

9 Term Papers in the Social Sciences

The social sciences—psychology, anthropology, political science, sociology, education, and economics—are all concerned with the systematic study of people and how they behave and live together as families, tribes, communities, and nations. With all of this emphasis on *people*, why must social science students spend so much time every semester alone in the library with a term paper assignment? The answer is that the library is the place where students have access to the most important work that has already been done in the social sciences. Through the process of surveying the state of knowledge on a particular topic, students learn more than merely what social scientists say about that topic; students learn how social scientists behave.

Social science research papers are usually assigned to allow students freedom to select and pursue a topic in some depth; to teach students to find and use social science library materials; and to teach students to evaluate and write about those readings in a coherent and contemporary social science framework.

Before you go on with this chapter, you may wish to reread chapter 4 on library resources (especially the section on resources in the social sciences), chapter 5 on using library resources, and the introduction to chapter 6 on the research paper in the humanities for a general overview of writing a paper from library materials.

Getting started

Assume that you have been assigned to write a term paper for a freshman psychology course, and your instructor has told you to look in your textbook to select a topic that interests you. At first, your interest in a topic may be overwhelmed by your fears of inadequacy in dealing with any topic in a field that you have been studying for only a few weeks. It may be comforting to remember that you have been asked to do the term paper assignment to give you an opportunity to learn about a topic, not to expound expertly on it. Through the process of researching and writing,

you will learn more than a specific body of subject matter. You will learn general procedures within the field.

But do begin with a topic that has in some way piqued your interest. We have assumed in the social science section of chapter 4 that our sample student developed some curiosity about the topic of autism. Perhaps when this student was reading his textbook the disquieting image of a small child in total retreat from the world stimulated a desire to learn more about this mystery. Perhaps this student had written expressively in his personal journal about this situation and then found in this private writing the seeds of an interest that he could sustain through a semester of research. When you are looking for ideas for a topic, read through your private journal. (See chapter 2.)

We will assume that you have followed the procedures for a library search and that you are now ready to get started on writing up what you have recorded from your library work. Good research always results in more material than you can or should use. You will have to resist the common undergraduate tendency to use all of your information. This compulsion usually arises from one of two causes: either you want the instructor to know how much work you have done; or you begin writing without first deciding how to focus your paper, and consequently, you have no guidelines to aid you in determining what details you need. You can overcome the first difficulty by remembering that an instructor will be more impressed with how you integrate your research into a coherent presentation than with how much research you have done. The second difficulty can be avoided by focusing on a problem for your paper before you begin to write.

By focusing on a problem, we mean, simply, identifying or creating a real question within your broad topic area. The existence of a problem, or a controlling question, allows you to establish a direction in which to work in constructing arguments and selecting evidence. Your writing will then be goal-directed.

There is no magical point at which a writer begins to narrow a topic in a goal-directed way. Some writers begin with a series of questions that they keep in mind all through their library search. Frequently these questions are suggested to them by their reading of general reference works on the topic. Then, as these students proceed with their research they select from these questions and further refine their perspective. Other students need to accumulate many inches of notecards before drawing up a list of productive questions about a topic. Here are seven general questions to help you to categorize your accumulated information about a social science topic. Our sample student would substitute autism or the autistic child for X in each case. But these questions will work with a wide variety of topics.

- 1 What are the causes of X?
- 2 What are the theories about X?

- 3 What are the characteristics or symptoms of X?
- 4 What are the capacities for and likelihood of change in X; and what are the effects of any change in X?
- 5 What are the characteristics of the family or social group of X?
- 6 What are the similarities or differences in X depending on the environment?
- 7 What is the history of X?

