

WRITING AS COMMUNICATION

1.1 WRITING TO LEARN

Writing is a way of ordering your experience. Think about it: No matter what you are writing—a paper for your introductory sociology class, a short story, a limerick, or a grocery list—you are putting pieces of your world together in new ways and making yourself freshly conscious of these pieces. This is one of the reasons writing is so hard. From the infinite welter of data that your mind continually processes and locks in your memory, you are selecting only certain items significant to the task at hand, relating them to other items, and phrasing them in a new coherence. You are mapping a part of your universe that has hitherto been unknown territory. You are gaining a little more control over the processes by which you interact with the world around you.

This is why the act of writing, no matter where it leads, is never insignificant. It is always communication, a way of making a fresh connection with your world. Writing, therefore, is also one of the best ways to learn. This statement, at first, may sound odd. If you are an unpracticed writer, you may share a common notion that the only purpose writing can have is to express what you already know or think. Any learning that you as a writer might do has already been accomplished by the time your pen meets the paper. In this view, your task is to inform or even surprise the reader. But if you are a practiced writer, you know that, at any moment as you write, you are capable of surprising yourself. And it is surprise that you look for: the shock of seeing what happens in your own mind when you drop an old, established opinion into a batch of new facts or bump into a cherished belief from a different angle. Writing synthesizes new understanding for the writer. E. M. Forster's famous question "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" is one that all of us could ask. We make meaning as we write, jolting ourselves by little, surprising discoveries into a larger and more interesting universe.

1.1.1 The Irony of Writing

Good writing often helps the reader become aware of the ironies and paradoxes of human existence. One such paradox is that good writing expresses that which is unique about the writer and, at the same time, that which is common, not to the writer alone, but to every human being. Many of our most famous political statements share this double attribute of mirroring the singular and the ordinary. For example, read the following excerpts from President Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address, spoken on March 4, 1933, in the middle of the Great Depression. Then answer this question: Is what Roosevelt said famous because its expression is extraordinary, or because it appeals to something that is basic to every human being?

This is pre-eminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper.

So first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror that paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves that is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days.

In such a spirit on my part and on yours we face our common difficulties. They concern, thank God, only material things. Values have shrunk to fantastic levels; taxes have risen; our ability to pay has fallen; government of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income; the means of exchange are frozen in the currents of trade; the withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side; farmers find no markets for their produce; the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone.

More important, a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return. Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.

Yet our distress comes from no failure of substance. We are stricken by no plague of locusts. Compared with the perils that our forefathers conquered because they believed and were not afraid, we have still much to be thankful for. Nature still offers her bounty and human efforts have multiplied it. Plenty is at our doorstep, but a generous use of it languishes in the very sight of the supply. . . .

The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.

Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort.

The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow-men. (quoted in Commager 1963:240)

The benefits of writing in learning and in controlling what we learn are why sociology instructors will require a great deal of writing in their classes. Learning the complex and diverse world of sociology takes more than a passive ingestion of facts. You have to understand and come to grips with social issues

and with your own attitudes toward them. When you write in an introductory sociology or minorities in American society class, you are entering into the world of the sociologist in the same way he or she does—testing theory against fact, fact against belief, belief against reality.

Writing is the entryway into social and political life. Virtually everything that happens in education, politics, and so on, happens on paper first. Documents are wrestled into shape before their contents can affect institutions and/or the public. Great speeches are written before they are spoken. Meaningful social programs must be spelled out before they are implemented. The written word has helped free slaves, end wars, create new opportunities in the workplace, and shape the values of nations. Often, gaining recognition for our ourselves and our ideas depends less on what we say than on how we say it. Accurate and persuasive writing is absolutely vital to the sociologist.

1.1.2 Learning by Writing

Here is a way to test the notion that writing is a powerful learning tool: Rewrite the notes you have taken from a recent class lecture. It does not matter which class—it can be history, chemistry, or advertising. Choose a difficult class, if possible, one in which you are feeling somewhat unsure of the material and in which you have taken copious notes. As you rewrite, provide the transitional elements (connecting phrases, such as *in order to*, *because of*, *and*, *but*, *however*) that you were unable to supply in class because of time constraints. Furnish your own examples or illustrations of the ideas expressed in the lecture.

This experiment forces you to make your own thought processes coherent. See if the time it takes you to rewrite the notes is not more than compensated for by a gain in your understanding of the lecture material.

1.1.3 Challenging Yourself

There is no way around it—writing is a struggle. Do you think you are the only one to feel this way? Take heart! Writing is hard for everyone, great writers included. Bringing order into the world is never easy. Isaac Bashevis Singer, winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize in literature, once wrote: “I believe in miracles in every area of life except writing. Experience has shown me that there are no miracles in writing. The only thing that produces good writing is hard work” (quoted in Lunsford and Connors 1992:2). Hard work was evident in the words of John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address. Each word is crafted to embed an image in the reader’s mind. As you read the following excerpts from Kennedy’s speech, what images come to mind? Historians tend to consider a president “great” when his words live longer than his deeds in the minds of the people. Do you think this will be true of Kennedy?

We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as change. For I

have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebearers prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebearers fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world. . . .

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hours of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion that we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man. (quoted in Commager 1963:688–689)

One reason for the difficulty of writing is that it is not actually a single activity but a process consisting of several activities that can overlap each other, with two or more sometimes operating simultaneously as you labor to organize and phrase your thoughts (this will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter). The writing process tends to be sloppy for everyone—an often frustrating search for the best way to articulate meaning.

Frustrating though that search may sometimes be, however, it need not be futile. Remember that the writing process makes use of skills that we all have. In other words, the ability to write is not some magical competence bestowed on the rare, fortunate individual. Although few of us may achieve the proficiency of Isaac Singer, we are all capable of phrasing thoughts clearly and in a well-organized fashion. But learning how to do so takes practice: The one sure way to improve your writing is to write.

Remember also that one of the toughest but most important jobs in writing is to maintain enthusiasm for your writing project. Commitment may sometimes be hard to come by given the difficulties inherent in the writing process—difficulties that can be made worse when the project assigned is unappealing at first glance. For example, how can you be enthusiastic about having to write a paper analyzing welfare reform, when you know little about the American welfare system and see no real use in doing the project?

