

How to Write Empirical Research Articles in the Social Sciences



by Joshua Dubrow

How to Write Empirical Research Articles in the Social Sciences

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Introduction

For the social scientist, writing is an essential skill.

If you are an MA or PhD student, or post-doctoral scholar, or professor young, old, recent, or established – writing is an essential skill.

You write many things. You write texts and emails. Social media posts. Notes, reports, and literature reviews. But empirical research articles in the social sciences remain your most important and long-lasting form of scientific communication. These articles are your way to share what you know with other scientists. These articles shape the future of the social sciences. They are your scientific legacy.

As a social scientist, you are a writer. Writing is what you do. You may not like it. You may love it. Whatever your disposition, writing is the essential skill. And what should you do if your job requires an essential skill? You seek to get better at the essential skill.

This short book is about writing empirical articles in the social sciences. It is not about writing books or NGO reports or emails. It is only about one thing, and that one thing is the world's most prevalent form of social science communication.

I designed this book for both absolute beginners in their graduate school career and for those who have already written and published a few articles. For established scholars, you may find some of the information helpful, especially the parts about writing habits and strategies. Chances are, you never took a course or read a book about how to write articles in the social sciences. The first time I stepped into a classroom on how to write such things was in 2018, when I co-taught my first class on it. Until then, I was taught by example, trial and error, and osmosis. I wish I had taken a course, or read a book, or had been asked to take a course or read a book. I would have been a better writer earlier in my career. I would have been more thoughtful about my writing habits and strategies, and preserved what is left of my mental health. So, you, the established scholar, may find a few helpful things, or not.

I'm writing this book at the dawn of the AI era. As of today, chatbot LLMs (Large Language Models) miraculously imitate decent (read: OK) writing. Most AI models (for now, Open AI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude, and Google's Gemini are the most popular) were built by USA-based Silicon Valley companies seeking to maximize their return on investment for the venture capital that funded them. They don't care about academia because there is no money in academia.

Thus, the AI models of today are designed for business – not for academia. As of today, AI cannot write an academic article from start to finish that would be publishable in a reputable social science journal. You could write a half-assed article and publish it in one of the thousands of disreputable, low-level, predatory journals, if you want. Perhaps you are in a compromised position or feel that there is no way out but through, and you make a bargain with the AI devils to sell your academic soul for a few dollars more and publish a completely AI-generated article in one of those places. You realize that you can fool a few people who don't know what they're doing – i.e. administrators who look for quantity over quality. You probably don't feel good about it.

I use AI all the time. I'm a big fan of AI. I think it's a great tool. But, I also know that AI cannot yet rise to the level of expertise required in the upper half of the scientific community. I use AI as a tool in my writing. And I know good writing from bad. This skill – knowing how to write a good article, and relatedly, how to recognize a good article from a bad one – is essential for my job. AI is rapidly becoming the most important tool in the social sciences. Perhaps, in ten years or less, most articles in the social sciences produced per annum will be AI-generated, and we humans will not know the difference between an article written by one of us and one written by a machine.

Well, until then, if it happens, we still need to know how to write empirical research articles in the social sciences. And, for our jobs, we need to keep playing with AI and hope it helps us more than it hurts us.

I'm not a great writer. I'm good. I love writing. I think writing is fun! Not all the time, but most of the time. I avoid writing some things, but that's due to bursts of anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, or there's something I don't want to write (bored of it, or I think it's too hard, etc.).

I really enjoy teaching and I found that I like teaching graduate students how to write. I like to see students improve throughout the semester. I like to see the light bulbs turn on above their heads when they finally figure something out. Over the years, I collected my class notes on writing and posted them on my blog, [TheSociology.Place](#). I direct my students to the blog because they are fine distillations of my class lectures. I thought that putting them all in one place might help a few people. So, I collected these blog posts, updated them, and created this book.

What will you learn? Well, that's up to you. I take the reader from the beginning of the journey to the near end of the writing process. I start with the psychology and philosophy of it: how to think about writing in the social sciences and about writing habits and strategies. I argue that concepts are the building blocks of writing empirical research articles; concepts are the source of all that you write about and thus are the source of all your troubles and all your successes. I

take the writer through every part of the research article, from title to conclusion. I discuss how to think about and use AI. I then apply all this stuff to auxiliary writing topics of grant proposals and article reviews. I use examples from sociology and social psychology, but it can be fruitfully applied to political science and economics.

There are many books about writing, but very few specifically for the social sciences, and even fewer specifically about empirical research articles. This book is one of the few. This book is free and self-published. I will release versions as I improve on the chapters and add new things and find typos and formatting errors. Nobody's perfect.

In case you are wondering about the author: I was born in the USA, I got my PhD from The Ohio State University in sociology in 2006, and I'm a professor of sociology at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences (and got my "habilitation" there, too – it's a European status thing, like tenure in the US). I've written a lot of articles and co-authored and edited many books and I got a few Polish national grants and I helped other people write their articles and grants. I supervised a bunch of MA theses and dissertations. I've taught writing at the Graduate School for Social Research (GSSR), a PhD school at the Polish Academy of Sciences (with my colleague Dr. Ilona Wyszynski, to PhD students), and at the University of Warsaw's department of psychology (alone to MA students). My CV is online.

Thinking about writing

What is an empirical research article in the social sciences?



Definition and purpose

Empirical research articles in the social sciences are documents that communicate research ideas. Articles present the answers to the social scientist's research questions.

The purpose of an article is to communicate ideas from one researcher or research team to an audience. There are many ways to do this: orally (as in a conference, or podcast or interview), visually (video or graphically), or in writing.

We focus on journal articles, and, as such, on writing as the means of scientific communication. For the purpose of this chapter, "writing" refers to all elements within a standard journal article: text and tables and graphs.

Their audience

There are many audiences, from the public to experts, from policy-makers to scientists. These include articles designed to be read by teachers and organizations.

The primary audience of journal articles are other social scientists.

Their structure

Social scientists expect to understand what the author(s) – researcher or research team – did. As such, they expect specific kinds of information to appear in the articles. Due to long-held conventions, the structure became standard.

The structure of empirical research articles varies by discipline, but there are commonalities across the social sciences. Some refer to it as the IMRaD structure – Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion, which is the standard structure of articles in the natural sciences and psychology. Sociologists also use this structure, but include a special section called “Theory and Hypotheses” – psychologists include this information in their “Introduction” section. There are other disciplinary differences in what scientists expect.

Criticism of the structure of empirical research articles in the social sciences

The IMRaD and similar structures misrepresent the scientific process and are inefficient in many ways. The process from idea to publishing in the social sciences is not and never a straight line from introduction to conclusion. It misses important steps in the scientific process, such as how scientists discover ideas and tests of various ideas that do not work, both of which are creative endeavors. The rigid structure of social science articles hides the creativity of science and suggests, wrongly, a linear path from idea to completed article.

The article structure, as it appears in the vast majority of social science journals, is inefficient. The title can have unhelpful information. Information in the abstract appears in the introduction. Information in the introduction appears in the theory section. The conclusion can have, at times, a version of the introduction written in the past tense.

Moreover, the strict “word count” publishers impose on articles is a legacy of the age of the printing press that, in the age of the internet, is no longer necessary.

Scientists are trapped in expectations of others and, thus, in the current structure of empirical articles.

We could consider the structure as a sacrifice – scientists need specific information that the structure provides. For example, it would be difficult to report on the dead ends of research ideas in a way that would be clear for the audience to understand what the researcher or research team did. As such, the paper sacrifices accurate representations of the scientific process, as well as creativity and efficiency, to be a quick(ish) and clear report on how the scientists answered their research question.

How to think about academic writing in the social sciences



With so many parts to write in a research article, academic writing can seem overwhelming.

How should we think about it?

To help with your thinking, I present a simple philosophy of academic writing in the social sciences. It acknowledges who we are and is rooted in honesty and respect.

Social scientists are writers.

Sociology, political science, economics, psychology. Our primary job is to write papers based on the analysis of data.

You may be a student. You may be a PhD. It doesn't matter: if you are doing social science, you are a social scientist.

Social scientists are human beings.

We have expectations, preferences, and feelings.

Our expectations can be subverted, our preferences can be ignored, and our feelings can be hurt.

We need to acknowledge all of this as we go about our job in reading and writing social science research articles.

Why? Because we must acknowledge that our writing is an extension of ourselves. We have feelings bound up in our writing. When our writing is criticized, we may feel hurt. This is normal.

We must acknowledge that we have preferences for what we like and what we do not like. This is also normal.

We must acknowledge that we have expectations for what is good research and what is not good research. For what is good writing and what is not good writing. For what is acceptable in a research article and what is not.

And our readers have these expectations, too. (and they, too, have preferences and feelings!)

As writers and human beings, it is important that we treat each other with respect.

This goes for the classroom and for our colleagues (and others). We should treat ourselves with respect. By acknowledging our humanity, by placing ourselves in the writing, we become human writers. As Bill & Ted used to say, "Be excellent to each other."

Writing should be clear, simple, and engaging

To respect the reader, we need to produce clear, simple, and engaging writing.

Clear means that the sentences convey the meaning that you intend.

Simple means that the structure of everything from sentences to paragraphs to sections to the whole paper, is easily understood by your audience.

Engaging is not necessarily *The New Yorker* style engaging, or “funny.” It means that the work that you produce is interesting to your intended audience.

Overall, of course, it must be honest.

Your article should be a Harmonious Whole

The article should be a harmonious whole – every part should tell a key part of the story.

There are a limited set of concepts that repeat throughout the paper. The key is to write only about those concepts.

From title to appendix, the key concepts and their relationships to one another are central.

Like trees reaching the same overstory, like a band singing together in key, all of the parts fit together.

All else is unnecessary.



Writing habits and writing strategies



Staring at a blank Word doc or looking up at a mountain of scrap notes — you may find yourself stuck. You are stuck because you need to write the draft of the article, but you find it hard to write. What to do?

We should all discuss writing habits and writing strategies for social scientists.

Writing habits

What is a habit? Habit: “a settled or regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up.”

You can have any writing habit you want

The most important thing to remember is that you can have any writing habit you want — the need for a cozy, quiet room, or a noisy room and a disorganized desk, or to run around the block after writing a paragraph, and so on — **so long as you are productive.**

If you are able to achieve what you want to achieve, you can cultivate any habit you like to get there -- so long as it does not harm others, and it does not harm you.

Writing habits change over time (it's natural!)

It is important to remember that your writing habits may change over time. As you progress in your academic career, moving from graduate student to PhD and beyond, as you get older, your life will change and your priorities will change. Your habits, naturally, will change.

You can have one habit now, realize it is maladaptive, and then change the strategy to get a new habit. You may end up going back to your original habit. It doesn't matter, so long as you are productive in the way that you want to be productive.

Don't beat yourself up! Be kind to yourself, and others.

Self-assessment and honesty

My advice: Self-assess and be honest with yourself with the results of that assessment. You may not discover for a month or more that your writing habits are no longer productive. You may discover that a cozy, quiet room exactly at 10 am each day is no longer possible to have. You may discover that your habit of blaring 1950s cool jazz at midnight just to get started causes problems with your roommates and neighbors.

Monitor your progress: Miss your deadlines? Writing quality has declined? You have trouble even getting started? Etc. Try a new strategy. Be honest in your self-assessment to give yourself the best chance to start a new and more productive habit.

For strategies, try something new. Even if it seems very different from what you had done before, try it. You are social scientists: Theorize! Observe! Repeated observation is the hallmark of science. Theorize why it does not work and observe yourself.

If your new strategy doesn't work, there are plenty of other free options to try. You can always go back to your old habits.

You can have any habit you want – so long as it does not harm you or others.



Photo by Brett Jordan on Unsplash

Writing strategies

There are many writing strategies to choose from. Below are two articles to read about them.

Accountability

This means that someone else is counting on you to produce text or will check your work. Having someone else read your stuff is essential to writing well. This form of accountability is also a good strategy to get you to write that article draft.

Ask a colleague to read your article and give yourself a deadline to send it to them. Tell your colleague the deadline. For folks who like deadlines, this is a good strategy.

Time blocking

Ever hear of the quantified self? The quantified self is when you monitor and record your own activity to track progress. Well, this is a minor variant, and perhaps more palatable to most folks.

Create an Excel or Google Sheet. Put in the hours of the day and the days of the week. Look at your calendar and schedule the hours in which you will write. Schedule a writing time. It could be for one hour. It could be for two or more. Don't over-promise. Then, when the appointed day and hour comes, write.

When the time is up, stop writing and move on to something else. Give yourself a small reward (which should include leaving your laptop and desk, moving your body, and looking outside). With time blocking, you set aside your writing time, prioritizing it, and doing it.

Look back after a week and see how you did. Be honest! If you didn't actually write, think of why, and see if that time slot is best. If not, choose a new one. Keep tinkering.

The Egg Timer Method

The egg timer method is time blocking without a calendar. This is best if you can't get started. Simply set your timer (on your phone, or the egg timer, or what-have-you) for a half-hour or 45 minutes. Close your email. Press start. Now, write! When the timer rings, stop what you are doing, and get away from your laptop and desk. If it worked, try it again!

Using AI to brainstorm

With ChatGPT and many other AI-assisted writing programs, there is no need to stare at a blank page. With Notion AI and other "second brain" apps, there is no need to despair when looking up at your mountain of notes. Use these apps to get started and get organized! Just type something in, copy and paste the text, and start editing. Soon enough, you've got a paragraph going, the juices flowing, and a paper on the way.

Summary: Your habit doesn't matter. Your strategy does not matter. Productivity does.

Notes: What is productivity? How productive should I be? Etc. Those are different questions, but how *you* define productivity is paramount. Don't let others define you. If you see someone producing an article a month, think about whether that is how you would like to spend your life. Do you define yourself by the quantity of your scientific output? What is a good life? What is a good life for *you*?

How to find, read, and organize academic social science research



The bare bones of academic research is: Find and read academic articles and organize the massive amounts of research materials you will collect and produce. This is some advice for social science students and others to manage academic research.

How to find academic articles

It all comes down to the right key words. Each discipline and field has their own key words for research. For example, “acting politically” is understood by political sociologists as “political participation,” or “democratic engagement.” The term “activist organizations” is also understood as “social movement organizations,” with the acronym SMO. To find the right article, you have to find the key word that academics use.

To find the right key word, first do a general search. General search engines like Google or DuckDuckGo are great places to start. As you find some links to academic literature, you will discover some key words. Take those key words and put them in the search engines that scholars use: Google Scholar, Elicit, Consensus and the like provide academic-targeted results.

Once you find the papers, look to their references section. Articles published in good journals often cite other valuable works.

There are other places to find the right article. Social media, especially academic Bluesky or Facebook, can lead you to current discussions and posts by authors on the latest research. In the offline world, go to conferences and workshops, and engage in conversations there to hear about new and classic works in the field.

How to choose a relevant academic article

There are over 30,000 academic journals, and there are likely thousands in the social sciences, and there are dozens in your specific field. They can't all be gems. Since not every source you find is worth your time, you need to evaluate each source carefully.

Check the credibility of authors, journals, and publishers. Peer-reviewed articles from well-known publishers usually ensure higher quality. Stay away from predatory journals. There are lesser-known journals that can be valuable. Ultimately, you need to read the article to understand its value.

Don't be swayed by "big name" academics, many of whom will publish a mix of lesser works with major works. We've all been disappointed by a "big name" and "big university" academic's arrogant, crappy, and useless article or book. You know who you are.

Consider objectivity—does the article rely on facts or express opinions? Be wary of biased perspectives. Are they trying to sell you something, or simply tell you about something? Do they have a conflict of interest?

Check publication dates, too. Be sure to read a mix of current and classic articles.

Look for clarity and professionalism. Good articles are organized logically, clearly written, and free from significant errors. Poor presentation may indicate questionable quality.



Photo by Mikhail Vasilyev on Unsplash

Read efficiently

The Google Book project revealed that there are millions of books and billions of words. There are thousands of articles related to your field, and hundreds of those to potentially consider. Again: They can't all be gems.

First, assess the article's usefulness. Don't feel obligated to read an article from start to finish until you know it's worthwhile for you.

Begin with the title and abstract. Quickly scan the introduction for the research question and its contribution. Review the data and methods section carefully—if the methods section is weak, then the conclusion is useless. A strong abstract will summarize key findings.

Hopefully, the article is written with point-first paragraphs. Good academic writing uses point-first paragraphs. If the title and abstract look OK, then skim the article by reading the first sentence of each paragraph. This will take a minute or two. Then, read the methods section carefully. If the methods section seems legitimate and relevant to your research, then begin to read the article in-depth.

Articles are not murder mysteries! You can know the ending at the start, and you can jump around the article for relevant parts as you see fit. If the article is truly worthwhile, then read every word.

Take notes as you read! Don't rely on your memory. Given the hundreds of articles to sort through, and the dozens and dozens that are relevant, unless you have eidetic or photographic memory, you will not be able to retain information well.



