

RIJKSUNIVERSITEIT LEIDEN

INSTITUUT YOOR CULTURELE ANTHROPOLOGIE EN  
SOCIOLOGIE DER NIET-WESTERSE VOLKEN

(by courtesy of the University of Zambia, Department of Sociology)

NOTES ON WRITING

based in part on a shorter text by Jeremy Boissevain : 'Writing an Essay',  
Anthropological Sociological Centre, Amsterdam University, 1966

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Preliminary remarks.

Writing about a particular topic is a good way to prove, to yourself and other people, that you digested the material and grasped the major theoretical issues involved. This is the main reason why you have to write so much during your academic training. Moreover, the degree you will eventually take in this University, will qualify you for the kind of positions in which you will be likely to write reports, publications, recommendations etc.; it would be a pity if by that time you would still not command the required skills.

Writing an essay is a difficult task, and one you must learn gradually. The hand-out on "Writing an essay" (J.P. Boissevain) surely will help you in this process. However, I find it useful to discuss below some aspects of essay writing in more detail with special reference to the kind of difficulties most of you are likely to experience. I shall number my remarks, so that I can easily refer to them while correcting your forthcoming work.

## 1. Presentation and Structure.

### 1.1. General presentation.

Present a text which is, at least, legible. If you have a very personal handwriting, then make special efforts to write clearly. Still better, type your work. Submit a final version, and not a rough draft with erasures, torn edges, etc. You should respect your own work enough to present it in an acceptable form.

### 1.2. Length.

Essays should have at least 2000 words. (You can easily find the number of words by counting the exact number in the first 3 or 4 lines of your text; dividing this number by the number of lines in order to find the average number of words per line; multiplying this, finally, by the number of pages. Any more precise procedure - e.g. actually counting all words in your text - is a waste of time). You are free to make your assignments as long or as short as you want, provided of course that you cover all relevant points in a satisfactory way, and that you avoid waffling.

### 1.3. Outline .

Making an outline is an essential step in writing your essay or assignment. However, you are not supposed to present your outline in the text you submit. Just regard the outline as a piece of scribbling - paper to be thrown away after use. Especially since most often, the outline is written in a kind of telegram style that does not really help your reader to understand the structure of your argument.

### 1.4. Introduction.

Though you should not include your outline literally in your essay, you could rewrite the outline in normal, full sentences, and so it may often provide a very good introduction to your essay. I strongly advise you to begin with an explicit introduction. It makes your own task clearer and easier. Also it makes the reader anticipate what you will be writing in the main body of your essay; and thus the reader will understand, and accept, your argument much more readily.

### 1.5. Headings.

There is yet another way to profit from your outline: from it you can easily derive headings to structure and streamline the main body of your essay.

### 1.6. Paragraphs etc.

Even without using these headings your text should be, typographically, structured and streamlined in such a way as to optimally reflect the logical structure of your argument. Paragraphs (numbered, if you think this useful), open lines, etc. serve this purpose. If you want your reader to understand and appreciate your argument, then it should be as clear as possible.

### 1.7. Conclusion.

To show yourself and your reader why it was worthwhile to go through the trouble of writing (and reading!) your essay, end with an explicit conclusion, where you sum up the results of your analysis.

## •2. Language and Science. 2.1.

### Language and thinking.

Language presents a special problem. In this University, most students, and many teachers, do not have English as their mother-tongue. Our department teaches sociology, not English, so we should not be too fussy about language and style. But even so, we much acknowledge that, for us, language is not only a matter of grammatical and syntactic rules, but also the carrier of sociological, general scientific, and logical, concepts and relations. V/e should try to write as clearly and correctly as possible, not so much to live up the standards of middle--class English, but rather because loose language too often implies loose thinking and loose conceptualizing. Therefore the line between "just a matter of style" and scientific inadequacy is difficult to draw, in many cases. To illustrate my point, let me give a couple of examples.

