

# Writing in the Social Sciences: An Old Concept, A New Course

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## Abstract

Building on the theories of writing as a mode of learning and writing in the disciplines, a new course attempts to meet the needs of students whose disciplinary discourse communities follow the conventions of APA style. The course has engendered different expectations in various instructors and in the students. Variations in writing style, including sentence- and document-level differences, and content knowledge issues are addressed. Writing assignments in the course include annotated bibliographies, a literature review, an abstract, and a journal article review. Other assignments include a poster presentation and an oral report on the topic of the literature review.

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## Keywords

writing in the disciplines, social sciences, writing assignments, literature reviews, writing conventions

## Introduction

Writing in the Social Sciences is a relatively new course at my university. Added two years ago, the course was implemented to ensure that students entering the social sciences (sociology, psychology, and education) had the composition skills and experience necessary to successfully complete upper division courses.

This is an issue that has been of concern for years (Duke, 1982; Young, 1985). The first developed discussion came in 1979 when the first course specifically focused on APA writing and library research skills was proposed by Calhoun and Selby (1979). The reception of this suggestion, however, was generally negative, and the predominant move was to integrate additional writing assignments into extant courses in the discipline (R. Dowden, Conference of College Teachers of English presentation, March 5, 2010).

Since then college faculty have continued to find that requiring one or two general writing courses is insufficient to give students the skills needed for adequate academic writing within their disciplines. Adding writing components to multiple courses within disciplines has also been seen by many as an

unsuccessful attempt to improve student writing. Thus, even while many universities are continuing to emphasize writing across the curriculum, Dowden describes that they are also “seeking reinforcements through specialized courses” (R. Dowden, Conference of College Teachers of English presentation, March 5, 2010), such as *Writing in the Social Sciences* (now listed as *Writing in the Behavioral Sciences*).

At my university, this course is the first as well as the gateway offering in the social science majors. Until majors have a C or better in *Writing in the Social Sciences*, they cannot continue with any additional coursework in the majors. Because of this, the course sets the stage for writing as a mode of learning within these disciplines (Emig, 1977). Relevant writing skills are recognizably essential to the process of socialization within the discipline (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). Even though they are not in the social sciences, nursing majors also take the course, because their discipline also conforms to the APA style manual (APA, 2001). The students in this course are socialized into their discourse communities through the introduction of applicable writing conventions (Porter, 1985), which serve to guide both readers and writers into a shared understanding of the expectations for texts within the social sciences.

The course is beneficial to multiple colleges at the university. Clearly it is a benefit to the social sciences, because the content-specific courses in their departments do not have to devote time to writing skill introduction, but can focus on writing ability refinement and content knowledge. As an introduction for their students to the conventions of their disciplines, writing skills, and library research, it is also beneficial to the nursing school. Finally, it is a benefit to the humanities division because they have an additional composition course, required by all social science majors, within their purview.

### Expectations of the Instructors

When the course was originally created, differing expectations between the social science instructors for whom the class was initiated and the English instructors who would be teaching the course were discussed. Writing in the MLA style tends to lend itself to persuasive argument based on personal interpretations (Hult, 1996). A literary analysis, for example, would focus on one possible interpretation of a work and argue for its importance, even while tacitly acknowledging the possibility of multiple alternative interpretations. In contrast, the APA style of the social sciences prefers an objective factual presentation which they hedge with limiting qualifiers (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995) and build their arguments as part of a continuity of the discipline (MacDonald, 1994). They place their discussion within the framework of the discipline by beginning their papers with where the field has been and ending with where it should go next.

In addition, the social science teachers wanted specific assignments. Their desired outcome was to have the social science majors be able to write literature reviews, abstracts, and annotated bibliographies and to be able to interpret research. Research in the social sciences has found that oral communication is also important for social science majors (Nadelman, 1990). All of these learning outcomes were incorporated into *Writing in the Social Sciences*.