Photo by Paul Hanaoka on Unsplash

How to organize your academic research

Once you've selected useful sources, staying organized is crucial. Divide your project into clear categories:

- Literature (articles, books, websites)
- Writing (notes, drafts)

- Data (datasets, analysis)
- Scientific Communication (emails, supervisor comments)
- Bureaucracy (official university documents and forms)

If you have a grant, add:

- Budget (proposal budgets, Excel tracking sheets)
- Administration (grant proposals, funder correspondence, contracts)

Organization of all this information is essential for successful research. Keep your digital files clearly titled with descriptive names and dates. Track versions carefully for there will be many, many revisions.

For paper documents such as notes, keep them neatly organized in named folders. Convert your materials into searchable formats like Google Drive to save significant time. Clearly name your folders to avoid confusion.

Citations accumulate quickly, so start using Zotero or it's like early to manage references efficiently. If you think it useful (I don't, but others do), use "second brain" AI tools like Notion or Rewind to collect and search for information. I find that Google Drive does just fine. But, I also organize my references like it's the 1990s. So, do what's best for you.

Finally, **always back up your data**. Schedule a weekly backup to a flash drive or the cloud—ideally both—to protect your hard work. You never know when you might lose all your data. Be prepared!

Concepts are the building blocks of research articles



The building blocks of a social science research article are concepts. The author must present and define all major concepts. Throughout the article, the author must link these concepts together to show how they relate to one another.

When you think of your article, think of the main concepts and their relationships. All of your writing is about these concepts.

When you are lost in your own paper, go back to your main concepts. They hold the lantern and the key.

The journey of the concepts through the article

In a previous chapter, we discussed what concepts are and how to choose them: What is a concept? How should we choose a concept?

Concepts are abstract ideas. The social scientist's job is to choose and define the right concepts, and to show how these concepts fit together.

The article is the tale of the concepts' journey. The structure of the article is the route the concepts follow. Each element of the structure tells a part of the tale.

The title presents the concepts to the audience. The introduction presents the concepts again, briefly defines them, defends why they are important, uses them to ask a question, and poses a

thesis (and/or hypothesis) about the relationship between them. The theory section defines the concepts in detail and explicitly shows how the main concepts relate to one another. The methodology section presents how you measure the concepts and how you will analyze their relationships. The results section presents the analyses of the relationships between the concepts. The conclusion discusses the contribution of the paper to the definition, theory, and measurement of the concepts and their relationships, and posits some directions for the concepts to go for their onward journey. Your references are tales of those concepts' previous adventures. (And the abstract is a microcosm of the entire article.)

You are the steward of the concepts' journey. What words you choose to describe the concepts and their relationships to one another shapes how the reader understands them. The references you choose bolsters (or, if chosen badly, undermines) this understanding.



Focus on the concepts

You can solve article writing problems by focusing on concepts.

Problem: “My paper is too long. I don’t know where to cut!”

Diagnosis: You have too many concepts to write about. Or you have too many unnecessary analyses of the concepts.

Solution: Go through your paper’s introduction and theory section and highlight every concept you mention and discuss. You will be amazed at how many words are highlighted. Then, on a separate document, list what you believe to be the top three concepts of your paper. Define these concepts with one sentence each. Write three to four concise sentences about the relationships between these concepts. You are now focused on what is most necessary for your paper — the three main concepts, and their relationships to each other. Look at all the highlighting on your article, and start cutting sentences with unnecessary concepts.

Problem: “I don’t know how to organize my theory section. It looks like a list of article summaries!”

Diagnosis: A theory section is not a literature review. You wrote your theory section like a literature review or a set of notes — just one summary after another, barely organized. You forgot to organize your theory section by concept.

Solution: A theory section is a series of statements about the main concepts and their relationships to one another. Your entire theory section should be organized by concept.

Lead each sentence and each paragraph by concept, not by citation. Go paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence. For each sentence where you start with “Domhall (2019) said...”, put the “author (year)” as the citation. Start the sentence with the concept. For example, instead of “Domhall (2019) argued that social norms on altruism influence communication behavior,” write “Social norms on altruism impact communication behavior (Domhall 2019).” Organize each paragraph by concept. The first paragraph should be about social norms. The second paragraph on altruism. The third paragraph on communication behavior. The following paragraph brings it all together.

Problem: “I feel lost in this paper. It seems so disorganized!”

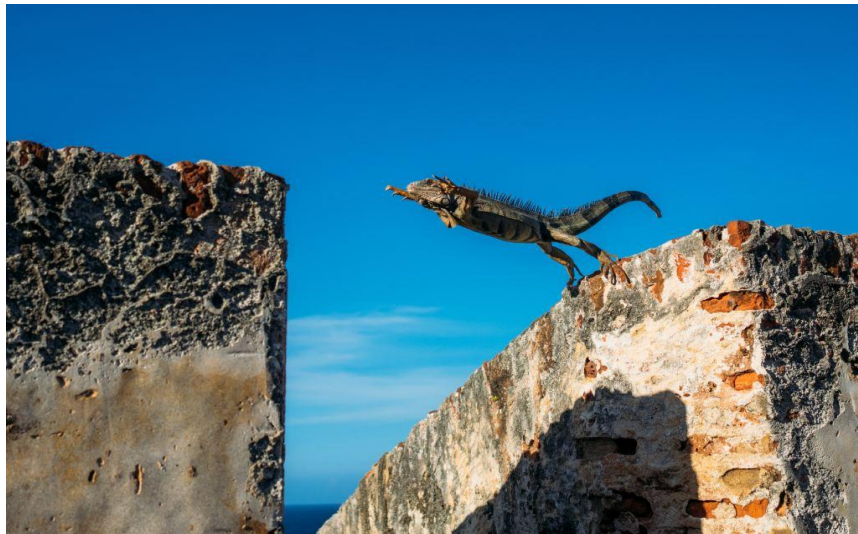
Diagnosis: You have too many concepts to write about.

Solution: Same as when the paper is too long and same as when the theory section is disorganized.



Basic knowledge about social science articles

Knowledge gap and examples



Researchers often talk about the “knowledge gap.”

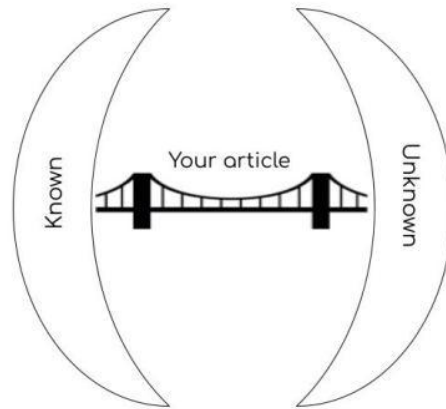
What is the knowledge gap?

The knowledge gap is the space between what we know and what we do not know.

“Whereas we know this...”

“We do not know that...”

Your research should present a puzzle — something that needs to be solved. The puzzle is the “problem” — something that we do not know, but should. The article is the “solution.” In other words, the article will solve (or address) the problem, and so fill the knowledge gap.



To know where the gap is, we need to know its boundaries. The boundaries are (a) the known knowledge (what we know) and (b) the unknown knowledge (what we know of what we do not know).

Filling the gap is the contribution of the article (or thesis or dissertation) to the field or discipline.

There are three major contributions an article can make to the social sciences

Concepts and Theory

It helps us understand extant concepts and theories in a new way, or provides a set of newly useful concepts or theories to explain related phenomena.

Methods

It contributes to data or methods, e.g. new data, refined data, new methods, etc.

National knowledge

Whereas the article is not new in terms of concepts, theory, data, or methods, with this article we can understand the nation (or nations) that are studied in the article. Whereas some, especially in the West, would consider “national knowledge” a minor contribution, for many countries of the Global South and others outside of the West, contributions to better knowledge of the nation can be a worthwhile contribution.

The knowledge gap is a criticism of the literature. It is a criticism of what we know. It is important to be specific about what we do not know.

Examples of knowledge gaps

There are two main ways to frame the knowledge gap. There is a “one-step” approach, and a “two-step” approach (from Schimel’s 2012 Writing Science: How to Write Papers That Get Cited and Proposals That Get Funded). Let’s look at examples for each.

One-step approach

Use the one-step approach when the audience is already familiar with the concepts of the article.

In this example, don’t worry if you are not familiar with these concepts — just focus on how the author wrote the one-step approach.

“Although previous research has substantiated the important role that issue identification plays in the decision-making process (e.g., Dutton, Stumpf, & Wagoner, 1990; Panzano & Billings, 1994; Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993; Thomas & McDaniel, 1990), **little empirical work has examined** what variables predispose an individual to frame an issue in a certain way. Addressing this research need, the purpose of the current study is to examine the effects of self-efficacy and issue characteristics on issue categorization.”

Mohammed, S., & Billings, R. S. (2002). The Effect of Self-Efficacy and Issue Characteristics on Threat and Opportunity Categorization. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 32(6), 1253-1275.

This is a classic one-step approach. “Although” is about what we know. “Little empirical work” is about what we do not know. The knowledge gap is the space between what we know and what we do not know. And all of this is in one sentence.

Nota bene! The phrase “little empirical work” is risky. In the age of Google Scholar and AI academic search tools such as Google Scholar Labs, Elicit and Consensus, it is likely that you will find ample empirical work on whatever you are studying. The best criticism of the literature is not that there is “little” empirical work, but that there are flaws of the empirical work itself — e.g. in the conceptualization, theory, measurement, and analysis.

Two-step approach

We use the two-step approach when terms are unfamiliar to the audience.

The audience is who reads the journal — a generalist journal, such as the *American Sociological Review*, has all of sociology as the audience. The audience for a specialist journal, such as *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, has mostly scholars in the speciality.

Here is an example of an article published in a specialist journal, but Introduces terms that may be unfamiliar. The specialist journal published it because it was relevant for their audience.

Step one: Introduce the importance

Shipp, A. J., Edwards, J. R., & Lambert, L. S. (2009). Conceptualization and measurement of temporal focus: The subjective experience of the past, present, and future. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 110(1), 1-22.

The concept was “temporal focus.” The authors begin with a basic description of the importance of time.

“A fundamental premise underlying temporal research is the notion that people differ in their perceptions of the past, present, and future (Bluedorn, 2002; Nuttin, 1985; Rappaport, 1990)... One individual difference construct, temporal focus, describes the extent to which people characteristically devote their attention to perceptions of the past, present, and future (Bluedorn, 2002). **Temporal focus is important** because thinking about the past, present, and future affects current attitudes, decisions, and behaviors, as evidenced by research on goal-setting, motivation, and performance (Bandura, 2001; Cottle, 1976; Fried & Slowik, 2004; Nuttin, 1985), learning and self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Sanna, Stocker, & Clarke, 2003), sense-making (Weick, 1979), affect (Wilson & Ross, 2003), and strategic choice (Bird, 1988; Das, 1987; Hambrick & Mason, 1984)...”

In step one, the authors introduced the topic and why it was important.

Step two: Introduce the gap

“Despite the importance of temporal focus for a variety of organizational behavior concepts, several conceptual and methodological challenges remain... The purpose of this article is to advance the conceptualization and measurement of the temporal focus construct.”

In step two, they define the boundaries of the knowledge gap.

Here we have an example of a psychology article published in a journal designed for specialists in organizational studies. The organizational studies audience was unfamiliar with the basic term, so the author

defined it and stated explicitly its importance. Then, the authors defined the boundaries of the knowledge gap and told them that this article will fill the gap.

Nota bene! When writing the knowledge gap, the phrase “few have” or “there is no research on...” becomes risky when so much research appears in so many forms – articles, presentations at conferences, working papers, etc. Knowledge gaps are about criticism. A better criticism would be about the *specific* deficiencies of previous studies. Perhaps previous research had not emphasized this link between A and B, and had some deficiency in how they approached it methodologically or theoretically.

In knowledge gaps, the problems should be grouped. Are they problems of methodology? Are they conceptual or theoretical problems? Are they problems of theoretical or group focus? Groups them under these contributions.

Summary

In sum, the knowledge gap is a criticism of the literature — it is the space between what we know and what we do not know. That space is a puzzle to solve! The article is the solution to that puzzle.

Research questions with examples



All research starts with a question. We define “research question” and provide examples of research questions in the social sciences.

What is a research question?

A research question is a clear and concise goal that is derived from the knowledge gap. Researchers ask questions to obtain valuable knowledge about the relationships between concepts.

When phrased as a question, it is the guiding inquiry that drives your research design. In an empirical article in the social sciences, the research question guides the research procedure, i.e. the data collection, the selection of methods, and the analyses of the data.

A Guide to Research Questions

Types of questions, or “inquiry,” influence the direction of the research.

Question (I ask ...)	Answer (I get ...)
What	Typology
Do...? (or Can...?)	Yes/no
When and where	“under what conditions”
Why	explanations, i.e. theory
How	Mechanisms

The types of questions determine the types of answers.

- If you ask “What is...”, you will look for a typology of the phenomenon.
- If you ask “Do(es)...”, you will look for a binary response: yes or no.
- If you ask “when...” or “where...”, you will look for the conditions in which that phenomenon exists (or emerges).
- If you ask “Why...” or “How...”, you are asking for a mechanism or a theory.

What is a mechanism?

A “mechanism” is the process that produces the effect. It describes how (“under what conditions”) something leads to the outcome. You know the mechanism when you know the process of how you got from one point to another (a sequence of actions or events). In sociology, a mechanism might describe the process through which social norms, as a macro or meso-level phenomenon, influence individual behavior.

Mechanisms are a series of steps. Each step involves certain actions, reactions, or decisions that lead to the next step. The result is the social effect that you observed.

What are the types of questions researchers ask?

Descriptive

Descriptive research questions identify and classify characteristics of the subject. For example, “What are the types of mental health issues among graduate students?”

Relationship

These are about the relationships between concepts. For instance, “Is there a relationship between socioeconomic status and the prevalence of certain mental health disorders?”

Causal

These are about cause-effect relationships. For example, “Does family SES background lead to certain types of mental health coping strategies?”

Comparative

Comparative research questions are about the similarities and differences between groups or phenomena. For example, “How do socioeconomic status groups differ in coping with mental health issues?”

Explanatory

These questions aim to understand underlying mechanisms or reasons. For example, “Why do some individuals develop self-medication, e.g. alcohol abuse, as a coping strategy while others do not?” or “How do some individuals develop self-medication, e.g. alcohol abuse, as a coping strategy?”

Nota bene! A well-phrased and narrow research question is specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART).

How should we write research questions in the article?

It is true that a “research question” is crucial for the article – but the name is a misnomer.

Some articles do not phrase the “research question” as a question. Rather, they phrase it as a statement of what the article is about.

The point of “research question” is not how the authors write it in the article, but whether the article is focused on some goal, and what that goal is.

It is more of the question that the researchers use in guiding their work; but it is not necessary to write in the form of the question.

Examples of research questions

Questions not in the form of a question

Let’s take a look at an example of an introduction, but this time paying attention to the phrasing of the research question:

Newman, D. B., Nezlek, J. B., & Thrash, T. M. (2023). The dynamics of prayer in daily life and implications for well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

“Even though participation in organized religion has declined in recent years, a substantial number of people who do not affiliate with any religion still pray on occasion...

... Yet, little is known about the types of daily events and experiences that may influence prayer content and how prayer may influence fluctuating states of well-being. This is particularly surprising given that prayers may reflect current events of daily life (Lambert et al., 2011). The goal of the present research was to

examine, using naturalistic daily diary methods, the dynamic processes that link prayer to daily events, affective states, and well-being” (1299).

Here, the authors frame the knowledge gap in a classic problem/solution format: Although organized religion is declining in the US, people still pray. Yet, we don’t know what they pray about or whether it improves their well-being.

But, the research question is not in the form of a question. It’s simply a statement about what the article is about. “The goal of the present research...” is to solve the puzzle.

Questions used simplistically as a writing device

O’Keefe, P. A., Horberg, E. J., Lee, F., & Dweck, C. S. (2022). Implicit theories of opportunity: When opportunity fails to knock, keep waiting, or start cultivating? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

“The world is changing rapidly and dramatically. A report from McKinsey & Company (Manyika et al., 2017) suggested that the rise of automation and artificial intelligence could reduce the global paid workforce by half, greatly decreasing or eliminating many common occupations like freight trucker (Taddonio, 2019), cook (Dean, 2020), bookkeeper (Monga, 2015), construction worker (Murphy, 2017), and even knowledge-based occupations like market research analyst (Molla, 2019). Employment opportunities have changed even more in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (International Labor Organization, 2020) to further affect the livelihood of people across the globe. Such changes have left people understandably concerned about their job prospects (Lund et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2017). We acknowledge that opportunities are not distributed equally among people; some groups have more doors open to them than others due to societal inequalities—a structural injustice that must be rectified. Nonetheless, a tendency to actively cultivate new opportunities may be more critical than ever. That is, when opportunities could exist for someone, do they believe that those opportunities can be cultivated?”

