

**Denison Writing Center Website**

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**“Writing at Denison”**

**Discipline:** Sociology and Anthropology

## 1. Description of the Discipline

- a. *Sociology*: Sociology is the study of human social behavior, both at the level of small groups and of entire nations. It is the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society as well as the study of social problems. There are many fields in sociology including but not limited to criminology, medical sociology, family sociology, social work.
- b. *Anthropology*: Anthropology is the study of humans, particularly why humans act, speak, and live in the ways that they do. Much of anthropology focuses on human groups and cultures both past and present. Anthropology is a four-field discipline that includes: cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, archaeology, and physical (or biological) anthropology.
- c. *Differences between the two disciplines*: Anthropologists often spend years living with and studying a particular small group of people. Sociologists often incorporate more quantitative analysis than anthropologists in their research. One interesting way to conceptualize the difference is that anthropologists might ask each other first, “Where do you study?” whereas sociologists would ask “What do you study?” There is, however, a large amount of overlap between the two disciplines, and that is what the Denison program highlights.
- d. *Sociology/Anthropology at Denison*: Here at Denison, the Soc/Anth Department focuses mainly on the similarities between the two disciplines both in theory, methods, and in topical or geographical areas. Courses integrate sources from both disciplines in the exploration of a particular topic. The full range of sociology and anthropology are not represented at Denison; for example, we do not offer any linguistic anthropology, demography, or social work. For more information, visit the departmental website:  
<http://www.denison.edu/academics/departments/sociology/>

## 2. Citation Style Used

American Sociological Review (ASR). Guidelines will be on the syllabus of any Soc/Anth class. If any more in-depth information is required, there is a copy of the American Sociological Association style guide in the library or the online style guide:  
[http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/topnav/sociology\\_depts/quick\\_style\\_guide](http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/topnav/sociology_depts/quick_style_guide)

### 3. **Organization/Required Components**

One of the most important aspects of writing most Soc/Anth papers is linking social theory with empirical data and research. Soc/Anth papers require understanding of theoretical ideas about the way humans interact and corresponding empirical research that demonstrates relationships (whether they confirm or disprove) theoretical positions. It is also imperative to take a position regarding a concept or data, and to defend that position. For instance, instead of simply describing the civil rights movement, you should take that information and argue for what its impact on society was, or why it was successful, or any number of things from a sociological and/or anthropological perspective.

### 4. **Voice**

First-person declarative. Instead of saying “This paper considers...”, it is preferable to say “I consider...” It is important to include quotes in papers to allow people to speak for themselves whether it is people you are researching or social theorists. Sexist language and pronouns are not acceptable in these disciplines. One of the main topics examined in these disciplines is sexual inequality, and language that reflects this is highly frowned upon.

### 5. **Types of Writing Assignments**

- a. *Ethnography*: An ethnography is a social scientific description of a particular group of people and their customs that aims to portray accurately their lives as they are lived. It is based on fieldwork and participant observation. Anthropologists write ethnographies when they go to live with groups of people from different cultures. Knowledge of the social and historical context of a particular group is necessary to write a good ethnography.
- b. *Textual Analysis*: Some assignments will ask you to describe or compare and contrast views expressed in course literature. These papers require a thorough understanding of the authors’ intentions and main points. Oftentimes, exploring secondary literature on a theorist can be helpful in making sense of his or her views.
- c. *Critical Essay*: Often a professor will ask you to examine a part of society or even your own life from a sociological perspective. It is important to refer to course readings and concepts learned in class when writing these types of papers.
- d. *Research Paper*: A research paper in Soc/Anth will often involve both a review of relevant literature and application of the concepts in that literature to a specific topic. An effective paper will show that you understand and can critique the theory or theories in question very well and choose an appropriate case study that illustrates a useful connection between theory and the real world (“Sociology”). For example, a paper on the success of the civil rights movement in the United States will examine first what makes any social movement successful and then apply those standards to the particular movement in question.

There are many different types of assignments, and what you are assigned will vary greatly depending on what course you are taking. If you are unclear as to what sort of approach you

should take, make sure that you have carefully examined the assignment. If it is still confusing, go ask the professor about his or her expectations

## 6. **Research Process**

It is important to use your 'sociological imagination' by taking into account historical and societal factors and questioning all aspects of society. Always try to take a broad perspective, do not simply accept conventional wisdom or stated reasons for anything. Since sociology and anthropology are studies of people, make sure the question deals with people in a significant way. Ask a question that identifies relationships between two or more concepts or variables (Giarrusso et al 1994: 11-13).

### **Research Tools**

Books can be found through Consort (<http://consort.library.denison.edu>) or OhioLink (<http://olc1.ohiolink.edu/search/>). Articles from major sociology and anthropology journals can be found through JSTOR (<http://0-www.jstor.org.dewey2.library.denison.edu/>).

### **An example of the research process from a Soc/Anth major**

I decided that I wanted to write a paper about how fear can be used to exert social control. In thinking about specific topics I could discuss, I kept in mind the readings and discussions from class that highlighted media and government manipulation of the public. I decided to examine the Department of Homeland Security's terror alert level system and how it could be used to exert social control through the use of fear. I first reviewed the literature pertaining to how fear is used to gain social control. Then, I searched the *New York Times* in the library's database and LexisNexis for all articles pertaining to fear and to the alerts in particular during the periods in which the terror alert level had been raised. I read all of the articles and identified patterns that were indicative of phenomena I had previously read about in the literature on the subject of fear and social control. My paper argued that one of the main purposes of the terror alert level is to keep the American public fearful of outside threats, in order to increase their support of government policies that might otherwise be questioned.

*Note: Sociology and anthropology are studies of people, so much research is done on human subjects. It is important to understand ethical considerations in this sort of research. Denison has a review board, and any research done on human subjects must meet certain qualifications.*

## 7. Common Mistakes

There are several flawed arguments one can make in a Soc/Anth paper (“Sociology”):

- a. *Individual argument*: Encompasses the idea that the decisions of individuals exclusively determine the course of society. Sociology and anthropology are dependent upon the idea that society influences the actions of individuals. Focus on the individual without reference to societal factors is more characteristic of psychology than sociology or anthropology.
- b. *Human nature argument*: explains human behavior with arguments such as “Humans are by nature X, therefore it is not surprising that Y” (“Sociology”). This argument ignores social and cultural factors and is not an acceptable explanation for human behavior in this discipline unless you are discussing a theorist who holds a specific view about human nature.
- c. *Society argument*: This argument often takes the form: “Society made me do it” (“Sociology”). This analysis is too broad and ignores the complexity of an issue. There are many factors that make up society and an effective analysis will take this into consideration.
- d. *Ecological fallacy*: The assumption that what is true of the group as a whole also holds true of its individual members (“Sociology”).

## 8. Preferred Language (jargon, pronouns)

Technical language is important because it is the conceptual language of the discipline. Part of the training we receive here at Denison is to be able to understand and apply language. However, it is important to define any jargon within a paper in ordinary language to demonstrate full understanding.

## References

“Anthropology.” University of North Carolina: Writing Center Handouts. (Online). Available: <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>. (October 16, 2006).

Giarusso, Roseann, Judith Richlin Klonsky, William G. Roy, Ellen Strenski. 1994. *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: St. Martins Press.

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