### Expectations of Students

When the students enter the *Writing in the Social Sciences* course, their expectations are not always in line with the learning outcomes of the course. The common background of the students in the course is a year of freshman composition spent writing using MLA formatting and style, because that is a university-wide requirement. This familiarity with another style manual can be problematic as students expect to be able to continue with the

writing they have already mastered. They are sometimes, as Nadelman observes, surprised when the discursive practices they have mastered do not transfer perfectly (1990). A clear delineation between the MLA and the APA styles of writing, however, helps the students realize that the two sets of conventions differ significantly and that there is plenty of new information for them to learn.

### Reasons for the Differences in Styles

The differences in writing styles are a clear manifestation of the discourse communities' values. Within the humanities, the emphasis is on the "human" and what the author of the text knows, experiences, or extrapolates. Within the social sciences, the emphasis is on the "science" and there is a determined move away from the personal and towards an objective tone with details that can also be presented as statistics or in graphs.

The reasoning behind the social scientists' emphasis on objectivity is unclear, though some arguments have been made about its genesis. Historically the social sciences have been looked down upon by the hard sciences as being less empirical or even unscientific, at least partially because there is less consensus among social scientists regarding how and what to measure than there is among naturalistic scientists (Goldstein, 1984). The social sciences, however, have seen their roots in the sciences, and therefore the disciplines have made a concerted effort to present their work in a scientific way by being consistent, clear, brief, recursive, and accurate (Dunn, 2008). Some further argue that the discourse community views its work as cumulative and collaborative and thus an objective tone is seen as focusing on the empirical details and not personalities (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). Regardless of the reasons, APA style is significantly different from writing in the humanities (APA, 2001).

Various instructors have integrated the differences between MLA and APA style in multiple ways.

Basically one of two approaches has been implemented. Either the instructor begins with an MLA style persuasive argument as the first essay in the course and followed by a transition into APA style, or the instructor teaches APA style writing only in the course. While each approach has sound pedagogical reasoning, I have chosen the second approach.

### Introducing the APA Writing Style

As part of the intent of the course is to differentiate between APA and MLA, the first lecture and readings in my class discuss the unique characteristics of each style (APA, 2001). Differences in writing expectations come first, since the focus of the course is composing. Students are taught that the variations in the two styles are not random: there are differences in word choices, verb use, sentence length and agency, paragraphing, formatting, quoting, and the use of discursive footnotes.

Word choice can be quickly covered. Though the students will probably not recognize this when they first begin reading, since they do not know the vocabulary of their fields yet, the preferred word choices in their majors are simple or common words. Though it is clear that some words cannot be simple or common, since the subject matter often requires highly specialized vocabulary, if there is a choice between an everyday word or one which is more esoteric, social science writers tend toward the more common (Young, 1996). Without specific instruction, it is hard for students, reading for the first time about comorbidity or significance, to comprehend that the authors are not trying to confuse them, but are simply using specialized vocabulary.

Verb use in the two styles also differs considerably. While within the humanities we argue for dynamic sentences in which the verbs are active, and, in fact, some English instructors put a moratorium on the "to be" verbs, verbs in the social sciences tend to be passive or linking (Cluett, 1976). The use of the passive voice is a way of forming an objective tone (Fulwiler, 2002).

Sentence length and agency also vary between MLA and APA style (APA, 2001). Within our courses, sentence length is discussed, requiring a three-line maximum for APA sentences (Kennedy, 2008, Appendix). Other differences in writing conventions at the sentence level include subject emphases in terms of the expectations of APA style, specifically identifying differences between MLA and APA (APA, 2001). I mention that psychology's sentence subjects tend to be groups that are studied (such as depressed mothers) and the quantitative details (such as "the evidence"), because in social science writing the focus is on the research. In contrast, in literary study, the sentence subjects group in literary terms (such as "the ironic tone") and in particulars (such as Chaucer) (MacDonald, 1994), because in the humanities the focus tends to be on the authors and the literary techniques they employ.

Paragraphing issues, both length and how to break topics into segments, are also addressed. A requirement of at least two paragraphs per page for social science writing (Kennedy, 2008) is introduced. Paragraphs also have a minimum length of two sentences. The concept of chunking information, as it is used in electronic media, is compared to the social science convention.