Here, the authors frame the knowledge gap in a classic problem/solution format: There are many troubles and from trouble comes opportunities. But, not everyone believes that they can access those opportunities.

The research question is asked rhetorically, in a “yes/no” format. They have a more sophisticated phrasing of their research question in their abstract: “can beliefs about the nature and workings of opportunities help people see the door to their goals as more open than closed, and can these beliefs influence the likelihood of goal attainment?” It's still "yes/no."

Yes/no questions are a rhetorical device designed for simplicity. Such simplicity can be useful to get a complex thought across to the reader. However, asking such questions leave little room for a complex answer with nuance. As such, "yes/no" questions are a writing device and not much of a scientific device.

Questions phrased in the title

Kurdi, B., Morehouse, K. N., & Dunham, Y. (2022). **How do explicit and implicit evaluations shift?** A preregistered meta-analysis of the effects of co-occurrence and relational information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Here, the question is in the title.

Summary

We defined the term, “research question” and provided examples of research questions. In the social sciences, a research question defines the scope of inquiry and the type of question influences the research direction. It’s a goal arising from a knowledge gap and aims to understand relationships between concepts. The research question, while not necessarily phrased as a question, guides the article’s focus.

Outline of the structure of research articles in the social sciences



Why is the structure important?

You are building an article.

The structure is crucial.

A social scientist reading an empirical article in a social science journal expects that the article has a familiar organizational structure. The author's job is to satisfy the audience. You can satisfy the audience by satisfying their curiosity, their love of intellectual puzzles, or their desire to understand the issue and replicate the author's findings.

There is a standard structure. Deviations from the standard are acceptable within limits; if the author deviates, the reader must easily understand the logical flow of the structure.

What is the structure of a research article in the social sciences?

In addition to the title and the abstract, the standard structural elements of a research article in the social sciences are:

I. Introduction

Cites the relevant literature, states the research topic, poses the research question and answers "So What?"

II. Theories and Hypotheses

This section contains an in-depth exposition of theories relevant to the article and clearly stated hypotheses.

III. Data and Methods

Description of data, variables and methods of social inquiry are clear enough for someone to replicate your results.

IV. Results

All most important parts of tables, graphs and the like are clearly interpreted and put in language that the reader recognizes. The author personally and formally addresses the hypotheses.

V. Conclusion and/or Discussion

This section is a Wild, Wild West. It has no standard form and may contain the following (not necessarily in order): summary of article (question, theory, hypotheses, data and main results); restatement of the answer to So What and the implications of your results for new theoretical or methodological directions; explanation of the weird things you found in your analyses that you didn't expect to find; limitations of the research; suggestions for future research, including new theory or other empirical articles that should be written; practical implications and policy suggestions; and speculations. Some folks think that conclusions should not present any new information. Others think this is the place for speculations and interesting and relevant stuff that didn't seem to fit anywhere else (like the footnotes). There isn't even a consensus on what to call this section. Some call it discussion. Some call it conclusion. Some call it "Discussion and Conclusion."

Setting

If the empirical article is a case study (of a country, a village, and so on), a demographic, political, economic and social description of the physical or virtual place in which the objects of your study interact. Settings can be placed after theory and before methods.

The structure of a research article in the social sciences starts with a title and abstract, and then has an introduction, theory (and hypotheses) section, data and methods, results, conclusion, and references. Don't forget the acknowledgements!

Writing each part of the research article

Effective titles in social science research are short, truthful, and informative



You want people to read your research. When looking for a useful article, titles are often the first thing people see. Titles should be useful — they should let the reader know what to expect.

Two rules for writing effective titles

1. Effective titles have the main concepts of the paper.
2. Effective titles are short, truthful, and informative.

There are two arguments about title length: Short titles vs. long titles.

Short titles

- A short and succinct title is clear and can make a quick impact on the reader.
- Short titles are the norm for high-quality journals and thus fit well with scholarly expectations.
- However, they can be ambiguous, i.e. by design they may not be truthful; they have less detail, i.e. they may not convey enough information.
- Too-short titles have a “mystery box” design that may lead to clicks, but is equally likely to lead to disappointment.

Long titles

- A long title provides plenty of information and thus is likely to be accurate, i.e. truthful.
- However, they are less likely to make an immediate impression.
- Long titles are also outside of the norm, which may reduce their perceived usefulness.
- For long titles, there is the SEO argument: a long title is better for search engine optimization because it contains more key words. However, the evidence for whether it really boosts citation counts is not clear.

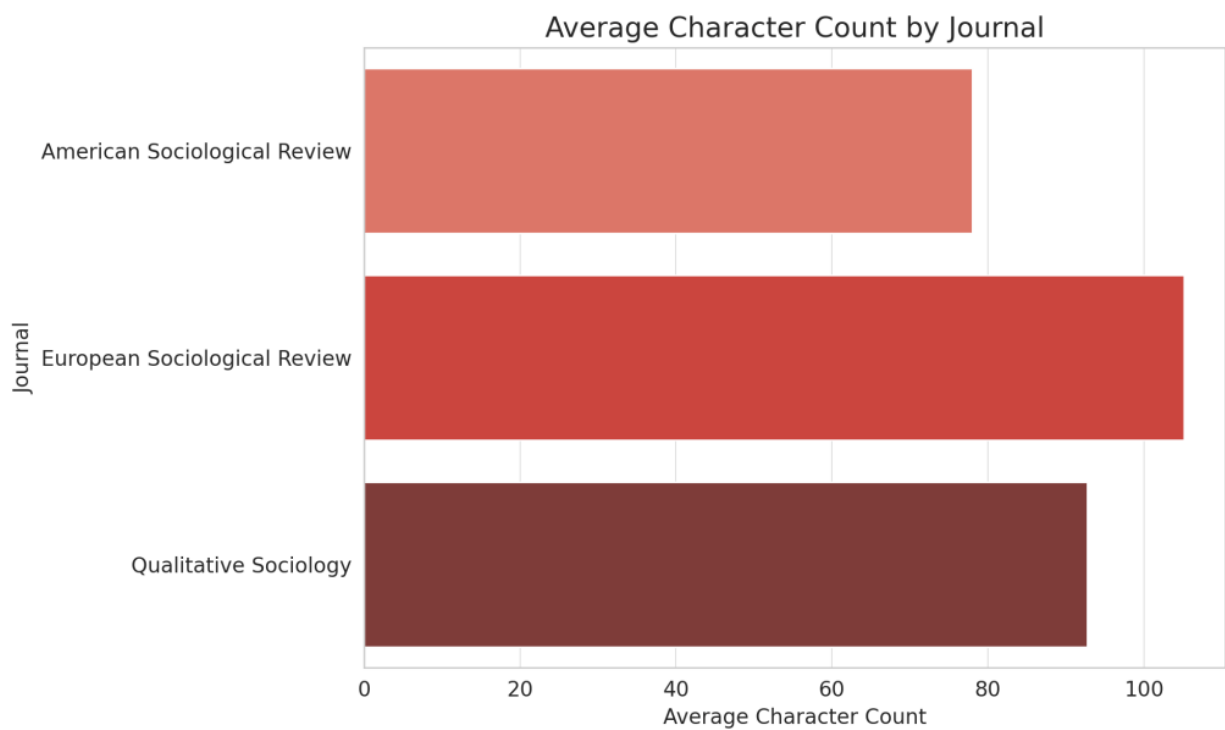
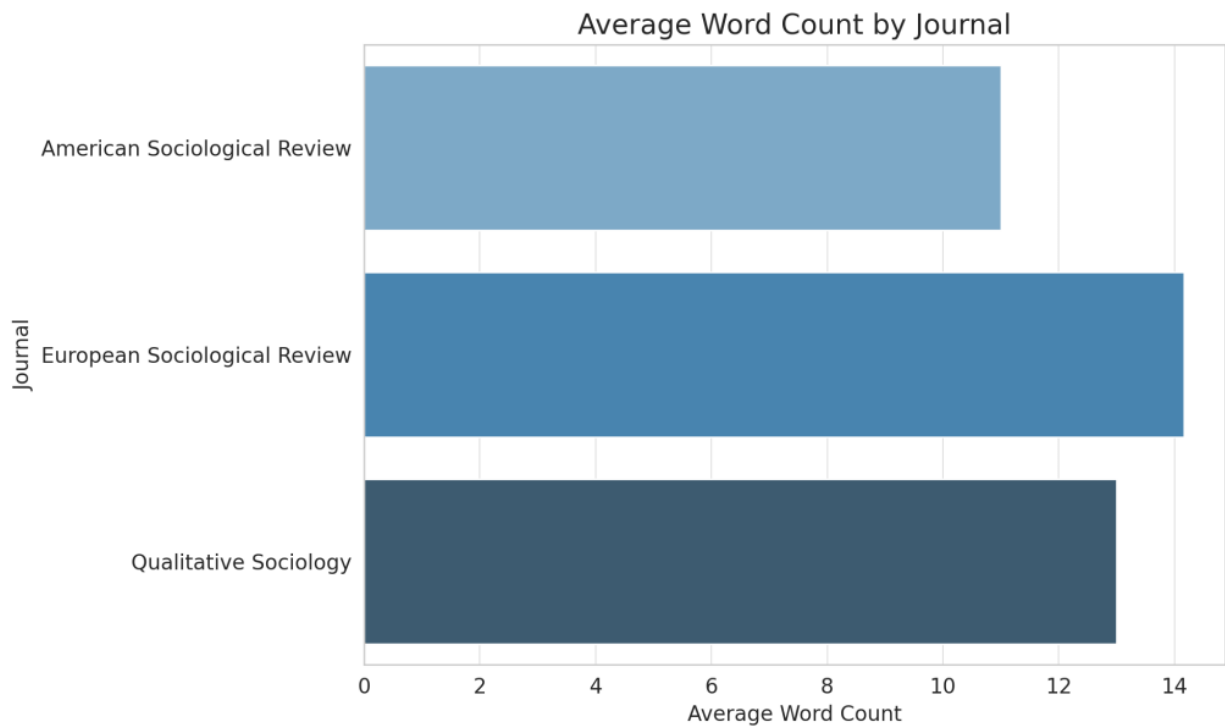
The relative gains in optimizing title length for citation counts are small. It is best to follow the norms. Where the journal is published and the usefulness of the article matter much more for citation counts.

For more on this topic, read: Guo, Feng, Chao Ma, Qingling Shi, and Qingqing Zong. “Succinct effect or informative effect: The relationship between title length and the number of citations.” *Scientometrics* 116 (2018): 1531-1539.

Short titles: How short is short?

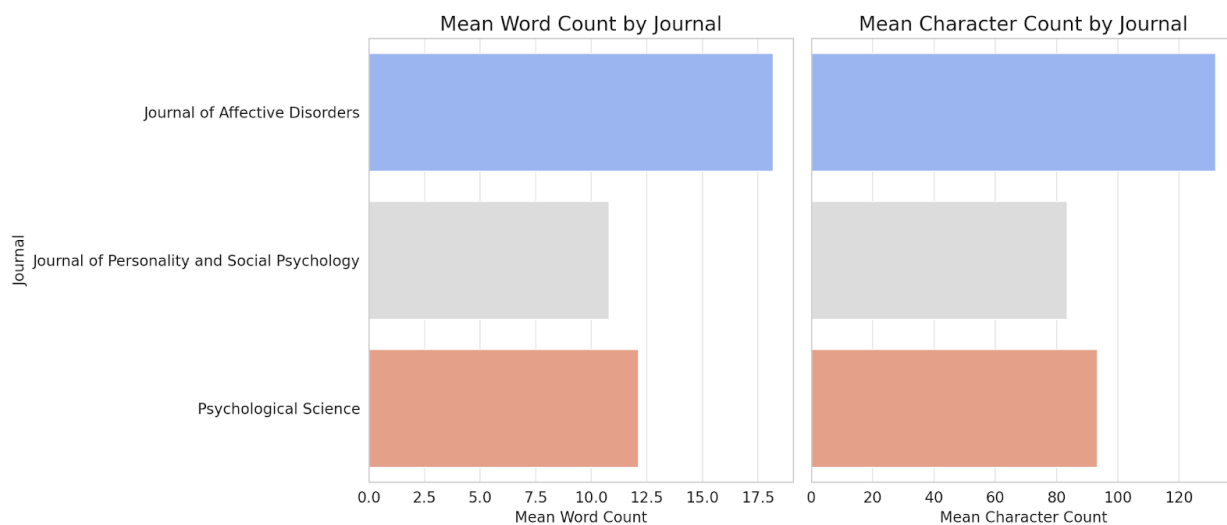
I conducted an anecdotal analysis (i.e. not scientific, but it may pass an eye test).

For sociology, I examined 41 titles from articles in top sociology journals: *American Sociological Review* (17), *European Sociological Review* (12), and *Qualitative Sociology* (12), 2023 and 2024. I recorded the word and character (with spaces) counts.



Authors looking to publish in international English language sociology journals should aim for titles around 12 to 14 words or 90 to 105 characters in length, adjusting based on the specific journal's historical preferences.

I did the same for psychology. I examined the 53 titles and noted the word and character counts across three major psychology journals: *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Psychological Science*.



Whereas one journal is a clear outlier, the generalist journals in psychology were between 11 and 12 words, 83 – 90 characters.

Titles should be truthful and informative

What does it mean to be truthful and informative?

Truthful = the concepts in the title are concepts that the author(s) write about in the article.

Informative = all of the main concepts are listed.

A short title can be just truthful, but not informative — and therefore unhelpful.

Here is an example:

VanHeuvelen, Tom. "The Right to Work and American Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 88, no. 5 (2023): 810-843.

It is about the policy of Right to Work. It is about inequality, but only in terms of economic outcomes, and not about any of the many forms of inequality – ethnic, gender, political, etc. Therefore, while it is truthful, it is a mystery box where no one really knows what the article contains until they open it.

Here's another example of a short, truthful, but un-informative title:

Bhargava, Saurabh. "Experienced Love: An Empirical Account." *Psychological Science* 35, no. 1 (2024): 7-20.

It is truthful: it is about the concept of "experienced love," and it is an empirical study. However, it is impossible to know what the authors intend, other than some generic empirical study of the concept. This is a mystery box and therefore suspicious.

Good examples of short, truthful, and informative titles

Ranganathan, Aruna, and Aayan Das. "Marching to Her Own Beat: Asynchronous Teamwork and Gender Differences in Performance on Creative Projects." *American Sociological Review* 88, no. 5 (2023): 901-937.

It is an excellent article, and the title matches the abstract well. The title contains all the main concepts: it is exactly about gender differences in performance in asynchronous team work on creative projects. The first part of the title matches the data, which is about musical groups. Great job!

Laurence, James, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth. "What buffered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on depression? A longitudinal study of caregivers of school aged children in Ireland." *European Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (2024): 14-40.

The research question of the article is in the title. All the main concepts are present, as well as the methodological aspects. In short, a great title, though a bit on the long side. Great job!

Title types

There are a few main types of titles. Remember that good and effective titles contain the main concepts. Some contain methodological details or the setting of the research — this information can be essential to understanding what is in the article.

The following titles are taken from *American Sociological Review*, *European Sociological Review*, and *Qualitative Sociology*.

Fun: science, science, science

Risky Ties and Taxing Ties: The Multiple Dimensions of Negativity

Hybrid Imbalance: Collaborative Fabrication of Digital Teaching and Learning Material

Note: These are risky because the “fun” part introduces a new concept to the social sciences, added to the enormous mountain of concepts – if the concept doesn’t catch on, then the “fun” part is a wasted part of the title. Most of the time, the “fun” parts merely add yet another bloated concept to the pile.

Quote from qualitative research: elaborating statement

“It Was, Ugh, It Was So Gnarly. And I Kept Going”: The Cultural Significance of Scars in the Workplace

“You Can’t Punish People for the Rest of Their Life for Something that They Learned from, and Changed from:” Collateral Consequences, Inclusion, and Narratives of Responsibility

Note: Most of the time there are in qualitative articles. These can generate interest and be evocative, but tend to be longer titles than the norm.

Statement: specifics

The impact of religious involvement on trust, volunteering, and perceived cooperativeness: evidence from two British panels

Cohort changes in the association between parental divorce and children's education: A long-term perspective on the institutionalization hypothesis

Note: These title types are simple and straightforward. They include a statement as to what the article is about and methodological or theory details.

Statements only

Urban Marginality, Neighborhood Dynamics, and the Illicit Drug Trade in Mexico City

Young adults' labour market transitions and intergenerational support in Germany

Note: These can be a little too short, but they tend to be truthful and informative.

Question titles

What buffered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on depression? A longitudinal study of caregivers of school aged children in Ireland

To Empower or Safeguard? How Novice Rape and Domestic Violence Victim Advocates Render Institutional Complexity Visible

Note: Titles are a matter of preference. Some folks do not like question titles. If they try to enforce their preferences on you, know that their preferences for non-question titles is purely subjective. There is no evidence whatsoever that question titles are less truthful or informative, or less effective in generative citations than other title types. So, if someone tells you that they don't like question titles, point to the evidence that many question titles are published in the best sociology journals.

