

Writing in the Social Sciences

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Learning Outcomes

In this chapter, you will learn

- why this class is important
- how you can benefit from becoming a better writer
- which disciplines are part of the social sciences
- how knowledge is created in the social sciences
- what constitutes a discourse community
- how writing in the social sciences is distinctive from other disciplines.

1.1 You Are Here



Know where you are so you can know where you're going. "2010_05_14-you-are-here" (CC BY-SA 2.0) by joelogan

Here you are in a class about Writing in the Social Sciences. Are you wondering what you're doing here? What's the point of this class? Is it just another hoop to jump through before graduating? Didn't you already take a writing class as a freshman? Haven't you already learned how to write papers in your other classes? Isn't that good enough?

My answer to that is, sure. It's good enough if you're okay with just being okay. If your favorite emoji is the "meh" emoji [add emoji]. If you want to spend your whole life jumping through hoops rather than calling the shots. If you never want to get a raise or influence the people around you . Or if you identify with this baby (see awesome photo):



Is this your Writing Spirit Baby? <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chr/5789906963>(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

But wouldn't it be amazing if your words could actually change people's minds? (Like your boss's mind about that raise?) What about changing people's lives? What if you could not only find answers to major problems but also share your work with others so they make a real difference? Or what if you just want to express yourself better to that cute student across the room? Wouldn't it be cool if you could convince your friends to . . . to influence . . . Or what if you could convince your city to move a walking path that juts into your property because you want to install a fence and you don't have the tools or permission to move it? (This may or may not be based on a real life example from my backyard.) All of these things and more can be yours if you learn how to up your game as a communicator. And that takes practice--thus, this class.



Secret: even babies know how important communication is.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/abardwell/1218015037> (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Let me tell you a secret: you will spend most of your life communicating. Even those of you who chose your college major thinking that you wouldn't have to write a lot (geography, anyone?) will spend most of your work life communicating--reading, speaking, and writing. Trust me; you might not believe it now, but go talk to someone who has the job you want someday, and you'll find out just how much of their work life involves communication. (Spoiler alert: it's a lot.)

Not only that, but you'll probably spend much of your your personal life communicating, too. What's that, you say? You plan to spend most of your personal life sitting on your couch at home in front of a screen and never seeing any people?



Well, I have news for you: you still can't avoid communication. In fact, everything on that screen involves some form of communication--that movie was written and produced by people for people. That video game, too. Even that cat meme you're chuckling at was created by a person to make an impact. And the minute you click "share," presto! You're communicating right back. You can't help it. Because you're human (I'm assuming you're human), and that's what humans do. In fact, you might even say that communication is one of the main things that make us human.

So you might as well get good at it, right? And that's where this class comes in. If you'll dig in and do your best in this class, you'll learn those awesome communication skills we were talking about and you'll get lots of good practice communicating so you can . And then you can be a better human and help other humans be better humans, too. And isn't that what you came here to college study anyway? Humans? Are you sick of the word "human" yet? You'd better not be if you're going into social science because that's what they're all about.

I'm Majoring in Humans

To be more specific, this class is geared toward anyone majoring or minoring in the social sciences. What are the social sciences, you ask? They're just that: sciences (aka fields of study) that deal with social-ness (aka people and how they act or interact). Therefore, if

you're a person or your major has to do with people, you're welcome in this class. Here are some of the typical examples of social sciences.

- Anthropology
- Archaeology
- Communication Studies
- Economics
- Education
- Family Science
- Geography
- History
- Law
- Linguistics
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Sociology

But don't think we stop there. Many other fields involve the study of people and therefore fit into the social sciences while also overlapping with other fields such as the hard sciences or business:

- Advertising
- Communication Disorders
- Exercise Science
- Health Studies
- Marketing
- Nutrition Science
- Public Administration
- Public Health

One easy test to see if you're part of the social sciences is if your field uses the [APA Manual \[https://edtechbooks.org/-jMo\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-jMo) (aka the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association) as its chosen Style Guide. (If you don't know what I'm talking about, no worries. We'll talk more about that later in Chapter 8). Not every single social science uses it, but the majority do.

