



Writing Sociology at University

GUIDES FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES



1 What is Sociology?

Sociology has emerged as a science which analyses and explains social change, as well as the causes and consequences of human behaviour. It analyses the structure of groups, organisations and societies and the way in which individuals interact in these contexts. It studies how people's lives are shaped by their opportunities and experiences, and how factors such as social class, wealth, origin, gender or sexuality, in different contexts, shape our lives and our position in the social hierarchy. It attempts to explain the link that makes individual existence possible at the same time as the existence of a society, because each individual life is a reflection of possible social experiences and, therefore, what we individually consider natural, inevitable, good or true, may not be so. The task of sociology is to explain how our lives are influenced, in complex, profound and subtle ways, by historical and social forces.

2 General characteristics of writing in Sociology

Sociology involves certain assumptions that form the basis of the scientific method: one, that society exists; two, that there is a certain logic or regularity in society, and three, that it is possible to comprehend it. For this reason, the concept of *social structure* is central to sociology, as it refers to the fact that the social contexts of our lives are not only composed of a random collection of events and actions, but are structured in various ways or follow a pattern. Sociology identifies these regularities, and also detects and analyses changes and the desired and unwanted consequences of social action.

Sociology allows us to think analytically about the world we live in, but it also involves making diagnoses that are the basis for designing appropriate social interventions, in order to achieve a better, fairer and more sustainable society. These two possibilities also constitute two different ways of writing: the former is oriented towards the more academic development of the discipline as a science, and the latter is oriented towards informing and disseminating what society is and how we can transform it.

Sociology includes different perspectives, but in all of them we try to understand social reality by producing knowledge that can be verified, as in any science. A key element in the development of sociology is the relationship between the abstraction of theory and solid empirical research, which, as Merton would say, must always go hand in hand. Therefore, writing well in sociology involves knowing how to convey the concepts and theoretical models that theorise an explanation of any social fact, and knowing how to describe solid social facts in a rigorous way, including the evidence collected on the social phenomenon under investigation.

The rigor and objectivity of sociology is obtained by applying the methods and techniques of analysis developed within the sociological discipline over time and that ensure a systematic gathering of social reality, both from a quantitative approach

(applied to real-life data that is potentially translatable to mathematical values and symbols), and from a qualitative approach (in this case, applied to data that cannot be reduced to any mathematical value, but is potentially interpretative of a predominant social meaning), and very often by the combination of both.

Thus, in the specific task of sociology we find a complex diversity of objectives, which outline the various ways of working, analysing and writing: there are studies that analyse already existing sets of statistical data (prepared by organisations that control the state of labour markets, population demographics, opinions, consumer markets, incomes and wages, etc.), some studies design their own tools to analyse their own data (surveys, interviews, field observations, discourse analysis, etc.), and there are also studies that design theoretical models, pursue discussion and conceptual precision, pose new research questions, formulate hypotheses and methods, etc. Typically, many sociology papers include a combination of the three types of objectives and therefore of the writing styles listed.

Sociological writing is also conditioned by the type of information sources used: texts that reproduce interviews with study subjects; graphs and charts representing statistical data; images or archival data sources that bear witness to the facts, such as newspapers, legislation, organisational records or public interventions of different political, economic, cultural representatives, etc.

But a good sociological text, in addition to adequately presenting the various levels and types of objectives of sociological research and the diversity of sources of information used, must also try to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and, consequently, must express what has already been published in previous research. Therefore, an important section of sociological writing must express the state of the art of the central issue in question. The second section of any work must include the methodology and techniques that will be followed to gather the appropriate and necessary data in order to advance knowledge of the phenomenon studied. The third section must provide an original analysis of the work and discussion of the results. And, finally, the final or conclusive explanations of the work must be written as precisely as possible, pointing out the limits of the research, but without generalising on wider issues, or those not contemplated directly in the research.

3 Common written texts in Sociology

It is common to think that sociologists are the people who conduct surveys, and analyse and interpret the results. Although this image may be more or less accurate, we must take into account that in sociology there are a wide variety of texts that require quite different skills and knowledge.

We can find **methodological texts** that explain the strategies to approach fieldwork, such as the criteria for designing surveys, structured interviews, analysis of certain temporal conjunctures, comparisons between societies, etc. But the texts we are likely to find more frequently, and within immediate reach, are texts that analyse a social dimension, and which usually anticipate a political measure or evaluate the social result of a specific political action. These texts are usually in report format. **Reports** tend to be informative documents, with less technical language, which are usually the result of commissions from public, private or third sector bodies. They are often supplemented with appendices which include the objectives, the analysis techniques applied and the data obtained. We also find **books and articles of a more academic nature** that consolidate the cumulative knowledge of sociology as a science. And, finally, there are **informative texts** which bring all this knowledge closer to society as a whole, from certain publishers and journals that publish reviews and revisions of theories and research, or articles about social current events that are disseminated from a wide range of media or social networks.