One of the worst mistakes that unpracticed writers sometimes make is failing to assume responsibility for keeping themselves interested in their writing. No matter how hard it may seem at first to drum up interest in your topic, you have to do it—that is, if you want to write a paper you can be proud of, one that

contributes useful material and a fresh point of view to the topic. One thing is guaranteed: If you are bored with your writing, your reader will be, too.

So what can you do to keep your interest and energy level high? Challenge yourself. Think of the paper not as an assignment for a grade, but as a piece of writing that has a point to make. Getting this point across persuasively is the real reason that you are writing, not the simple fact that a teacher has assigned a project.

If someone were to ask you why you are writing your paper, what would you answer? If your immediate, unthinking response is, "Because I've been given a writing assignment," or "Because I want a good grade," your paper may be in trouble. If, on the other hand, your first impulse is to explain the challenge of your main point—"I'm writing to show how welfare reform will benefit both welfare recipients and the American taxpayer"—then you are thinking usefully about your topic.

1.1.4 *Maintaining Self-Confidence*

Having a sense of confidence in your ability to write well about your topic is essential for good writing. This does not mean that you will always know what the end result of a particular writing activity will be. In fact, you have to cultivate your ability to tolerate a high degree of uncertainty while weighing evidence, testing hypotheses, and experimenting with organizational strategies and wording. Be ready for temporary confusion and for seeming dead-ends, and remember that every writer faces them. It is from your struggle to combine fact with fact, to buttress conjecture with evidence, that order arises.

Do not be intimidated by the amount and quality of work already done in your field of inquiry. The array of opinion and evidence that confronts you in the published literature can be confusing. But remember that no important topic is ever exhausted. There are always gaps—questions that have not yet been satisfactorily explored either in the published research on a subject or in the prevailing popular opinion. It is in these gaps that you establish your own authority, your own sense of control.

Remember that the various stages of the writing process reinforce one another. Establishing a solid motivation strengthens your sense of confidence about the project, which in turn influences how successfully you organize and write. If you start out well, using good work habits, and give yourself ample time for the various activities to gel, you should produce a paper that will reflect your best work, one that your audience will find both readable and useful.

1.2 THE WRITING PROCESS

As you engage in the writing process, you are doing many different things at once. While planning, you are no doubt defining the audience for your paper at the same time that you are thinking about the paper's purpose. As you draft the paper, you may organize your next sentence while revising the one you have just

written. Different parts of the writing process overlap, and much of the difficulty of writing is that so many things happen at once. Through practice—in other words, through writing—it is possible to learn how to control those parts of the process that can be controlled and to encourage those mysterious, less controllable activities.

No two people go about writing in exactly the same way. It is important for you to recognize routines—modes of thought as well as individual exercises—that help you negotiate the process successfully. And it is also important to give yourself as much time as possible to complete the process. Procrastination is one of the writer's greatest enemies. It saps confidence, undermines energy, and destroys concentration. Working regularly and keeping as close as possible to a well-thought-out schedule often make the difference between a successful paper and an embarrassment.

Although the various parts of the writing process are interwoven, there is, naturally, a general order to the work you have to do. You have to start somewhere! What follows is a description of the various stages of the writing process—planning, using intervention strategies, outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading—along with suggestions as to how to get the most out of each.

1.2.1 *Planning*

Planning includes all activities that lead up to the writing of the first draft. These activities differ from person to person. For instance, some writers prefer to compile a formal outline before writing that draft. Others perform brief writing exercises to jump-start their imaginations. Some draw diagrams; others doodle. Later on we'll look at a few starting strategies, and you can determine which may be of help to you.

Right now, however, let us discuss some early choices that all writers must make during the planning stage. These choices concern topic, thesis, purpose, and audience—four elements that help make up the writing context, the terms under which we all write. Every time you write—even if you are writing a diary entry or a note to the delivery person—these four elements are present. You may not give conscious consideration to all of them in each piece of writing that you do, but it is extremely important to think carefully about them when writing a sociology paper. Some or all of these defining elements may be dictated by your assignment, yet you will always have a degree of control over them.

Selecting your topic. No matter how restrictive an assignment may seem to be, there is no reason to feel trapped by it. Within any assigned subject you can find a range of topics to explore. What you are looking for is a topic that engages your own interest. Let your curiosity be your guide. For example, if you have been assigned the subject of welfare reform, then try to find some issues concerning welfare reform that interest you. (How does receiving something for nothing affect an individual's self-esteem? What would be the repercussions of limiting the amount of time anyone could receive welfare benefits?) Any good topic comes

with a set of questions; you may well find that your interest picks up if you simply begin asking questions. One strong recommendation: Ask your questions on paper. Like most other mental activities, the process of exploring your way through a topic is transformed when you write down your thoughts as they come instead of letting them fly through your mind unrecorded. Remember the old adage from Louis Agassiz: "A pen is often the best of eyes" (quoted in Pearce 1958:106).

Although it is vital to be interested in your topic, you do not have to know much about it at the outset of your investigation. In fact, having too heartfelt a commitment to a topic can be an impediment to writing about it; emotions can get in the way of objectivity. Often it is better to choose a topic that has piqued your interest yet remained something of a mystery to you—a topic discussed in one of your classes, perhaps, or mentioned on television or in a conversation with friends.

Narrowing your topic. The task of narrowing your topic offers you a tremendous opportunity to establish a measure of control over the writing project. It is up to you to hone your topic to just the right shape and size to suit both your own interests and the requirements of the assignment. Do a good job of it, and you will go a long way toward guaranteeing yourself sufficient motivation and confidence for the tasks ahead of you. Do it wrong, and somewhere along the way you may find yourself directionless and out of energy.

Generally, the first topics that come to your mind will be too large to handle in your research paper. For example, the topic of a national health policy has generated a tremendous number of news articles and reports recently published by experts in the field. Despite all the attention turned toward this topic, however, there is still plenty of room for you to investigate it on a level that has real meaning to you and that does not merely recapitulate the published research. What about an analysis of how one of the proposed U.S. health policies might affect insurance costs in a locally owned company?

The problem with most topics is not that they are too narrow or too completely explored; it is that they are too rich. There are so many useful ways to address a topic that choosing the best focus is often difficult. Take your time narrowing the topic. Think through the possibilities that occur to you, and—as always—jot down your thoughts.

