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ON WRITING AND CRITICISM

Writing well is difficult, but the returns for learning how to do it are very high. The key to writing well is extensive editing. First drafts have one function: to get basic ideas on paper. After the first draft is written, successive editing creates organization, style, and clarification. Some planning is necessary at the outset, usually in the form of an outline. An outline serves as a general measure of progress, and should be structured around the biggest ideas you have about a topic. Once you finish the first draft, discard the outline and start editing. As you edit, you see different ways of arranging the argument, places where it is incomplete, or where it is vague. It's amazing how many ideas arise when you are actually writing. There are no born writers, editing is the only way.

One reason it is hard to edit is because higher education rewards bad writing. Professors require students to write in-class exams and students delay writing papers until soon before assignments are due. Both of these practices require that students be evaluated on first drafts, although we all pretend the drafts are final products. It is a pedagogical paradox that professors teach this way because none of them use the procrastinating method to write papers. We never share our first drafts with our colleagues, because first drafts are confused, have dumb statements in them, and are little more than a stack of notes we've written to ourselves. The document you are reading was edited at least ten times.

Clarity is the goal of good writing, and therefore of editing (and clear writing directly indicates clear thinking). Some good sources of information on clarity are:

- *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White (author of *Charlotte's Web*), NY: Macmillan. You can read this book (85 pages) in 2 hours, and savor it for a lifetime.
- *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing* by Jacques Barzun, Chicago: University of Chicago press. Another short one (130 pages) with clear advice and examples.
- *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* by Howard S. Becker, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. A joy to read. Especially helpful are Chapters 1 (Freshman English for Graduate Students), 3 (One Right Way), and 5 (Learning to Write as a Professional).
- *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* by Peter Elbow, NY: Oxford University Press, 1981.

CRITERIA FOR CRITICISM

Learning to criticize effectively is enormously difficult, and one of the most important skills we are supposed to learn in school. Effective critique is a functional prerequisite for thinking clearly about your own work, for identifying what is important in others' work, and for competently reviewing for journals and publishers.

Let me be a bit more specific about this. Writing and thinking are interwoven. Muddy writing is a sign of unclear thinking, and much muddy thinking is clarified through clear, straightforward expression. More, writing and thinking are inherently social, that is to say interactive, things. Even when you write and think alone at your desk in the middle of the night your product is a social one. This is so in several ways but the one most relevant here is this: when scholars fail to tell their audiences the relations between what they're claiming and what others have claimed they fail to provide readers with a key standard of judgment. And they fail to make a case for why what they're claiming is important and interesting. Figuring out others' arguments, and the holes in those arguments, is therefore fundamental to scholarly creation.

Following are guidelines to use in writing critical papers.

Don't summarize material beyond three or four sentences to highlight your argument. Often, even that much is unnecessary. You have a limited number of pages, so don't waste time and space telling me things I already know. Assume I have read the material.

Don't praise the material. If I didn't think there were important ideas in it, I wouldn't have assigned it. Don't criticize the writing, presentation, or style. Those things are important, as noted, but we are mainly interested in the argument. Don't use heavy irony, ad hominem arguments, or political criticisms. Such devices are not effective criticisms in this context; indeed generally they are in bad taste.

Avoid, also, rhetorical questions. If such a question is so darned important, go ahead and answer it. Rhetorical questions imply the author missed something you think is important, but they are snide devices that say, with a wink, "You and I know something the author should have known. How foolish of that author." Example: "By ignoring social class, can Clarke's theory really explain chocolate addiction?" This is not an argument but a lazy way to call someone names.

The most effective criticism points out what difference it would make if the author did what you think should have been done, or examined other examples, or used different methods or assumptions. This is the most important point in a critical piece. To simply say something such as, "Marx didn't consider the rise of the middle class" is cheap criticism unless you then say what would happen to Marx's theory if he had anticipated the rise of the middle class. To say something such as "Mills ignores power, conflict, cooperation, etc." is also cheap because all theories leave out things. But to demonstrate how leaving out something might affect Mills' theory or conclusions is a very good criticism. In general, saying "she left out" or "he didn't" doesn't say much without an accompanying argument about the effects of the omissions on the author's argument, findings, or conclusions.