Begin by organizing your notecards about autism according to these questions. Keep in mind that in your actual paper you will probably deal with no more than one or two questions. But for a start take a look at your notes in terms of these categories. At the least, you will have a better sense later of what you can, in good conscience, omit. Some students will find these questions useful much earlier in the process, possibly as they begin their library research. What information do you have about causes of autism? How are these theories related? What descriptive material do you have about autistic children? Then look for possible connections between the answers you have written down. For the topic of autism, you may find that questions 1, 2, and 3—those about causes, theories, and symptoms—are most productive. What are the connections between theories about the causes of autism and the way that various theories describe the symptoms?

Disciplines are defined by the problems that are appropriately posed within them. Table 9.1 provides examples of four controlling questions, each one appropriate within a different social science field, on the general topic autism.

As you formulate your controlling question you will, by necessity, begin to make choices. This process of selection reflects your understanding of the field you are studying. Your social science term paper is not expected to contribute new knowledge to the field; you are selecting and synthesizing the published material of others. Your controlling questions create a structure for your synthesis, and the structure that you create is your contribution to this term paper assignment.

Writing the first draft

Once you have formulated a controlling question you are ready to select and order your collected information to address that controlling question. A good starting point for the example above would be a definition of autism. But even here you face a difficulty. How can you distinguish a definition of autism from a description of its symptoms? To some extent autism is defined by its symptoms. Moreover, your sources may disagree on which symptoms are central to the condition.

You may want to address this controversy head on by beginning your paper with an overview of various definitions of autism and various de-

<i>Field</i>	<i>Much too broad</i>	<i>Too broad</i>	<i>Still too broad</i>	<i>Controlling question</i>
Psychology	Autism	Description of autistic children	Symptoms of autistic children and emotionally disturbed children.	What are the theories explaining autism? How well do the symptoms fit the theories?
Sociology	Autism	The role of autistic children in society	Autistic children in different societies.	Are autistic children found in all social classes and in all societies? Why or why not?
Political Science	Autism	Autistic children in U.S.	Laws about the schooling of autistic children.	What impact has the required education of autistic and other disturbed children had on local school budgets?
Education	Autism	The education of autistic children	The behavior of autistic children in the classroom.	What do the characteristic symptoms, emotional and cognitive, require in remedial teaching?

TABLE 9.1
Sample controlling
questions in various
social science
disciplines

scriptions of symptoms. You should not feel uncomfortable about presenting your perception of controversy early in your paper. Divided opinion is a hallmark of the social sciences. Whether you address this controversy early or later in your paper, as background material or as part of your central focus, you must always take account of a variety of views, some of them mutually contradictory.

Another way to begin the first draft of the autism paper is to abstract from your sources the simplest and most generally acceptable definition and then to write that out as a start for your draft. The student quoted below has tried this strategy:

Autism is a childhood psychosis characterized by withdrawal from reality and a refusal to communicate and deal with people. It is considered the most severe mental illness among children and occurs more frequently in boys than in girls. Psychiatrists believe the condition is present from birth but is usually not noticed until the third or fourth month and is also influenced negatively or positively by the home

environment. Characteristics of autism are: severe disturbance of language functioning; skillful relationships with objects; queer mannerisms and repetitious movements such as rocking; abnormal desire to preserve various objects in the environment in an unchanged state; occasional phenomenal memory; and unusual mechanical and musical genius.

This writer can always go back later, after he sees his whole first draft, and establish a broader context for his general definition. The most important thing about the paragraph quoted above—especially for a first draft—is that it can generate further paragraphs. The catalog of symptoms leads to a number of choices.

No theory or theoretical controversy has been mentioned yet. You now must decide whether to focus on one theory or on several theories of autism. Given your controlling question, you are under no obligation to write a paper that presents a comprehensive treatment of all theories. But which theories should you leave out? And how do you indicate that you have chosen to omit some theories? While you don't want to overwhelm your readers with excessive research, you do want to show that the omission of important theories was a deliberate choice and not an oversight. The notecard shown in figure 9.1 presents the major theories that could be addressed in this paper.