The following is a list of topics assigned to undergraduate students in a course on social theory. Their task was to choose a topic and write an essay of 2,500 words. Next to each topic is an example of how a student narrowed it to make it a manageable paper topic.

General Topic	Paper Topic
Plato	Plato's philosophy of the role of women in politics
Freedom	A comparison of Rousseau's concept of freedom with Locke's

Community	Arguments for the necessity of community used by Amitai Etzioni
Max Weber	Weber's definition of bureaucracy

Without taking time to research them, see what kinds of viable narrowed topics you can make from the following general topics:

crime in America	political corruption
international terrorism	military spending
education	affirmative action hiring policies
freedom of speech	freedom of religion
gun control	abortion rights

Example

general topic:	the family
narrowed topics:	cultural demands that keep family members isolated the effect of substance abuse on family stability the impact of the single-parent family on work in America

Finding your thesis. As you plan, be on the lookout for an idea that would serve as your thesis. A thesis is not a fact that can be immediately proven by recourse to recorded information, but a hypothesis worth discussing, an argument with more than one possible conclusion. Your thesis sentence will reveal to your reader not only the argument you have chosen, but also your orientation toward it—the conclusion that your paper will attempt to prove.

In looking for a thesis, you do many jobs at once:

1. You limit the amount and kind of material that you must cover, making it manageable.
2. You increase your own interest in the narrowing field of study.
3. You work to establish your paper's purpose—the reason that you are writing about your topic. (If the only reason you can see for writing is to earn a good grade, then you probably won't!)
4. You establish your notion of who your audience is and what sort of approach might best catch their interest.

In short, you gain control over your writing context. For this reason, it is a good idea to establish a thesis early on—a working thesis—that will very probably change as your thinking deepens but that will allow you to establish a measure of order in the planning stage.

Writing your thesis sentence. The introduction of your paper will contain a sentence that expresses in a nutshell the task that you intend to accomplish. This thesis sentence communicates your main idea—the one you are going to support or defend or illustrate. The thesis sets up an expectation in the reader's mind that you must satisfy. But it is more than just the statement that informs

your reader of your goal; in the planning stage, the thesis is a valuable tool to help you narrow your focus and confirm in your own mind your paper's purpose.

Developing your thesis. A class on crime and society was assigned a twenty-page paper studying a problem currently being faced by the municipal authorities in their own city. The choice of the problem was left up to the students. One student, Richard Gonzales, decided to investigate the problem posed to the city by the large number of abandoned buildings in a downtown neighborhood that he drove through on his way to the university. Richard's first working thesis was: "Abandoned houses result in negative social effects to the city."

The problem with this thesis, as Richard found out, was that it was not an idea that could be argued, but a fact corroborated easily by the sources he began to consult. As he read reports from various sources, such as the Urban Land Institute and the City Planning Commission, and talked with representatives from the Community Planning Department, Richard began to get interested in the dilemma faced by his city in responding to the problem of abandoned buildings.

Richard's second working thesis was: "Removal of abandoned buildings is a major problem facing the city." This thesis narrowed the topic somewhat and gave Richard an opportunity to use material gleaned from his research, but there was still no real comment attached to it. It still states a bare fact, easily proved. At this point, Richard became interested in the still narrower topic of how building removal should best be handled. He found that the major issue was funding and that different civic groups favored different methods of funding the demolition. As Richard explored the arguments for and against funding plans, he began to feel that one of them might be best for the city.

Richard's third working thesis was: "Assessing a 'demolition fee' to each sale of a property offers a viable solution to the city's building removal problem." Note how this thesis narrowed the focus of his paper still further than the other two yet presents an arguable hypothesis. This thesis told Richard what he had to do in his paper, just as it tells his reader what to expect.

At some time during your preliminary thinking on a topic, you should consult the library to see how much published work has already been done. This search is beneficial in at least two ways:

1. It acquaints you with a body of writing that will become very important in the research phase.
2. It gives you a sense of how your topic is generally addressed by the community of scholars you are joining. Is the topic as important as you think it is? Has there already been so much research on the topic as to make your inquiry, in its present formulation, irrelevant? These questions can be answered by reviewing the literature.

As you go about determining your topic, remember that one goal of sociology writing in college is to enhance your own understanding of the social and/or social-psychological process, to build an accurate model of the way societies work. Let this goal help you: Aim your research into those subject areas that you know are important to your understanding of the discipline.

Defining your purpose. There are many ways to classify the purposes of writing, but in general most writing is undertaken either to inform or to persuade an audience. The goal of informative or expository writing is, simply, to impart information about a particular subject, whereas the aim of persuasive writing is to convince your reader of your point of view on an issue. The distinction between expository and persuasive writing is not hard and fast. Most sociology writing has elements of both exposition and persuasion. However, most effective writing has a clearly chosen focus of either exposition or persuasion. When you begin writing, consciously select a primary aim of exposition or persuasion, and then set out to achieve that goal.

Suppose you have been required to write a paper explaining how parents' attitudes affect their children's choice of college. If you are writing an expository paper, your task could be to describe in a coherent and impartial way the attitudes of the parents and the choices of their children.

If, however, your paper attempts to convince your reader that parental attitudes often result in children making poor choices, you are now writing to persuade, and your strategy is radically different. You will now need to explain the negative effects of parental attitudes. Persuasive writing seeks to influence the opinions of its audience toward its subject. Writing assignments in sociology may break down the distinction between expository and persuasive writing in a number of ways. You may be called on to analyze sociopolitical situations, evaluate government programs, speculate on directions in social policy, identify or define problems within a range of fields, or suggest solutions and predict results. It is very important to spend planning time sharpening your sense of purpose.

Know what you want to say. By the time you begin working on your final draft, you must have a very sound notion of the point you wish to argue or the position you wish to support. If, during the writing of the final draft, someone were to ask you to state your thesis, you should be able to give a satisfactory answer with a minimum of delay and no prompting. On the other hand, if you have to hedge your answer because you cannot easily form a notion of your thesis in your own mind, you may not yet have arrived at a final draft.

For example, two writers have been asked what point they wish to make in their papers. One of these writers has a better grip on her writing task.

Writer 1: My paper is about tax reform for the middle class.

Writer 2: My paper argues that tax reform for the middle class would be unfair to the upper and lower classes, who would then have to share more responsibility for the cost of government.

