

## General Advice on Social Science Writing

by John Gerring, with Joshua Yesnowitz and Stephen Bird

Courses in the social science disciplines (anthropology, economics, political science, sociology) are usually geared toward a basic, straightforward type of paper-writing that goes by the name of expository prose. This is serviceable for most nonfiction writing, academic or otherwise. Following is a set of general guidelines and advice, applicable to many writing assignments. You might also wish to consult the resources listed at the end of this document.

*Nota bene:* if you're having trouble figuring out some aspect of a writing assignment, don't sit by yourself and sulk. Talk to your friends and classmates, your TF, or your professor. Don't let the time slip by until the deadline is a day away. At this point, it will be too late. *Do not wander distractedly through the semester thinking that the paper assignments will somehow sort themselves out without direct intervention on your part. You must take charge.*

### OVERVIEW

*Length, presentation.* Most professors are less concerned with length than with the quality of an essay. I assure you that length is not an important criterion of my grading scheme. Longer is not necessarily better. Do not extend, or reduce, the length of your essay by odd choices in paper, font, or margin size. Standard-sized paper, 11- or 12-point fonts, and double- or one-and-a-half-spaced lines will do nicely. (Single-spaced lines are appropriate only for circumstances where the reader is not commenting on the work.) Please leave 1.25 inches on the left and right margins and an inch on the top and bottom margins. Staple the pages together in the upper-left corner (no folders or bindings). Make sure your name, the course number, and your TF's name are printed clearly on the first page (add your student ID# if your name is a common one). Do not insert spaces between paragraphs, though you may do so between separate sections if there are differentiated sections in your paper (as in this piece).

*Style.* I expect grammar, spelling, and other niceties of the English language to be observed. But this is the most obvious, and in some ways least essential, part of an essay's style. More important is a clear argument and logical organization. Good thinking is inseparable from good writing. Otherwise stated, a good argument poorly stated is a poor argument. You will be graded both on the *force* and the *form* of your argument. Please do not consider the latter to be a mere formality.

### ORGANIZATION

An appropriate format for most papers is the following.

*Introduction.* Begin by introducing your reader to your subject. Why should we care about this topic? An introduction could be as short as a paragraph or as long as a page or two. But be wary of extremely long or extremely abstract introductions. As a rule, avoid comments on human history, human nature, and the like.

*Thesis.* Having introduced your topic, tell the reader what you want to say about it.

What do you have to add to this subject? What's new and/or different in your approach?

*Signposting.* Before heading into the body of the argument you should prepare the reader for what is to follow. State in a general way how you will go about proving your case -- the structure of the argument to follow. Don't shy away from obvious sign-posting techniques: "First, I will address the question of X. Next, I will . . ."

*The argument.* The body of the paper is composed of your argument. Here is where you present evidence and supporting arguments that are intended to convince the reader that you are right. In a longer paper -- say, over five pages -- it is usually helpful to separate different sections of an argument by headings. These may be bolded, as in this text. Whether or not the different sections of a paper are set apart by headings and sub-headings, each portion of the paper should address a different facet of the problem. Generally, one saves the most important and/or the longest arguments for last. But this is a matter of taste.

*Conclusion.* One is obliged to sum things up in some manner. In a short paper, this summation should be brief. Remind the reader what you have argued and what you have proven. If there are weaknesses in the argument this is the time to acknowledge them. Traditionally, conclusions also analyze the subject from a broader perspective, exploring the implications of the thesis. Conclusions are often somewhat speculative in nature. Here is where you might point the way to further research. What problems and questions remain?

## **FINDING, AND SUSTAINING, A THESIS**

Good social science writing has a clear thesis. A thesis is more than a topic. Perhaps the nearest synonym for this oft-misunderstood term is argument. Having settled on a topic, what is it that you wish to say about it?

Evidently, not all theses are created equal. What distinguishes the good from the bad? A good thesis is *new*, *true*, and *significant*. Let's explore these concepts in greater detail.