Formatting differences, including headings, sub-headings, and the use of cover pages, are introduced. While cover pages are not ubiquitous in the social sciences, they are expected at my university, and so they are introduced and required in this course. MLA style convention numbers the introductory pages of the text differently from the main body of the text, while in APA the introductory pages, usually the cover page and abstract, are numbered sequentially with the rest of the paper (APA, 2001). These are stylistic issues that need to be made transparent to the students. The use of headings and subheadings allow for shorter prose, since transitional passages are unnecessary, and also for easier navigation through the text since the headings act as visible breaks and place markers.

Another difference that is introduced and discussed is the different expectations for quotations within the two styles. MLA expects multiple short quotations, with the occasional longer quote, while APA actively discourages quotations (APA, 2001). One of the most significant differences in the writing of APA style papers for the students involves the removal of quoting as a writing activity (APA, 2001). Students are so used to a required percentage of quotations in their papers, that eliminating all quotes can be a frustration for them. The two styles also differ in regard to footnotes. While discursive footnotes are prominent in many kinds of humanities writing (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995), they are rare to the point of being non-existent in the social sciences, depending on the field.

While these points primarily relate to the mechanics of style, the rhetorical aspects of the two approaches to writing are also different. The story schema, the way disagreement is expressed, the hedging of conclusions, and the use of appeals are different in MLA and APA styles (APA, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, the headings form signposts for organization in the APA paper (APA, 2001). They also reinforce a certain story schema in empirical reports. Empirical studies begin with an introduction, have a methods section, give the results, and then discuss the findings. Bem's model of the empirical article, an hourglass figure with introduction and discussion as the more developed ends, presents a simple understanding of the standard in APA style for the empirical model (as cited in Dunn, 2008). This orderly progression of information is imposed on the studies by the authors after the fact. Too often research is not linear and logical. In their presentation of research, however, APA writers are always orderly and show a step-by-step progression (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995).

In addition, the standardization of headings and subheadings creates between the writer and reader a

common understanding of expectations in communication (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). While the students in my classes are not writing empirical studies, they are reading them, and so it is important for them to recognize the cohesiveness of their disciplines' schema (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton).

APA style also requires depersonalized disagreements (APA, 2001). To properly disagree the writer must remove the other researcher from the conversation. The researcher is never wrong: the focus in APA style disagreements is on the empirical process. When an author disagrees with a previous study, the generalizability of the work is described as problematic, or the methods are suspect, or the data is reinterpreted (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). Students need to recognize these as markers of disagreement.

Social scientists also value hedging conclusions. In the MLA fields, hedging lessens the strength of the argument. "It seems to me" implies, in the humanities, that the writer could be wrong. This makes the argument weaker. In the APA fields, hedging strengthens the argument (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). By hedging, the authors are limiting the argument to specific data that supports the argument, while leaving open the possibility of new data and a change in interpretation. Thus, the hedging supports the objectivity of the writing by giving primacy to the data rather than to the conclusions.

Finally, the discussion of rhetorical appeals is introduced. The appeal to logos is a strong one within both the humanities and the social sciences. This appeal is one the students do not have difficulty recognizing. A discussion of the ethical appeal includes a discussion of how references to other studies-- primarily in the literature reviews of empirical research, but also in the discussions-- draws on the appeal to authority. This is a clear use of the ethical appeal, and students recognize its difference from what they have read before. The fact that people within the field would also recognize

the important researchers listed among the authors is a fact that I point out, but do not dwell on. Instead I tell them that they will learn the significant researchers within their areas as they focus on those areas in their discipline-specific classes. We also discuss the lack of the emotional appeal in APA style. There are no heart-string tugging introductions or stories as examples within the text, as can be found in some humanities writing. All of the appeals are employed in APA style to present an objective tone (APA, 2001).