Welcome to My Parlor

Now that we've established that you're in the right place, let me tell you what your job is in this class. I know, I know, you're going to say your job is "to learn." And you're not wrong. But more specifically, we want to teach you how to join a conversation. And not just any conversation, but the particular conversation in your field. That's what makes this writing class an "advanced writing" class as opposed to your freshman writing class. Your freshman class was all about writing skills in general, but this one focuses on your discipline and the specific vocabulary, strategies, and tools social scientists use. To explain this, first, let me

set the mood. (Feel free to turn down the lights for this section.) Welcome to my parlor:



This is actually George Washington's Parlor. Photo by [Matt Briney](https://edtechbooks.org/-HTW) [https://edtechbooks.org/-HTW] on [Unsplash](https://unsplash.com/) [https://unsplash.com/]

Or if you prefer this modern parlor...



This parlor belongs to hipsters. Photo by [Sven Brandsma \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Zbo\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Zbo) on [Unsplash \[https://unsplash.com/\]](https://unsplash.com/)

A famous scholar named Kenneth Burke (okay, famous mostly just to writing teacher nerds) came up with an equally famous analogy for academic writing (also mostly writing-teacher famous, but still awesome). Note: It helps if you imagine Morgan Freeman's voice reading it. He said,

“Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him [or her]; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself [or herself] against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.” — Kenneth Burke, [The Philosophy of Literary Form \[https://edtechbooks.org/-xQB\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-xQB)

Cool party, right? (Okay also mainly cool to writing teachers.) But still, Burke makes a great point. If you've ever been to a party and wanted to join in on a conversation, you know that you had to first listen to what's going on, catch the lingo, note who's taking which sides, and then finally put in your oar--enter the conversation. This is the way knowledge is created and shared in the world of social science--by figuring out what's come before, learning about what's going on, and then adding your two cents (to which someone else will respond, and the cycle continues). And it's by honing those skills that you'll become a master communicator in your field. So how do you "listen" to your field's conversation? By joining its discourse community.

Can You Say Shibboleth?

A [discourse community \[https://edtechbooks.org/-GGE\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-GGE) means a group with shared knowledge, values, characteristics, genres, language, and/or style. You're already part of many discourse communities. For example, your "Friends" on Instagram are a collection of people who have something in common (you), who understand what a post is (the genre or the form writing usually takes), who share a lingo (like LOL, BTW, and TMI), and who enter into conversations (by responding with words, emojis, or just cat memes).

Do you remember the first time you visited the family of your significant other or your roommate or best friend? Did you notice that they talk and act differently than the family you grew up in? Did they have little nicknames or mannerisms or ways of responding that surprised (or even amused or annoyed) you? Did they have inside jokes that you didn't understand? That's because they've developed a discourse community and you're an outsider. Here's hoping things worked out and now you've made it into their inner linguistic circle. But if not, that's okay. At least your life wasn't on the line. Here's a great story about a discourse community with wild consequences for outsiders. It's from the Old Testament in the Bible. (Again, try imagining Morgan Freeman's voice--it really helps):

“And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.” Judges 12:5-6

What? Did you catch that? The Gileadites had a discourse community with a built-in test to see if someone was a member of their group. They knew that people in their community could pronounce the sound "sh" in shibboleth, but the Ephraimites couldn't--it would always come out sounding like "ssss" for them. So the Gileadites tested everyone who tried to cross the river, and using that one word caught and killed 42,000 Ephraimites! And now, to this day, the word shibboleth means "any custom or tradition, usually a choice of phrasing or even a single word, that distinguishes one group of people from another" (Wikipedia). In

other words, this story was so compelling that the word shibboleth has come to mean anything that marks you as an outsider of a discourse community.

And what you don't want is to be considered an outsider in your field of study--your goal in this class is to learn how to become an insider so that when you put in your oar and enter the conversation, you don't get your proverbial head chopped off. Here's a quick video that illustrates what happens when you use one discourse community's (business) language and style in the wrong setting with the wrong audience.