*Novelty.* There is no point in re-hashing standard wisdom. If it is already universally accepted that congressional committees favor particularistic constituencies then another paper with this thesis is not very interesting or useful. If, on the other hand, there is some debate on the matter, or if you are arguing *against* standard wisdom, it becomes a topic of interest. As a general rule, your thesis is more interesting and useful insofar as it points out things that are not readily apparent, at least to the proverbial man-in-the-street. To be sure, someone will have made your general point before, but you should try to shed new light or new evidence on the subject.

*Truth.* Truth, in the social sciences, can rarely be established beyond a shadow of a doubt. But it should be established to the best of your abilities -- given constraints on time, resources, and sources. In arguing for your thesis imagine possible responses from those who might be inclined to skepticism. How might you convert this sort of reader to your argument? Remember that in order to convince the skeptics you will need to deal not only with the evidence and arguments that support your case, but also those that do not. Omission of contrary evidence is generally damning to an argument for it suggests that the writer is not aware, or has not fully considered, the facts of the case. Thus, you need to show why these points are either wrong, overstated, or counterbalanced by opposing arguments or evidence.

*Significance.* Significance in research is also a matter-of-degrees. At the very least, you need to explain to your reader why it is important for him or her to read your essay. Conventionally, this is handled in the introductory paragraphs, where the writer links her

topic to a broader concept of generally-accepted relevance (e.g., democracy, liberty, or equality). Your thesis should *matter*.

*Summary.* If you are having trouble locating a thesis, ask yourself, Why am I drawn to this topic? What interests me about it? What are the puzzles this subject introduces? What are the unsolved, or unresolved questions and ambiguities? What aspects of this question are most misunderstood by the general public?

Developing a thesis is perhaps 90% of the job of writing a good paper. So take your time, and don't be afraid to revise it continually as you come up with new ideas, as you outline, and as you write.

A great way to start is to jot down all your ideas about the topic on a piece of paper. Free-associate for a while. You might also go through the books and articles you are reading again, looking for ideas or evidence to support your thesis, or simply for inspiration. Make as many connections as you can without judging their quality.

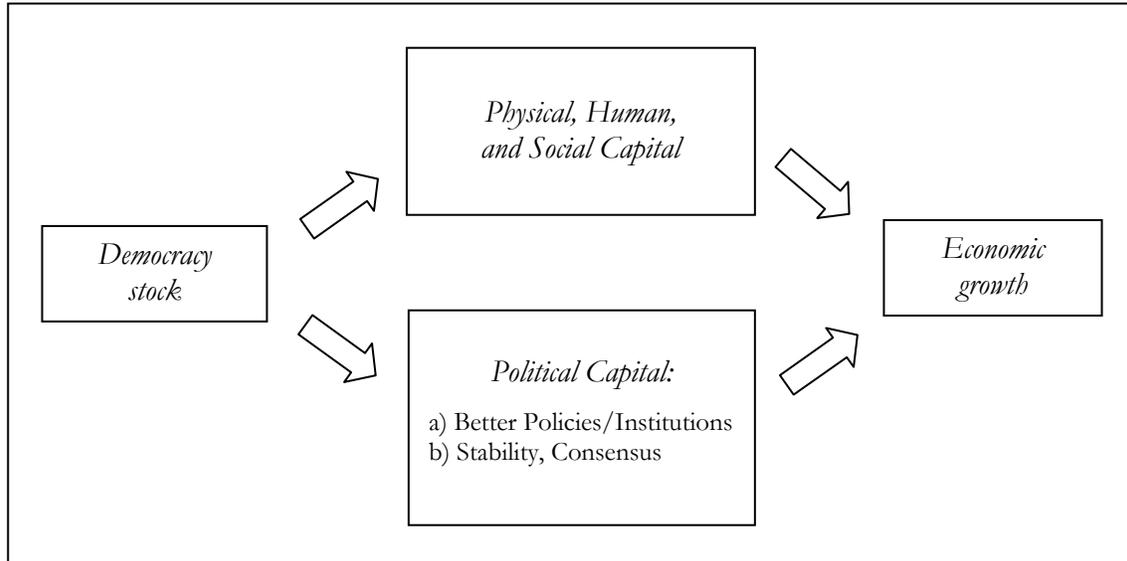
Now try going through and organizing things, throwing out that which doesn't fit your thesis, and putting "oranges with oranges and apples with apples," as the phrase goes. Then, figure out what the most logical order of presentation would be.