Once you have categorized the various theories recorded in your notes, you are ready to decide and to explain your particular focus. Here are two paragraphs, from two different first drafts. Each one provides a different focus for the paper's treatment of theories of autism.

Sample draft—student X:

This paper will not cover all of the varied theoretical explanations of autism. Psychogenic theories of Bettelheim and Kanner, as well as the behaviorist position articulated by Krasner and Ullman, cannot be covered here. Instead, the focus of this paper will be on organic theories such as those of Rimland, or Knobloch, or Rutter. The paper will describe several of the organic theories in some detail and determine how good a fit those theories make to the symptoms of autistic children.

Sample draft—student Y:

There are many individual theories which attempt to explain autism. Space limitations

Many viewpoints about causes of autism.

1. Kanner originally tho't it was inborn disturbance of affect, different from childhood schizophrenia, partly because of early appearance.
2. Kanner later gave greater emphasis to coldness of parents as a cause, w. minimum effect from in-born — psychogenic.
3. Bettelheim also psychogenic.
4. Problems of making the definition too broad, includes too much.
5. Behaviorists: autism environmentally determined (Krasner & Ullman) — faulty learning, differential reinforcement — parents at fault.
6. Organic views: Bender — diffuse encephaly. Kloblock — brain damage at birth or pregnancy.
7. Organic — more specific: Rimland — reticular system. Many others — abnormal responses to stimuli, lack of response to sounds (Rutter) — could be form of mental subnormality.

Rest of chapter looks more completely at these points.

FIGURE 9.1

prohibit an examination of all of them, but one theory from each of three main orientations will be described and compared. Thus, the psychogenic position of Bettelheim, the behaviorist position of Lovaas, and the organic view exemplified by Rimland will be presented.

Each of these paragraphs informs the reader of what limitations have been placed on the scope of this paper. Telling the reader what is not covered in the paper puts the paper in its broader context without writing an encyclopedic study.

Remember that at this stage you are writing paragraphs to test thoughts. You can go back and revise the material later into finished prose. Whatever approach you select for categorizing the theories of autism, you will have to go on to explain the theories that you select and then, in response to your controlling question, show how the symptoms of autism do or do not fit various theories.

As you compose your paragraphs, you may find it useful to jot down in the margins a few one-word reminders to yourself about how you will proceed. Remember also that you are not locked into any choice you make along the way. You can always go back and change the beginning to conform with a better idea that occurs to you later.

As you write your first draft, you should return to reassess choices that you made in a general way when you were doing your research. Do you intend your paper to be comprehensive, representative, or argumentative? (See table 4.1 for definitions and uses of these characteristics of a paper.) Your decision on these characteristics helped to guide choices during your research. Think about these characteristics again as you select material from your research to write your first draft. Whatever else you intend your social science paper to be, you should always make it as up to date and authoritative as you can. Consequently, during your research you have collected some material from the most up-to-date and authoritative sources—scholarly journals.

You may encounter some difficulty, however, when you try to incorporate material from scholarly journals into your draft. You may have notes from a number of journal articles, but you may not know whether the research presented in a particular article is important or esoteric. You may also be unaware of which journals are prestigious and which are not. You may find some clues to the status of an article by looking it up in *Scientific Citation Index* to determine whether the article has been referred to by others. (See chapter 4 for a description of how to use this index.)

Journal articles represent the day-to-day workings of social science. An individual social scientist does research that replicates, extends, or refutes the efforts of other researchers. Thus, in a series of small steps, information about a phenomenon is compiled, forming a composite picture of the causes and limits and relationships of a phenomenon of human functioning. As you work with your scholarly material on autism, think of how the particular subject matter of the article fits in with the wider framework that you are developing. Then connect the highly particular material from the journal article to the emerging structure of your paper as a whole. For example, let us say that you have written a notecard (figure 9.2) from an article in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*.

