Reading to Write in Sociology

How to read:

At this point in your academic career, you know how to read in that you have achieved basic literacy. However, when students are asked to read articles or books in sociology classes, the process will be different. Think of reading in sociology as fishing, in that reading will take time and effort in order for you to "catch" the information that you need. As you know, from reading the UNCC Sociology Department's writing guide, common assignments in sociology classes include summaries and critiques of required reading. This reading guide will help you learn how to read required texts in a way that will help you pinpoint relevant information and articulate meaningful critiques.

Reading for Information versus Critical Reading

Reading for information is something that most college students have experienced before. When you were in high school, much of the reading you did was probably for information. Reading at the high school level encourages students to memorize "facts" that they will then be tested on. This style of reading is informative, and still occurs at the college level but in a different way. Perhaps you need to look for methodologies that will help you construct your own methods section in a proposal. When you set out to read a text, think of what the purpose is for reading it. Do you need to read the text for gist, main ideas, detail, or inference and application? If you're reading for information, you can shorten the reading process by adjusting your strategy.

Sociological literature is written in a particular structure that will allow you to pinpoint the information you need. Here's how research reports are organized:

I. *Abstract.* This is a complete summary of the study, its purposes, and main results in about 100 words.

2. *Introduction.* This gives an overview of the key issue, problem, or question. It may also give a brief preview of what earlier research has shown about the key issue, and it may give a one– or two-sentence indication of what the current study found or expects to find and why it matters.

3. *Literature Review.* This section summarizes the state of knowledge about the key issue. First, it identifies the main fields or disciplines that have conducted research (sociology? psychology? history?) and the specialty areas where the work was done (media studies, cultural studies, etc.). With that big picture, the so-called *lit review* then walks through the main studies, citing and summarizing each one and indicating what it has contributed to the understanding of the key issue. (Usually the researchers construct this section rhetorically, to justify the particular study they are reporting. Watch for signals of the authors' intentions.)

4. *Methods.* This section explains, usually in excruciating detail, exactly what procedures the researchers followed, step by step. Sometimes adjustments must be made mid-stream, and they are reported as well. (What the researchers have written is the *methods section,* not the *methodology.* Methodology is the scholarly study of research techniques. There's a difference.)

5. *Results.* In this section, the authors report what they found. It may be broken into subsections, to deal with various aspects of the key issue. The secret to this section is to look at the data first — the tables and charts in quantitative research and the quotations or other documentation for qualitative research. Tables and quotations are easy to find and scan.

6. *Discussion.* This section explains what the results mean. It may also talk about problems that emerged or things the study left unclear (usually presented as questions the study raises). It tries to identify (and possibly justify) weaknesses in the study.

7. *Conclusion.* Authors sometimes fuse this final section with the discussion section. It contains some statements indicating why the results are important and the study worth attention. Usually the authors also make recommendations for further research, based on what they found and what questions and weaknesses remain.

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Critical Reading is different from reading for information in that you will be analyzing the literature to create an argument. As a result, you will need to adjust your reading strategy. Think of critical reading as a tool for writing a paper in which you inform, establish, and argue as opposed to reviewing the literature. Below are some recommended strategies for approaching literature that you will read critically:

Actively Reading

You've probably heard an instructor tell you to "struggle" or "engage" with your readings. They've probably told you to write in the margins or take notes while you read. While it may seem trivial, forming habits such as these are incredibly useful when reviewing literature in sociology classes. Whether you're reading one assigned article for a summary, critiquing the author of a book's argument, or reviewing the relevant literature for a research proposal, actively engaging with the text will be useful. Here are some ways to actively engage with the reading:

- Take notes while you read, recording any questions or comments that come to mind.
- Give yourself plenty of time to read. Students often imagine that expert readers are also "speed readers". This is not the case, as experts read and re-read texts so make sure you have plenty of time allotted to do the same.
- Look up words you don't understand. There's no shame in doing this, as authors tend to refer to other concepts or use terms that you may not understand. Looking up these terms

or theories will help you clear up your confusion. **FOR EXAMPLE** the word "role" in sociology means something completely different from what most people would define as a role. Typically, a role is a make-believe part an actor plays. In sociology, a role is a pattern of behavior associated with a certain social position.

Reading and Re-Reading

As noted above, expert readers may read a text several times to better understand the author's argument and the information within the text. It is recommended that you read a text three times to make as much meaning as you can. Below is four-step approach to reading that is designed to help students actively read and better understand their assigned readings.

First Reading: Previewing
The first time you read a text, skim it quickly for its main ideas. Pay attention to the introduction, the opening sentences of paragraphs, and section headings, if there are any. Previewing the text in this way gets you off to a good start when you have to read critically.

Second Reading: Annotating and Analyzing
The second reading includes annotating and analyzing the evidence in support of the argument. It should be a slow, meditative read, and you should have your pencil in your hand so you can annotate the text. Taking time to annotate your text during the second reading may be the most important strategy to master if you want to become a critical reader.

Third Reading: Review
The third reading should take into account any questions you asked yourself by annotating in the margins. You should use this reading to look up any unfamiliar words and to make sure you have understood any confusing or complicated sections of the text.

Fourth Step: Responding
Responding to what you read is an important step in understanding what you read. You can respond in writing or by talking about what you've read to others.

This reading guide adapted from:

Adams, W. Royce. 1992. *Making the Grade: Strategies for Reading in Social Sciences, Sciences, and Humanities*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Company.

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