Mystery box



The Stigma of Diseases: Unequal Burden, Uneven Decline

Inequality Below the Poverty Line since 1967: The Role of the U.S. Welfare State

Note: The problem with mystery box titles is that they can be misleading, i.e. untruthful and uninformative. It is impossible to know what is in the article from reading the mystery box title. Moreover, there is no evidence whatsoever that mystery box titles are more effective than straightforward titles.

Summary

There are norms in the social sciences. The norms for titles are that they have the main concepts of the paper and are short, truthful, and informative. Main concept-focused, short, truthful, and informative titles are effective. Short means around 13 words and 95 characters, more or less.

There are many title types to choose from. It does not matter what title type you choose so long as the main concepts are there and it is truthful and informative, and relatively short.

How to write an abstract for a social science research article



Abstracts are essential to writing science. Scientists read the title first, and then the abstract. The scientist will determine whether to read the article after reading the abstract. It's that important!

In this chapter, I explain how to write an abstract for an empirical article in the social sciences, with examples.

Abstracts, like titles, must have the main concepts. Thankfully, for empirical research articles in the social sciences (sociology, political science, and psychology) there is a standard structure. Note that journals may differ in length — some want 100 words, some 200 words, and so on — and some impose a structure (e.g. *Social Science Quarterly* demands a specific structure).

Useful abstracts have a problem-solution approach

- I. Knowledge gap: What is the problem/ topic; what do we know and what do we not know? (1-2 sentences)
- II. Data and methods: How did you address the problem? (1-2 sentences)
- III. Results (3-4 sentences)
- IV. General contribution of the article to the field (1 sentence)

Examples of good abstracts

Example 1: Qualitative

Cordner, Alissa. "Staring at the sun during wildfire season: knowledge, uncertainty, and front-line resistance in disaster preparation." *Qualitative sociology* 44, no. 2 (2021): 313-335.

I. Knowledge gap

"As climate change increases the frequency and severity of disasters, and population and social changes raise the public's vulnerability to disaster events, societies face additional risk of multiple disaster events or other hazards occurring simultaneously. Such hazards involve significant uncertainty, which must be translated into concrete plans able to be implemented by disaster workers. Little research has explored how disaster managers incorporate different forms of knowledge and uncertainty into preparations for simultaneous hazards or disaster events, or how front-line disaster workers respond to and implement these plans."

The author begins with a general statement about disasters and public risks. Then, Dr. Cordner presents a knowledge gap: what we know about how disaster workers prepare for the uncertainty of hazards, and then what we do not know about it.

II. Data and methods

"In this paper I draw on ethnographic research working as a wildland firefighter, interviews with firefighters and fire managers, and state and agency planning documents to examine preparations for two events occurring in Central Oregon in August 2017: (1) the height of wildfire season and (2) hundreds of thousands of anticipated visitors for a total solar eclipse."

As expected in a classic social science abstract, the next sentences are about the data and methods. We hope that the next part of the abstract will address the findings.

III. Results

"I find that different qualities of risk, hazard, and uncertainty across these two events were central to the development and implementation of disaster plans. Agency leaders devised worst-case scenario plans for the eclipse based on uncertain predictions regarding hazards from the eclipse and the occurrence of severe wildfires, aiming to eliminate the potential for unknown hazards. These plans were generally met with skepticism by front-line disaster workers. Despite the uncertainties that dominated eclipse-planning

rhetoric, firefighters largely identified risks from the eclipse that were risks they dealt with in their daily work as firefighters.”

Indeed, Dr. Cordner does proceed with the findings. The final sentence should have a statement about the contribution.

IV. Contribution

“I conclude by discussing implications of these findings for conceptual understandings of disaster planning as well as contemporary concerns about skepticism and conspiracy theories directed at government planning and response to disaster events.”

The abstract indeed ends with a statement about the contribution to the social sciences. Great job!

Example 2: Quantitative

Jungkunz, Sebastian, and Paul Marx. “Material deprivation in childhood and unequal political socialization: the relationship between children’s economic hardship and future voting.” *European Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (2024): 72-84.

I. Knowledge gap

“Long-term socialization patterns are considered a key explanation for socio-economic inequalities in political participation. Material conditions in youth and childhood are assumed to contribute to rather stable trajectories of political apathy or involvement and lay the foundations for unequal participation from before voting age and far into adulthood. However, our understanding of when such inequalities begin to become noticeable, the importance of parental socio-economic status as opposed to personal socio-economic status, and potential long-term consequences is still limited.”

The authors begin with a statement about what we know, and what we don’t know, about inequality, socialization, and political participation.

II. Data and methods

“We address these issues using the youth questionnaire of the UK Household Longitudinal Study.”

Next, the authors present the data. Not much info here, but they use a well-known dataset and thus can get away with a minimal presentation of data and methods.

III. Results

“We show that material deprivation in childhood is negatively related to turnout in young adults’ first election in which they are eligible to vote. This result holds when we control for an unusually exhaustive list of potential confounders, such as psychological childhood characteristics, parental–political interest and education, present material conditions, mental health, and future educational degrees.”

A long results section, but thorough. The next section should be about the wider implications of their findings.

IV. Contribution

“Our results, hence, suggest that—while personal socio-economic experiences in early adulthood are not irrelevant—socio-economic family background has an independent effect on political participation.”

And voila! Here the authors discuss the wider implications of their findings. This is a classic abstract for quantitative research in the social sciences. Great job!

Summary

Abstracts have a particular structure. They start with the knowledge gap, move to the data and methods, then present the results, and end with the contribution to the literature. This abstract structure holds for qualitative and quantitative articles, for most journals in sociology and political science, and for many in psychology. Please keep in mind that journals will differ in terms of word or character count, and some demand a particular structure.

How to write the introduction to a research article in the social sciences



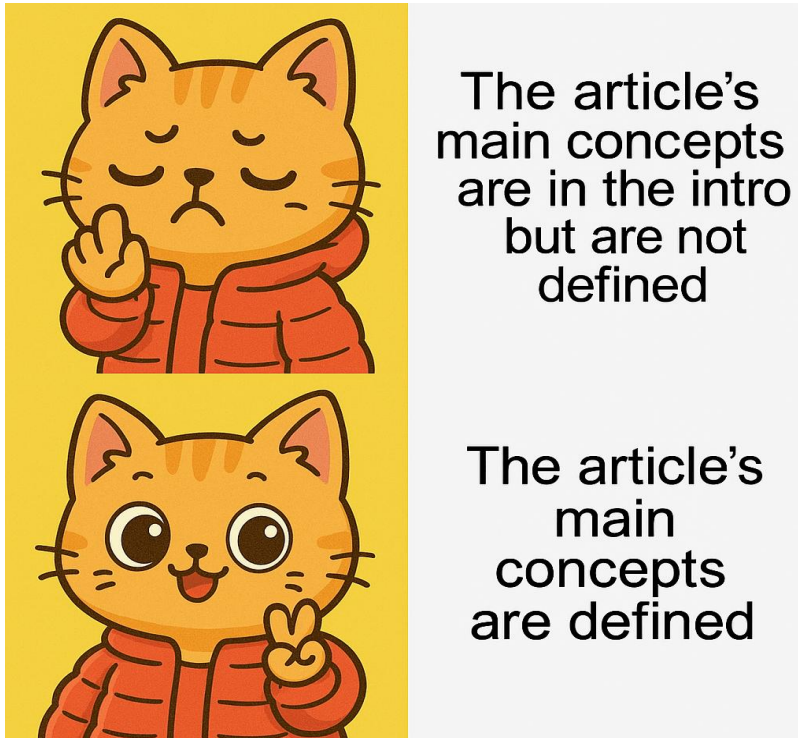
What is an introduction?

Empirical research articles in the social sciences require, among other parts, a title, an abstract, and an introduction.

Introductions in social science articles are short — about 3 to 6 paragraphs, depending on the journal and approach. They are at the beginning of empirically-based research articles in sociology, psychology, and political science.

It's all about concepts

The through-line of the article are concepts. All major concepts must be present and defined. The author must link these concepts together.



The introduction is a series of statements about the concepts and their relationships to each other. A major statement within the introduction is knowledge gap and contribution of the article to the scientific literature.

So What? Articles must make at least one contribution to the social science literature

A good introduction carries a heavy burden. It must cite relevant literature, state the research topic, pose the research question, and answer “So What?”

When social scientists read your research paper, they ask, “So what?” Or, “What is the contribution of this article to the literature? Why should I read this?” In other words, “This article exists... so what if it does? Who cares?”

Articles should be worthwhile for the reader and provide them with new knowledge.

After the **abstract**, the introduction is when you must make the case for the contribution the article makes to the social sciences.

Introductions should take a problem/solution approach. First, tell us the problem with the current literature. And then, tell us what the solution is (i.e. your study is the solution).

Introductions are where you explicitly state the Knowledge Gap

As a reminder: the knowledge gap is the space between what we know and what we do not know. It can be phrased as, “Whereas we know this... We do not know that...”

Your research should present a puzzle — something that needs to be solved. The puzzle is the “problem” — something that we do not know, but should. The article is the “solution.” In other words, the article will solve (or address) the problem, and so fill the knowledge gap.

The introduction explicitly states the knowledge gap.

Approaches to introductions in sociology

Following the work of Schimel (2012), I present a one-step approach and a two-step approach.

A sentence-by-sentence investigation of an excellent introduction

Another way to explain what an introduction does is to provide a sentence-by-sentence illustration. Here we present the introduction to the article:

Guetzkow, Joshua, Michèle Lamont, and Grégoire Mallard. “What is Originality in the Humanities and the Social Sciences?” *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 2 (2004): 190-212.

We recommend that you read the article (click the link above), especially the article’s abstract and introduction, and take note of the data and methods.

Imagine that we are reading this article out loud. We will take this introduction apart sentence by sentence, discussing wording and their place in the structure of the introduction.

Paragraph 1

[Sentence 1] “Research on peer review largely concerns how journal rejection rates, inter-reviewer reliability, review procedures, and turnaround times are affected by disciplinary differences in levels of consensus or paradigm development (see Braxton and Hargens 1996 for a review).”

The first sentence of an article announces the topic. The topic should be of importance, or at least of interest, to the reader. Here, the authors announce that the article will be about peer review. We don’t

know yet what kind of peer review, but for a first sentence, this is a good start. The sentence also informs us how peer review connects to other aspects of the professional lives of academics, such as “review procedures” and the like. We expect from this sentence that the rest will be about peer review.

[Sentence 2] “Accordingly, we know a great deal about how much reviewers in a given discipline disagree, but we are no closer to understanding what it is that they disagree about.”

For a second sentence, we expected more about peer review, and we got it. Here, the authors connect “peer review” to people — the “reviewers,” who are the professionals that review academic work. The sentence also highlights a theme from the first sentence: disagreement. Peer reviewers can disagree with each other.

[Sentence 3] “More generally, sociologists have yet to explore disciplinary variation in the criteria that peer reviewers use to distinguish between worthy and less worthy academic work.”

From “peer review” we get to the concept of “worthy.” Worthiness, in academia, is strongly related to contribution. Thus, the introduction alerts us that peer reviewers have some criteria, and that criteria is connected to worthiness.

Let’s take stock of what we know from the first three sentences.

We know that the primary concept of this article is “originality,” yet the first three sentences have not mentioned the term. Instead, the authors designed these three sentences to connect originality to “peer review” and “worthiness,” which are secondary yet important concepts for the article.

This article is special because it provides a bold presentation of ideas. It announces, very loudly, its intentions and the importance of its topic. The next sentence exemplifies this approach.

[Sentence 4] “This is an important topic given the unparalleled centrality of peer review in the academic stratification system (Cole and Cole 1973) and the impact of conceptions of worthy knowledge on academic restructuring (Gumport 2000).”

Wow! It states it right there: “This is an important topic...” They claim that peer review has “unparalleled centrality” in an unequal academic system. If one wants to make a bold claim, they better back it up with logic or evidence. And here, in the *American Sociological Review*, it would be difficult to argue against this sentence. Peer review IS central! Thus, the topic IS important! And since this article is about grant money, the concept of “stratification” is highlighted.

Few articles can make such bold claims. With sentences like this, the article provides a nearly caricatured example of how to write the introduction.

The next sentence is a bit of an anomaly, but in this article, it makes sense:

[Sentence 5] “Drawing on interviews conducted with panelists serving on five multidisciplinary fellowship competitions, this paper focuses on one of the criteria used most often to evaluate scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, namely, originality.”

It is not often that the methods are presented in the first paragraph of the introduction. And yet, here it works, because the previous sentences have made a clear sequence of connections between concepts: [1] peer review → [2] reviewers → [3] worthiness (contributions) → [4] academic stratification → [5] originality

Finally, they land on the primary concept of the article, and they place that concept in the ultimate power position in a sentence: last. The last word of this remarkable paragraph is the core concept of the research. This is powerful writing.

Paragraph 2

We won't go into detail of the second paragraph, but we will note its structure and wording.

The main structure of this second paragraph is a sing-song of contributions this article makes to the literature. It goes back and forth, rising and falling between “what is known in the literature” and “What we don't know, and what this article will do.”

[What we know] “Existing research in the sociology of science on originality, which generally concerns the natural sciences, defines it as the production of new findings and new theories.”

[What we don't know and what this article will do] “We expand this literature by exploring the definitions of originality used by panelists in the humanities, history, and social sciences.”

[What we know] “Whereas the literature has not considered the relative salience of the various dimensions of originality between disciplines...”

[What we don't know and what this article will do] “...we identified important variations”

[What we know] “Whereas the literature tends to equate originality with substantive innovation and to consider the personal attributes of the researcher as irrelevant to evaluation...”

[What we don’t know and what this article will do] “... we show that panelists often equated originality with the moral character of the researcher (especially his/her authenticity and integrity), and that this judgment plays a role in their evaluation”

In the next two sentences, the authors reassert the importance of these contributions in their typically bold way:

“These contributions are theoretically significant. They constitute a new approach to the study of peer review and originality that focuses on the meaning of criteria of evaluation and their distribution across clusters of disciplines.”

The meta-writing here takes this article to a new plane of existence. This article is about originality and their word choice makes explicit and direct claims about the article’s originality. Clearly, this is done on purpose and here it creates a good effect. It is a rare article that can do this.

It would be risky to try this approach in an article on other topics. Instead, treat the article as a bold, shiny exemplar from which you can draw inspiration.

Introductions: The Bottom Line

Use this article as a reminder of what you must convey in the introduction section of an empirical research article in the social sciences:

- Presents and defines the major concepts of the paper, and the relationships between them
- Cites the relevant literature
- Poses the research question
- Answers “So What?”

Types of qualitative sociology introductions

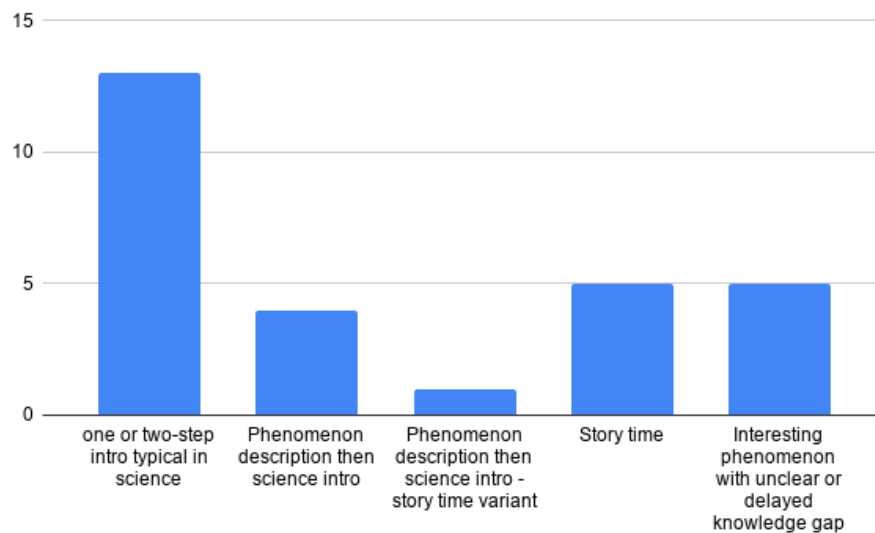
Whereas introductions in quantitative sociology articles follow the hard sciences and typically have either a one-step or two-step introduction, with a stated knowledge gap, research question(s), and thesis statement, qualitative article intros have many more deviations.

I have not seen advice on the internet about different styles of introductions to qualitative articles. This is an attempt to provide a typology of these introduction styles.

To build the typology, I examined 28 substantive, i.e. non-methodology focused, articles from the journal *Qualitative Sociology* between 2020 and 2025.