Books and articles can be written using a more or less academic language, taking into account the target audience or the specific publisher or magazine. Sociology texts usually have a fairly similar structure: introduction of the main social issue or phenomenon under analysis, starting theory or conceptual approach, hypotheses, data exploration methodology, analysis and interpretation of the results, conclusions or recommendations, and bibliographic references and sources of information.

In both **reports** and **more informative texts**, the structure is flexible and usually, instead of a formal introduction of an issue, there is a presentation of a social concern or event; instead of a theory there is a proposed explanation; and the methodology or hypotheses are formulated as possibilities for inquiry or discussion. If the document is of a more informative nature, the structure can be even more flexible and may not even raise theoretical frameworks or hypotheses.

In sociology there are a wide variety of texts that require quite different skills and knowledge.

Finally, another type of publication in sociology are **reviews**, which are usually published in journals. Each journal has its own publication criteria regarding length and format, and also the type of publication for which a review is requested. In general terms, reviews in sociology must contain: a) an introduction to the authors of the publication and their research background, b) a summary of the content of the work under review, c) the specification of the original contribution, and d) an assessment and reasoned critique of

the main ideas of the text. This critique must be based on a contrast with what has been published previously, or indicate major strong and weak points.

4 Writing conventions in Sociology

As in any academic writing, papers in sociology are expected to use formal language, maintain objectivity in arguments and clarity and precision in the use of concepts, and be based on properly cited evidence.

Papers in sociology are expected to use formal language, maintain objectivity in arguments and clarity and precision in the use of concepts, and be based on properly cited evidence.

Citing of sources

It is very common for a sociological text to refer to other sources, studies, reports or articles to present theoretical, methodological or analytical evidence that help to develop and ground the text.

The most common format is to cite using the author-date system, in which the author and the year of publication are included in brackets after the citation, for example:

Some studies show the correlation between educational performance and the level of the parents' education (Choi, 2018).

The corresponding bibliographic references are collected in a section at the end of the document (before the annexes, if there are any), and arranged alphabetically. In this case, the style of citations and bibliographic references follow the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Another format is to number the citations consecutively as they appear in the text, with a number written in square brackets after the citation, for example:

Some studies show the correlation between educational performance and the level of education of the parents [1].

In this case, in the final section, the corresponding bibliographic references appear arranged numerically in ascending order.

Graphs, tables and figures

It is very important that the graphs, tables or figures included in the text contain all the

basic data to be interpreted and understood without having to consult the text they are part of. They must have an unambiguous title, which describes the main characteristics of the data or information presented, as well as the timeframe to which it refers, for example:

Evolution of the at-risk-of-poverty rate. Catalonia 2006-2021

Titles are usually written without a full stop.

Graphs, tables and figures usually accompany the sociological explanation in the form of an essay or written text. They can either represent the explanation, or be used to illustrate the social reality under analysis.

The general recommendations for presenting graphs, tables and figures are:

- Graphs must show a fundamental characteristic or social trend of what is being analysed.
- Tables must present the most relevant empirical data referred to in the analysis.
- Figures represent an idea or model of analysis, usually the links between the fundamental concepts or terms of a theory, and are used as a guide for analysing or synthesising results and, in this case, they tend to be followed by a short and concise title of a relevant social issue, for example:

Phases of the rise of the anti-austerity movement in Spain

- They must be numbered consecutively according to the type of infographic, and this number must appear in the title. The generic name (*table, graph, figure, illustration, etc.*) must be written in lower case, except if it appears at the beginning of a sentence or after a full stop, for example:

Table 2. Evolution of demographic data 2020-2022

- Below these infographics, you can incorporate a text to clarify a concept or methodological tool. The source of the data must also be included here, for example:

Source: author's own infographic using data from the 2020 Living Conditions Survey, IDESCAT).

- Graphs and figures can include a legend explaining the symbols or codes used, which do not need to be repeated in the corresponding footer.

Graphs, tables and figures usually accompany the sociological explanation in the form of an essay or written text. They can either represent the explanation, or be used to illustrate the social reality under analysis.

Quantitative data, qualitative information and interpretation

Quantitative data used in sociological texts must be contextualised, interpreted and expressed in the appropriate units and magnitudes (for example, you should indicate whether they are different units such as individuals, households, specific social profiles, etc., as well as whether they are percentages, absolute numbers, probabilities, etc.) in order to facilitate understanding. It is important to consider the audience who will read the text, and whether the text is more or less specialised, in order to decide whether to include certain kinds of analyses which are more difficult and complex to understand, as well as an interpretation of the analyses. The more academic the text, the more technical data it will include. On the other hand, in more informative texts usually addressed to the general public, it is better to give a less technical interpretation of the data.

Regarding the information arising from qualitative research based on interviews, discussion groups or discourse analysis, it is common to add some type of textual citation to provide context to the research or evidence. Formally, these citations must be written between quotation marks if they appear in the middle of text, or in a smaller font size if they appear in a separate paragraph, in order to differentiate them from the rest of the text. To ensure, if necessary, the anonymity of the speaker, authorship is included but coded; for example: participant 1.

