

1. Overview:

A. What is an essay? The primary focus of an essay is to explain and clarify your understanding of and opinion about a particular topic, much like an editorial or essay article in a newspaper or magazine.

B. Purpose: The purpose of an essay assignment is to develop students' critical thinking skills, help them acquire an understanding of important sociological issues, make them better at presenting and evaluating arguments, and make them better writers.

C. Clarity: In a sociology paper you should strive to state the argument(s) with as much clarity and precision as you can whether it is your own position or someone else's. The conclusions of the arguments and the premises should be stated simply and clearly. The paper should make sense to any individual not familiar with the topic.

D. Thesis: Every philosophy paper should contain a clearly articulated thesis. Your thesis is the central or overall claim that you are arguing for. When summarizing the work of another author, a thesis statement should clearly summarize the topic of the article selected.

2. Common problems with certain words.

There are a number of writing problems that occur frequently enough to deserve special mention here:

A. People often confuse "then" and "than." The former indicates sequence, either chronological or logical: "If I miss class, **then** I will miss the deadline." The latter is used to show contrast: "Jane is stronger **than** Jack."

B. People often confuse "there," "their," and "they're." The first indicates a statement or location: "There are four cultural variations for bride selection," or "Your bicycle is over there." The second indicates possession: "In India, most men have their wives selected through the process of arranged marriages." The third is an abbreviation for "they are."

B. "Very," "really," and "basically," are clumsy words to use in an academic paper. They do not add anything to the sentence that is not said without them. "Weber basically argues that the modern world is becoming really bureaucratized," could be restated as "Weber argues that the modern world is becoming more and more bureaucratized."

C. Avoid using the word, "feels," when attributing philosophical claims to an author. When we write sociology papers, we are discussing what the author has claimed, stated, argued, or said. We are rarely concerned with the author's feelings, nor are we in a position to know what they are. "Durkheim claims that crime is useful to society by helping to clarify what is right and what is wrong," is better than, "Durkheim feels that crime is useful to society by helping to clarify what is right and what is wrong."

D. "This," used at the beginning or inside a sentence to refer to something in the previous sentence is often problematic. Consider, "This could save him from having to take out a loan with an extremely high interest rate." "This," is a pronoun, but the antecedent, or the noun that it refers to, is frequently unclear. It is unclear what could help save him. Avoid the term unless it is absolutely clear what it refers to.

3. Sentences.

A. Fragments. Every sentence should have a subject and a verb. You should avoid sentence fragments. "Like his example of a triangle." for instance, is not a complete sentence.

B. Run-on sentences. Each sentence should contain a single idea. If more than one idea is expressed, put the new idea in a separate sentence. Consider the sentence, "His parents are finally tiring of his shameful behavior they are considering sending him out to one of the institutions." This can be corrected by simply separating into two separate sentences.

C. Avoid vacuous or empty claims. Each sentence in your paper is an important opportunity to say something about the assigned topic. Sometimes we write sentences that on the surface seem to make a claim of substance, but nothing is actually stated. Consider what is said by this example, "It is one of those things that you have to take in all the information first to really understand." All sentences on an assigned topic must directly relate to the information and argument on hand. This sentence was used more as a filler and does not provide the reader with useful information to further understand the topic.

D. Use transitions or write sentences so that the connection to the previous and next sentence is clear to your reader.

4. Paragraphs.

A. If you are going to make a new point, then start a new paragraph. Be careful about jumping too quickly from one point to the next or mixing too many issues together. Any new or different topics should be gathered together by topic and put into another paragraphs. Each paragraph should have cohesive unity that resembles a well-written paper.

5. Writing Style.

A. The diction of a college paper should be more formal than conversational English. We all say things like, "I don't buy that argument," or "It made me happy to see that crime is declining," in conversation, but those kind of casual and colloquial comments are not appropriate for the subject matter or context of a college paper.

B. We should avoid cliches in our writing. Phrases like, "Back in the day. . .," and "for all intents and purposes," are cheap sayings that get casually thrown into a paper

indicating to the reader that the author does not choose her words carefully. Sayings like these get used so often that they lose their meaning.

C. Avoid auto-biographical details about your experience in writing the paper.

Comments like, "I had a hard time reading Durkheim," "This assignment has taught me a lot," or "I was really surprised to learn this," are not appropriate. The assignment is to address the paper topic, not give a diary entry or a casual statement about personal history.

D. "I believe," or "It is my opinion that," are often unnecessary in a paper, as well.

You are the author of the paper, so it goes without saying that the claims made in it are yours (with the exception of quotes and paraphrases). Adding that a claim is your "opinion," usually doesn't inform your reader of anything new. In fact, such claims may undermine your efforts to convince the reader.

