PART 3

Finishing Up

It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.

SHERLOCK HOLMES IN ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S
"Adventure of the Copper Beeches"

POLISHING

First impressions count. What your paper *looks* like is important. Its appearance will create expectations in the instructor who picks it up to read and grade. A professional-looking paper promises quality. So take the necessary trouble at the very end of the process of writing your paper to proofread and polish it before you hand it in. Now the most difficult stages are behind you. In fact, some writers who do anything "to avoid writing that first word" actually *enjoy* polishing their final draft.

Think of polishing as a way of showing hospitality, and your reader as a special guest whom you would not dream of putting to work. In some cases, your paper will be among dozens that your probably overworked instructor or reader must evaluate. Imagine your own irritation if, after reading students' papers for hours, you picked up one that was printed with a spent cartridge that should have been replaced long ago; or, conversely, imagine your sigh of relief and gratitude when the next paper in the stack is easy to read. Although a nicely presented paper that lacks substance will not likely fool

even the weariest instructor, studies reveal that a professional-looking paper implies a smart and serious student and often contributes to a better grade. Taking the time to "package" a carefully written paper also shows respect for your instructor's workload—a respect that he or she may well be inclined to return.

At this stage you are on the last lap, but do not underestimate the importance of a strong finish. Therefore, allow ample time for a careful—not rushed—polishing of your paper. Doing so can often turn "poor" into "satisfactory," or "good" into "excellent."

EDITING

Edit your draft to find and correct inadvertent errors in spelling and punctuation, repeated words and phrases, and omitted words. After you print out what you hope will be your last draft, get away from it—for several days if possible, or for a good night's sleep at least. Efficiency in spotting weaknesses increases dramatically with distance from the paper, and flaws that escape your bleary eyes at 2 A.M. often leap off the page when you are rested.

The way to spot such mechanical problems is to proofread. To proofread efficiently, you must *see*, not just *look at*, your draft. The way to *see* errors is to examine a hard copy of your paper (not just a computer screen) to engage hand, brain, and eye coordination. Take a pen or pencil and then point to each word as you read it silently, or, better, out loud, to yourself. Only through this hand movement will you make yourself actually see what you have written; otherwise you will be consulting your short-term memory and will literally not see your draft. Once you have proofread your paper, have someone else proofread it, too.

A computer tip. Most word-processing programs have spellcheckers. Use your spellchecker to detect and correct misspellings. There is no excuse for spelling mistakes in a word-processed paper. But do not depend on your spellchecker alone to edit your paper.

Especially be on the alert for these two common problems in word-processed papers that spellcheckers cannot detect: (1) repeated passages in the paper that you moved from one location to another but did not delete from the first location and (2) incorrect sentence structure caused through revising on the computer. As an example of this second problem, consider this sentence in a revised draft: "This paper will to show how Robert Parks's model of racial and ethnic group contact explains Latino discontent about the recent UCLA student body elections." The author of this mangled sentence originally wrote "The purpose of this paper is to show how . . ." and then changed it to "This paper will show how." But when she edited her draft she did not completely delete the original phrase.

A number of computer programs go beyond spellchecking in order to check grammar and style. Although not foolproof, they can be useful aids.

Corrections. Despite your best efforts, however, you may need to make some last-minute corrections. Even though there should be no handwritten corrections on a word-processed paper, it is better to correct any mistakes by hand than pass in an uncorrected paper. Here are several of the most common corrections, which can be made in ink by using conventional proofreader's marks.

To insert, put a caret (^) just below the line at the place where you want to insert and then write in the word or phrase directly above the caret.

Example

This is what you do if you have left^out a word or phrase.

To delete, put a single line through the word or phrase.

Example

the ~~good~~ word

If you neglected to indent a paragraph, put the paragraph sign (¶) right before it.

FORMATTING

Begin by setting up the following automatic features on your computer. Use the tabs, not the space bar, for measurement (for example, one inch, not eight spaces) so that the format remains constant when you print out your text, even if you change fonts, pitch, or typeface.

- Margins (one to one-and-a-half inches on all sides)
- Double-spacing (quotations longer than five lines should be single-spaced and indented one inch from the left margin)
- Paragraph indentions (one-half to one inch)
- Left margin justification. Do not justify the right margin; a ragged right margin is friendlier and the spacing between the letters often looks better.
- A header with your last name and the page number only

Word processing turns writers into designers. The creative possibilities of printing out a final draft, once the completed draft has been saved in the computer's memory, can be very satisfying. Here is an opportunity to experiment with typeface, pitch, font, italics, boldface, boxes, borders, underlining, and so forth. Unfortunately, the result is sometimes a mess and distracts the reader from your ideas. To avoid this problem, keep these design principles in mind:

- Make the shape follow sense. What you do to the printed words should emphasize their meaning. For example, 12-point Helvetica Narrow is

excellent for tables and other types of writing that require lots of information in a very small space. Zapf Chancery is a display face that gives headings a decorative look. New Century Schoolbook looks traditionally academic.

- Use restraint. If you emphasize everything, nothing stands out.
- Use your page preview function or scroll through the document to identify and repair "widows," which are single lines separated from the rest of their paragraph by a page break, or other breaks such as captions separated from figures.
- Stick with 12-point fonts. Smaller ones are hard to read.
- Use your italics function to indicate titles of publications.
- Use the bold command for emphasis, not italics, underlining, or capitalization.
- Simplicity is best. Just because you can create elaborate headers and footers, for instance, doesn't mean that the reader needs all that information.