The second writer has a clear view of her task; the first knows what her topic is—tax reform for the middle class—but may not yet know what it is about tax reform that she wishes to support. It may be that you will have to write a draft or two or engage in various prewriting activities to arrive at a secure understanding of your task.

Watch out for bias! There is no such thing as pure objectivity. You are not a machine. No matter how hard you may try to produce an objective paper, every

choice you make as you write is influenced to some extent by your personal beliefs and opinions. What you tell your readers is influenced—sometimes without your knowing—by a multitude of factors: your environment, upbringing, and education; your attitude toward your audience; your political affiliation; your race and gender; your career goals; and your ambitions for the paper you are writing. The influence of these factors can be very subtle, and it is something you must work to identify in your own writing as well as in the writing of others in order not to mislead or be misled. Remember that one of the reasons you write is for self-discovery. The writing you will do in sociology classes—as well as the writing you will do for the rest of your life—will give you a chance to discover and confront honestly your own views on your subjects. Responsible writers keep an eye on their own biases and are honest with their readers about them.

Defining your audience. It may sometimes be difficult to remember that the point of your writing is not simply to jump through the technical hoops imposed by the assignment. The point is communication—the transmission of your knowledge and your conclusions—to the reader in a way that suits you. Your task is to pass to your reader the spark of your own enthusiasm for the topic. Readers who were indifferent to your topic should look at it in a new way after reading your paper. This is the great challenge of writing: to enter into your reader's mind and leave behind new knowledge and new questions.

It is tempting to think that most writing problems would be solved if the writer could view his or her writing as if it had been produced by another person. The ego barrier between writer and audience is the single greatest impediment to accurate communication. To reduce the discrepancy between your understanding and that of your audience, it is necessary to consider the audience's needs. By the time you begin drafting, most—if not all—of your ideas have begun to attain coherent shape in your mind, so that virtually any words in which you try to phrase those ideas will reflect your thought accurately—to you. Your reader, however, does not already have in mind the conclusions that you have so painstakingly achieved. If you leave out of your writing the material that is necessary to complete your reader's understanding of your argument, he or she may not be able to supply that information himself.

The potential for misunderstanding is a given for any audience—whether it is made up of general readers, experts in the field, or your professor, who is reading, in part, to see how well you have mastered the constraints that govern the relationship between writer and reader. Make your presentation as complete as possible, writing always as if to an audience whose previous knowledge of your topic is limited to information easily available to the general public.

John F. Kennedy's Pastry Mistake

President Kennedy was one of America's greatest speechmakers. He had a gift for understanding and speaking directly to the audience he was addressing. At one point during the Cold War, the Soviet Union banned shipments of supplies across East Germany to West Berlin, the part of the city governed by the Western, non-communist countries. It was a tense moment in East-West relations.

Going to Berlin on June 26, 1963, Kennedy spoke to the besieged people as if he were one of them. The people responded warmly, cheering his speech continuously. At the climactic moment, Kennedy boldly proclaimed, in words that became famous, "Ich bein ein Berliner." He was attempting to say, in German, "I am a citizen of Berlin," meaning, "I am one of you; I share your concerns in this moment of crisis." What he said instead was German for "I am a pastry." His mistake was in inserting the article *ein*—*ein Berliner* is a kind of pastry in Germany.

Communicating to your audience can sometimes be more difficult than it first appears.

1.2.2 Using Invention Strategies

In this chapter, we have discussed methods of selecting and narrowing the topic of a paper. As your focus on a specific topic sharpens, you naturally begin to think about the kinds of information that will go into the paper. In the case of papers not requiring formal research, that material comes largely from your own recollections. Indeed, one of the reasons why instructors assign unresearched papers is to convince you of the incredible richness of your memory, the vastness and variety of the "database" that you have accumulated and that, moment by moment, you continue to build.

So vast is your horde of information that it is sometimes difficult to find within it the material that would best suit your paper. In other words, finding out what you already know about a topic is not always easy. Invention—a term borrowed from classical rhetoric—refers to the task of discovering, or recovering from memory, information about your topic. As we write, all of us go through some sort of invention procedure that helps us explore our topic. Some writers seem to have little problem coming up with material; others need more help. Over the centuries writers have devised different exercises that can help locate useful material housed in memory. We shall look at a few of these briefly.

Freewriting. Freewriting is an activity that forces you to get something down on paper. There is no waiting around for inspiration. Instead, you set yourself a time limit—three minutes or five minutes—and write for that length of time without stopping, not even to lift the pen from the paper or your hands from the typewriter or computer keyboard. Focus on the topic, and don't let the difficulty of finding relevant material stop you from writing. If necessary, you may begin by writing, over and over, some seemingly useless phrase, like, "I cannot think of anything to write about," or perhaps the name of your topic. Eventually, something else will occur to you. (It is surprising how long a three-minute freewriting can seem to take!) At the end of the freewriting, look over what you have produced for anything of use. Granted, much of the writing will be unusable, but there may be an insight or two that you did not know you possessed. In addition to its ability to recover usable material for your paper, freewriting yields a few other benefits. First, it takes little time to do, which means you may repeat the exercise as often as you like within a relatively short span of time. Second, it breaks down

AN EXAMPLE OF FREEWRITING

The professor in Shelby Johnson's second-year Family as a Social Institution class assigned a paper focusing on some aspect of American family life. Shelby, who felt her understanding of the family as an institution was modest, tried to get her mind started on the job of finding a topic that interested her with a three-minute freewriting exercise. Thinking about the family and child development, Shelby wrote steadily for three minutes without lifting her pen from the paper. Here is the result of her freewriting:

Okay, now, what do I know about the family? I was raised in one. I have a father, mother, and sister. Both parents were present all my life. Both worked. Professionals. Sometimes I wished Mom was at home. That might be interesting: working parents, the effects on kids. Two-paycheck families. I like it. Where to start? I could interview my parents. I need to find some recent statistics on two-paycheck families.

some of the resistance that stands between you and the act of writing. There is no initial struggle to find something to say; you just write.

Brainstorming. Brainstorming is simply the process of making a list of ideas about a topic. It can be done quickly and, initially, without any need to order items into a coherent pattern. The point is to write down everything that occurs to you as quickly and as briefly as possible, as individual words or short phrases. Once you have a good-sized list of items, you can then group the items according to relationships that you see among them. Brainstorming allows you both to uncover ideas stored in your memory and to make useful associations among those ideas.

