

Writing in the Social Sciences

General Advice

Social Sciences (e.g. Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Communication, Political Science, and Economics) are the branches of study that deal with humans in their social relations/interactions. They diverge from the arts and humanities in that the social sciences have a history of using the scientific method in studying the subjective, objective and structural aspects of human behavior in society. However, more recently, many social scientists are less concerned with defining the causes of human behavior and are more largely interested in how people make meaning of their world. Writing in the social sciences is often concerned with systematic observations of human activities.

Evidence and Methods

In order to investigate human culture and social interactions, social scientists focus on different methods of investigation, including *quantitative* (observations that can be converted to statistics/numbers) and *qualitative* (observations that tell a narrative of people's interpretations) methods. When social scientists make a claim, they must construct a method of acquiring the necessary evidence. These methods may include: surveys and questionnaires, controlled experiments, controlled observations, interviews, field work, and textual analysis. Once the method is constructed, the social scientist begins her work, observing, processing, and recording carefully as she 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 the results.

Structuring the Paper

In the social sciences, sentences must be well-crafted; the argument must be well-supported by evidence from the study. The format for the social science paper is formal and relatively structured:

1. **The introduction:**
 - A. Defines the social phenomenon that is to be explored
 - B. Reviews the literature on the topic
 - C. Notes the gaps in the literature
 - D. Tell how this study intends to address these gaps
 - E. Presents research questions guiding the current study
2. After the introduction, the writer **describes the methods of inquiry and data gathered/examined** for the current study.
3. After the methods have been clearly and thoroughly described, the writer **discusses the results**. The writer makes relevant connections or distinctions between findings and the findings of others. In short, social scientists present an argument to their

readers concerning what these results can, and cannot, tell about the social phenomenon at hand.

4. **Conclusion.** The writer will summarize briefly the results and their implications, and include possible future research projects on the same topic.

A Good, Working Thesis:

1. Narrows your topic to a main idea you want to communicate;
2. Asserts your position clearly in a sentence that makes a claim about a topic;
3. States not simply a fact but an opinion;
4. Makes a generalization that you can support with details, fact, and examples;
5. Stimulates curiosity and interest in readers and makes them want to keep reading.

When writing an Introduction:

1. Make sure the first sentence stands alone and does not depend on the title or assignment to make sense.
2. Provide context and background to set up your thesis.
3. Define key terms.
4. Establish the tone of the paper: serious, humorous, formal, informal.
5. Engage reader's interest.

Avoid:

1. Being overly general, telling the obvious such as "Crime is a big problem" or "Since the beginning of time the sexes have been in conflict."
2. Referring to your intentions, such as "In this essay I will..."
3. Restating the assigned essay question.

When writing a Conclusion:

1. Include a short summary of the points you've made, using fresh wording.
2. Frame the essay by referring to some aspect of your introduction and to your thesis.
3. End on a strong note: a quotation, a question, a suggestion, a reference to an anecdote in the introduction or a humorous insightful comment.

Avoid:

1. Apologizing for the inadequacy of your argument or for holding your opinions.
2. Using the same wording as your introduction.
3. Introducing totally new ideas—since a reader might expect more details.
4. Contradicting what you said previously.
5. Being too sweeping in your conclusions. For example, don't condemn the whole medical profession because one person you know had a bad time in the hospital.

Adapted from *Keys for Writers* by Ann Raimes, 3rd edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2002, and adapted from a handout provided by Karen Gocsik, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, July 12, 2005