rewriting.

Rewriting to improve clarity often requires reorganizing. When I was a graduate student, a professional researcher hired me to help write a grant proposal and gave only one direction: organize the proposal well by grouping topics in coherent paragraphs and sections: talk about one topic, then another, then a third. Following his advice involves moving around chunks of text. Therefore, block moves are your friend.

The fourth principle of good writing is: Give your work to *several* people, ideally those who write clearly. Ask them to tell you *first* what they liked, what persuaded them, what they found interesting, well said, compelling. Readers will always tell you their criticisms; although essential, criticism can be disheartening. Even your dearest friends will be slow to tell you what they liked about your writing. It is more work but make them do it. Ask for specific examples of things you did well. Restate for them what they say to make sure you understand. Be a glutton for knowledgeable praise. Try to produce what your readers like. Push your readers to suggest alternate wordings and specific solutions to the problems they find. And take their editorial suggestions to heart. If two readers you trust find a sentence, paragraph or section unsatisfactory, change it – even if you think it's the finest thing you ever wrote.

The fifth principle of good writing is: Edit other people's work. *Only* by editing other people's writing can we develop competence at editing our own work. You will find it much easier to recognize the problems in other peoples' writings. So edit *their* work. Break up *their* sentences. Cut *their* redundancies. Rearrange *their* paragraphs. Rewrite *their* sentences into the active voice. Offer *them* alternate wordings. Ask *them* to expand underdeveloped points. In the long run, the editing you so generously provide for others will be among the most self-serving things you've ever done.

Writing is solitary work. Writers spend a lot of time alone looking at pieces of paper and computer screens and talking to themselves. By editing other people's work, getting multiple readers for our drafts, learning what smart readers like and incorporating their suggestions, we make the work less solitary, more fun, and much better.

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## 2. *Writing up Research: Telling True Stories with Good Data*

Our job as sociologists, scholars, writers and teachers is to tell true stories.

To tell true stories we need data, usually good data, and if possible great data. The better the data, the better the story can be. Data come in all forms: words, numbers, pictures, graphs, recordings, artifacts, whatever. Contrary to what many graduate students and sociologists believe, for young academics trying to write for publication, data will get you through times of no theory better than theory will get you through times of no data.

To get good data we have to do research. We have to go out, get data, bring it home, and work with it. Fortunately, graduate schools of sociology can and sometimes do teach basic research skills, though research shops often do it better. For most research projects, curiosity, persistence, good luck, and some resources matter most.

To tell good stories with data we must figure out what we have learned and what we want to say. This requires thinking. Most of the time so-called writer's block is actually a case of *thinker's* block. Sometimes so-called writer's block is caused by a lack of data. If you find yourself stuck when writing, take it as a sign that you need to think more about what you are trying say, and a sign that you may need more information.

Everyone does some thinking at the keyboard or writing pad, but many intellectual and writing problems are best solved away from the keyboard. The more precisely we know what we want to say, the easier it is to write. Reading, pacing, biking, driving, listening to music, or just leaning against a wall can stimulate thinking and writing for some people sometimes. Conversation with clever friends and colleagues also can help a lot. And some writers only figure out what they think in the course of writing. Rewriting is even more crucial for them.

I recommend starting a paper with the data, with the story, and then generalizing at the end. Tell data-driven and theoretically-informed stories. After telling our tale, if we wish, we can step out from behind the curtain and use theory to contextualize, illuminate and explain our data. Unlike historians, sociologists have tended to do the opposite – to use data to support and illustrate a hypothesis or theory. I think that sociologists have much to learn from good historians about how to present findings and tell stories.

Make an argument; an argument is a story. A paper can develop only a few important points and make a case for something. Theory is a story told more abstractly, but a story nonetheless. If something can't be told as a story, it doesn't make sense. And if something doesn't make sense, it doesn't make sense. Don't be awed by nonsense no matter who says it. Ask the same questions of your own work and anyone else's: What's the point? What's the argument? What's the story?

Find model work. Closely read and master books and articles that are like the work you want to do. If we can't find good examples of the type of research and writing we want to do, we probably can't do it. Read (or at least periodically check out) top-notch intellectual journals. A serious sociologist is a real intellectual, someone who works creatively with facts, ideas and language. Therefore, read the best intellectuals writing today. Study and imitate them. Buy their books or take them home from the library, even if you don't read everything you collect. All good intellectuals do that.