If you use a title page, center your title horizontally and place it halfway down the page. In the lower right-hand corner, put your name, the course number (for example, Sociology 101), the name of your instructor, and the date. Number pages beginning with the first page of the text, not with the title page. Sometimes instructors do not require a title page for short papers (approximately five or fewer pages). If you're not using a title page, provide the same information (your name, the course number, the instructor's name, and the date) in the upper right-hand corner of page 1; triple-space and center the title; and triple-space again before you begin the first paragraph.

A quick review of Chapter 3 will remind you of the proper form for citing sources in the text of your paper and for the list of references that follows the text.

Depending on the type of paper you've written, some instructors may want you to include your raw data, statistical calculations, questionnaires, observation checklists, instructions to respondents, ethnographic field notes, or other items. As appropriate, you should make each of these items an appendix to your paper. (The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "appendix" as "supplementary material.") The appendix belongs after the References or Bibliography on a separate, titled page. If your paper requires more than one appendix, number or letter each one (Appendix 1, Appendix 2; or Appendix A, Appendix B, and so on). Number the pages of the appendix(es) as if they were additional text pages—if, for example, the last page of the text is numbered 5, the first page of the appendix would be 6.

You may single-space or double-space an appendix depending on the nature of the material and how it can most easily be read. The spacing need not be the same for all appendixes. However, the heading is ordinarily centered and triple-spaced—that is, you triple-space between "Appendix" and the title and triple-space again between the title and the body of the appendix.

As with any work created on a computer, save your document often and back it up on a portable media device (such as a CD or flash drive) or to a hard disk, or e-mail it to yourself as an attachment. For insurance against hardware problems, make an extra copy on another portable media device.

A FINAL CHECKLIST FOR SUBMITTING YOUR PAPER

1. Can you quickly identify your thesis (your central argument) or, if you're writing a quantitative research paper, your hypothesis (or statement of the expected relationship between two variables)?
2. Does your thesis, or the logic behind your hypothesis, remain evident and central throughout the paper?
3. Do you support your thesis, or hypothesis, with adequate evidence? One trick for checking the quantity and quality of your evidence is to put a mark in the margin of a rough draft wherever you see evidence for your thesis, or hypothesis, pausing at each point to review its soundness. Instructors sometimes use this method when evaluating the reasonableness of an argument.
4. Is there a clear, logical relationship among all the paragraphs? If one is irrelevant to your thesis or hypothesis—no matter how dazzling—delete it; if one wanders from the topic, bring it back into line. Stick to the subject.
5. Repeat 4 (above), substituting "sentences" for "paragraphs."
6. Does the writing flow back and forth between generalizations and specifics that support and clarify those generalizations?
7. Are there transitions between paragraphs? Sometimes transitions seem to create themselves naturally during the writing process. Other times you have to create them, very deliberately, at the polishing stage. But make them look natural, not slapped on. The smoothest transitions, perhaps, come in the first sentence of each paragraph, deftly referring back from where you came and forward to where you are going. Your reader will be grateful for transitions because the ride through the paper will be smooth, not bumpy.
8. Now pay attention to transitions between sentences.
9. Do all your words mean what you think they mean? For those occasional moments of doubt, we recommend your owning a good hardcover dictionary (*The American Heritage College Dictionary* is one good choice) as well as a portable paperback if you sometimes write and study in the library. Or if you're working on a computer with Internet access, you can access Web sites such as <www.dictionary.com>. As we mentioned in Chapter 2 (page 39), be especially careful when using terms that have become part of everyday

language and yet retain special sociological definitions (the examples we gave were "stereotype," "status," and "self-fulfilling prophecy"). If you're uncertain about the sociological definitions of your key terms, you might find them quickly in sociology textbooks by using the index and/or glossary. Several dictionaries of sociological terms are also available.

When dealing with words that do not have special sociological meanings, a thesaurus can help you both to locate the most precise word that expresses what you want to say and to find synonyms for varying your word choice. The popular paperback *Roget A to Z: The Classic Thesaurus in Dictionary Form* is simple to use because words are alphabetized just as they are in a dictionary. Or if you're working on a computer with Internet access, you can access Web sites such as <www.thesaurus.reference.com>. However, before you use a synonym from a thesaurus in your paper, check its meaning in a dictionary. Mark Twain said that "the difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." Believe it or not, the search for "just the right word" can be fun.

10. Have you looked carefully for errors in style (sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, citations)? As we mentioned in Chapter 2, reference books that present style guidelines are available online (see page 42) as well as in bookstores and libraries.

11. What about contractions (for example, "it's," "don't," "you're")? If you do not know your instructor's preference, avoid using contractions.

12. Have you stated your conclusion clearly and forcefully?

13. Have you avoided sexist language (for example, using the masculine pronoun "he" exclusively)?

THINKING BIG

If you or your instructor is particularly pleased with the quality of the paper you produced, you might consider submitting it for presentation at a national or regional meeting of a professional sociological association or for publication in a scholarly journal. Paper presentations and publications that demonstrate good communication skills will increase your chance of getting into graduate school and will enhance your résumé.

The main professional organization in sociology is the American Sociological Association (ASA). The ASA holds an annual national meeting for the presentation of both theoretical and empirical research. Usually, several sessions are devoted to undergraduate and graduate student papers. The international sociology honor society, Alpha Kappa Delta (AKD), also holds both regional and national meetings at which students have the opportunity to present their work. Ask your instructor or undergraduate counselor for more information about these and other professional associations.

If you wish to submit your paper for publication in a scholarly journal, refer to the list in Chapter 4. Always look inside the cover of the latest issue of the journal for the name and address of the current editor and the guidelines for submission. Ask your instructor how to draft a cover letter to accompany your paper submission.