Since the thesis is your purpose for writing, if you do not argue your thesis effectively you have not achieved your stated object. Make sure you're not leaving out obvious points, that you're presenting all the evidence you can to defend your thesis. Make sure that you exclude points that are irrelevant to your thesis (however brilliant they may be). Lastly, make sure that you're not repeating yourself (except, perhaps, in the conclusion, where you restate your general argument). If you find yourself violating any of these precepts this may be a sign that you've not yet found the best possible organization for your paper.

Sometimes, one does not become aware of the main idea until one has already written a rough draft and put it aside for a few days. It is common to see thesis statements in *concluding* paragraphs. Once you realize this, a simple reorganization of the paper should be possible (sometimes just swapping text from back to front is sufficient).

*Clarifying the argument.* Most arguments in political science are causal arguments. They attempt to show a causal link between an independent variable (usually denoted X) and a dependent variable (Y). If this is a complicated relationship it may be helpful to include a simple diagram of how various factors inter-relate. Below is a diagram drawn from a paper of mine (Gerring, Bond, and Barndt, "Democracy and Economic Growth: A Historical Perspective"; available on my web site). Here, democracy stock is the independent variable, various forms of capital the intermediate variables, and economic growth the dependent variable. (If there are various indicators of each general concept you may want to include these in your diagram too.)

*Sample Diagram of Causal Argument:*



**WRITING STYLE**

Good writing is possible only if one has a good idea of the audience one is writing for. For purposes of most college assignments, you may assume an audience of your peers. As you sit before the computer screen, imagine yourself writing to other members of your class. Don't assume knowledge of specialized topics. Use examples wherever possible in order to avoid the arid (and often obfuscatory) effect of an unrelieved series of generalizations.

The object of your paper is to persuade the reader, to communicate. So try to be as clear and straightforward as you can, without trivializing your ideas or patronizing your reader. The secret to what is generally regarded as good nonfiction writing probably has less to do with prose style than with clear thinking. The problem is to get on paper what's in your head.

Don't let the prose get in the way of the logic of the argument. Overly long sentences with multiple clauses are hard for the reader to follow. Beware of the run-on sentence. Fancy or technical words often come out sounding pretentious, and alienate your reader. Don't talk down to your reader. It's important that your reader have a positive impression of you, the author, if you are to persuade him or her of anything whatsoever. Control your prose.

Remember that language, in common with math, chemistry, and music, has rules. Speaking and writing is a rule-bound exercise. Without rules, language is meaningless; indeed, it is no longer language at all. To be sure, in speaking colloquially or in writing email messages we may apply these rules loosely (or a different set of rules may apply). However, in a formal setting such as a legal brief, a business memo, a report, or a course assignment, it is important to take the act of communication seriously and to abide by the formal – albeit rather meticulous – rules of the English language.

Spelling, grammar, word choice, and all the delicate mechanics of language are essential to effective communication. You will not convince your reader that you know what you are talking about and have thought seriously about the subject at-hand if there are careless

mistakes of punctuation or spelling. This is a serious “image” problem, and you need to protect your credibility. Matters of style are also likely to affect the substance the argument. But even if they are peripheral, stylistic mistakes will affect the rhetorical power of your paper – your ability to persuade.