From these data I identified **five types of introductions to qualitative sociology articles**. I don't have spiffy and pithy category titles for them.

1. Typical science format with one or two-step introductions
2. Starts with a description of the phenomenon, and then has a more or less typical science format
3. Description of the phenomenon, and then has a more or less typical science format — story time variant
4. Interesting phenomenon with unclear or delayed knowledge gap
5. Story time



The data and chart indicate that most introductions to qualitative sociology articles follow an introduction style that one would find in quantitative articles. But, it also shows variations. Below, I define them.

Typical science format with one or two-step introductions

These are a one-step or two-step introduction, with a stated knowledge gap, research question(s), and thesis statement, all within the first three paragraphs.

There are many deviations, but they have the main features of typical science introductions. Some deviate from writing standards, with phrases like “to the best of my knowledge” (Czeranowska 2025: 308). Many of them write many paragraphs before they get to the knowledge gap and the research question. Some declare the knowledge gap without citations, and then, a paragraph or so later, rephrase the knowledge gap with explicit reference to the literature. But in the main, they are substantively similar to other scientific articles.

Starts with a description of the phenomenon, and then has a more or less typical science format

The first paragraph starts with a description of an event, e.g. “In September 2017, the central area of Mexico was shaken by two earthquakes which damaged over two thousand historic heritage buildings” (Fridman et al 2025: 184). The author uses event description to concretize the phenomenon in the minds of the reader before heading into a traditional science format.

Description of the phenomenon, and then has a more or less typical science format — story time variant

It starts with a story from the data which serves as a description of the phenomenon, and then more or less gets into a typical science format.

Interesting phenomenon with unclear or delayed knowledge gap

The introduction describes an interesting phenomenon and the author(s) declare that they studied it. There is little reference to the phenomenon in the prior literature, and thus there is no clear knowledge gap.

As a variant, the introduction describes an interesting phenomenon and the author(s) declare that they studied it, but the introduction does not clearly reference the previous literature. The author (may) eventually present a knowledge gap, but it is delayed until deep into the theory section.

Story time

Story time introductions begin with a non-fiction story from their data and maintain that format throughout the introduction. Eventually, many paragraphs later, the authors discuss what the paper is about, and perhaps what the possible contributions might be. This popular “non-fiction magazine” style may not have a clearly stated knowledge gap, and in this way is similar to the “interesting phenomenon” type. Some eventually get to a knowledge gap, but after a subheading that would typically start the theory section, and in any case, not until many, many pages into the article. Some never get there.

How to write the theory section of a research article in the social sciences



Every empirical research article in sociology and political science requires a theory section. When you conduct research with data, there are dozens of concepts and theories to choose from. However, only some can fit into the theory section.

What to do?

This chapter provides some commonsense tips on how to write the theory section of an empirical research article in the social sciences.

What is theory?

Theories are a set of explanations and predictions of phenomena. The explanations can be about a particular phenomenon that occurs at one point in time, but they can also lead to predictions of how societies, groups, and individuals will think, feel, and act when faced with similar phenomena in the future.

Theories are sets of statements about the relationships between concepts. Each concept must have a definition.

The theory section is where you define the concepts in detail and where you clarify the connections between the concepts.

How to write the theory section of an article

1. Remember that the empirical research paper in the social sciences should be a harmonious whole — everything should meaningfully connect. The title, the abstract, the introduction, and so on should all be about the same set of concepts. Everything should fit together with as little extraneous information as possible.
2. Remember: the paper is 8000 words. The author cannot write an 8000 word theory section. There must be some reduction, some selection, and some judgment of what goes in.
3. The theory section should focus on the concepts that were “introduced” in the introduction.
4. It is not the job of the author to survey every possible theory from Earth to Mars, from Greece to France. Rather, they should discuss only the theories that are directly relevant to this article.
5. Remember your audience; they are the audience of the particular journal to which you will send the article. The audience does not expect to read a meandering theory section that winds its way back to Aristotle, unless of course, the article is specifically about Aristotelian political philosophy. You do not need to invoke Marx every time you write about class, etc.
6. Keep in the theory section...
 - (a) ... what the literature at the time of your writing considers as the main theories. When you research your topic, you will keep notes on the theories previous scholars have used. From them you will know what the main theories are.

(b) ... new theories that the literature has not considered, if that is a contribution of your article to the field of study. If you do not use the theory in your paper, you should harshly question why it is in the paper.

7. A mix of old and new references to theory and concepts is best. It will demonstrate the temporal and intellectual breadth of your research.

8. **Organize your theory section by concepts.** Do not organize them as a series of summaries of other articles. When you organize by concept, you can trace the connections between concepts and build your theoretical argument. When you present a series of article summaries, it is difficult to understand the connections between them. So, organize by concept.

Data Write-up: The Who, What, When, Where, and Why



You are an investigator. You collect data to test your theory and prove your point.

You and journalists are similar. In writing their articles, journalists are taught to answer five questions: who, what, when, where, and why.

What is the data and methods section of an empirical research article in the social sciences?

The data section of an empirical research article in the social sciences must address the who, what, when, where, and why of the data.

These are classic journalist questions that can be applied to the data write-up section of your article. Let's define them.

Who

These are the units of analysis. Example: Individuals in European Social Survey or countries in a comparative research project that uses World Bank Indicators or interviewees in a qualitative study.

What

This is the type of data: survey, in-depth interview, participant observation, and so on.

When

These are the dates of the data collection expressed in years or months or even days, depending on the situation.

Where

This is the location of the units of analysis (countries, city/town/village). This can include the "scene" of the interview, and gets close to the "setting."

Why

Justify the choice of the data — the reasons that these data are the best to address the research question.

Let's look at an example from survey data



"Our data are all 30 countries in the European Social Survey data Round 9 (ESS 2018). ESS is a high quality sociological survey with individuals as the units of analysis and has the items we need to address our research question on the relationships between immigration attitudes, employment, and protest across nations."

This short statement about the data answers the basic questions of the data.

Who: Individuals nested in countries

What: Cross-national survey

When: 2018

Where: 30 countries

Why: High quality survey data that has the appropriate items for the research question.

Let's look at an example from a qualitative article

From: "Latino/a professionals as entrepreneurs: how race, class, and gender shape entrepreneurial incorporation" by Jody Agius Vallejo & Stephanie L. Canizales published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2016).

"This research draws on a larger study of middle- and upper-class Latino entrepreneurs in Los Angeles. For this paper we control for business sector by limiting our analyses to twenty-three entrepreneurs who own professional services businesses such as finance, insurance, real estate, law, and public relations... Lasting between two and three hours, the interviews were conducted by the authors and a Latina graduate student, either at the subject's office, home, or in public, between October 2010 and July 2014. The interviews were open-ended, tape-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim."

Who: Latino/a professionals, i.e. individuals

What: In-depth interviews (lasted ca. 2 hours)

When: 2010 – 2014

Where: Los Angeles, California, USA

Why: They do not say it here, but in the introduction, they write that they wanted to explore an "intersectional approach that considers how race, class position, and gender, coalesce to differently shape Latinos/as' entry into and experiences in the professional business sector." As such, the data on male and female Latinx are a justification for the data that did not need to be explicitly stated in the data section.

How to write the results section of a research article in the social sciences



When you analyze data, your readers will want to know the results. But, you have lots of data and lots of analyses. How can we best write the results section of an empirical research article in the social sciences.

Some tips on how to write the results section of a research article

1. The results section should flow from the rest of the paper. As with the theory section, for example, the results section should be selective.
2. Be honest! It is important to include all results, not just the ones that “fit” your theory. Present the results objectively and transparently, including any unexpected or contradictory findings.
3. Whatever data you have, or will produce, there will be a lot of it. The possibilities for analysis are vast. Indeed, there may be uses for your data that, at the current time, are not known.

However, for an empirical research article in the social sciences, the results section must focus on...

- (a) testing hypotheses, i.e. the relationships between the main concepts of the paper,
- (b) anomalous results that are not methodological artifacts (an artefact are results that are due to issues with the methods only and thus do not reflect reality).

4. Text on the results should be about results of the analyses, not the interpretation of them in terms of theory. The conclusion or “summary” or “discussion” sections are where you can summarize the results and interpret them with regard to the theories.

5. Use subheadings: organize your results with a clear structure. The structure should be primarily about the main concepts of the paper in the order they were introduced.

6. Other notes:

Positionality: If the “I” is important in how you collected the data and analyze the results, then there must be some writing on how you fit into the story and may have influenced these crucial parts of the study.

Chronology: If the study’s focus is how the events unfolded over time, then a chronological structure is best. I.e. Alissa Cordner’s “Staring at the sun during wildfire season: knowledge, uncertainty, and front-line resistance in disaster preparation,” published in *Qualitative Sociology* 44, no. 2 (2021): 313-335, and summarized in Occams.Press.

Comparative: This is when the researcher compares different groups, cases, or settings. The writer will compare and contrast the experiences, perspectives, or behaviors of the different groups or cases. This can be done thematically, or can be done case by case.

How to write the conclusion section of a research article in the social sciences



All good things must come to an end — even your empirical research article in the social sciences. In terms of structure and content, of all of the sections, the conclusion section of a research article in the social sciences has the fewest common expectations and the greatest variability.

What is the conclusion section of a research article?

Some folks think that conclusions should not present any new information. Others think this is the place for speculations and interesting and relevant stuff that didn't seem to fit anywhere else (like the footnotes). There isn't even a consensus on what to call this section. Some prefer "Discussion," others "Conclusion and Discussion."

Given the variability, there are still some good ways to structure it and some nearly-always useful content to provide.

Here, I discuss how to write the conclusion section of a research article in the social sciences.

I recommend the book *Writing Science: How to Write Papers That Get Cited and Proposals That Get Funded* by Joshua Schimel (OUP 2012). I refer to specific page numbers and chapters from that book, but even if you have not read it, the following advice is straightforward.

1. Summary of what the article is about (a short paragraph, ca. 3 -4 sentences)

Unlike an abstract or an introduction or even a theory section, here you can summarize the (a) purpose and (b) the knowledge gap and research question and (c) the methods and data with specificity. You can assume that you are writing to an audience that has read the other sections of the paper. You do not have to define concepts or explain what the theories mean because you already did that in the preceding sections. You are writing to “experts” in a way; their expertise comes from reading the previous sections of your article.

2. If you have hypotheses, the fate of each one, in order (one or two paragraphs, depending on how many hypotheses you have)

After a summary, you slowly answer the research question that you posed in the beginning of the paper. Start with the hypotheses. Do they have empirical support? If so, to what extent? And if not, what happened? Here some anomalies can be raised. You can address the anomalies in detail towards the end of the conclusion.

3. Re-pose and answer, in a straightforward way, the research question(s) (one to three paragraphs, depending)

You’ve summarized and you’ve answered the specific research question.

4. Discuss limitations, but turn them into strengths

If you have important data limitations, you can raise them here, and see if you can turn those limitations into strengths. Schimel, in Chapter 18, tells the reader to raise these limitations earlier:

“Deal with the limitations as early as possible, get that discussion out of the way, and then get on with developing a strong story” (180) and “Depending on the issues, you may need to address limitations in any part of a paper or proposal; as a rule, earlier is better” (181).

Later (p.184), Schimel clarifies this:

“When constraints are methodological detail, address them in the Methods. When they go beyond that to affect how you interpret the data, you must address them in the Discussion.”

A key idea is that the limitations are actually strengths. “The limitations of X are a, b, and c. Although we did X, we still got a robust explanation for Y. In addition, through X, we were able to observe interesting features of Y that expand what we know about the phenomenon. Specifically...” (See also Schimel 2012: 187 – 188). Imagine re-writing a grant proposal (like Madlibs) in the social sciences from Schimel’s earth sciences example (p. 183).

It might look like this:

“Each of the methods proposed has potential limitations, and the utility of several have been questioned. However, we believe that we have constrained the limitations adequately. We have done this by being careful in interpreting what the data actually reveal (e.g. X1 rather than X2) and in part by carefully integrating different approaches to complement each other. Thus, we believe that this suite of methods sufficiently characterizes Y.”

5. Other: Anomalies, Speculations, Policy Suggestions, and Future Research

If you have interesting anomalies, discuss them here. If you want to posit future research questions, i.e. where this study can go next, pose them here. Likewise for policy suggestions or broader social impacts. Here is also a good place to discuss alternative explanations for the phenomenon, i.e. speculations. This is also a good place to address specific-yet-minor suggestions from the reviewers.

6. Last statement (one paragraph) in the conclusion section

Here is where you can remind people of your main “take away” message and why it is a contribution to the field of study. Yes, it is a bit of a repetition. But, this is a chance to formulate a clearer, stronger message that, if you had 100 -150 words, what you would want people to know about this article.



Done!

How to write the acknowledgements section



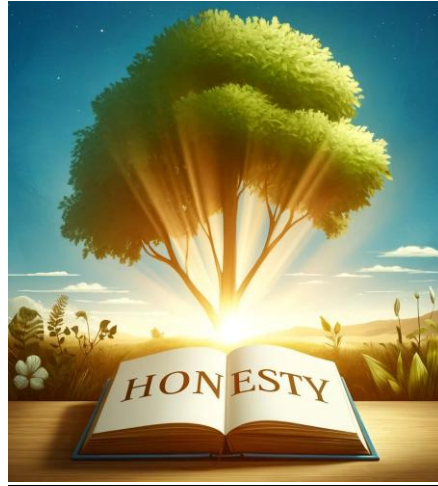
Who should you acknowledge in a research article in the social sciences?

Many things went right (and, perhaps wrong) in your writing of a research article in the social sciences. You should acknowledge the help that you received.

But, who should you acknowledge?

The ethical core of an acknowledgment section in a research article in the social sciences is **honesty**: you are to publicly recognize and declare that you had help with your article. That help can come from people and organizations.

This chapter discusses who to acknowledge in a research article in the social sciences.



Acknowledge the people who helped

If this is a peer reviewed article, at minimum, the people who helped you are the editor and the reviewer(s). They can be thanked, here. Most likely, there are those who you discussed or shared the article with prior to publication. It would be good to publicly acknowledge them, as they gave their time and effort to help this paper get to the publishing stage.

It does not have to be everyone you ever discussed it with: you can be judicious and fair at the same time.

Acknowledge the organizations that funded the research

There are three main types of organizations to acknowledge.

1. The place in which you conducted the research.

Even if they did not pay you directly for the publication, the place in which you conducted the research (e.g. your affiliation) had provided the infrastructure that you needed to conduct and write the research. If this is the place where you work, that acknowledgement comes in the form of the institutional affiliation that you put after your name in the article. If it is somewhere other than your place of work (research visits or former employer, etc.), publicly declare it in the acknowledgements section.

2. The conference, seminar, or workshop where you presented the research.

If you presented a version of that paper in a conference, seminar, or workshop, taxpayers or dues paying members or any combination of these funded that event. It would be good to publicly acknowledge it.

3. The direct funding — funding organization — for the research.

The funding likely came from the government, which means that it came from the taxpayers. Sometimes it comes from private sources. This funding acknowledgement is so important that most journals require you to disclose it when submitting your article for publication. If you received a fellowship, scholarship, or employment to do research on the topic of your article, and during that funding time you worked on the article, the ethical decision is to publicly acknowledge it.

The acknowledgment should come with the grant number. If you require even light mental gymnastics to not put the grant number on it, then the best thing to do is to simply acknowledge the grant. Remember: the journals require this disclosure. If you are in doubt, ask the principle investigator of the grant or, if feasible, the administrator of the funding source.

Principles of good writing

Arcs and Flow: Good academic writing with examples



What is good academic writing in the social sciences? How to write academic research articles well? We provide the building blocks of good academic writing with examples.

In short, good academic writing builds arcs and achieves flow. How? This is done through point-first paragraphs and logical structures within paragraphs.

Don't worry — we will define everything and provide examples. First, we explain the building blocks of good academic writing. Then, we present examples.

Let's start with the building blocks.

Good academic writing: How to think about it

Good academic writing starts with a structure. As we discussed in another chapter, all academic research articles have a deliberate and purposeful structure. In the book *Writing Science*, Schimel (2012) presents the structure as an “arc.”

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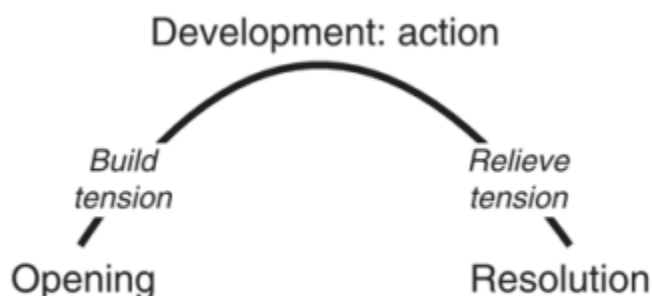


Figure 10.1. A story arc.

The structure of a paper is an arc.