- a. Needless repetition is inelegant, but also shows that the author did not economize in thinking up and presenting his argument.
- b. "Because", "since", "but'-, "although", and other words indicating an effect, explanation, implication, contrast, should only be used if these essentially logical relations are clear in the text. If the relation might not be clear to the general reader, then you should be more explicit, or use other words. Make sure that what you present as an explanation is not actually a tautology (the same thing stated twice). E.G. J "The Lozi are pastoralists for the reasonc .hey that they raise cattle" - the actual explanation of the fact may lie in environmental conditions, economic alternatives, etc., but not in repetition of the fact itself!"
- c. Mixing up of concepts that in fact belong to a different order, e.g. "status group"; "Classes are stratified into higher and lower classes" (instead of: "society

is stratified"). Words that have a special, technical meaning in sociology or in science in general, are sometimes used in a causal and loose way and treated as synonyms; e.g. the following series:

definition-hypothesis-theory-model  
cause-reason-determinant  
power-authority-influence.

Try to avoid this confusion.

## 2.2. Definitions.

Definitions give rise to many logical and stylistic problems. Modern science is built upon the notion that the way we define our concepts is essentially arbitrary, and is not imposed on us by "innate" properties of the word, nor by its usage in every-day language. A definition is a product of the scientist's mind, to serve the purposes of his analysis. Essentially every sociologist is free in the choice of his definitions, provided that he explicitly states them, and that he convinces us of the advantages of his idiosyncratic definitions above the more current ones hitherto worked out within the sociological tradition. Sociological concepts are neither true nor false, and can, as such, not be refuted. Therefore it is, logically, nonsense to say that, e.g. "Weber's notion of class has been refuted", or "during his life, Marx gradually understood that the true nature of social class lies in the relation to the means of production". Also, because of the lack of agreement with regard to sociological definitions, it is always advisable to identify the more important concepts in your argument (either by stating the author, or, if it is a self-made definition, by explicitly introducing and defending it).

## 2.3. Hypotheses and theories.

Concepts, whatever be their definition, are but the atoms in the structure of scientific reasoning. We connect two or more concepts to one another by an hypothesis: a supposed relation between two sets of phenomena (each set being labeled, identified, by a concept). The crucial characteristic of a hypothesis is that it is open to testing: it can be refuted. In sociology we test our hypotheses by exposing them to laboriously collected empirical data. The more comprehensive and representative our data are, the wider is the range of phenomena for which our hypothesis (or its negation) can be generalized. Social phenomena differ widely in place and time, so that there is always the risk of making illicit generalizations. If we avoid this pitfall, we may be able to arrive at a theory: an interrelated set of tested hypotheses.

## 2.4. Methodology and essay writing.

Methodology as introduced in section 2.2 and 2.3. may appear to be somewhat remote from essay writing, yet in fact it is its very essence. After all, concepts, theories, and their application to empirical material, should form your main concern in every essay you will write. Only if you understand the theoretical issues you will be able to structure your

argument adequately, and to rise above the sheer descriptive level. The essays and assignments are not just intended to develop your skill in reading and compiling what other people wrote. You must work scientifically upon that material. Essays that are just compilation and description, without at least the beginnings of a theoretical analysis, will be regarded as mediocre.

Moreover, when you discuss sociological hypotheses and theories, realize that they are no sacred truths, established once for ever. Various "schools" in sociology, and various individual sociologists, differ widely in the concepts they choose and in their general approach. And all have to face the problems of generalization. Therefore, far from being abstract universal laws, our hypotheses and theories are still provisional and tentative efforts to understand society - and as such they are always open to criticism and improvement.

### 3. Content.

#### 3.1. Complete your task.

Most essay topics are formulated as a question. So, when devising your argument, make sure that you explicitly answer this question. When asked, e.g. "contrast the ranking system of Bemba and Ankole" it is definitely not enough just to give a concise description of both systems; the most important part is your presentation, point after point, of differences and similarities between the two societies. In general, when you wish to point out a contrast between two things, it is never enough just to put one after the other; you must make very clear with regard to what feature you are comparing them, and what is your conclusion. It would not be fair if you let the reader do the most important part of the work.