This article reports on the varying ability of autistic children, children

Litrownik, McAnis, Wetzel,
Pritchard, and Filipelli

Study on 7 autistic, 7 Down's and 7 normal kids,
all with same mental age. Match-to-sample task
used because memory is not a factor in this discrimina-
tion task. Memory does influence performance in tradi-
tional discrimination paradigm used in previous studies.
In this study, in contrast to previous one, autistic
children performed as well as normals when matched
for mental age; Down's children inferior performance.

FIGURE 9.2

with Down's Syndrome, and normal children to perform a task that involves making discriminations. Your first impulse may be to reject this material as too narrow for your paper, but actually these experimental data can be integrated into your paper to explain further the lack of attention frequently observed as a symptom in autistic children. The researchers selected an experimental task that did not involve memory and found that when memory was minimized as an influencing factor, autistic children performed as well as normal children of the same mental age. Thus, you might suggest in your own paper that problems with memory might influence the generally observed inattention of autistic children.

Once you have selected appropriate material from your notes and tentatively organized this material into sentences and paragraphs, you have written a useful first draft. Don't worry about composing an opening or closing paragraph until the next stage of your writing.

Revising

You now have the body of your paper in first-draft form. Next, go through and try to outline this material. This outline provides a visual overview of your paper. If your outline does not work well, that is, if the topics are not organized to your satisfaction, then begin moving around topics and

categories in your outline. Working with your outline at this point is faster and less cumbersome than working with your draft. Once you are happy with the order of topics in your outline, then turn to rearranging material in your paper.

Many writers use the cut-and-paste method; they actually cut apart their first draft, rearranging paragraphs, adding and deleting material, and then pasting the whole thing together again, like a jigsaw puzzle. If you use this method, be sure to photocopy the original of your first draft before you take a scissors to it. You may decide that, after all, you prefer parts of the original structure, so you will need a record of the way things were.

As you restructure your paper in this revising stage, you should focus your attention on the needs of your readers. As we have suggested for a number of other papers, you should assume that the audience for your term paper is composed of your classmates and your instructor. You must make your topic comprehensible to classmates who do not have the same background on the topic as you do, but you must write in a style more formal than one you would use if writing only for classmates. Most experienced writers do not wait until the revising stage to consider the needs of their audience. In fact, considerations of audience can serve as a heuristic throughout the writing process. But in a first draft, you can feel much more free to write with the primary purpose of testing and clarifying your ideas for yourself. When you are revising, you must give much of your attention to communicating ideas and information to others.

Especially if you use the cut-and-paste method of rearranging material in your first draft, you may have a fragmented paper. As you revise, give special attention to the transitions that you make between paragraphs. Transitional words—*consequently*, *thus*, *therefore*, *nevertheless*—must be used accurately (see chapters 2 and 6), but even their correct use is not enough. As your readers move from paragraph to paragraph, they need signposts to indicate the function of each paragraph as part of the whole logical structure. If signposts are really to serve their function of making readers feel comfortable about the road that they are traveling, these signposts must depend to some extent on repetition. Don't be afraid to reiterate an earlier point to show its connection to a later one. Repeat key phrases to connect two different situations to the main ideas in your paper.

At appropriate places in your paper, insert a tabular presentation to summarize material for your readers. These graphic presentations can serve as the best signposts of all, since they can clearly demonstrate relationships that you have been developing in your discourse. You should develop a table of your own, rather than reproducing one from another source. But tables do not need to be complex. Table A is an example of a table from the final draft of a student's paper on autism. The table gives clear visual form to the relationships of various theoretical positions about proposed causes of autism. Although a tabular presentation is an excellent signpost, it should not hang in midair. You should discuss the material

TABLE A

Theoretical Positions and Proposed Causes of Autism

Theoretical position	Theorist	Proposed cause
Psychogenic-functional due to stress	late Kanner	"emotional refrigeration" of parents
	Bettelheim	parental cause
Behavioral-environment	Krasner & Ullman	faulty learning from parents
	Lovaas	inability to learn appropriate responses
Organic	early Kanner	inborn defect
	Rimland	underactive reticular system
	Rutter	relative inability to comprehend sounds

in the table as part of the body of your paper. Use tables as clarifications and connections. *Never* let them stand alone.