E. Avoid wordiness. We often include words in our sentences that are not necessary.

Consider the differences between, "In an effort to further prove her view, Smith describes an experiment that shows her point," and, "Smith illustrates her point with an experiment." Sixteen words have been reduced to six. Ask yourself what is lost by changing, "The fact that the author believes that social justice is possible leads her to defend the claim that people should participate in their democratic systems," to, "She argues that people should participate in their democratic systems because social justice is possible." Twenty five words have been reduced to fifteen and with a dramatic improvement in the sentence.

6. Quotes.

A. Quotes need to be explained. The relevance, implication, and meaning of the author's claims in a quote need to be explained immediately after or before you give a quote.

B. Long quotes. Any quotes 4 lines or longer should be single-spaced, indented, and introduced. ("Locke claims, [return, indent, begin long quote]) Be cautious about using quotes of this length. The paper should be primarily your own words. If you are going to use a quote of this length, be sure it is a good one and that all of it is relevant to the point you are making.

C. Avoid using too many quotes. The majority of your paper should be in your own words. While using a quote can help demonstrate the exact intention of the original author, the majority of the paper should be written in your own words.

7. Proofread and edit your paper carefully.

A. There should be no spelling mistakes in an academic paper, particularly since automatic spell checkers are so common on word processors. Double check your spellings of proper names and philosophy terms that will not be in your spell checker.

B. Check your paper carefully for grammar and punctuation mistakes. Some of the most common mistakes in college writing are commas, and apostrophes in contractions and possessives.

C. Reading your paper out loud or having someone else read it can be helpful when proofreading. You or your reader will notice awkward phrases, run-on sentences, unclear ideas, and other problems that you would not notice otherwise.

8. Audience.

You should write your philosophy papers as if your audience is intelligent and college-educated, but does not know about the issue you are addressing, has not read the texts you have read, and has not attended class. Do not write your paper for the instructor of the class, omitting important facts because you think he/she already knows them. One of the main goals of the writing exercise is to train students to carefully think through the issues themselves and learn to express and explain them clearly.

9. Critical evaluation.

You will often be asked to write a critical evaluation of a sociologist's position or research. An evaluation is a demanding task with specific guidelines. It is not simply an expression of the writer's opinions as many students think, although your views are a central part of it. As teachers, we want to see a demonstration of your critical reasoning abilities focused carefully on the topic. To accomplish this, all ideas and opinions must be supported by evidence and logical arguments.

Consider this paragraph:

I feel that imprisoning Mr Zhao is a tragic example of exercising too much control over the press. Reporters often get their information from outside sources and if they could be put in prison for not releasing contact information, then it would violate their constitutional rights. In the United States, we don't usually put reporters in prison, so it just isn't fair that they put Ms. Miller in prison. I believe we shouldn't put reporters in jail for choosing to exercise their right to silence.

Compare that to this paragraph:

Mr. Zhao's imprisonment is tragically typical of China's tight control of the press. Thirty other essayists are currently imprisoned in China, according to the organization Reporters Without Borders. In the United States, Ms. Miller's imprisonment stands out for its rarity, and harshness. No other newspaper reporter has ever been jailed this long for standing on her constitutional rights - and most prosecutors would not take such action. In fact, nearly three dozen state attorneys general appealed to the court not to jail Ms. Miller in the first place.

While both paragraphs clarify the argument that reporters should not be imprisoned, the second paragraph provides evidence for this argument, strengthening the weight of the argument.

10. What not to do in a sociological evaluation:

A. Disagreeing with an argument's or author's conclusion, but accepting the reasons for believing the conclusion is not an option in your critical evaluation. If you disagree with a conclusion, then you must say so and explain why with evaluations of the argument that allegedly supports it. Simply rejecting their position is not acceptable, nor are responses like, "Marx can believe x because he is entitled to his opinion, but I disagree," or "I choose not to believe Mead," without any further explanation why.

C. Furthermore, stylistic evaluations of the author's work or research are not appropriate for sociology papers. The purpose of a critical evaluation is not to comment on how clear or well-expressed the author's work is, nor is it to address whether or not the author has given enough examples. So comments like, "Weber's paper was difficult to understand," "I don't think the statistics were right," or "The argument is clearly stated and well-written," are not appropriate for a sociology paper.

D. Do not misrepresent an author's reasoning. Before evaluating the topic or article at hand, make sure you are clear about what the author saying. Students often misinterpret the argument made by an author, and then proceed to evaluate what they misunderstood. Before disagreeing or agreeing with an author's claim, make sure that is what the author is actually claiming.