How does the arc work? The beginning of the paper is the introduction. This is the opening of the paper. It is the start of the arc. The opening presents a puzzle — a knowledge gap. By asking a research question, and through the theory and the data and methods, the paper arcs toward the resolution. Your paper solves the puzzle — it fills the knowledge gap. The resolution is the end of the arc.

Remember that the structure of the paper satisfies expectations – the structure is what the reader (your audience) expects to see. The structure of academic research articles fits into their expectations and thus they are eager to read the article.

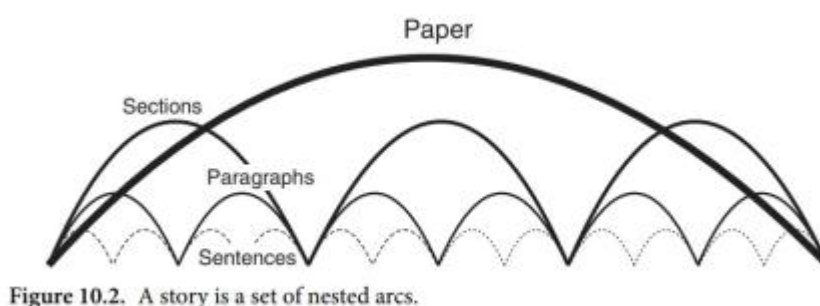
The structure contributes to the flow.

What is flow? **Flow** is a seamless arc from one idea to the next.

Arcs within the paper

There are structures within the main structure of the paper. Each section, and each paragraph, should have the structure that the reader expects.

Within each section are paragraphs. The paragraphs, and sentences within, and the words within, also flow (Schimel 2012).



There are arcs within sections. Within a section, the first paragraph is the introduction to the section. The middle paragraphs explicate (develop) that thought. The last paragraph is the end of that thought. Paragraphs lead one idea to the next.

There are arcs within paragraphs. The paragraph's first sentence presents what the paragraph is about. It presents a puzzle. The middle of the paragraph solves the puzzle. The end can be part of the resolution, or a nice summary.

Good academic writing uses point-first paragraphs

Point-first paragraphs tell the story of the paragraph. What is a point-first paragraph? A point-first paragraph is one where the first sentence clearly presents the idea of the entire paragraph.

Point-first paragraphs make the flow visible. When done correctly, one can skim the whole paper just by reading the first sentence of each paragraph and get a deeper understanding of what the article is about. (in good academic writing, the details begin in the second sentence of the paragraph)

One point-first paragraph leads to the next, and so on. Last sentences can be nice summaries, but they should also lead to the next paragraph. And so on.

Good academic writing: Examples

We presented the building blocks. Now we need examples of how it works.

Point-first paragraphs

Let's look at this paper: Kalkstein, D. A., Hook, C. J., Hard, B. M., & Walton, G. M. (2022). Social norms govern what behaviors come to mind—And what do not. It was published in a leading social psychology journal, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

This article is about how social norms constrain, or “regulate,” thought and behavior. (like a social structure) The authors need to explain what a social norm is. So, they devote a whole section, called “Social Norms,” to this task. It is an excellent example of arcs and how to use point-first paragraphs to tell the story.

The fragment looks like this:

Social Norms

Social norms are consensually held beliefs about what behaviors are common and appropriate in a setting (Bicchieri et al., 2018; Legros & Cislighi, 2020). They often take the form of formal or informal rules (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). They have long been recognized for their influence on individuals (Bem, 1970; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Pepitone, 1976) and as strong predictors of behavior across a wide variety of domains (Ajzen, 1991; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Walton & Wilson, 2018).

Social norms are a classic topic of study in the social sciences. Past work has sought to answer such questions as how norms are learned and detected (e.g., Crandall, 1988; Dannals et al., 2020; Savani et al., 2022); when norms will exert stronger or weaker influence on behavior (Cislighi & Heise, 2018); how they spread through social networks (Paluck et al., 2016); and the processes that contribute to the emergence, maintenance, and dissipation of social norms (see Legros & Cislighi, 2020). Previous work has also sought to understand the mechanisms behind the normative influence. Such work has primarily explored the underlying reasons why people adhere to norms, such as rational-choice calculations; motivations to express social identity; and inferences that a behavior will be effective or will garner social approval (see Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Morris et al., 2015, for reviews).

Building on this literature, we explore mechanisms, not in terms of *why* people adhere to social norms, but *how* norms impact behavior: the basic cognitive processes through which social norms have their influence. A primary way they do so, we suggest, is by shaping people's behavioral choice set. Uncovering the cognitive mechanisms involved in normative influence on behavior is an important step for research, as it is crucial for understanding the implications of norms for individual experience, motivation, and behavior.

Let's take a look at the point-first paragraphs.

“Social Norms

P1: “Social norms are consensually held beliefs about what behaviors are common and appropriate in a setting...”

P2: “Social norms are a classic topic of study in the social sciences...”

P3: “Building on this literature, we explore mechanisms, not in terms of why people adhere to social norms, but how norms impact behavior: the basic cognitive processes through which social norms have their influence...”

Each paragraph played a role:

Paragraph One defined the concept. Paragraph Two show that the concept is a common concept and is important. Paragraph Three presented how this study will use the concept.

The section flowed from one paragraph to the next. That section led, logically, into the next section in which they built their theory: “How Social Norms Shape Cognition and Regulate Behavior.”

Flow

From this same paper, let’s look at how they achieve flow *within* a paragraph. Let’s look at the paragraph from their section, “How Social Norms Can Ease Burdens of Self-Control.”

Here’s the fragment. We will break down the paragraph, sentence by sentence.

How Social Norms Can Ease Burdens of Self-Control

A strong determinant of whether people reach their goals—to reduce drinking, to quit smoking, to eat healthier, or to stick to a studying plan—is how often and how strongly they experience countervailing temptations (Allen et al., 2008; Duckworth et al., 2016; Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017; Witkiewitz, 2013). When temptations are encountered, they create self-control conflicts that pit the motivation to indulge against the motivation to adhere to higher order goals (Fujita, 2011; Kalkstein & Fujita, 2020; Kalkstein et al., 2018). The difficulty of resisting temptations means that an important question for goal pursuit is what factors can prevent temptations from arising in the first place; after all, people have no trouble resisting temptations that never arise. Our theory implies that social norms can obviate the need for in-the-moment self-control by transforming a potentially tempting course of action into one unconsidered altogether.

Sentence 1: “A strong determinant of whether people reach their goals—to reduce drinking, to quit smoking, to eat healthier, or to stick to a studying plan—is how often and how strongly they experience countervailing temptations (Allen et al., 2008; Duckworth et al., 2016; Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017; Witkiewitz, 2013).”

They introduce the term “temptations.” Temptations are in conflict. There are what they call “countervailing” temptations. We would expect Sentence 2 to advance the idea of conflicting temptations and add more information.

Sentence 2: “When temptations are encountered, they create self-control conflicts that pit the motivation to indulge against the motivation to adhere to higher order goals (Fujita, 2011; Kalkstein & Fujita, 2020; Kalkstein et al., 2018).”

The authors start this sentence by picking up on the idea of temptations in conflict, and then add a detail — temptations are hierarchical (a dangerous hierarchy of temptations!).

So far, the authors present a conflict. The conflict would need to be resolved. What would resolve this conflict?

Sentence 3: “The difficulty of resisting temptations means that an important question for goal pursuit is what factors can prevent temptations from arising in the first place; after all, people have no trouble resisting temptations that never arise.”

Ah! Now we have the *start* of the resolution. What can prevent temptations from arising? We would hope that Sentence 4 resolves the conflict entirely.

Sentence 4: “Our theory implies that social norms can obviate the need for in-the-moment self-control by transforming a potentially tempting course of action into one unconsidered altogether.”

Sentence 4 resolves the conflict: social norms eliminate the conflict of temptations. How? By regulating whether the individual even considers these temptations at all!

Summary

We have a perfect arc within a section and within a single paragraph — from opening, to conflict, to resolution of the conflict. The section flowed and the paragraph flowed.

Good academic writing: what to do

Good academic writing for empirical research articles has a clear and expected structure. The structure is an arc from beginning (introduction) to end (conclusion). Within the structure are other structures, and these structures also arc: sections and paragraphs.

Good academic writing uses point-first paragraphs. The point-first paragraphs make visible the flow of the whole article. When done right, one can skim a whole article by just reading the first sentences! (of course, to deeply understand it, you would have to read the details, which start in the second sentence).

You would hope that the reader — your audience — will read without interruption. That your writing will allow the reader to flow from one sentence to the next, on and on, until they get to the references section. And then cite your paper for their research.

And on and on.



Ethics

Authorship and substantial contributions



This chapter discusses the issue of academic authorship. We ask, who is an author? An author is someone who makes a substantial contribution. Since that is not very satisfying, we must also ask, what is a substantial contribution?

Authorship definition and substantial contribution

Academic authorship is typically given to those who have made a substantial contribution to a research project. However, what constitutes a “substantial contribution” is often not clearly defined and leaves room for subjectivity.

Codes of Ethics

Various professional bodies, like the International Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association, have codes of ethics that mention authorship but do not provide strict guidelines.

Avoiding plagiarism and honorary authorship

The guidelines consistently warn against plagiarism and honorary authorship. Plagiarism involves taking others’ work and claiming it as your own. Honorary authorship refers to being listed as an author without having made a significant contribution to the work.

Negotiation and fairness in authorship

The determination of what counts as a substantial contribution often involves negotiation, highlighting the importance of fairness, honesty, and professionalism among researchers. This complexity can be further amplified in long-term research projects, where team members may change. In absence of rigid rules, self-reflection and professionalism are key to making good authorship decisions.

Who is an author?

Let's read what the profession says about authorship. First stop is the International Sociological Association Code of Ethics:

They do not have strict or explicit authorship guidelines, but they do mention acknowledgement:

"The contribution of scholars, sponsors, technicians or other collaborators who have made a substantial contribution in carrying out a research project should be acknowledged explicitly in any subsequent publication."

The term "substantial contribution" is not clear. It does show that, in these guidelines, there is subjectivity as to what constitutes contribution. Looking at the logic of acknowledgements, there are some good rules to follow. But let's look further.

Let's read the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics:

"14. Authorship. Sociologists take responsibility and credit, including authorship credit, only for work they have actually performed or to which they have made a substantial contribution.

(a) In collaborative work, both within Sociology and across disciplines, research teams vary with regard to decisions about the order of authorship. Although there are alternate approaches (which may be explained in a footnote or acknowledgement), the default order of authorship in Sociology is based on the relative scientific or professional contributions of the authors.

(b) When collaborative work substantially derives from a student's dissertation or thesis, the student is usually listed as first author."

Is this better?

While ASA says a bit more about it, their definition leaves room for subjectivity. We read again about "substantial contribution," but they do not define it. Students whose dissertation or thesis work is the basis of the publication should be first author, but even here, ASA uses the word, "usually."

Avoid plagiarism

One clear message is to **avoid plagiarism and honorary authorship**. Plagiarism is taking others' writing and posing it as your own without credit or attribution to the original work. Honorary authorship is being listed as an author but not having anything whatsoever to do with the work. (see the British Sociological Association BSA)

Acknowledgments are Important

But, most cases in the social sciences are about the negotiation of what constitutes "substantial contribution" and what constitutes acknowledgement. Phrases that BSA uses such as "significant intellectual contribution" and "substantial direct academic contribution (i.e. intellectual responsibility and substantive work)" still rely on the word, "substantial."

To find out more, let's go beyond the social sciences.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, or ICMJE, is a "working group" of editors from such high profile publications as *New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Lancet*, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, and others.

They have authorship guidelines and they appear to be detailed: Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors.

Authorship is responsibility. Authors are responsible for the published work. Here, they want to distinguish between an author and a contributor. They have four authorship criteria. The first is the ubiquitous "Substantial contributions." They try to delineate what that means.

"Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND

Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND

Final approval of the version to be published; AND

Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.”

Note the connector AND. This AND means that all conditions must be met. Though there is more detail, what constitutes “substantial contribution” is not clear.

They argue that potential authors should have an opportunity to be a named author: “all individuals who meet the first criterion should have the opportunity to participate in the review, drafting, and final approval of the manuscript.”



Is she doing all the work around here?

What Is substantial contribution?

It seems that substantial contribution is a negotiation that has no strict equivalent across all situations — in some teams or organizations, these rules can be codified. But in others, there are no detailed codified rules. There are ethics and other useful guidelines, however, and these should be read and reflected upon.

This means that principles of fairness and honesty of all participants involved is needed to provide a satisfactory authorship. Ideally, as ICMJE points out, this would be worked out beforehand.

Reality is messy. Some research is conducted over years, which complicates authorship. People drop out of projects. New people are brought in. Conflicts between researchers can lead to bias in authorship decision-making. Researchers can be unrealistic about their actual contribution. Others are not assertive enough and are left out. No one should be forced to be an author.

Remember

In the absence of rigid institutional or organizational rules, the hope for good authorship decisions is in self-reflection, honesty, and professionalism.

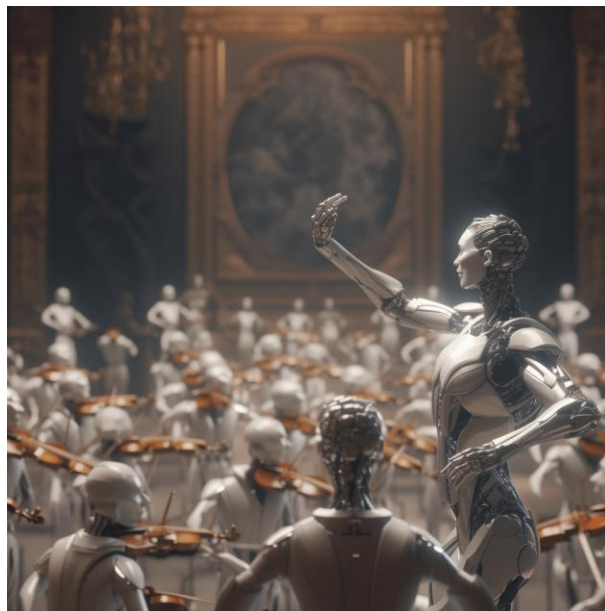
A professional is one who is honest in their communication with others and is willing to change their mind as a result of good arguments and self-reflection.

Other Resources

CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) “is a high-level taxonomy, including 14 roles, that can be used to represent the roles typically played by contributors to research outputs.”

Using AI assistants

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Social Scientist



AI has increased in use and popularity and, consequently, the profession of the social sciences has changed.

AI has changed the daily job of the social scientist in terms of research, teaching, and administration. There are ethical issues of plagiarism, defined as “pretending to write something that is not yours – even if it is stolen from a robot, not a person.” It has also changed personal, “off-the-job” tasks.

Let’s take a moment to anticipate the future. The future is vast because the possibilities are numerous. With such complexity, we need a framework to guide our thoughts.

The AI Future in research, teaching, and administration

A good framework to think about the AI-assisted future is to consider the mechanical, mundane tasks in research, teaching, and administration. The AI will automate those mechanical, mundane tasks to free the researcher, teacher, and administrator to focus on higher-level, creative tasks.

Social science research

In research that features analysis of data, mechanical and mundane tasks include, among others, coding statistical or qualitative software and conducting diagnostics to understand the data.

Imagine a future in which, through simple conversation – written or verbal – the AI-assistant will find the data on the internet, download it, and provide a detailed description of the data and its problems and potential for answering your research question. Knowing “how to code from scratch” will be unnecessary, as the AI will build sophisticated code behind the scenes and provide fast and reliable answers to specific questions. The AI will also help the researcher to refine the questions, and, through conversation, ask better ones.

The AI will then provide a detailed report, with text, tables, and figures, detailed methodology, and code (syntax) for others to check if need be. R, an open-source statistical program, will probably be the background of this capability.

Right now, the AI companies are building what they call “agents” that do this kind of work. It is primitive, but it is a step toward that future.

Social science teaching

Already, students use Word to spell-check and Grammarly to proofread. Autocompletion and AI suggestions of sentences are fast becoming the norm. Few question the use of these AI tools. Eventually, all students will use ChatGPT and the like to provide the basic text that they will then edit.

Imagine a future in which all written essays are AI-assisted. This, perhaps more than anything, frightens scholars. They think: *It will lead to a decline in thought. AI will become a kind of addiction, a dependency...* ... much like the internet is today?

Imagine an alternative to the thought that scares scholars. Imagine the elimination of uninspired essay assignments on subjects one could easily look-up on Wikipedia. Instead of a decline in thought, the AI will be a helpful assistant that unlocks new heights of creative thinking about the relationships between concepts and the construction of theories.

Social science administration

Administration is filled with mechanical, mundane activities: meeting notes, emails and other correspondence, budget construction and evaluation, and so on.

Imagine a future in which the AI is an assistant to the administrator. Note taking will be automatic and harmonized with notes from previous meetings. Emails are automated, set in the proper tone and style of the administrator. The administrator can, as the researcher does, engage in conversation with the AI to parse the budgets.