As you revise, keep reminding yourself that your audience has not read all the background material that you have. Try to remember that not so long ago you knew very little about the topic and revise your term paper into the sort of presentation that you would have been grateful to read when you first started your research.

Your introduction, in particular, should be designed to help or at least to interest your readers. One way to engage your readers is to make them see your topic in concrete terms. A well-chosen quotation may be useful here. For instance, you might begin your paper on autism this way:

"We can't understand why Michael isn't like other children. His father and I live with a constant sense of guilt and fear. Last week, without warning, Mike bolted out the front door and ran right into the street. A car just missed him because the driver slammed on the brakes. Even so, I had to drag Mike screaming back into the house." The mother of a six-year-old autistic child described this situation to me.

Or you might prefer to open with this quote from Bruno Bettelheim's *Love Is Not Enough*:

The most important of all skills, that of living well with oneself and with others, can be acquired only by living in an emotionally stable and satisfying human environment. If too many families no longer provide it, a vicious circle is created because parents convey to their children what they have never learned themselves.¹

Both of these quotations create a vivid opening, the first because of the concrete situation described and the second because of the power of Bruno Bettelheim's language. Although direct quotations may provide a memorable way to begin or end social science term papers, direct quotations should be used sparingly at other points in your paper, probably even more sparingly than in a humanities paper. The norms of social science writing are in this way different from those of writing in the humanities.

At the beginning of your social science paper you may want to provide an overview of your topic rather than a dramatic opening. The student who began his first draft with a definition of autism decided to insert the following paragraph to precede that definition:

What is early infantile autism? What symptoms does an autistic child display? What are the conflicting theories about autism? Do the theories adequately explain the syndrome? The topic of early infantile autism raises these questions, which will be addressed in this paper.

In fact, it is better to use a clear, straightforward, unembellished style like that of this paragraph than to reach too far for flair. In social science writing, as in any kind of writing, keep your *aim* foremost, and your aim is to be in control of a body of social science material and to communicate your understanding of that material to your peers and your professor. You also want to show that your research has helped you to intuit some of the conventions—the etiquette of social science. Social scientists value factual writing presented with some sense of authority.

Even though you are just a beginner in the field, you can show your growing authority in small ways as well as large. For example, you might

¹ Reprinted with permission of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. from *Love Is Not Enough* (p. 375) by Bruno Bettelheim. Copyright 1950 by The Free Press, a Corporation, renewed 1978 by Bruno Bettelheim.

remember that most articles that you have read during your research used headings and subheadings as a standard feature of their format. You should divide your own paper into sections and use appropriate subheadings. Properly used, subheadings can function usefully as signposts for your reader. The use of subheadings is distinctive to the social and natural sciences. Most professors in the humanities do not want to see subheadings in the papers that you write for their classes. As we have said throughout this book, traditions are different in different academic fields.

In writing, as in life, through experience students develop a sense of tact. Perceptive students learn not to confuse the objective with the evasive. They understand that factual prose need not be dead prose. If, for example, you have done some field work with autistic children, you could integrate relevant parts of that experience with your research presentation. One student strengthened her paper with the following paragraph:

There is also a desperate need for sameness. I worked with a little girl who had an obsession with the way she wore her garments. For example, whenever she wore a sweater she insisted it be buttoned to the top button. Not only this, but it had to be done from the bottom up, and yet when she chose to take it off it had to be done from the top down.

Some students might hesitate to include this interesting piece of information, not only because it is anecdotal, but because the writer must use the word "I" to relate it. It is true that the word "I" is used less frequently in the social and natural sciences than it is in the humanities, but in an instance like the one above, most instructors will approve the use of "I."