A professor in a political sociology class asked her students to write a 700-word paper, in the form of a letter to be translated and published in a Warsaw newspaper, giving the Polish readers useful advice about living in a democracy. Carrie Nation, a student in the class, started thinking about the assignment by brainstorming. First, she simply wrote down anything that occurred to her:

Life in a Democracy

voting rights	welfare	freedom of the press
protest movements	everybody equal	minorities
racial prejudice	American Dream	injustice
the individual	no job security	lobbyists and PACs
justice takes time	psychological factors	aristocracy of wealth
size of bureaucracy	market economy	

Thinking through her list, Carrie decided to rearrange her list into two: one devoted to positive aspects of life in a democracy, the other to negative aspects. At this point she decided to discard some items that were redundant or did not seem to have much potential. As you can see, Carrie had some questions about where some of her items would fit.

Positive

voting rights
freedom of the press
everybody equal
American Dream
psychological factors
protest movements

Negative

aristocracy of wealth
justice takes time
racial prejudice
welfare
lobbyists and PACs
size of bureaucracy

At this point, Carrie decided that her strongest inclination was to explore the ways in which money and special interests affect a democratically elected government. Which of the remaining items in her two lists would be of help to Carrie?

Asking questions. It is always possible to ask most or all of the following questions about any topic: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? These questions force you to approach it the way a journalist does, setting it within different perspectives that can then be compared to discover insights within the material.

For a class in the sociology of law, a professor asked her class to write a paper describing the impact of Supreme Court clerks on the decision-making process. Here are some questions that a student in the class might logically ask to begin thinking about a thesis.

- Who are the Supreme Court's clerks? (How old? What racial and gender mix are they? What are their politics?)
- What are their qualifications for the job?
- What exactly is their job?
- When during the court term are they most influential?
- Where do they come from? (Is there any discernible geographical pattern in the way they are chosen? Any pattern regarding religion? Do certain law schools contribute a significantly greater number of clerks than any others?)
- How are they chosen? (Are they appointed? elected?)
- When in their careers do they serve?
- Why are they chosen as they are?
- Who have been some influential court clerks? (Have any gone on to sit on the bench themselves?)

Can you think of other questions that would make for useful inquiry?

Being flexible. As you engage in invention strategies, you are also doing other work. You are still narrowing your topic, for example, as well as making decisions that will affect your choice of tone or audience. You move forward on all fronts, with each decision you make affecting the others. This means you must be flexible enough in your understanding of the paper's development to allow for adjustments or alterations in your understanding of your goal. Never be so determined to prove a particular theory that you fail to notice when your own understanding of it changes. Stay objective.

1.2.3 Organizing Your Writing by Outlining

A paper that contains all the facts but provides them in an ineffective order will confuse rather than inform or persuade. Although there are various methods of grouping ideas, none is potentially more effective than outlining. Unfortunately, no organizing process is more often misunderstood.

Outlining for yourself. There are really two jobs that outlining can do. First, it can serve as a means of forcing you, the writer, to gain a better understanding of your ideas by arranging them according to their interrelationships. As the following model indicates, there is one primary rule of outlining: Ideas of equal weight are placed on the same level within the outline. This rule requires you to determine the relative importance of your ideas. You must decide whether one idea is of the same type or order as another and which subtopic each idea best fits into. If you arrange your ideas with care in a coherent outline in the planning stage, your own grasp of your topic will be greatly enhanced. You will have linked your ideas together logically and given a skeleton to the body of the paper. This sort of subordinating and coordinating activity is difficult, however, and as a result, inexperienced writers sometimes fail to pay the necessary attention to the outline. They begin writing their first draft without an effective outline, hoping for the best. That hope usually disappears, especially in complex papers involving research. Garcia, a student in a second-year class in government management, researched the impact of a worker-retraining program in his state and came up with the following facts and theories. Number them in logical order.

___ A growing number of workers in the state do not possess the basic skills and education demanded by employers.

___ The number of dislocated workers in the state increased from 21,000 in 1982 to 32,000 in 1992.

___ A public policy to retrain uneducated workers would allow them to move into new and expanding sectors of the Oklahoma economy.

___ Investment in high technology would allow the state's employers to remain competitive in the production of goods and services in both domestic and foreign markets.

___ The economy is becoming more global and more competitive.

Outlining for your reader. The second job of an outline is aimed not at the writer's understanding, but at the reader's. An outline accompanying your paper can serve the reader as its blueprint—a summary of the paper's points and their interrelationships. A busy person can consult your outline to quickly get a sense of your paper's goal and the argument you have used to promote it. This accompanying outline, then, is very important, since its clarity and coherence help to determine how much attention your audience will give to your ideas. As sociology students, you will be given a great deal of help with the arrangement of your material into an outline to accompany your paper. A look at the model presented in other chapters of this manual will show you how strictly these formal outlines are structured. But while you must pay close attention to the requirements of the accompanying outline, do not forget that an outline is a powerful tool in the early planning stages of your paper.

Formal outline pattern. Following this pattern accurately during the planning stage of your paper helps to guarantee that your ideas are placed logically.

Thesis sentence (prefaces the organized outline)

- I. First main idea
 - A. First subordinate idea
 - 1. Reason, example, or illustration
 - 2. Reason, example, or illustration
 - a. Detail supporting reason 2
 - b. Detail supporting reason 2
 - c. Detail supporting reason 2
 - B. Second subordinate idea
- II. Second main idea

Notice that each level of the paper must have more than one entry: For every A there must be at least a B (and, if required, a C, D, and so on); for every 1 there must be a 2. This arrangement forces you to compare ideas, looking carefully at each one to determine its place among the others. The insistence on assigning relative values to your ideas is what makes your outline an effective organizing tool.

The structure of any particular type of sociology paper is governed by a formal pattern. When rigid external controls are placed on their writing, some writers tend to feel stifled, their creativity impeded by this kind of paint-by-numbers approach to structure. It is vital to the success of your paper that you never allow yourself to be overwhelmed by the pattern rules of a particular type of paper. Remember that such controls are placed on papers not to limit your creativity but to make the paper easy to read and immediately useful to its intended audience. It is as necessary to write clearly and confidently in a social issue paper or a case study as it is in a term paper for English literature, a résumé, a short story, or a job application letter.