What happens when you use the wrong language for your discourse community:



[Watch on YouTube https://edtechbooks.org/-Wsmi](https://edtechbooks.org/-Wsmi)

Don't be like these guys. Do your homework and learn what's appropriate--and not--in your field.

How to Listen

So how can you discern the characteristics of the discourse community in your particular field? By doing a bunch of "listening" first. Here are some places you can go to start learning how social scientists talk, write, and respond. The more read and talk to people in your field, the faster you'll catch on and the faster you'll be able to contribute.

- Publications (journals, books, newspapers, websites)
- Style Guides (APA Manual, Turabian, etc.)

- Conferences/Societies
- Websites
- Email Listservs
- Online forums
- Conversations
- Interviews
- LinkedIn/Facebook/Instagram/Twitter
- Pinterest

Discourse Community Activity

Search online for 2-3 publications or websites in your particular major/field of study. They can be written for an academic audience, a general audience, or anything in between, but they have to be from your field. Now skim through the publications and list at least 3 things that stick out to you that they have in common--either in their form (genre), look (design), writing style, vocabulary, etc. List those characteristics here along with the field you looked up. Voila! You've already started to recognize what distinguishes your discourse community.

What sets apart writing in the Social Sciences?

[make this heading more clever] Ben Hill will add

Spoiler Alerts

Here are some spoiler alerts so you know what's coming in the rest of this book.

Writing Tools

The rest of this first section of our textbook focuses on Writing Tools you can use as you dig into your major and career. In this chapter 1 Writing in the Social Sciences , we've talked about how writing in the social sciences represents a discourse community whose style, forms, and vocabulary you'll need to learn to be taken seriously. Chapter 2 Writing Tools deals with the rhetorical strategies you learned in your first-year writing class and how we will build on those strategies in this course. Chapter 3 Writing Processes addresses the steps involved in creating a piece of writing and how best to approach a writing assignment. Chapter 4 Grammar will review the most important grammar and punctuation concepts that will convince your audience that you know what you're talking about. In chapter 5 Style , we'll will delve into the nuances of language that can take your writing from good to great. And finally, in chapter 6 Design , you'll learn about visual design and how to use images, fonts, color, and other visual elements to best get your message across.

We've divided the rest of this book into two sections based on the two most common audiences social scientists write for: Academic Audiences and General Audiences.

Academic Audiences

Since this is a college-level Advanced Writing course, we want you to learn how best to write formally for an academic audience. This will serve you in your college classes but will also prepare you for future publishing and grant proposal writing scenarios. In chapter 7 Writing for Academic Audiences , we'll talk about what is valued in an academic discourse community and how to write for that group. Chapter 8 Finding and Evaluating Sources will help you see how research and evidence are the main currency of academia and that you need certain skills to find as well as analyze the sources you find. Chapter 9 Citing Sources deals with the best ways to cite your sources and give credit to others' work--an essential skill that can also keep you out of trouble. In chapter 10 Literature Reviews , you'll learn the steps for writing a Literature Review which will also hone your research and analysis skills. And finally, chapter 11 Proposals will cover the genre of the Proposal and the best ways to ask for things--especially money.

General Audiences

The last unit will deal with how to write for general audiences because it turns out that more and more social scientists are spending time writing blog posts, opinion editorials, infographics, and even tweets for general audiences. To that end, Chapter 12 Writing for General Audiences will cover strategies for getting your message across to a general audience and explain how that differs from academic writing. Chapter 13 Professional Portfolio will delve into some specific genres--namely, resumes, cover letters, CVs, and graduate school applications. In chapter 14 Public Texts , you'll learn about other typical genres for general audiences such as how to write blog posts, create infographics, or submit opinion editorials. And finally, chapter 15 Presentations will take you through the steps to creating a killer presentation--whether a traditional oral presentation or a poster presentation. So buckle up, because you're in for a wild ride!

1.2 Language of Social Sciences

Reputation for dry and boring.

Jargon

Objective, passive voice vs. I/We active voice

Academic vs General Audiences

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