

**Department of Sociology
The Faculties**

Introduction to Sociology

Essay Writing

Preliminaries

Good essay writing is hard work but the rewards of mastering it extend beyond your academic career. The first step in writing a good essay is to grasp what your lecturers do not want in an essay. Generally speaking, there are several undesirable elements con-anon to essays in all disciplines and these are evident in the sorts of comments markers write on essays. The obvious ones are:

- (i) "You haven't answered the question". Essay questions or topics are generally clear about what you are required to do. If, for example, you have to "argue for and against" some proposition, be sure you know what "argue" means. It does not mean "describe" but, rather, weighing up the evidence for and against the proposition and arriving at a conclusion;
- (ii) "You are on your soapbox". Essay writing is not an opportunity to present your opinions on a topic unless the essay specifically requires it, and that is rare. However, this is not to say that you should not be clear about your conclusions which are based on the evidence you are analysing. There is, for example, a difference between the claims "I think all environmentalists are off their heads!" and "I believe that, based on the evidence presented in this essay, social inequality is widespread in Australia"; and
- (iii) "Don't use clichés!". Use clear statements rather than worn out prose, such as "at this present time" (= "now") and "in the passage of history" (= "historically").

Other critical comments markers commonly write on essays include:

"there is insufficient evidence here"

"you haven't defined your terms"

"this essay doesn't hang together: it rambles" and

"you do not use quotations properly and your referencing is sloppy".

These criticisms need some discussion, which is the substance of the following section.

Planning and Writing an Essay

Imagine an essay having a beginning, middle and an end. These parts of the essay are for planning and writing purposes and may not be that visible in the finished product. In terms of planning, these parts have the following contents:

Beginning (Introduction)	(i) what is the essay about? (ii) what does the question mean? (iii) what is the position you adopt? (iv) what sort of evidence will you use to argue your case?
Bridge	Transition to middle section
Middle (Development)	(i) defines terms (ii) presents evidence (iii) pulls argument together
Bridge	Transition to end section
End (Conclusion/Evaluation)	(i) summarises argument (ii) adds any qualifications or modifications (iii) any implications of conclusions.

Using this plan to write an essay is not as easy as it might appear and, for this reason, a hypothetical topic and essay with annotations appear below as a guide.

Consider the topic:

"Sociologists are sometimes described as troublemakers because of their scrutiny of the taken for granted nature of the social world". Discuss.

"Discuss" does not mean describe, Although it is not the clearest instruction in an essay topic, it involves making clear what the topic means and where you stand and so on

It is not difficult to see why sociologists are often seen as troublemakers for scrutinising the taken for granted nature of the social world. This situation arises because sociologists are thought not to respect the values and truths other individuals believe to be inherent in key areas of social life, such as marriage and religion. In researching significant domains, both the results of research and the very act of wanting to study them are often seen to be provocative. This point will be supported below, where I draw on recent research on religious sects, bikie gangs, and the creation of poverty. However, first, it is necessary to clarify some key terms; to comment on the nature of sociology; and to elaborate on the term "troublemaker".

Note the clear statement of the author's position and what the question means, which, in turn, give the reader an idea of what the essay is about

Note reference to the sort of evidence to be used

Note how this bridge anticipates the middle section

What is involved in scrutiny of the taken for granted world? To scrutinise is to ask questions. In sociology, for example, we ask questions, such as "how did the structure of marriage develop?" or "over the past decade in Australia to what extent has the pattern of social inequality changed?" The "taken for granted world" is that singular or collective perception of social reality which assumes that reality is a given, that is, "natural", and therefore not of human creation, and that it is relatively immutable or permanent in nature.

← *The use of a question like this is useful in text but it can be overdone*

← *Defines the terms used*

There are some notable examples of scrutiny of the taken for granted world by sociologists. Black's (1990) study of bikie gangs was initially viewed by bikies themselves as insulting and destructive of the image of motor cyclists in the community (Pink 1991:10). Similarly, Green's (1992) recent work on religious sects was labelled by many sect members as an "act of the devil" after that work was published (Brown 1992). The conflict surrounding these sociological studies warrants consideration of the question as to why such scrutiny should be seen as "troublemaking".

← *Proper referencing is important*

← *Presentation of evidence in use of these sources*

There are several overlapping reasons why sociology is often viewed as troublemaking. First, sociological research often exposes embarrassing evidence, especially in those situations where social problems are also sociological problems. The cause of poverty is a good example of the latter point and is illustrated by White et al's (1989) detailed examination of the role of governments in bringing about the high levels of poverty they profess to be combating. The reactions of state governments to that study is indicative of the extent to which White et al were stigmatised as troublemakers (The Age 1989). However, this so called troublemaking is not confined to exposing embarrassing evidence nor to the realm of politics.

Green's (1992) well known participant observation study of religious sects did not have anything to say about embarrassing evidence but it did challenge individual members' ideologies and their definitions of the situation. As Green notes:

most of the time I could converse with sect members about a range of matters as if they were friends or neighbours. However, when it came to the place of the 'guru' within the sect and the reasons for unquestioning obedience to him, I may as well have been a Martian. It was not that we were on 'different wavelengths': we were on different planets (1992: 7).

← *Proper use of Quotations is also important, especially to avoid accusations of plagiarism*

These examples indicate that troublemaking, apart from causing embarrassment and challenging set ideologies, is also closely related to a challenge to the holders of social power, which, at the same time, may explain why sociology is a challenge to the taken for granted world. However, although we can be confident about some aspects of this challenge, some caution is warranted. It should not be assumed that sociologists are necessarily hostile to the social world. Many sociologists are religious believers; are married; and are still capable of carrying out their professional activities. Furthermore, scrutiny of one's subject matter is not peculiar to sociology. All sciences ask questions and sociology simply poses questions of its subject matter - the social world.

Pulling together the main points of the argument

Bridge to end section

Note the qualifications

In conclusion, it is possible to summarise the main points of this essay. It argues, first, that sociology, by its nature, attempts to "get behind" the taken for granted nature of social life; second, that because much of the taken for granted world involves meanings, symbols and "obvious" truths, participants often do not want to know what sociologists have to offer and interpret their actions as hostile; and finally, that it is the nature of the subject matter of sociology which gives the appearance that "troublemaking" research is peculiar to sociology.

In using "in conclusion" in this manner to indicate your conclusion, make sure you have a conclusion

Summarising statement, Note that this statement Could be a one sentence summary of the essay.

References

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