After this discussion of style differences in the writing conventions is finished, explanations of the APA style of references begin. As a means of reinforcing the APA style as it is introduced, a worksheet with MLA and Chicago bibliographic entries are handed out. Chicago references are included because some students have been introduced to these in other courses. The students are instructed to change the two styles of bibliographic entries into the correct APA format (APA, 2001). This is a low-consequence homework exercise that forces the students to begin applying the correct referencing style.

### Content Knowledge Issues

Because this course is a prerequisite for the social sciences majors, there are issues beyond stylistic differences that must be addressed. While the course requires an understanding of content issues, the students enter the course with a minimum of content knowledge. Indeed their content awareness is rarely more than sufficient for them to register an interest in the major, and thus they have no clear focus for research.

To ameliorate the problems which are inherent in a lack of content knowledge, simple "introduction to the field" exercises are helpful. First, instructors discuss the importance of journals within the social science fields (Dunn, 2008). Then they supply a list of first tier journals in these fields (Cuba, 2002). Discipline-specific resources may also be suggested (Hult, 1996).

These introductory explanations allow the students to identify the best sources for research. After the journals have been introduced, students are instructed to access tables of content (TOC) from multiple journals. As a homework assignment, I require six TOCs from at least three journals so that students can see what kinds of studies are represented. It also gives the students possible directions for their semester-long writing project. To ensure that the TOCs are read and not simply printed out, I require that the students write yes or no beside each article title, indicating whether or not the student finds this particular topic of interest. After this homework assignment is turned in, a quiz asking which topics the students found in the TOCs might become research interests ensures that the students have actually read at least the titles of the articles.

### Major Assignments in the Syllabus

Following the introduction to the citation style, journals, and possible research topics, instructors introduce the series of assignments which build upon each other towards the major project. Students must choose a topic for research, find fifteen studies published in top tier journals within a limited time period (usually five, sometimes ten, years), and use those studies for both annotated bibliographies and a literature review.

Before the reading of the chosen journal articles begins, the format of the studies which the students will be reading are introduced through both informational explanations and examples. Once the students have an understanding of the consistent content of the studies: including introduction, method, results, and discussion, they feel less adrift when researching and reading. An explanation of the introduction as placing the work within the discipline helps students see why such significant citation is expected (Goddard, 2003). This minimal familiarity makes the studies more accessible to them. Then some simple guidelines in how to read a journal article are presented (Dunn, 2008).

An overview of what the literature review entails and more specific directions for annotations are then presented, including well-written examples of both assignments.

### *Annotated Bibliographies*

Students are instructed to begin reading the article that seems easiest to understand. The first assignment in this series is a single annotated bibliography entry. Through this assignment the students learn to read sources for content, accessing information and beginning to make evaluations of the value of the work. Often the researchers presenting the study in article form have already noted problems with their own work, and these indications offer the students points of evaluation for other studies later.

Students also benefit from good question guides (The Health Care Communication Group, 2001). Instructors can provide as many or as few guiding questions for the students as they wish. I do not hand out a list, but instead I go over possible questions in my presentation of a sample annotation over a sample journal article.

A peer-editing workshop on the single annotated bibliography entry, with points to identify and questions created by the instructors, facilitates discussion of the expectations in written form. I have found that when students are exposed to examples of other student work, they feel more secure in their own understanding of what the assignment actually entailed. I use the time when the students are critiquing each other's annotations to quickly read through all the annotations and make short notes on areas where the students are lacking. In the next class period, I discuss significant issues which appeared in multiple annotations. Students then revise their single annotation for a grade and begin completing the rest of the fifteen annotations. By presenting the work in stages, I am more likely to receive work which is on par with my expectations. Through repetition, the students become more familiar with the

APA style of referencing and through their descriptions and evaluations of the various studies, they begin to move into a position from which they can discuss the topic they chose to research with some facility.

### *Literature Review*

When the annotated bibliographies are complete, a more thorough introduction to the literature review commences. Students are shown multiple strong examples, as well as a few (usually only one or two) with significant issues. These few poor examples are clearly labeled because otherwise, students tend to forget that the example was presented as “what *not* to do.” Following this extended introduction to the literature review, students are assigned prewriting exercises.