Many sociological research projects and areas of study require expertise in two or more fields. To write knowledgeably about drugs, I also need to know some history, anthropology and pharmacology. The more we know about our topic, and of writing on it in any field, the better our work will be. It requires more time and effort to have depth in two or more fields, but the personal, intellectual, and professional payoffs are substantial.

Develop relationships with people who study the same topics as you. Read their writings, develop email conversations with them, talk with them on the phone. Try to make some of them your friends. Here in the twenty-first century, we have the possibility of regular working relationships and even intimate friendships with people we rarely see. Do it.

Writing with another person can be productive and fun. Two people together can be smarter than one and a paper written by two people can be better than either could do alone. But collaborating is not less work. A good article written by two people takes *at least* twice as much time as an article written by one person. There are no short cuts, only many interesting long cuts.

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### 3. *Being a Sociologist*

My old friend Jerry Himmelstein wrote an undergraduate thesis in his senior year at Columbia. Jerry worked extremely hard all year. In the final few weeks he slaved night and day completing the project. Collapsing across the finish line, he brought the thesis to his professor's office. His mentor took the large manuscript, thumbed through it briefly, and said:

"Nice job Himmelstein. You're going to graduate school in sociology aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," answered Jerry proudly.

"Well," said the professor, "if you work very hard, and if you are very good, you get to do this for the rest of your life."

Why would anyone want to do *that*?

I'm happy being a sociologist for a variety of reasons, perhaps most of all for the largely unalienated labor. I like teaching and by now I'm fairly good at it. But I've been hired, paid, and promoted for learning, and for writing some of what I learn. The writing is often difficult, but the learning is fantastic. As a sociologist I get to learn almost anything I want. One of the best things about being a sociologist is that we can go anywhere, see anything, read anything, talk to anyone, and we can always say we are doing fieldwork. And we may well be. No one knows what will be useful in our writing and teaching, and we certainly don't. When you are a sociologist, as Edward Brecher once said, the damndest things are tax deductible.

Our job as sociologists is to learn true things about the social world and to write about them. Much of the time, perhaps most of the time, we can be neither neutral nor disinterested.

But we can be honest about what we find. The actual existing world of human beings is hardly ever the way anyone would like it to be. People's actions and statements are frequently surprising, and even peculiar, strange, bizarre. Our chief task as sociologists is to describe some part of that world as clearly and truthfully as we can. If you do not believe there are important true things to say about the social world and what people do, you are in the wrong field. Consider a career in philosophy, law or economics.

Sociology is a science. It is not a purely positivist science on the model of physics. But it does make use of many of the logical and empirical tools of the physical sciences. All sciences, including sociology, seek to systematically describe and understand the world. But sociology is also an art form – among many other reasons because it is a variety of literature. (Robert Nisbet has a good discussion of this in his book, *Sociology as an Art Form*).

In *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Peter Berger says that sociology is defined neither by what it studies, nor by its theories or methods. He says sociology is distinguished by its *perspectives*, especially its mistrust of conventional knowledge and the taken for granted. In his chapter “Sociology As A Form Of Consciousness,” Berger boldly offers what he calls “the first wisdom of sociology.” It is: “*things are not as they seem.*”

Berger then identifies four motifs he finds central in sociological writing. He calls these: *debunking* (unmasking, revealing the truth about something); *unrespectability* (looking at the world from the perspective of the unrespectables, the underdogs); *relativizing* (understanding that almost everything depends on context); and *cosmopolitanism* (an appreciation for the city and human diversity). I love being in a field with those values. All are essential, but I think debunking is most important. I suggest that good sociologists are good story tellers who show that things are not as they seem.

I am a C. Wright Millsian. I believe that making sense of the world is fascinating and useful work. I love figuring out the social world and I require the big picture to orient myself. I routinely understand who I am, what I want, and what I feel in terms of the intersection of history and biography. I understand my own life and those of people around me by viewing them in political, economic, cultural, institutional, social-psychological, and historical context. I believe that the sociological imagination can truly help people – collectively *and* individually – to improve their lives and be happier, saner, and more effective at whatever they do. I believe that more strongly now than ever.

