

# RESOURCE FOR FACULTY TEACHING WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Mini Research on Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches  
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Social science writing intensive courses at Bronx Community College are geared towards using rigorous writing to improve critical thinking skills and to help students understand and retain information better. This mini research provides a bibliographical resource for faculty teaching writing intensive courses in the Social Sciences. Using key articles from sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists, it offers examples of assignments by scholars who have integrated Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogy into their courses.

Within the social sciences there is variation in how information is presented. Acknowledging the differences in writing conventions across the social sciences, and that some approaches may be more successful than others in each discipline, this mini research enables faculty to access information tailored to their discipline, whether anthropology, sociology, or psychology, and allows them to teach writing using discipline-specific writing conventions. Given that all social science faculty at Bronx Community College are grouped into one department, I highlight some of the different approaches in writing conventions across social science disciplines, all which may require reading and writing for *qualitative* and *quantitative* data.

## I. Writing for disciplines in the social sciences that use quantitative approaches

### **Why should writing assignments be incorporated into the social sciences using quantitative data?**

Teaching complex computations is not of real value when student assignments and exams that require number calculations reflect various (and often incorrect) responses. Students' lack of understanding comes from the ways textbooks and most classroom teaching consists of *how* to do computations rather than *what* computations mean. Furthermore, many classroom exercises ask students to perform the computation rather than *explain* the results.

In addition to performing correct calculations in classroom activities or examinations, students majoring in the social sciences using numbers and statistical analyses will at some point in their academic life and career need to evaluate quantitative data. They will have to understand and explain number summaries and demonstrate skepticism about what number abstracts mean. Students may need to evaluate statistics used by researchers in their own field, or they might carry out statistical research and data analysis themselves, which requires data collection, storage, editing, and analysis. For this reason, spending time on data *meaning*, *evaluation*, and *interpretation* are important in social science courses that teach numerical, statistical, and mathematical data sets.

## Sample assignments and how to incorporate writing in the social sciences using quantitative data

Students are often trained to use manipulative skills and memorization. Instructors incorporating evaluation and interpretation in quantitative approaches will therefore benefit from integrating assignments that sharpen skills they never learned in prior courses, ones that deemphasize mechanics and spend more time on explanation and meaning. One way of doing this is through in-class sample questions that may appear on a future assignment or exam. While teaching students to compare and contrast methods, assessments, uses, and histories of statistical techniques are the long term goals of writing for courses using numbers and computation, beginning with basic questions such as, “for the following data, find the mean, mode, and median, and *explain* which best describes the data and *why*,” or “*interpret* the slope in  $y=2x+3$ : how much does  $y$  change for a unit increase in  $x$  when  $y=2x+3$ ?” are gateways into teaching students to be better critical and creative thinkers (Hayden 1989).

Furthermore, exam questions that ask students to *explain* a process rather than perform it, help students demonstrate competence and subject mastery in statistical analyses. Some instructors combine this with journaling. Asking students to journal on the process of explaining the answer allows for a better understanding of statistical data and what they mean: why we use them and what might be some of the benefits and limitations of different quantitative approaches. For example, Hamilton (2001) recommends the following exercise:

- Write a question on the chalkboard and ask students to answer the question without consulting any references
- Once responses are written in students’ journals, ask them to exchange papers with their peers
- Ask students to take the papers home, research the correct answers, and correct and critique their partner’s answer
- Papers are then returned at the next class period with time allowed for each pair of students to discuss their reviews with each other
- Ask students to re-write their journal response with the correct answer. The correct responses are collected by the instructor and are reviewed for accuracy

Faculty might incorporate the dialog journal in the student’s total course grade. This approach to assignments also develops a system where journal partners can help each other’s intellectual growth.

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## **II. Writing for disciplines in the social sciences that use qualitative approaches**

### **Incorporating writing exercises into the social sciences using qualitative data**

Sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists study human behavior and social life. Incorporating writing assignments into social science disciplines can help students develop critical thinking on various social issues, examine an issue from social, political, economic perspective, apply theory, take a position with supporting evidence, or critique an existing position.

Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogy helps students explain human social behavior, and how various social groups, such as families, neighborhoods, cities, or nations, shape people. It also allows us to analyze how the world is experienced through various lenses based on one's identity, such as race, gender, class, religion, or sexual orientation; understand social reproduction (how groups are created and maintained); recognize and predict social change (social movements and social transformation); how people's identities are formed (and how they might shift); and grasp how individuals are defined by the group(s) they belong to. In short, writing intensive courses aid students in identifying connections among individuals, their stories, and their relations to the wider social world.

### **Sample assignments and how to incorporate writing in the social sciences using quantitative data**

Various types of writing assignments help student sharpen their critical thinking and analytical skills. A literature review, for example, requires students to identify a question or topic to be investigated, conduct library/archival research for relevant scholarly articles, books, and Internet sites, and create a synthesis of material to develop a new way of thinking about a topic or offer suggestions for further research. A quantitative research paper may ask students to present an issue, question, or hypothesis to be tested, or to conduct original research that includes analysis

of data by comparing the opinions of social scientists, the public, and the media about an issue; apply sociological/anthropological theory to current events; analyze historical changes in interpretive ways, or to conduct ethnographic research such as observational investigations, participant research, or interviews.

The following simple writing assignments may be incorporated in the different types of projects listed above or may be used as preparation for final assignments:

- Abstracts: include outlines of the essential elements of a work
- Annotated bibliographies: use brief sentences to summarize a list of sources
- Summaries: consist of short, concise outlines of main ideas and their relevance to a topic or issue
- Textual Analysis: comprise of summaries, analysis, and evaluation such as explanations of the main points of a text; a critique of an argument; pointing out the relationships between evidence and conclusions, among concepts in text, or comparisons to other texts; and use *reasoning* to examine rhetorical strategies to determine how well an author makes their argument
- Proposals: rely on formulating a research question, outlining a list of methods in which questions will be answered, and explaining how the data will be analyzed. This requires:
  - a. Framing a question and proposing a method of answering the question
  - b. Writing a short statement of intent
  - c. Explaining why the issue or topic is important, how it is relevant to a thesis, and explaining the hypothesis, methods, and references

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