1.2.4 Writing Drafts

The rough draft. After the planning comes the writing of the first draft. Using your thesis and outline as direction markers, you must now weave your amalgam of ideas, researched data, and persuasion strategies into logically ordered sentences and paragraphs. Though adequate prewriting may make the drafting easier than it might have been, it will still not be easy. Writers establish their own methods of encouraging themselves to forge ahead with the draft, but here are some tips to bear in mind:

1. Remember that this is a rough draft, not the final draft. At this stage, it is not necessary that every word you write be the best possible choice. Do not put that sort of pressure on yourself; you must not allow anything to slow you down now. Writing is not like sculpting, in which every chip is permanent—you can always go back to your draft later and add, delete, reword, or rearrange. No matter how much effort you have put into planning, you cannot be sure how much of this first draft you will eventually keep. It may take several drafts to get one that you find satisfactory.
2. Give yourself sufficient time to write. Don't delay the first draft by telling yourself there is still more research to do. You cannot uncover all the material there is to know on a particular subject, so don't fool yourself into trying. Remember that writing is a process of discovery. You may have to begin writing before you can see exactly what sort of final research you need to do. Keep in mind that there are other tasks waiting for you after the first draft is finished, so allow for them as you determine your writing schedule. Giving yourself time is very important for another reason: The more time that passes after you write a draft, the better your ability to view it with greater objectivity. It is very difficult to evaluate your writing accurately soon after you complete it. You need to cool down, to recover from the effort of putting all those words together. The "colder" you get on your writing, the better able you are to read it as if it were written by someone else, which helps you acknowledge the changes needed to strengthen the paper.
3. Stay sharp. It is important to keep in mind the plan you created for yourself as you narrowed your topic, composed a thesis sentence, and outlined the material. But if, as you write, you feel a strong need to change the plan a bit, do not be afraid to do so. Be ready for surprises dealt you by your own growing understanding of your topic. Your goal is to render your best thinking on the subject as accurately as possible.

Authority. To be convincing, your writing needs to be authoritative; that is, you have to sound as if you have confidence in your ability to convey your ideas in words. Sentences that sound stilted or that suffer from weak phrasing or the use of clichés are not going to win supporters for the aims that you express in your paper. Thus, sounding confident becomes a major concern. Consider the following points as you work to convey to your reader that necessary sense of authority.

Level of formality. Tone is one of the primary methods by which you signal to the readers who you are and what your attitude is toward them and toward your topic. The major choice you make has to do with the level of language

formality that you feel is most appropriate for your audience. The informal tone you would use in a letter to a friend might well be out of place in a paper called "Waste in Military Spending," written for your sociology professor. Remember that tone is only part of the overall decision that you make about how to present your information. To some extent, formality is a function of individual word choices and phrasing. Is it appropriate to use contractions like *isn't* or *they'll*? Would the strategic use of a sentence fragment for effect be out of place? The use of informal language, the personal *I*, and the second-person *you* is traditionally forbidden—for better or worse—in certain kinds of writing. Often, part of the challenge of writing a formal paper is, simply, how to give your prose bite while staying within the conventions.

Jargon. One way to lose readers quickly is to overwhelm them with jargon—phrases that have a special, usually technical meaning within your discipline, but that are unfamiliar to the average reader. The occasional use of jargon may add an effective touch of atmosphere, but anything more than that will severely dampen a reader's enthusiasm for the paper. Often a reason for jargon is the writer's desire to impress the reader by sounding lofty or knowledgeable. Unfortunately, all jargon usually does is make for confusion. In fact, jargon is often an index of the writer's lack of connection to his audience.

Sociology writing is a haven for jargon. Perhaps writers of professional journals and certain issue papers believe their readers are all completely attuned to their terminology. It may be that these writers occasionally hope to obscure faulty information or potentially unpopular ideas in confusing language. Or the problem could simply be fuzzy thinking on the writer's part. Whatever the reason, sociology papers too often sound like prose made by machines to be read by machines.

Some students may feel that, in order to be accepted as sociologists, their papers should conform to the practices of their published peers. This is a mistake. Remember that it is always better to write a clear sentence than a cluttered or confusing one, and that burying your ideas in jargon defeats the effort that you went through to form them.

Clichés. In the heat of composition, as you are looking for words to help you form your ideas, it is sometimes easy to plug in a cliché—a phrase that has attained universal recognition by overuse. (Note that clichés differ from jargon in that clichés are part of the general public's everyday language, while jargon is specific to the language of experts in a particular field.) Our vocabularies are brimming with clichés:

It's raining cats and dogs.

That issue is as dead as a doornail.

It's time for the governor to face the music.

Angry voters made a beeline for the ballot box.

The problem with clichés is that they are virtually meaningless. Once colorful means of expression, they have lost their color through overuse, and they tend to bleed energy and color from the surrounding words. When revising, replace clichés with words that more accurately convey the specific impression that you wish to create.

Descriptive language. Language that appeals to the reader's senses will always engage his or her interest more fully than language that is abstract. This is especially important for writing in disciplines that tend to deal in abstracts—such as sociology. The typical sociology paper—with its discussions of abstract principles, demographics, or deterministic outcomes—is often in danger of floating off on a cloud of abstractions, drifting farther away in each paragraph from the tangible life of the reader. Whenever appropriate, appeal to your reader's sense of sight, hearing, taste, touch, or smell. Consider the effectiveness of the following second sentence, as opposed to that of the first.

1. The housing project had deteriorated since the last inspection.
2. Since the last inspection, deterioration of the housing project had become evident in stench rising from the plumbing, grime on the walls and floors, and the sound of rats scurrying in the hallways.

Bias-free and gender-neutral writing. Language can be a very powerful method of either reinforcing or destroying cultural stereotypes. You should try to avoid gender bias and ethnic stereotyping in your writing. By treating the sexes in subtly different ways in your writing, you may unknowingly be committing an act of discrimination. A common example is the use of the pronoun *he* to refer to a person whose gender has not been identified. But there are many other writing situations in which sexist and/or ethnic bias may appear. To avoid gender bias, the American Sociological Association (1997) recommends replacing words like *man*, *men*, or *mankind* with *person*, *people*, or *humankind*. When both sexes must be referred to in a sentence, use *he or she*, *her or him*, and *his or hers* instead of *he/she*, *him/her*, and *his/hers*. Consider the following examples of sexist and nonsexist language:

Sexist: A lawyer should always treat his client with respect.