Search for internal contradictions. Try to work primarily with the material the author presents. Sometimes you can't, but this is the place to start. By doing this you stay on solid ground — criticizing authors with their own evidence or logic. (It is also the best way to understand and puzzle out a theory.) For example, a criticism might go like this: On page 115 Clarke says "_____" This implies_____ But on 119 he says "_____" and this contradicts his argument because_____ This suggests (his concepts are unclear; his data are poor; his theory is incomplete or wrong, etc.)

The first step in a critical analysis is to find two or three major points (or even one) and build a case for them (or it) rather than a shot-gun approach that may not get at the basic problem with the author's position. Clearly identify the question you wish to deal with.

Try to begin your critical analysis with: "The problem with_____ is that_____"
Minimize warm ups; they can usually be cut completely from second drafts.

The points of this exercise are to (1) thoroughly understand an author's position, (2) develop good critical abilities, rather than relying on cheap shots and hasty dismissals, (3) develop a terse, analytical writing style in place of a long, rambling one where your instincts might be on target, but the point is not clearly and sharply expressed. As always, this means redrafting, editing, and redrafting again.

A helpful tool is to draw pictures of the author's argument; draw arrows between concepts, or between conceptions and evidence. These are for your purposes only; don't turn them in. Also, try to think through what you consider acceptable criteria for a sociological argument. Does the argument under review stack up? In what ways? Is it interesting? Is it important? And by what standards do you answer such questions?

CRITICAL PAPERS SHOULD BE NO LONGER THAN 3 DOUBLE SPACED PAGES.

ON SEX AND WRITING

Since we are thinking about how to write well, a few words on sexist language are in order. By applying sociological analysis to language it is easy to see that words have meaning only because of their social definitions. So, for example, the term "tree" is a useful term because we all agree on the basic definition of those things with roots, trunks, branches, and leaves. Notice, there is nothing inherent in trees that requires they be given that label. We could just as easily call the thing "xorn" and, as long as we all agreed what a xorn is, the term would serve just as well as "tree." People used to use the generic male to refer to both sexes: mailman, the nature of man, the condition of man in modern society. But there no longer exists wide-spread agreement that the word "man" includes women as well, and since women constitute more than half the world's population, it is important to include them in our ideas (especially our sociological ideas) and therefore our language. Thus, as an imprecise term, it is sloppy thinking to use the generic male in writing and speaking. Do not use the terms "man" and "men" in writing for this class unless you specifically mean to refer to males; do not use the general female either. (Also, don't use xorn to refer to trees.) The exception here is that if you are quoting someone else who uses the generic male you should not change their language.

THE PAPER

You could write long essays and even books about most of the paper topics. However, you have only eight to ten pages. Thus, your answers will have to be well thought-out, organized, and concisely written. In addition, you will have to be selective and make judgments about what to include, what to exclude, and what level of detail each specific point deserves. Your grade will be based to a considerable extent on how well you make these judgments.

Assume a reader familiar with the material, but be sure to clarify technical terms. Avoid spending a lot of words on things I already know.

Don't repeat lecture material back to me. Integrate the lecture material and the required readings and especially, formulate answers in your own terms, rather than in mine or in Marx's, Weber's, or Durkheim's.

Use direct quotations sparingly; usually paraphrasing is preferable. Quotations are intended to make a strong point, so use them selectively. Take care to acknowledge sources.

Where possible, give illustrations or examples of ideas and concepts; this will show that you can apply what you know and that you can explain abstract ideas in concrete terms. Remember, your assertions are central and material from the book should mainly be used to support your ideas.

Turn in two copies of your paper (and keep another for yourself). I'll make comments on one of them and return it.