



**The Weissman Center for Leadership and the Liberal Arts
The Speaking, Arguing, and Writing Program
122 Porter Hall**

Writing in the Social Sciences: General Advice for Non-Majors

Humanities majors facing a Social Science paper are often struck by the very different methods required by these disciplines. In the Social Sciences, students are often asked to come up with a question, to develop an experiment that will explore that question, and then to report the findings of the experiment objectively.

The "fun" in the Social Sciences is precisely in these methods. Social scientists make it their business to examine behavior - sometimes the behavior of an individual, other times the behavior of a system, society, or culture. Social scientists believe that careful observation of behavior will reveal patterns in that behavior, indicating that behaviors aren't random but are in fact driven by certain forces. For the social scientist, behavior is something that might be defined and understood.

The Social Sciences address many of the questions that concern the Humanities (i.e., what is the nature of friendship?). But these scholars would not examine how the qualities of friendship are important to a fictional character, nor would they deconstruct ancient texts on Platonic love. Instead, the social scientist would consider how he might objectively measure some aspect of friendship. He might construct a study, for example, that indicates how economic or geographical conditions determine (or don't determine) the quantity and quality of friendships. Or he might survey individuals with an abundant circle of friends to see if they report better-than-average psychological health.

The social scientist doesn't aim to come up with a definitive answer about the behavior of a system or an individual. She is not concerned, as the scientist is, with discovering facts. She doesn't focus, as the humanist does, on the construction and deconstruction of meaning. His interest lies in defining behavior, and in discovering its tendencies and its possibilities.

Evidence and Methods

What sort of evidence does a social scientist use in these sorts of discoveries? The social scientist's evidence must be either *quantitative*, based on statistics, or it must be *qualitative*, based on observation. In the Humanities, writers make claims and then support them immediately with evidence from the text. When a social scientist makes a claim, he cannot go to a text for his evidence. Instead, he must **construct a method of acquiring** the necessary evidence. He will choose from the following methods:

- Surveys and questionnaires
- Controlled experiments
- Controlled observations
- Interviews
- Field Work

Once the method is constructed, the social scientist begins his work, observing, processing, and recording carefully as he goes along. Most of the time the social scientist will use a lab notebook, a field notebook, or a tape recorder in order to keep track of his results.

Structuring the Paper

When the research process is over, the social scientist will want to report his findings. The format for the social science paper is formal and relatively fixed, saving the writer the challenge of having to invent a structure. The paper should be structured as follows:

1. First is **the abstract**, which in 100-200 words summarizes for the reader the purpose of the study, its methods, and its results.
2. Following the abstract is **the introduction**, whose purpose is to:
 - A. Define the problem that is to be explored
 - B. Review the literature on this problem
 - C. Note the gaps in the literature
 - D. Tell how this study intends to address these gaps
3. After the introduction, the writer will **describe his methods**. Did he conduct a survey? If so, who was surveyed? When? How? What was asked? Etc.
4. After the methods have been clearly and thoroughly described, the writer will **declare his results**. These results need to be presented coolly and without rhetoric. The Humanities major will have to resist commenting on the results until the next section.
5. **Discuss the results**. In this section, the writer will interpret her results. She will make relevant connections or distinctions between her findings and the findings of others. In short, she will present an argument to her reader concerning what these results can, and cannot, tell about the problem at hand.
6. **Conclusion**. The writer will summarize briefly her results and their implications.

Preferred Style of Writing

Every reader, no matter what his profession or academic discipline, prefers prose that is clear, concise, and coherent. Understand, however, that writing for a particular discipline means more than simply writing good sentences. Every discipline has a preferred writing style. If you are a Humanities student, you will certainly be somewhat put off by the style of writing in the Social Sciences. The paragraphs seem surprisingly short, the sentences remarkably unremarkable, and what's up with that pesky passive voice?

In the Social Sciences, sentences must be well-crafted but they mustn't be "flowery." The reader mustn't feel that the writer is relying more on rhetoric than she is on evidence. Paragraphs must also be well-crafted and coherent, but they mustn't belabor the point. Digressing to interesting but not immediately relevant observations is discouraged. In short, the Social Science paper should report clearly, concisely, thoroughly, and objectively the writer's findings.

Finally, the Humanities student will find it difficult getting accustomed to the passive voice used in most Social Science papers. Perhaps it will help to understand that this voice is used for a reason: to keep the observer out of the narrative. Consider: "I observed no significant increase in aggressive behavior" vs. "No significant increase in aggressive behavior was observed." In the second, passive sentence the observation seems more objective and impersonal, cut loose from the very subjective "I."

Source:

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<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/sciences/write.shtml>

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/go/saw>

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