The administrator can then focus on improving the workplace. Instead of a burden that social scientists would rather avoid, administration can become a creative endeavor in which they can spend more time meeting with people and meeting their needs, or improving the conditions for research and teaching for everyone involved. And, they won't have to work as hard to do this vital job in academia. (but they should write their own damn emails and not rely on AI to write them)

Summary

In sum, think of it this way: the AI is an assistant and you are the director. You direct various AI-assistants to produce the best research, teaching, and administration.

Right now, these tools are primitive and not connected to one another. In years to come, we will marvel at how we managed the annoying minor difficulties we deal with now in linking sundry AI tools together to help us with our work. Eventually, there will be a plethora of excellent integrated tools to choose from. And for those who prefer a walled garden, like Apple is now, there will be a single suite of linked AI products.

Many AI tools for social scientists

There are many AI tools out there, including ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini. Otter.ai does transcripts. Notion.so integrates notes (including transcripts). Consensus and Elicit are like Google Scholar but it answers questions. Recently, Google Scholar Labs is an AI within Google Scholar, and performs similar functions to Elicit and Consensus, etc.

The best way to think about how to use AI tools is this: AI is the assistant and you are the director. As the director of AI assistants, you can choose which one to use, in what capacity, and at any time.

As a social scientist, you are the director of AI research assistants.



ChatGPT limits

First and foremost, we must recognize the limits of AI assistants for writing a research paper. The term for entering information is a “prompt.” They are multimodal, meaning that they can read pictures, data, text, and in a variety of formats. AI assistants have limits, and chief among them is that it will simply write things that are not true. The disclaimer at the bottom: “ChatGPT can make mistakes. Consider checking important info.”



The parlance is “hallucination,” but this is corporate brand-speak for what is really going on: the confident presentation of wrong information. ChatGPT will invent book titles and authors that never existed and claim that they are part of the literature. (however, Claude is aware of this and in the thinking version of it, will double check to see if the references are real – still, you cannot trust it). It will confidently and incorrectly define a concept and wrongly portray the relationship between concepts.

AI assistant writing, unedited, cannot rise to the level of sophistication necessary for publishing a good article in a journal.

(it can probably, right now, write a paper to publish in a low-visibility, peer-review challenged journal, and certainly in predatory journals, but these are unethical practices that are bad for science and bad for your career)

No matter the tone or style you set in the prompts, it cannot get past the low-level writing. Even though it can insert citations, the first limitation – it makes stuff up – renders the service too unreliable to write a full paper with it.

Priming

Priming is when you provide the AI information on which to base its response. Priming is necessary to get the best use of the AI. For example, “I am an academic researcher...” or “I am a high school student writing a term paper.”

Priming works best with prior knowledge of what you are specifically looking for. At this point, AI is not a mind reader. You can provide definitions of concepts, or specifics of the theory... It depends on what you want to write. The distinction between priming and being specific is blurry. It can all be done in the same prompt, and thus priming = specificity.

Note that ChatGPT and the like are not consistent with its replies. Sometimes they ignore commands you’ve given it, sometimes it adheres to them.

A human in the loop

AI assistants make too many mistakes to be trusted to write text and perform analyses. Therefore, it cannot be trusted to simply write a publishable article or report.

A human being must always oversee the work of AI assistants.

Always check the work of the AI assistant!



How to use AI assistants?

- **Brainstorming:** Get the thought-process started
- **Summaries of text:** Upload or enter in any text and ask for a summary
- **Text to edit:** Generate sections of a paper that you can then edit
- **Edit your text:** Input text you want it to fix
- **Critique your text:** Ask it to review your paper as a harsh critic (and if that starts to hurt your feelings, also as a sympathetic critic)
- **Translate text:** Sometimes better than Google Translate
- **Analyze photos:** It can read photos, incl. words, & translate the words
- **Analyze tables, graphs, and data:** Upload tables, pictures of graphs, or whole datasets. You can also create graphs.
- **Create tables:** For example, “Please analyze this interview into five main themes and place the themes in a table, where the first column is the theme and the second is a quote from the interview that supports the theme.”
- **Code:** ChatGPT, Claude, etc. can create code and assist with coding.

Nota Bene! *Some researchers and tech outlets have been critical about ChatGPT Deep Research:*



Raffaele Ciriello: “It’s no surprise that unreliable data can slip in, since AI models don’t “know” things in the same way humans do.”

Simon Willison: “The problem with this kind of tool is that while it’s possible to catch most hallucinations by checking the references it provides, the one thing that can’t be easily spotted is misinformation by omission.”

Benedict Evans: “LLMs are not databases: they do not do precise, deterministic, predictable data retrieval, and it’s irrelevant to test them as though they could.”

The Verge: “But the biggest problem was that ChatGPT didn’t follow the single clearest element of my request: tell me what happened in the last five years. ChatGPT’s report title declares that it covers 2019 to 2024. Yet the latest case it mentions was decided in 2023...”

Derek Lowe in Science.org: “As with all LLM output, all of these things are presented in the same fluid, confident-sounding style: you have to know the material already to realize when your foot has gone through what was earlier solid flooring. That, to me, is one of their most pernicious features. I know that these things were not designed per se to glide over or hide their weak points and their mistakes, but they do a terrific job of it, and that’s not really what you want.”

Sam Edelstein: “The outputted report on its surface looks polished and ready to send off to someone to read. But if it quotes an untrustworthy source, it is the human that sends the report that will get in trouble.”

tl;dr ChatGPT Deep Research cannot access any datasets that it was not trained on. It spits out reports that strongly imply that it can, but it cannot. Confidently presents unreliable data, omits information, cannot query databases, lies about the information it provides, and is deceptive about how it presents information.

AI writing tips from economist Tyler Cowen



Play around with AI

Cowen advises writers to play around with AI to understand their potential. He uses AI to understand nuances of complex topics. Using AI speeds up his research process: “In the old days,” he said, “I would have ordered and paid for 20 to 30 books. Now, maybe, I’ve ordered two or three books, but I’ll keep interrogating the best LLMs. I acquire the context much more quickly.”

As we all know, AI hallucinates, i.e. it spits out bad info. Cowen prefers to manage the hallucinations. He notices that, over time, the number of hallucinations has decreased. “The very best models with reasoning hallucinate much, much less,” he said. “Hallucinations have gone down by more than 10x in the last year.” To manage it, he advises to verify the information that AI gives you.

Prompting is a skill

A skillful prompt will significantly improve what AI will produce. To obtain high-quality responses from AI, Cowen recommends precise queries rather than general ones.

“Put humans out of your mind,” he said. “Imagine yourself either speaking to an alien or maybe a non-human animal. It’s not a cognitively difficult project to prompt well, but maybe it’s emotionally slightly challenging.”

Use *all* the AI models

Cowen will switch between several large language models (LLMs), depending on the task. Each model has strengths and weaknesses. Their strengths can be harnessed as tools that suit particular tasks.

For general research, he primarily uses GPT-4 (which he calls “01 Pro”) because it produces reliably deep information with the fewest hallucinations. But when Cowen needs a more creative, philosophical, or nuanced writing style, he turns to Claude. In his experience, Claude produces “a wonderful mix of thoughtful, philosophical, dreamy, flexible, versatile—it’s the best writer.”

For creative writing, Cowen uses DeepSeek, calling it “China boss.” DeepSeek is unpredictable in what it will put out. It will hallucinate more than the other major LLMs, and it will produce weird and emotional thoughts. The playfulness of DeepSeek is a quality that Cowen appreciates reading, but not necessarily using. “DeepSeek is less bland, better at poetry, better at emotion, more romantic, more uneven—it does hallucinate more. It’s just more creative.”

Publishers are getting screwed by the AI search engine bots, however.

Build your own voice

For Cowen, writing in his voice is crucial: “I want the writing to be my own. There are ways you can use AI that will smooth out your writing, but I don’t want to do that. I want to be like Tyler Cowen, this weirdo.”

AI is the future of the job market

The more that people use AI writing, the more important distinctly human stories—those based on authentic, lived experiences—will be. He sees a future where authenticity and personal perspective will be the coin of the realm: “A lot of books I would have written are now obsolete. I think the truly human books will stand out all the more.”



AI is great for student learning. Here's how Cowen uses AI in the classroom:

"There is no assigned textbook—that saves students money—but they have to subscribe to one of the better AI services, which costs some money, though much less than a textbook would. The main grade is based on a paper. They're required to use AI in some fashion and to report what they did, partly because I want to learn from their process. To me, it's entirely their own work, just like when they use pen and paper or word processing. I've done this before in my law class, requiring at least one paper written using AI. Students recognize there's a forthcoming equilibrium where using AI will be essential, especially as professionals like lawyers. So why not teach it now? Most students don't yet fully understand the importance of using the best AI models, and they genuinely want to learn—it's been a pretty positive experience."

Academia has lagged in AI adoption. "Every year I ask my econ class, 'Has anyone else been teaching you how to use AI?' Silence. And that to me is a scandal. This is academia! We should be at the forefront."

The increasing value of human networks and human mentors

In the AI robot future, networking and mentorship will be even more valuable. As AI tools become widely accessible, the value of what you, as an individual, knows, will go down. The value of personal connections

will increase. Those with strong social networks will use relationships to gain more resources and collaborate effectively.

“Your network of humans is not just like 20% more valuable—it could be 50x more valuable, because the most productive people could be 50x, 5,000x more impactful. They have this free army of highly intelligent servants at their disposal, but to mobilize their projects, they’ll need help from others.”

The future of humans and AI for writing has two pillars: networking and mentorship. Mentors, in Cowen’s view, provide context, practical wisdom, and personalized insights that AI can’t compete with. Mentors help you navigate nuanced and complex decisions:

“Humans know secrets. Maybe AIs can be fed secrets, but they don’t in general know secrets. Now, a human only knows so many secrets—that’s partly where decentralization comes in. How AIs will handle secrets, I think, is a big and interesting question.”

In the end, Cowen has two main pieces of advice:

“Two pieces of general advice, with or without AI in the world, that I think are pretty good for almost everyone, is get more and better mentors, and work every day at improving the quality of your peer network.”

Summary

Practical experimentation with AI tools is vital for success. Be wary of hallucinations and always check the work yourself. Use different LLMs for different purposes. Academia urgently needs to integrate AI literacy into curricula to adequately prepare students for the labor market.

As AI becomes more popular for writers, humans become more important. Cultivating your own voice becomes essential to stand out from the AI crowd. Human-written books will be more highly valued than AI-written ones. Networking and mentorship — with humans — will still be essential to gather information for important life and professional decisions.

Be human in the AI era.

What academic publishers say about using AI

Every academic publisher has a policy on AI use. Here is a comparison of Taylor & Francis vs. Elsevier:

Similarities: No AI co-authorship. No uploading manuscripts to 3rd party AI tools (for reviewers and editors). AI is OK for idea generation and coding and language improvement. Both mandate human oversight throughout the research process. Individual journals can set their own AI policies.

Slight differences: Wording matters! Both ask for disclosure statements, but Elsevier uses the word “should” and T&F use “must.” T&F bans any AI in image/figures, but Elsevier permits an exception when AI is integral to the research method.

Bigger differences: Elsevier uses AI and provides these tools to authors and editors; T&F do not say they use AI.

In general, all publishers say that you need to disclose the use of AI and that you cannot upload to AI an article to review for a journal.

What academics say about using AI

Academics use it but they don't want to admit it. AI is taboo, and thus there is fear and rumor. Some “find” that reviewers are more likely to reject a paper if AI use is disclosed (“perceptions of legitimacy”). Some say AI disclosure is more likely in some fields (computer science) than others (medicine). But all of this is rumor.

According to early available evidence, most academics do not disclose to journals whether they use AI. This article provides some evidence to consider:

He, Yongyuan, and Yi Bu. "Academic journals' AI policies fail to curb the surge in AI-assisted academic writing." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences PNAS* 123, no. 9 (2026): e2526734123.
<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2526734123>

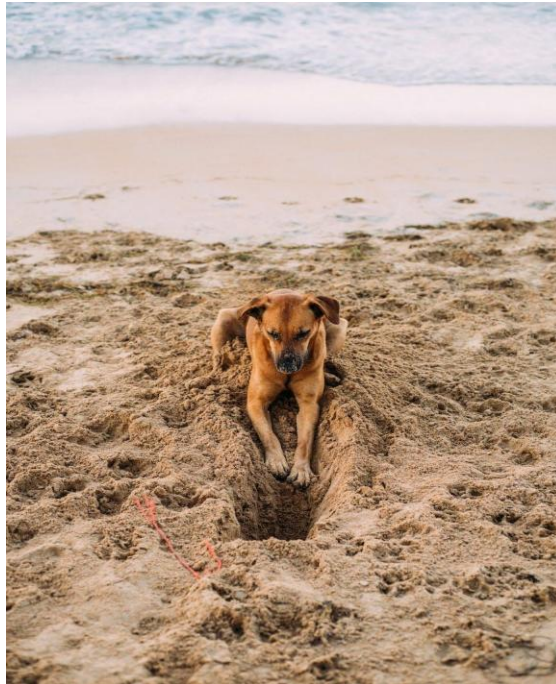
They write: “Full-text analysis on 164k scientific publications reveals a striking transparency gap: Of the 75k papers published since 2023, only 76 (~0.1%) explicitly disclosed AI use.”

They disclosed that they used AI to code the articles.

What should you do? It is important to follow the rules.

Grant writing

Some Tips on Finding Research Grants



With shrinking funding options and more and more PhDs in the world, how to get grants?
Some tips if you are...

A Reviewer of Grants

- Register to review for granting agencies. If you are dreaming of working in another country in the future, register to review their grants, too.
- Set clear limits, both in how many reviews you will do, and how long you will spend on each one.
- Since you live in a world of measurement, record your effort.
- Seek out mentoring, including peer mentoring.
- Be kind.

A Seeker of Grants

- To gain experience for yourself, work on grants with someone else, perhaps those with successful experience. Be a good collaborator.
- There is a world of funding that isn't peer reviewed. Industry funding, philanthropic funding, crowdfunding, micro-patronage, etc. Get creative with your funding opportunities.
- Reject academia altogether, at least for a short time. Go and work in industry, or set up your own entrepreneurial research endeavor.
- Set a time limit on how long you will bang your head against your rejection wall.

A Grant Agency

- Make the grant application process less onerous.
- Experiment with more inventive methods of review.
- Consider changing attitudes to the confidentiality of grant applications. You might choose to build a library of successful applications, or even make all your applications public. That would provide significant benefits to people learning to write good applications.
- Reduce grant applications to two pages, concentrating on the core idea. Fixed budgets, double-blind review and no administrivia.
- Give better feedback. "After the amount of work that most grant applications entail, it's always anticlimactic to get a 'yes/no' result."

An Established Scholar and Experienced Grant Writer

- Provide training in peer review, both for grants and publications.

Grant writing: What makes social science research ideas fundable?



Why funding?

Funding allows researchers the time, space, and materials to execute a research idea. Grant proposals communicate the research idea to the funding agency who awards the grant and to the scientists who review the proposal.

Are all ideas fundable?

No.

Not all research ideas need funding to turn them into high-quality research projects and publications. Some ideas can be executed with extant data (European Social Survey, or repositories of qualitative research, and so on).

Some ideas require funding in order to be conducted. They require collection of data, or transfigurations of extant data, or specialized methods that need to be developed in order to analyze extant data. Oftentimes, these ideas need a team to properly conduct them.

In the “ideas that require funding” category are PhD and Post-Doc grants — these are grants to pay a single person who, if given funding they could properly execute the idea. Generally, there must be some kind of data that needs to be collected, changed, or analyzed.

Innovative vs. incremental

Some of these ideas are risky, in that they are innovative (new and improved ideas or methods that adds value or solves existing problems in a different or more effective way than before) and there is a chance that the idea cannot be fully executed; some ideas are incremental, taking a well-known idea and improving it slightly. Some ideas are in the middle of innovation and incremental.

What makes an idea fundable, meaning that a committee would award economic resources to it?

Ultimately, whether the funding agency awards it. The same logic can be applied to art: **it is art if it is in an art museum**. People and organizations are the gatekeepers: when people and organizations deem your research project as worthy of funding, then it is fundable. This is not helpful if you want to know whether your idea has a chance at funding.