Despite this anonymisation, a table or description of the general characteristics of the participants in the qualitative study is usually included.

5 Selected works and websites for writing in Sociology

1. AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (APA). *APA Style & Grammar Guidelines* [online]. [<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines>]
Writing, citation and bibliographic reference standards of the American Psychological Association.
2. BECKER, Howard (2013). *Writing for social scientists. How to start and finish your thesis, book or article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Texts and publications in social sciences share a series of academic rules, writing structure, order and organisation of sections, and forms of citation, and this book presents all this information in a very informative way.

3. TERMCAT, Terminology Centre, 2019. *Sociology dictionary* [online].
[<https://www.termcat.cat/en/diccionaris-en-linia/269>]

Contains nearly 2,000 terms from the main fields of study in sociology. Each entry includes the name in Catalan, subject area, definition, equivalents in Spanish, English, and in many cases in French, and if applicable, complementary notes which expand the definition, refer to other terms to help illustrate the concept, give information on the use or origin of the terms, etc.

4. JONES, Jennifer; QUINN, Sarah; BROWN, Hana (ed.) (2011). *Writing for Sociology* [online]. 2nd edition Berkeley: University of California. Department of Sociology.
[https://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/documents/student_services/writing_guide/Writing%20for%20Sociology%20Guide%20Second%20Edition.pdf]

The academic environment is writing intensive, and this book provides guidance on how to improve academic writing. Among many detailed suggestions, it recommends spending hours rewriting and reworking texts to improve the writing of exams, essays and research papers. It helps to learn how to write clearly and rigorously.

5. QUIVY, Raymond; CAMPENHOUDT, Luc Van (1997). *Manual de recerca en ciències socials*. Barcelona: Herder Publishing.

This text provides a very good basis on what methodology is and how each of the techniques used in sociology are applied. It explains how to formulate a good research question and how to define the corresponding hypotheses very clearly.

6. SERAFINI, Maria Teresa (1992). *Cómo redactar un tema: Didáctica de la escritura*. Barcelona: Editorial Paidós.

Provides the tools needed to organise studies and the preparation of outlines and drafts, which are the preliminary tasks when writing a thesis, a lesson, a book or an article. It also provides detailed answers to questions such as what an introduction should include, how to structure an index or how to create conceptual maps.

7. TUFTS, Edward (1983). *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.

Text dedicated to the analysis and assessment of the presentation of graphs, figures and statistical data in social sciences and sociology. It includes very detailed guidelines on how to improve the editing and presentation of these visual resources, and also instructions for detecting possible graphic or statistical errors.

Main statistical databases for Sociology

European Union

- [EUROSTAT Database](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database). [<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database>]
- [EU statistical servers](https://www.ine.es/ss/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1254735905283&pagename=INE%2FINELayout&L=0&p=1254735905283)
[<https://www.ine.es/ss/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1254735905283&pagename=INE%2FINELayout&L=0&p=1254735905283>]

Spain

- [National Statistics Institute \(INE\)](https://www.ine.es/en/). [<https://www.ine.es/en/>]
- [Centre for Sociological Research \(CIS\)](https://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/EN/index.html). [<https://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/EN/index.html>]. For surveys, barometers and the Cuadernos Metodológicos (Methodological Handbook) collection.

Catalonia

- [Statistical Institute of Catalonia \(IDESCAT\)](https://www.idescat.cat/?lang=en). [<https://www.idescat.cat/?lang=en>]

Servei de Llengües (UAB), Serveis Lingüístics (UB), Servei de Llengües i Terminologia (UPC), Servei de Llengües Modernes (UdG), Institut de Llengües (UdL), Serveis Lingüístics (UVic-UCC)

Coordination: Virgínia Castillo, Enric Serra (UAB)

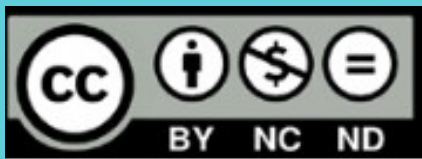
Author, Guide in Catalan: María Trinidad Bretones, Albert Julià Cano, Laura Llahí Ribó, Cristina López Villanueva, Marga Mari-Klose, Jordi Mundó Blanch (with Elisabet Solé Solé)

Adaptation to English: Emma Hitchen

Revision of English: Gry Edwards

This project has received an Interlingua grant from the Generalitat de Catalunya.

Publishing date: February 2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial No Derivatives 4.0. This document may be reproduced for non-commercial use if it is used in its entirety and the source is stated: Servei de Llengües (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), Serveis Lingüístics (Universitat de Barcelona), Servei de Llengües i Terminologia (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya), Servei de Llengües Modernes (Universitat de Girona), Institut de Llengües (Universitat de Lleida), Serveis Lingüístics (Universitat de Vic – Universitat Central de Catalunya).

This guide complies with the accessibility criteria (with the assessment of Adaptabit and Mireia Ribera).