Both a midterm and a final are required in this class; the midterm is an essay about the expected trajectory for the literature review which the students write after having been given a few days for prewriting and thoughtful ruminations. This fulfills the specific expectation for a midterm and also gives me an opportunity to comment on their planned organization for the literature review before any significant writing has been accomplished. In addition, asking the students to write this assignment as if it were for a popular magazine gives them a different audience to think about (Nadelman, 1990).

Even though students have read and comprehended the journal articles well enough to write annotated bibliographies, most students do not take the time to write notes over the articles while they are completing their annotations. A second reading of the material is necessary for note taking and this is often helpful for the students because they are able to absorb more information on a second careful reading.

Within the writing of the literature review, multiple issues manifest. Sometimes the students are unable to synthesize due to a lack of experience with synthesis. In those cases, I recommend that the students group their articles and attempt to discuss their categorization.

This is a simple beginning to the synthesis necessary to complete their literature review in an acceptable manner. Review of the format goes on while the students are writing. It is one thing to hear what they are supposed to do before the work has begun, but once they are writing specific questions arise, and these are often not topic specific. Since many students are likely to experience similar issues, questions asked and answered in class limit repetition from my perspective.

When the literature review is about halfway complete, the class has a peer editing workshop. This helps to encourage students to keep up with a schedule of writing and keeps them from drifting too far from the assignment. Issues that have been resolved during the peer editing workshop have included incorrect citations, lack of citations, the interjection of entirely personal discussions, and unfocused writing. The workshops have shown themselves to be valuable tools for the students and have salvaged many grades through preemptive corrections.

A second literature review peer-editing workshop follows the completion of the literature review. It allows formatting issues to be identified, including inconsistent running heads, page numbers that are not sequential or are restarted in MLA style, cover pages that do not meet the assigned parameters, misused headings, and incomplete references. All of these are items which students have made a lower priority than the actual writing of their paper. Thus the peer editing workshop helps to ensure that the format of the submitted literature review fully follows the social science conventions.

### *Abstract*

Once the literature review is fairly complete, the abstract is introduced. Again both articulated limitations and examples are presented. Abstracts range in length from one hundred to two hundred fifty words, depending on the specific discipline the students go into and the requirements of various journals. Because I do not want to have to keep in mind the various majors of all the

students while grading, and remembering Pascal's dictum (1656) that writing which is short is significantly more carefully crafted and time consuming, I limit the abstracts to between one hundred and one hundred fifty words. Students must be able to cover the important sections of their paper and describe the significance of their topic in a single short paragraph.

I explain the importance of keywords and ask them to make a list of these for their paper as the prewriting exercise for the abstract. Then they create an abstract. In some classes students have instituted a second prewriting exercise in which they start with the longest abstract length and tighten the writing from there. While I have not added this as a required prewriting exercise, it has been a useful tool for those students who have employed it, and I recommend it for students who are having trouble getting started due to a fear of the word limitation.

#### *Poster Presentation*

After the literature review is turned in, students are introduced to the concept of poster presentations. While poster presentations are ubiquitous in the social sciences, they are extremely uncommon in the humanities, and many instructors have never seen a professional poster presentation. This knowledge gap can be overcome by some assiduous searching of the internet since both professional recommendations for poster presentations and samples are available online. Some of the professional recommendations must be amended for students; they did not do primary research and thus their research method is not the most important focus of their poster presentation, but other advice is very useful.

Discussions of the poster presentations include design concepts, readability issues, limitations for colorblindness, and the introduction of both student and professional examples. Students tend to work up to the level of the posters they are shown, and so I present only those which are exceptionally well done. This has

resulted in some fascinating and outstandingly professional poster presentations.

One issue within the poster presentations is the question of whether artistic representation should be fairly clear or may be more abstract. An example of this was from a student writing on homophilia, which is an aspect of humanity that tends to have people search out those who are like them. She wanted to use a Frankenstein-esque apple, the two halves, one green and one red, sewn together with heavy suturing thread. This abstraction was abandoned when reminded of the need to design for colorblindness.