In order to convey the impersonal tone of science, students too often use passive sentence constructions. Good social science writing, on the contrary, conveys factual information in an objective tone without heavy reliance on the passive voice. In the example below the sentence in the active voice is just as objective and factual as the sentence in the passive voice, and the active sentence actually conveys more information in a more direct manner:

Passive: It was thought that autism and mental retardation were mutually exclusive.

Active: Early theorists thought that autism and mental retardation were mutually exclusive.

As you revise, check your passive sentences and see if you can provide them with a subject and transform them into active, forceful sentences.

Also look to see if you are using too many nouns—especially nouns that end in *-tion*, *-ment*, *-ing*, *-ion*, *-ance*—and too many weak linking verbs: *is*, *has*, *were*. Change them to strong verbs.

You should also check to see that you are using technical vocabulary clearly and appropriately. Since your audience is composed of other social science students, you should use specialized vocabulary when that vocabulary expresses a concept more precisely than you could do with more popular terms. For example, you may write that autistic children characteristically fail to “modulate sensory stimuli.” The word “modulate” means quite specifically to adjust the level, and “sensory stimuli” again refers quite specifically to things that activate any of the five sensory systems. The phrase “modulate sensory stimuli” is thus an example of useful technical language, not of jargon. Jargon is characteristically imprecise and evasive. A writer would be using jargon if he wrote, “Autistic children are known for persistent, percussive abuse of the cranial structure vis à vis a lateral environmental barrier.” What the writer means to say here, simply and precisely, is that autistic children sometimes bang their heads against the wall, and no social scientist would object to the phrase “bang their heads against the wall.” Good writing in the social sciences is precise, not evasive. If you do use a technical term like “modulate sensory stimuli,” you should probably go on to explain and illustrate the term to connect it to the context of your paper.

Finally, go through your paper and check carefully for errors in usage, spelling, and typing. After all the time and effort that you have expended to establish your authority to review writings on autism, you don't want to blow it by submitting a paper littered with errors. After you have worked for a semester on a project, each error is far too expensive. Proofread meticulously. Some students read their papers backward at this stage so that they have enough distance to spot spelling and typing errors.

Check also that your references are in the correct form. (See chapter 5 for APA style, which most of your social science instructors will want you to use.) Check, too, that you are listing only those works that you have actually read. For instance, the majority of material that you have read on autism refers to a 1943 paper by Kanner, which is a classic because of its early definition of the syndrome. But unless you read Kanner's original paper, you must not use it as a reference, although you certainly can write about Kanner and cite the author who cites him.

At some point in this challenging process you may begin to feel a bit autistic yourself. But if you sequence your activities so that you actually spend the whole term on this term project, you will learn a great deal about the workings of the social sciences from your thorough research on a particular topic.

QUESTIONS 1 What skills is the term paper in the social sciences designed to help you practice?

- 2 Why are references to other social scientists so important in the social science research paper?
- 3 What are the important rules for and limitations on using direct quotations in a social science research paper?
- 4 Identify the ways that considerations of your audience can help you at every stage in developing a research paper.

EXERCISES

- 1 Substitute a topic for "X" in the questions on pages 209–210. In your journal work out all of the possible questions you might follow up if you wrote a paper on that topic.
- 2 Identify the major differences between research papers in the humanities and those in social sciences. What are the most important similarities?
- 3 Select a topic, like the autism example, and try to develop it in the manner illustrated on page 211.
- 4 Avoiding jargon or excessively technical language, rewrite the following paragraph in clear, expressive English.

The limited parameters of our study preclude serious generalizations beyond suggesting that the continued availability of grain depends significantly upon favorable environmental influences. It is believed that forecasts subsequent to this study which indicate prolonged drought in the impacted area are based on too many variables to be meaningful. Precipitation is anticipated with a consequent increase in grain-producing capability.