I strongly advise you to turn on, and pay attention to, the grammar promptings that your word processor provides. However, as you think about grammar keep in mind that writing is not a paint-by-numbers exercise. Regrettably, it is not possible to issue a set of rules that would tell you everything you need to know about proper sentence structure. Good writing is a matter of developing sensitivity to the English language, a process that lasts a lifetime. Remember that English is a highly idiomatic language, so rules of grammar don’t take one very far. Moreover, good writing in any language involves much more than following correct rules of grammar. It involves choosing the best word from among several near-synonyms. It involves finding the right way to phrase an idea, the right organization for a set of related ideas, and the proper mix of general statements and supporting examples. This is what differentiates a good essay from one that is merely grammatically correct.

## TIPS

In general, it is a good idea to avoid deterministic language. This is because most things in the social-science universe are probabilistic, rather than invariant. Use qualifiers and caveats rather than definitive statements. You do not want to *over*-state your argument. In debates and in courtroom arguments one is enjoined to give no quarter, to contest every point. Academic writing is different. Here, you are enjoined to acknowledge the limitations of your own position and the useful arguments adduced by the other side. Better to think of the other side as comprised of other academics like yourself, rather than adversaries. Enlist them in your cause, rather than alienating them by putting them down.

The occasional use of a colloquial phrase may be appropriate. Sometimes, it’s damn funny. However, the overall tone of an academic paper should be even, measured, understated. Avoid a polemical or conversational style. Avoid qualifiers like “very,” “extremely,” “unbelievably.”

Avoid jargon wherever possible. “Jargon,” in my view, refers to technical or abstruse vocabulary for ideas that can be communicated just as accurately and parsimoniously with everyday words. Do not say *masticate* if *chew* is what you mean. If you wish to vary the vocabulary in an essay by introducing an unusual word, use this word only once or twice. *Chew* can be repeated; *masticate* sticks out in an essay and thus should be used sparingly. To be sure, there is a legitimate place for technical vocabulary in social science. Sometimes, ordinary terms do not convey a meaning as accurately or parsimoniously as a technical neologism or an abstruse phrase.

The thesaurus is your friend if used on an occasional basis and to aid with the tip-of-the-tongue problem. It is not, however, a good way to write an essay. Words drawn from a thesaurus tend to be poorly chosen and stick out inappropriately in a paper. In order to use a word correctly you need to be familiar with it, which is to say you need to have seen that word in a natural context several times. It should be familiar to you. A word that you have just encountered for the first time is not sufficiently within your grasp to introduce into a written form. Don’t try a new play on game-day; try it in your backyard until you are comfortable with it.

Avoid brackets (“”) wherever possible. Irony is not well-conveyed by the use of a scare-

quote. A new term, if questionable in some way or if under definition, may be placed in brackets when it is first introduced. Afterwards, it should be used without the brackets. Note the use of “jargon” above.

Each paragraph should contain a single idea. The length of a paragraph, in my opinion, is less important. Establish breaks between paragraphs when you move onto a new idea. Obviously, you will have to make exceptions to this when an idea takes a long time to develop. But in general you may think of paragraphs as separate sections within a Powerpoint presentation; each should address a different facet of the argument.

Work hard on your transitions from one paragraph to the next and from one section of the paper to the next. If there are no transitions, then your reader will have difficulty following the narrative.

State your points as concisely as possible and avoid redundancy. The main point of an essay should appear in the introduction, in the conclusion, and – in varying ways – within the body of a paper. This is justifiable redundancy – although each appearance should be phrased somewhat differently. Other points should appear only once in the course of your essay. If you find that a given issue is treated on several occasions, then perhaps you should think about reorganizing the essay to eliminate this redundancy. Another way to deal with this problem is to refer back to earlier points – “as stated above.” This relieves you of the necessity of repeating a point ad nauseum, but allows you to point out something important at several junctures.

## **HONING YOUR PROSE**

Because of its complexities the skill of writing is learned primarily by writing, not by reading about writing. But the act of writing, by itself, is not likely to advance your skills from semester to semester. You also need feedback. You should look closely at the comments you receive from your teachers. Request that they comment on the *form* of your essay, not simply its content. You may also wish to visit counselors at BU’s Educational Resource Center Writing Center (see below).