Since at the present APA style tends to eschew the metaphoric (APA, 2001), I recommend to the students that their visualizations be limited to obviously identifiable aspects of their studies, though not everyone follows my recommendations.

#### *Oral Presentation*

Despite the fact that poster presentations are usually limited to discussions with individuals perusing the area, students give an oral presentation on their topic utilizing their posters. These oral reports, between three and five minutes long, are intended to share with the class an overview of their research. The oral presentations allow the entire class to see the various avenues of research followed by their classmates, and the speakers are able to use the posters as visual aids.

#### *Submission Requirements for Two Journals*

The final out-of-class assignment for the course is the preparation of a list of journal submission requirements. Students are asked to use two of the journals whose articles they read, find the submission requirements for those journals, and present a one-page comparison/contrast in a table. Having students present this compare/contrast in table form, which is easy to read and allows for rapid differentiation between the two journals, also ensures that they are familiar with creating tables before they enter their discipline-specific courses. This assign-

ment usually only takes one day of in-class introduction and then students can complete the work at home.

### *Journal Article Review*

For the final exam, students must compose a journal article review. The students will have already read the article at least once for the annotated bibliography and again for the literature review. This third critical reading makes sure the students have had sufficient time to reflect on the study they are critiquing. As a final exam, the journal article review also emphasizes skills they should have learned in my class, including creating bibliographic citations, summarizing, and analyzing.

Since the final exam is announced in advance, students have the opportunity to prepare for the journal article review. The students are allowed to choose to review any of the fifteen articles they read for the earlier class assignments. I recommend to the students that they choose an article they feel confident discussing. The students must turn in the article with their review, which allows me to double check the article easily if there appears to be a problem or if I wonder about claims the students are making.

The journal article review I ask for in class is less detailed than a professional version; it is, however, a beginning and a version adequate for a sophomore-level class (Gimenez, 2007). The assigned length is between two and four pages. The first section is the student's bibliographic reference for the article they have chosen to review. The students have already compiled a bibliographic reference for the article, when they were writing their annotated bibliography, and by finals they should know the style well enough to create a new citation during the final exam. The second section of the journal article review is the introduction, which should include a discussion of the type of article they are looking at. Since the students are required to only use empirical articles, this identification is simple. The third section provides a summary of the article including the problem addressed, the methodology of the

study, and the evidence provided. To some extent, the students have already done this section in their annotated bibliographies.

The fourth section of the journal article review requires the greatest skill. Students must evaluate the article for strengths and weaknesses and for appropriate evidence for the conclusions provided within the article. This is still not terribly difficult, since the students have been doing this since the initial annotated bibliography. In the fifth section, students have to take a position on the article, saying whether they agree or disagree with the author and articulating their rationale for this decision. Even though some students have already taken a stance on the article before the final exam, for example, by grouping it with studies that have many flaws, the process of identifying their stance can be a challenge for other students. The students have to choose whether to agree with an expert, as a journal article author can certainly be identified, or to disagree with the expert.

Since the students are fairly new to their subjects and have only their own life knowledge and fifteen articles' worth of reading on the topic of that article, taking an oppositional stance can be difficult. It can also be unnecessary. It is at this point that thoughtful preparation for the final exam is most crucial. If students feel unable to disagree with the experts, they may choose an article to review with which they agree.

The journal article review as the final exam is a culmination of the work the students have been doing all semester. It shows whether or not the students are able to create a bibliographic reference, whether they can introduce and summarize an article they are extremely familiar with, and if they have mastered the proper skills for the identification and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in an empirical study.

### **Conclusion**

The Writing in the Social Sciences course builds upon an older concept. Writing in the disciplines, especially

as expressed by Miller (1984) and Bazerman (1988), requires an immersion into the academic community whose conventions the students need to learn. In this course, students learn about the academic community as they explore the discourse of the community with a guide who is able to articulate for them the writing conventions necessary to be successful in their major fields. After successfully completing this course, the students can be sure that they have at least a rudimentary understanding of the kinds of writing expected of them within their disciplines. ■■

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