#### 3.2. Confine yourself to your task.

Only include in your essay elements that are absolutely indispensable for your argument. Your essay is not meant to be an exhaustive resume of the recommended reading. So if, e.g., one of your sources on ranking systems elaborates much on the point of tribal myths and legends, you must decide whether this material is really pertinent to the question you have to answer; if it is not, leave it out entirely.

### 4. Sources.

#### 4.1. Reading.

Although the assignments are not just intended to make you read the recommended reading, reading is very important, and really very difficult. It involves: understanding an author's aims; following his argument step by step; distinguishing between major and minor points, between facts and interpretation, between the author's opinion and the opinion of the other writers he quoted; evaluating the material used and the way in which it is handled; finding out the distinctive features of the author's approach.

I realize that it takes years to develop some skill in reading scientific literature. But even so we can never accept from you a total distortion of an author's facts or viewpoints. The following suggestions may be helpful:

a. When you use a library, read economically.

Fortunately, many modern scientific publications are in such a form that the reader can get a very quick idea of their overall content and main points. Many books, chapters, articles contain an abstract, summary, conclusion. Other relevant information you can get before you set yourself to spelling out every single word of a text, lies in": table of contents, headings, illustration, notes, bibliography, title (although most titles are misleading). You should develop some professional intuition for authors, schools, movements, journals, within sociology, so that you can already predict, to some extent, what a certain new publication, against this background, is likely to contain. This know-how is by no means intended to discourage you reading ! , But it helps to select, for reading, those texts you need most (e.g. in the preparation of an essay), and to derive most from them. For in your own reading the same principles apply as when other people read your essays: the better a reader can anticipate what is coming, the more he will understand and appreciate it.

b. Store the information you obtain.

Make lists (preferably record cards, if you can afford this) of all books and articles you read thoroughly; include all bibliographical details; jot down the most salient points of each publication; also store your more extensive excerpts Of publications. Thus, through the years you will build up a fair body of organized and easily accessible reference material, that exactly reflects your own. formal training and professional interest, and that will prove to be invaluable when you have to prepare essays, a thesis, seminar talks etc.

4.2. Quoting.

Let not your enthusiasm carry you so far that complete phrases and sentences out of the reading material seep into your own essay, without quotation marks or reference. Only very rarely an author's formulation is so keen, illuminating, convincing, that you could not possibly do better in your own words, to aho" that you really digested the material. Your sources may use certain technical or uncommon words, which, for the general reader, would require some explanation (e.g. "multidimensional" vs. "unidimensional"; "infra-structure"). Only use these words if you perfectly understand their meaning; show this understanding by a brief explanation, which will also convince your reader that you know what you are writing about.

4.3. Bibliography.

Always include in your written work a list of references cited. This should meet international standards, and at least state for each item:

- author's surname; e.g. Gluckman.
- author's initials; e.g. M.
- year of publication; e.g. 1957, 1960, 1972.
- a. in case of a book: title and place of publication; e.g. The . judicial process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia, Manchester,

b. in case of a journal article: title of the article, and name and volume of the journal; e.g. Tribalism in modern British Central Africa, in: Cahiers des Etudes Africaines, 1. ,

ci. in case of an article from a book of readings: title of the article, surname and initials of the editor(s) title of the book, place of publication; e.g. Magical crises: moral and secular solutions, in: Gluckman, M. ed., The allocation of responsibility, Manchester.

If you give this information under one heading, then in your main text you can confine yourself to a short-hand reference, e.g. (Gluckman ^1972: 7) Give such a reference not only in case of a literal quotation , but whenever the passage referred to is relevant to your own argument: as a source of information, as an authority on theoretical viewpoints, as a position that contrasts with your own point etc. In these cases, indicate why you give the reference, unless this -is quite clear from your context.

#### 4-4« Name-dropping.

It is most childish if you, having read only a minimum of the recommended reading, still give an impressive bibliography, including works you, most obviously, did not see at all! I hope these remarks will be helpful to you, and wish you much success for your forthcoming essays!