

The Challenges of Writing for Publication in Sociology

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Scholars who specialise in sociology study individuals and families, organisations and institutions, social movements and political protests, the divisions and inequalities in societies, the origins and development of societies and the fundamental laws of social relations. In fact, the term sociology covers so many different areas and topics of research that it has been argued that what actually makes a piece of writing sociological has more to do with the perspective adopted by the sociologist than with the subject matter of his or her text.

Since sociology attempts to explain how individuals and groups interact within a society, relationships of various kinds are central to a sociological perspective. The relationship between individual agency and the constraints presented by a society, its history and its structure is absolutely central to sociological studies. Neglecting this and other important relationships while writing up the findings of sociological research can result in a weak argument and thus an article or book that will not be published by a reputable scholarly journal or press. However, well-honed writing skills are necessary to describe and discuss complex and changeable relationships with precision, sophistication and sensitivity. A high scholarly standard must be

maintained, the language used must communicate complicated material with absolute clarity and the ability to tell an engaging research story in ways that will hook and hold the attention of readers is also highly desirable.

Among the relationships important to many sociologists is that between qualitative and quantitative data. Both are frequently used in sociological research, and methods and results are sometimes blended to create a more comprehensive picture of the phenomena under investigation. Qualitative and quantitative research require different methodological, analytical and interpretive strategies, with quantitative research in sociology focussing on the measurement of characteristics and behaviours, while qualitative research attempts to provide insight into how people find meaning and construct reality. When the methods and terminology from one type of research are mixed with those of the other, special care must be taken to define and explain specialised language and theories, ensure accuracy and precision while describing research procedures, outline and justify units and categories, report findings and establish significant patterns, and finally analyse and discuss results in sophisticated and meaningful ways. Errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar must be avoided, as must awkward and unclear constructions: these can introduce ambiguities and mislead readers about your research and your understanding of its significance, so it is essential to write prose that is clear and correct in every way if you are to earn respect and acceptance from acquisitions editors and your future audience.

Previous research and theories are frequently discussed, evaluated, applied and tested in sociological writing – activities that require both textual finesse and the inclusion of citations and references, each of which must be recorded accurately and thoroughly in the correct style. The referencing style of the American Psychological Association is often used in sociology, and as anyone who has used it will know, recording sources in this style can be a little tricky, so extra time and attention is needed to ensure that every reference in both the main text and the final bibliographical list contains the right information and is correctly formatted. Tables and figures are also used with considerable frequency in sociological studies, and they must be designed, labelled and discussed in such a way that readers understand not only their content, but also when they are relevant and how they contribute to your overall argument. Finally, a carefully designed structure that organises and divides the content of your document to enhance the progression of your argument and make it as accessible as possible for your anticipated readers will always present your work effectively.

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