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#### 4. Good Writing as a Sociological Tradition

For C. Wright Mills, writing well was central to the task of making sense of the social world. All his intellectual heroes were good writers or very good writers. He listed: Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Sigmund Freud, W. E. H. Lecky, Jakob Burckhardt, W.E. B. DuBois, Robert Park, Karl Manheim, Charles Beard, and Thorstein Veblen.

Most of the good or just widely-read sociologists of the generation or two before me, of all political persuasions and sociological perspectives, thought of themselves as writers and worked hard to write well. Certainly some sociologists, from Talcott Parson to Harold Garfinkle and on, have written dense, plodding, jargon-filled prose. But good writing always has been a major tradition within sociology. For example, from the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s, along with C. Wright Mills and Peter Berger, among others there were:

Robert Lynd, Helen Lynd, Lewis Coser, Rose Coser, Phillip Slater, Alice Rossi, David Reisman, Everett Hughes, Helen Hughes, Howard Becker, Robert Merton, Louis Wirth, Mirra Komarovsky, Alvin Gouldner, Paul Cressy, Oliver Cox, Alfred Lindesmith, Seymour Lipset, William F. White, Dennis Wrong, Jessie Bernard, Nathan Glazer, Elliot Liebow, Ralph Miliband, Vance Packard, Robert Nisbet, Erving Goffman, Norbert Elias, Betty Friedan, Michel Foucault, Irving Zeitlin, Eric Fromm, Phillip Reiff, Ralph Dahrendorf, Herbert Blumer, Arthur Vidich, Joseph Bensman, Ned Polsky, Ernst Becker, Amitai Etzioni, Robin Williams, Irving Louis Horowitz, Robert Bellah, E. Digby Baltzell, Joseph Gusfield, John Seeley, Raymond Aron, William Domhoff, David Matza, Robert Blauner, Kingsley Davis, Reinhard Bendix, Herbert Gans, Daniel Bell, and Kai Erickson.

During the same period, most of the very good anthropologists, historians, political scientists, geographers, linguists, and philosophers also wrote skillfully and well. Their significant works endure and remain important to students and scholars in part because they are usually well written at the level of the sentence and paragraph.

After the mid-1970s, some of these men and women continued working and many more arrived who had something important to say and who said it well. Only some of the more prominent and productive sociologists – with multi-starred books listed at Amazon.com – are:

Arlie Hochschild, Paul Starr, Lillian Rubin, Troy Duster, Gary Alan Fine, Todd Gitlin, Pepper Schwartz, Cynthia Epstein, Orlando Patterson, Alan Wolfe, Richard Sennett, William Julius Wilson, Judith Stacey, Zygmunt Bauman, Frances Fox Piven, Randall Collins, Donald Levine, Claude Fischer, Jerome Karabel, Barrie Thorne, Loic Wacqaunt, Joel Rogers, William Kornblum, Samuel Heilman, Sharon Zukin, Barbara Katz Rothman, Saskia Sassen, Stanley Aronowitz, Caroline Persell, David Halle, Peter Drier, Joel Best, Ruth Milkman, David Halle, Joe Feagin, Wendy Griswold, Norman Denzin, Michèle Lamont, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Mitchell Duneier, Robert Wuthnow, Viviana Zelizer, Arlene Skolnick, Charles W. Smith, Howard Winant, Kim Voss, Craig Reinerman, Katherine Newman, Thomas Scheff, Magali Sarfatti Larson, Michael Kimmel, Michèle Lamont, Elija Anderson, Gaye Tuchman, David Garland, Rodney Stark, Eviatar Zerubavel, Mary Waters, George Ritzer, Kristin Luker, Barry Glassner, Kathleen Gerson, David Popenoe, Rosabeth Moss Kantor, Emmanuel Wallerstein, Theda Skocpol, Jill Quadagno, Alejandro Portes, Christopher Jencks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Harvey Molotch.

Learn from their work and from skillful writers in every field. In the long run you will find the two professional tasks – making sense of some part of the social world and writing about it skillfully – are one. A good sociologist *is* a good writer.

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