Corrected: A lawyer should always treat his or her client with respect.

Or: Lawyers should always treat their clients with respect.

Sexist: Man is a political animal.

Corrected: People are political animals.

There are other methods of avoiding gender bias in your writing. Some writers, faced with the aforementioned pronoun dilemma, alternate the use of male and female personal pronouns, identifying to the unknown referent as *he* in one section of their text, then as *she* in the next (a strategy often used in this manual). You can also change the subject to plural—there is no gender bias in *they*.

Sexist language denies to a large number of your readers the basic right to fair and equal treatment. Be aware of this subtle form of discrimination. Remember that language is more than the mere vehicle of your thoughts; your words shape perceptions for your reader. How well you say something will profoundly affect your reader's response to it.

1.2.5 Revising

After all the work you have gone through writing it, you may feel "married" to the first draft of your paper. However, revising is one of the most important steps in assuring your paper's success. Although unpracticed writers often think of revision as little more than making sure all the i's are dotted and t's are crossed, it is much more than that. Revising is reseeing the paper, looking at it from other perspectives, trying always to align your view with the view that will be held by your audience. Research in the process of composition indicates that we are actually revising all the time, in every phase of the writing process as we reread phrases, rethink the placement of a item in an outline, or test a new topic sentence for a paragraph. Subjecting your entire hard-fought draft to cold, objective scrutiny is one of the most difficult activities to master in the writing process, but it is absolutely necessary. You must make sure that you have said everything that needs to be said clearly and in logical order. One confusing passage, and the reader's attention is deflected from where you want it to be. Suddenly she has to become a detective, trying to figure out why you wrote what you did and what you meant by it. You don't want to throw such obstacles in the path of meaning.

Here are some tips to help you with revision:

1. Give yourself adequate time to revise. As mentioned, you need time to become "cold" on your paper in order to analyze it objectively. After you have written your draft, spend some time away from it. Try to come back to it as if it had been written by someone other than yourself.
2. Read the paper carefully. This is tougher than it sounds. One good strategy is to read it aloud or to have a friend read it aloud while you listen. (Note: Having friends critique your writing may be helpful, but friends do not usually make the best critics. They are rarely trained in revision techniques and are usually so close to you that they are unwilling—often unconsciously so—to risk disappointing you by giving your paper a really thorough examination.)
3. Prepare a list of specific items to check. It is important to revise in an orderly fashion—in stages—looking first at large concerns, such as the overall structure, and then rereading for problems with smaller elements, such as paragraph organization or sentence structure.
4. Check for unity—the clear and logical relation of all parts of the essay to its thesis. Make sure that every paragraph relates well to the whole paper and that it is in the right place.
5. Check for coherence. Make sure there are no gaps among the different parts of the argument and that you have adequate transition everywhere it is needed. Transitional elements are markers indicating places where the paper's focus or attitude changes. Transitional elements can be one-word long—*however*, *although*, *unfortunately*, *luckily*—or as long as a sentence or a paragraph:

"In order to fully appreciate the importance of democracy as a shaping presence in post-Cold War Polish politics, it is necessary to examine briefly the Poles' last historical attempt to implement democratic government." Transitional elements rarely introduce new material. Instead, they are direction pointers, either indicating a shift to new subject matter or signaling how the writer wishes certain material to be interpreted by the reader. Because you—the writer—already know where and why your paper changes direction and how you want particular passages to be received, it can be very difficult for you to determine where transition is needed.

6. Avoid unnecessary repetition.

Avoiding repetition. There are two types of repetition that can annoy a reader: repetition of content and repetition of wording. Repetition of content leads to redundancy. Ideally, you want to cover a topic once, memorably, and then move on to your next topic. Organizing a paper is a difficult task, however, one that usually occurs through a process of enlightenment as to purposes and strategies. It is possible for an early draft to circle back to a subject you have already covered, and to begin to treat the same material over again. This sort of repetition can happen even if you have made use of prewriting strategies. What is worse, it can be difficult for you as a writer to acknowledge the repetition—to admit to yourself that the material you have worked so hard to shape on page 2 returns on page 5 in much the same shape. As you write and revise, bear this in mind: Any unnecessary repetition of content that you allow into your final draft is a potential annoyance to your reader, who is working to make sense of the argument she or he is reading and does not want to be distracted by a passage that repeats material already encountered. Train yourself, through practice, to read through your draft, looking for material that you have repeated unnecessarily.

Repetition of wording results in boring material. Make sure that you do not overuse any phrases or individual words. This sort of repetition can make your prose sound choppy and uninspired. It is important that your language sound fresh and energetic. Before you turn in your final draft, make sure to read through your paper carefully, looking for such repetition. Here are some examples of repetition of wording:

The subcommittee's report on education reform will surprise a number of people. A number of people will want copies of the report.

The chairman said at a press conference that he is happy with the report. He will circulate it to the local news agencies in the morning. He will also make sure that the city council has copies.

I became upset when I heard how the committee had voted. I called the chairman and expressed my reservations about the committee's decision. I told him I felt that he had let the teachers and students of the state down. I also issued a press statement.

The last passage illustrates a condition known by composition teachers as the "I-syndrome." Can you hear how such duplicated phrasing can make a paper sound disconnected and unimaginative?

Note that not all repetition is bad. You may wish to repeat a phrase for rhetorical effect or special emphasis: "I came. I saw. I conquered." Just make sure that any repetition in your paper is intentional—placed there to produce a specific effect.

1.2.6 Editing

Editing is sometimes confused with the more involved process of revising. But editing happens later, after you have wrestled through your first draft—and maybe your second and third—and arrived at the final draft. Even though your draft now contains all the information you want to impart and the information is arranged to your satisfaction, there are still many factors to check, such as sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation.

It is at this point that an unpracticed writer might let down his guard. After all, most of the work on the paper is finished; the big jobs of discovering material and organizing and drafting it have been completed. But watch out! Editing is as important as any other step in the writing process. Any error that you allow in the final draft will count against you in the reader's mind. It may not seem fair, but a minor error—a misspelling or the confusing placement of a comma—will make a much greater impression on your reader than it perhaps should. Remember that everything about your paper is your responsibility, including getting even the supposedly little jobs right. Careless editing undermines the effectiveness of your paper. It would be a shame if all the hard work you put into prewriting, drafting, and revising were to be damaged because you carelessly allowed a comma splice!