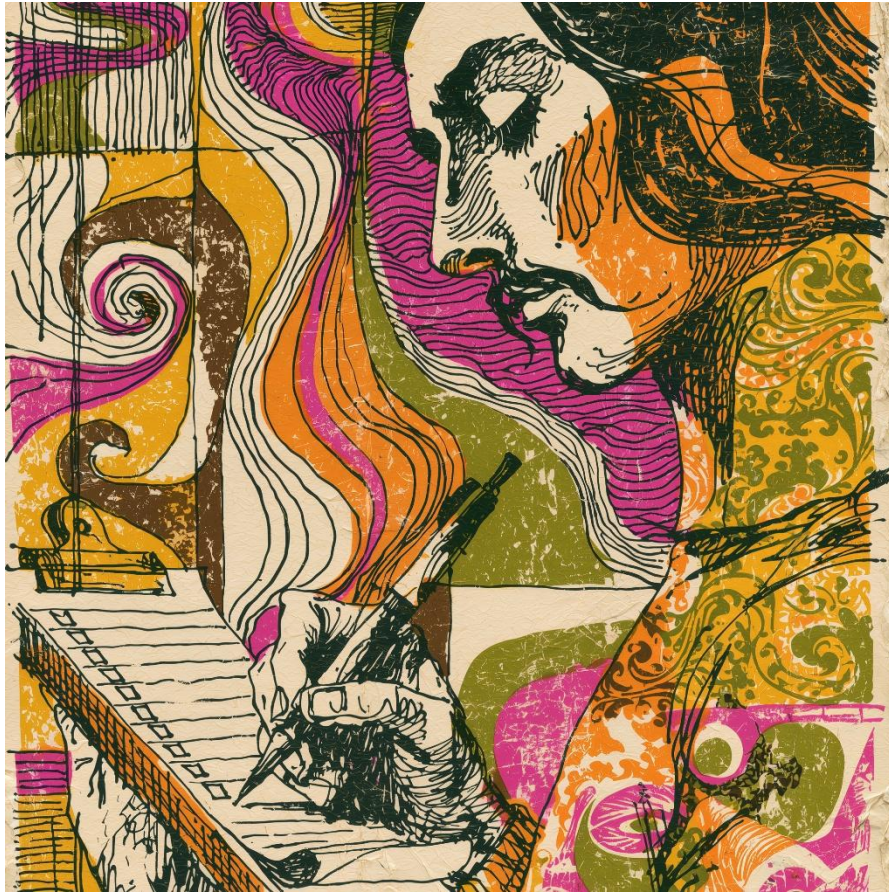
A fundable research idea is one in which the committee — the people and organizations — sees it as high quality, feasible, would make a strong contribution to the literature, would require funding in order to execute it, and recognizes the applicant as the right person to conduct the project. If this is correct, then it is incumbent upon the grant writer to convince the committee that the project meets the criteria.

Here are some general conditions for a fundable project

There is no one type of empirical research idea in the social sciences that is better than others. “Winning” a grant depends on a multitude of factors that change across time and funding agencies, but, ultimately, it depends on whether the committee reading the proposal agrees that funding is necessary for the project’s execution and evaluates it highly.

- There must be a knowledge gap (concepts, theory, data, methods, national importance) and a research question or objective that fills that gap. I.e. the contribution is obviously strong.
- The knowledge and question should address a major social issue or, for psychology, a fundamental aspect of human behavior. It would be helpful if the question is considered to be major by a sizable proportion of the scientific community or the population.
- The issue to be addressed has a literature that has partially addressed it, but there are clear gaps in it, or major societal or scientific debates on it. (knowledge gaps can be resolving a scientific debate) The proposal would address this gap or debate. Something without a literature dedicated to it would be risky, at best.
- The phenomenon is so new, yet so clearly important, that funding would open a new avenue of research or needs urgent address.

10 Tips for Writing Research Grant Proposals



To fund their research projects, academics apply for research grants from governments and philanthropies. Research grant writing has become a fundamental activity of academic researchers in sociology, psychology, and political science.

But grant writing is difficult, even for experienced social scientists. There are many things to learn. This article provides ten tips on how to write a research grant proposal.

1. First, look at eligibility.

Even expert grant writers can screw up this first step. It is easy to get excited over a possibility. But, after the rush, a clear head is needed to scrutinize the eligibility. Are you eligible? It is extremely important to look at the guidelines for the proposal. What is needed? How long is the proposal? What other supporting documents are needed? And so on. Make a list.

If you are eligible, and you want to pursue it, meet with some people — advisor and colleagues, etc. — to discuss the possibilities.

If you do decide to pursue the grant, inform the administrative unit in your institute that is responsible for grants. Why? Because for many grants, it is actually the institution that is the applicant. Also, your institute may have deadlines that are well before (perhaps as much as two weeks) the deadline specified in the Call for Applications. Administration needs time to prepare and administrate the submission of the grant proposal.

2. Know your audience.

Your immediate audience consists of both the funding agency administrators and the panel that will evaluate your proposal. Large funding organizations have their own language. You must use that language. If they use the term “milestone” to denote the stages of progress, then use the term “milestone” to denote the stages of progress. If they use the term “work package” to denote smaller sub-studies that comprise your research, then use “work package,” etc.

Many organizations that evaluate many proposals at once use numeric scores to discriminate one proposal from another. Everything is ranked. Even if you hate numbers, these numbers rule. Read the guidelines to determine what part of the proposal is worth the most points (or, highest percentage of the total). Your success will mostly hinge on your scores in what the funding organization considers as the most important parts of the proposal. You have to score high to have a chance. But, at the highest level of competition, when it comes down to the handful of proposals that will get considered to be funded, the smaller things will be decisive. Thus, pay attention to the small details, too.

The first people to look at your proposal are administrators of the funding agency who have advanced graduate degrees and academic professionals who are not experts in your particular field. What does that mean? It means that your audience must also be well-educated non-experts. Some jargon can be used, but you must also explain your research idea to experts outside of your field. These people like a good intellectual puzzle. Present that puzzle, clearly, and with a clear knowledge gap and contribution to the field and thus to knowledge itself, and you have a chance at funding.

3. Much of grant writing is like article writing.

Clarity and knowledge gap (answer the “so what?” question). Define your main concepts clearly and use those definitions consistently. Clearly describe your methods: the who, what, when, where, and why of your data. Clearly describe how you will collect these data.

And do all of this within the specific guidelines, including the space or word count, that are provided by the funding organization.

4. Do explanatory projects, not descriptive projects

Descriptive projects present new data and understanding about a group or phenomenon, but do not test theory. Explanatory projects use data to test theory. Many panelists take a dim view of merely descriptive projects. A project designed to “describe” the situation is usually, but not always, graded lower than a theory-testing project.

But, sometimes, description is great. A description is desirable when there is little basic information about the phenomenon or group of study. This is exceedingly rare in an era with hundreds of thousands of working social scientists all writing about modern life. But, it can happen, especially to novel phenomena. In writing theory, the best approach is to connect old theory to new theory.

5. Good writing matters.

Grammar and proofreading mistakes can sink a good idea. Bad writing with lots of mistakes will annoy the panelists and make it unlikely that your proposal will get funded. They will consider a poorly-written proposal as a strong sign that the PI has not done their Due Diligence. Good writing, and excellent writing, can curry favor with the panelists. Thus: clear, simple, and engaging writing is worthwhile.

6. Previous accomplishments matter. Build on your strengths.

If you apply for funding, your name and CV will be known to the panel. Your previous publications, or, in the case of PhD grants, also your presentations and work in research teams, will be evaluated. So, it’s good to get an early start in building your CV.

7. Make sure your project is feasible.

Something is “feasible” if it is likely or probable. Feasibility of a proposal can be understood as the probability that it can be accomplished given the (a) time and money allocated to it, (b) applicant capacity (or ability) to collect and analyze the data, (c) the research team hired by the grant to accomplish it, and (d) the degree of outsourcing.

Remember: the difficulty of the project must be matched by the time and money you want to allocate toward its execution. Panelists may deem that you do not have the experience or capacity to collect and

analyze the data, or that the outsourcing of data collection is unrealistic. They would then say that the project is “not feasible.” This would be the end of that proposal at that time for that funding opportunity.

8. Ethics must be straightforwardly addressed.

Ethics matters. Proposals can be eliminated from the competition if the ethics are not fully addressed.

9. Budget must be clear and justifiable.

The budget connects to the feasibility of the project. Problems can be in over- and under-budgeting: a project that requests too much for too little can be eliminated for budget concerns. A project that requests too little for too much may be deemed “not feasible.”

10. Guetzkow et al (2004) were right: panelists make moral judgements.

Guetzkow et al (2004), writing in the *American Sociological Review*, asked “What is originality?” To find out, they interviewed panelists from top US grant funding agencies.

A key finding was that panelists attribute morality to their interpretation of research proposals. Panelists are professionals and they are humans. They look at proposals with a professional eye, but they also make moral judgments about the proposal author or the work. The author who uses popular topics or too much jargon can be considered as “too trendy.” There are “courageous risk takers” and “lazy conformists.” Unfortunately, this moralizing still exists. Moralizing matters for how people view the proposal. Even if you cannot quantify it, having a positive or negative moral evaluation can be helpful/harmful.

Some panelists will see the “potential” of the proposal that is not clearly written, but seems to be there. Potential is subjective, to an extent, but it is strongly tied to feasibility (see above). You may find a champion of your proposal in that panel, but you cannot count on a champion.

Readings

Guetzkow, Joshua, Michèle Lamont and Grégoire Mallard. 2004. “What Is Originality in the Humanities and the Social Sciences?” *American Sociological Review* 69(2): 190-212.

Davis, Murray S. 1971. “That’s Interesting: Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and Sociology of Phenomenology.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1(4).

Henson, Kenneth T. 2003. “Debunking Some Myths about Grant Writing.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 26.

Moffat, Anne Simon. 1994. "Grantsmanship: what makes proposals work?" *Science* 265 (September 23)

Peer review

Writing Peer Review in the Social Sciences: Constructive, Honest, and Respectful



Peer review is a fundamental activity in social science. Whether you are a student or a seasoned professor, constructive feedback on your article by your colleagues is a necessary step in the writing process. A hallmark of feedback is an honest assessment of the strengths and limitations of the work under review. Honesty is necessary, but it can be hurtful. We are people, after all, and writing is an emotional act. As such, another hallmark of peer review is providing respectful feedback.

Peer review should focus on big issues first, with clear examples, praise for good work, and clear comments, all the while showing appreciation for the student's effort. Clear, fair, and consistent feedback supports student learning and development. Feedback has levels. It can address both higher order concerns (like the logic and structure of the argument) and lower order concerns (such as grammar).

Feedback should provide prompt and specific responses and encourage a culture of revising one's own work. Positive reinforcement should exist alongside constructive criticism.

There are two main types: proximate and holistic. Proximate feedback is detailed and selective, usually embedded directly in the text or in the margins. It typically involves marking specific mistakes or making suggestions related to a specific word or sentence, primarily for error correction. Holistic feedback is comprehensive, provided as endnotes at the top or bottom of the page, and focuses on the major points of advice related to the the work as a whole. The emphasis here is content and idea development. While proximate comments is easier to provide, students tend to prefer holistic feedback, which allows them to focus on a few significant areas for improvement as they revise their work.

Criticism such be humane, assuming of the best intentions of the author, and should avoid straw man arguments. Embrace humility by acknowledging your own limits. Consider that your critique might not fully grasp the other's work or perspective. Avoid the straw man arguments: don't misrepresent or oversimplify someone else's argument for the sake of easier critique. Do assume the best intentions — despite flaws or disagreements, assume that the work aims to contribute positively to the scientific discourse. For receiving criticism, it suggests not taking it personally, being open to being wrong, taking the high ground, and ignoring trolls.

Colleagues want constructive, respectful, and honest critique. It is best to prioritize major over minor issues, give clear examples, praise good work, and show appreciation for their effort. Feedback has levels. It should be proximate, offering specific suggestions within the text, and holistic, addressing overall content and ideas. Encourage a revision culture, practice humility, avoid misrepresenting others' arguments, and assume positive intentions.

To make academia better, we need to be honest, and encourage improvement while acknowledging the emotional weight of peer review feedback.

How to write a peer review for an article in a social science journal



Part of being a professional social scientist is to write peer reviews for articles in academic journals. Let's find out the mechanics of how to write them.

Basic Principles

Peer review serves to ensure the integrity and quality of scholarly research. It's a process designed to evaluate the value of a research work. The double blind peer review process is the standard in the social sciences. In these review types, confidentiality is essential, and in all types of peer review, the reviewer must act ethically and civilly.

You must disclose to the journal any potential conflicts of interest that could affect your impartiality in the review process.

There is a general structure and content to reviews, but each journal has its own focus, audience, and expectations; thus, **you should know the journal's review criteria and standards**. Part of this assessment is

whether the article is a fit to the journal's scope. While that step should be taken by the journal's editorial team, sometimes they miss it.

The tone of their review should be respectful and professional, even when pointing out flaws. The goal is to foster scientific dialogue, not to discourage authors. Always say something good about the paper, even for papers that have serious flaws. Try to encourage authors and acknowledge their effort. Focus your criticisms on the content and never the author.

Criticize what the paper is, not what you wish the paper would be. For example, suggesting a quantitative study when the paper is qualitative is not appropriate. If the paper's research question and objectives are out of alignment with the methods, then suggest that the paper revise the question and objectives, e.g. if the research question is about causality, but the methods reveal only correlations, then suggest that the question be rephrased appropriately.

Be specific in your constructive criticism. Feedback should be objective, substantiated, and free from personal bias. Be clear about the weaknesses and provide concrete suggestions for improvement where possible.

Remember that peer reviewing is a skill that improves with practice.



If the journal does not provide specific guidelines on the structure of the review, then it is up to you to provide that structure. Here is a generic structure.

Start with a summary

Start with a brief, ca. 100 word summary of the paper. The topic, the research question, the data and methods, and the main findings. If the contribution is clearly stated, then include it in the summary. Next, discuss the strengths of the paper. Point out what the paper does well, even if it is mainly about the topic and the potential of such an article.

Separate major from minor criticisms

It is important to separate major from minor criticisms. The author (and the editor) will be mainly concerned with major criticisms, and therefore your review should clearly state whether the criticisms you express are major or minor. You can do this with subheadings (“Major Criticisms”) or in text “My major criticisms are as follows...”).

Start with your major criticisms, loosely following the paper’s structure. If possible, start with the issues with how the study contributes to the literature with a focus on the research question, definition of concepts, and theory and hypotheses. Then, discuss major criticisms with the data and methods. End with criticisms of the results and conclusions, if you consider them major. As always, be specific. If you criticize the data, for example, you must be specific about what the data problems are.

Next, write about any minor criticisms. Perhaps there are some issues with grammar, or the wording of the title and abstract, etc.

End with suggestions for improvement

How can the paper be improved overall? This does not have to be a separate section. You may, if you’d like, mix in the suggestions for improvement with the major and minor criticisms.

What to critique?

Remember: criticize the article that you are reading, not the one you wish you were reading. **Be fair by being realistic in your criticisms.**

The following is a **list of questions to ask about the article** that you are reading.

Introduction

- What is the research question? Is it clearly stated?
- Is the literature review comprehensive and up-to-date? Does it effectively frame the problem that the study aims to address?
- Does the introduction articulate the study's contribution to the field? What, specifically, are these contributions? How does it advance or challenge existing knowledge?
- Are the research objectives and hypotheses clearly stated and logically derived from the literature review?
- Are the concepts clearly defined and consistent throughout the paper?

Theory

- Is the theoretical framework clearly defined and relevant to the research question?
- Does the theory section provide a thorough review of the relevant theories? Is the literature review up-to-date, reflecting current knowledge in the field?
- Are key theories and concepts critically analyzed rather than just described? How well does the review engage with different perspectives or debates within the literature? Does the theory section identify gaps or inconsistencies in the literature that the study aims to address?
- Are all key concepts clearly defined and consistently used?
- Does the study contribute to the development or refinement of concepts or theory?

Methods

- Does the article explain how the theory guides the methodology, analysis, and interpretation of results?
- How are concepts operationalized in the study? Are the measures and methods of data collection consistent with the theoretical underpinnings?
- Is the research design appropriate for the research question?
- Are the methods of data collection clearly described and justified?
- Is the sample size, selection process, and unit of observation adequately explained? Are they appropriate for the study's aims?
- Are the tools, measures, and techniques adequately described and appropriate?
- Is the procedure clearly outlined so that the study could be replicated?
- Are ethical considerations and approvals mentioned and appropriately addressed?

Results

- Are the results presented clearly and systematically?

- Is the data analysis appropriate and adequately supported by the data?
- Are tables, figures, and graphs used effectively to summarize and explain the findings?
- Does the section avoid interpreting or extrapolating the results beyond what the data can support?

Conclusion

- Does the conclusion clearly summarize the key findings and their relevance to the research question and broader field?
- Does this section answer the research question?
- Does the conclusion logically follow from the results?
- Is the theoretical framework effectively used to interpret findings?
- Are theoretical implications discussed in the conclusion? Does the study propose new avenues for theoretical advancement or application?
- Are limitations of the study openly discussed, and do they appear to undermine the main message of the paper?
- Does the discussion offer theoretical or methodological implications of the findings?

Overall Assessment

- Does the article contribute new knowledge or insights to the field?
- Is the argument coherent and well-supported across all sections?
- Are there any critical flaws or gaps in the research?
- Is the writing clear, concise, and well-organized?
- Would the findings be of interest to the readership of the journal?