Most of the preceding tips for revising hold for editing as well. It is best to edit in stages, looking for only one or two kinds of errors each time you reread the paper. Focus especially on errors that you remember committing in the past. For instance, if you know you have a tendency to misplace commas, go through your paper looking at each comma carefully. If you have a weakness for writing unintentional sentence fragments, read each sentence aloud to make sure that it is, indeed, a complete sentence. Have you accidentally shifted verb tenses anywhere, moving from past to present tense for no reason? Do all the subjects in your sentences agree in number with their verbs? Now is the time to find out.

Watch out for miscues—problems with a sentence that the writer can easily overlook. Remember that your search for errors is hampered in two ways:

1. As the writer, you hope not to find any errors with your writing. This desire can lead you to miss sighting them when they occur.
2. Because you know your material so well, it is easy, as you read, to unconsciously supply missing material—a word, correct punctuation—as if it were present.

How difficult is it to see that something is missing in the following sentence?

Unfortunately, legislators often have too little regard their constituents.

We can even guess that the missing word is probably *for*, which should be inserted after *regard*. However, it is quite possible that the writer of the sentence will supply the missing *for* automatically as he reads it, as if he has seen it on the page. This is a miscue, and miscues can be hard for the writer to spot because he is so close to his own material.

Editing is the stage in which you finally answer those minor questions that you put off earlier when you were wrestling with wording and organization. Any ambiguities regarding the use of abbreviations, italics, numerals, capital letters, titles (for example, when do you capitalize the title *president?*), hyphens, dashes (usually created on a typewriter or computer by striking the hyphen key twice), apostrophes, and quotation marks have to be cleared up. You must check to see that you have used the required formats for footnotes, endnotes, margins, and page numbers.

Guessing is not allowed. Sometimes unpracticed writers who realize that they don't quite understand a particular rule of grammar, punctuation, or format often do nothing to fill that knowledge gap. Instead they rely on guesswork and their own logic—which is not always up to the task of dealing with so contrary a language as English—to get them through problems that they could solve if only they referred to a writing manual. Remember that it does not matter to the reader why or how an error shows up in your writing; it only matters that you as the writer have dropped your guard. You must not allow a careless error to diminish your hard work.

One tactic for catching mistakes in sentence structure is to read the sentences aloud, starting with the last one in the paper, moving to the next to last, and then the previous sentence, thus going backward through the paper (reading each sentence in the normal, left-to-right manner, of course) until you reach the first sentence of the introduction. This backward progression strips each sentence of its rhetorical context and helps you to focus on its internal structure.

1.2.7 Proofreading

Before you hand in your final version of the paper, it is vital that you check it over one more time to make sure there are no errors of any sort. This job is called *proofreading* or *proofing*. In essence, you are looking for many of the same things you checked for during editing, but now you are doing it on the last draft, which has been typed and is about to be submitted to your audience. Proofreading is as important as editing; you may have missed an error in the previous stages, or an error may have been introduced when the draft was recopied or typed for the last time. Like every other stage of the writing process, proofreading is your responsibility.

At this stage, it is essential that you check for typing mistakes—letters transposed or left out of words, or missing words, phrases, or punctuation. If you have had the paper professionally typed, you still must check it carefully. Do not rely solely on the typist's proofreading abilities. If you typed your paper on a computer or a word processor, it is possible that you unintentionally inserted a command that alters your document drastically—slicing out a word or a line or a sentence at the touch of a key. Make sure such accidental deletions have not occurred.

Above all else, remember that your paper represents you. It is a product of your best thoughts, your most energetic and imaginative response to a writing challenge. If you have maintained your enthusiasm for the project and worked through the different stages of the writing process honestly and carefully, you should produce a paper you can be proud of and one that will serve its readers well.

1.3 LEVELS OF ACADEMIC WRITING

Researchers who study the written work of college students find that several patterns of effort and expertise emerge. Morgan (1981:5–6) refers to these patterns as “levels of academic writing,” and believes that they appear in nearly every college class, graduate and undergraduate alike. Although writing quality increases with grade level, many students—no matter what their grade level—have trouble using words effectively.

1.3.1 Level One: The Fact-Gathering Level

Students at this level have little more to offer in their writing than opinions that they have heard others state or that they found in a newspaper or periodical. If asked, “What is Social Security?” a level-one student might answer, “Social Security is welfare for the elderly or disabled,” or “Social Security is a liberal program.” Students who are stranded at level one or below are unable to advance much further than presenting a fact or two to support their statements. This is the lowest level of scholarship. The level-one student, when assigned a report, will simply go to the library and assemble facts and opinions incoherently and return with a paper. At best, this is a very simple presentation of “What is?” However, mastery of level one is a necessary learning experience.

1.3.2 Level Two: The Informational Level

At this level, students learn to clarify facts and understand them more completely through the process of comparison. When asked the question, “What is Social Security?” the student writing at level two might draw on what she has learned of political science and economics to suggest different ideological perspectives, each with its own facts. A level-two answer shows greater depth of knowledge than a level-one answer; the student has advanced beyond a recitation of facts, taking the initial steps toward analysis.

1.3.3 Level Three: The Analytical Level

At this level, the student becomes familiar with and somewhat proficient in completing various types of sociological analysis. Using the same example, “What is Social Security?” some students might present their facts in numerical terms,

using formulas, mathematical curves, statistical tests, or tables to express relationships among variables. Other students might reduce their data to common prose, utilizing different theories to analyze and explain the same phenomena.

1.3.4 Level Four: The Creative Level

This is the highest and most difficult level of academic writing. The student is able to use facts, theories, and analytical ability to reach levels of creativity. At the creative level, the student is essentially alone, trying to discover something new, perhaps an insight that colleagues can't appreciate initially.

To the question, "What is Social Security?" the creative sociologist, utilizing the sociological imagination described in the Introduction, might employ both historical analysis and creative forecasting to discover new information. The creative level is where knowledge is advanced, its frontiers pushed inevitably outward.

It is the purpose of this book to help you advance, from whatever level at which you presently find yourself, to the full professional expression of level four—creative and insightful writing in sociology.