Be aware that very few writers – even professional writers – get it right the first time. Thus, good writing depends upon *re-writing*. Sometimes it is better to write quickly, in a stream of consciousness, than to slave over each sentence as it reaches consciousness. Editing, in any case, is essential. Careful proofreading can tell you where things work and where they’re not so clear or convincing. Reading the paper aloud to yourself may also alert you to stylistic problems that look innocent enough on the written page but sound awkward or confusing when spoken.

If you can enlist a friend to read the paper, this is often extremely helpful. By the time you have written a paper you are perhaps *too* familiar with the subject matter to be an objective judge of your communication skills. Someone with no knowledge of the topic is in a better position to tell whether you have done a good job of getting your point across. If he or she doesn’t get it, or has to struggle to understand it, then you have done a poor job.

As you proofread, make sure that you are actually addressing your thesis in some way in every paragraph. You may wish to keep a sentence-long copy of your thesis taped to a wall next to you as you write so that you can remind yourself of your argument.

## **USING SOURCES CREATIVELY AND HONESTLY**

Don’t simply repeat another author’s argument; you have to come up with your own.

Stealing an argument is plagiarism to the same extent as stealing exact words. Both may be used, however, with proper attribution. Whenever you take quotations, facts, or ideas -- anything that is not common knowledge -- from a source, you must note the source. Indeed, correct use and acknowledgment of source materials is vital to any research project. Only through accurate documentation can the reader distinguish the writer's original contribution from those of others. This allows the reader (1) to consult the source of a fact or opinion if he or she so desires and (2) to assign credit or blame judiciously (to the writer or the writer's sources).

To repeat, if you use material drawn from something aside from your own first-hand experience, and the material is not common knowledge, give credit to your source. If you quote directly, even a word or phrase, use quotation marks and a citation. If you paraphrase (i.e., take the ideas and put them into your own words), cite your source.

A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself whether a reader who consulted the works listed in your bibliography recognize in your paper sentences, phrases, and even striking words; patterns of organization; interpretations or attitudes or points of view or whole ideas or facts, as deriving from any one of these sources? If the reader could, you must cite those passages. Thus, if you borrow everything in your paper, cite everything in your paper! Once your paper is turned in, the reader has the right to assume that whatever appears in the paper, unless otherwise indicated, is your own work or is common knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, even with appropriate citation, you do not want to take your entire argument from someone else. What you should be taking from your sources are 'bits-and-pieces': a fact here, a point there -- whatever bears upon *your* argument. You will need to refer to multiple sources; otherwise, you can hardly avoid relying excessively on one person's work. Creativity, in this context, means putting together the material presented in the text in a new way in order to answer a question that is at least slightly different from the authors' point of view.

In citing evidence, don't simply cite an author's view that such-and-such is true. Research is not a polling of authors. If four out of five authors say something is true, it still may be false. Of course, it may be helpful to establish what the prevailing wisdom on a topic is. However, in bringing evidence to bear you must be sensitive to whether a particular source is authoritative. An authoritative source is a source that is, for one reason or another, well-suited to weigh in on a given topic -- an eye-witness, an expert, and so forth. For these sources, direct quotations may be appropriate. Note that if a direct quotation exceeds a sentence or two you should set it off in the text in a block quotation.

Even so, such authorities must often be viewed with suspicion. In general, you should avoid avoid quotations, especially long ones. Try to paraphrase instead (put things in your own words). This, of course, still requires a citation.

Note that the purpose of a citation determines what sort of source is most useful, most authoritative. If you are attempting to demonstrate that a certain mood pervades a society, or that a certain event received a great deal of attention, then citing a popular media (newspaper, wide-circulation magazine, best-selling novel, television report) may be the best source. You might also cite an academic study that studied these popular media in a systematic fashion. If, on the other hand, you are trying to demonstrate a non-obvious point

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is adapted from a document entitled "Use of Source Materials," Pomona College Department of Government, Claremont, CA.

about the world – a descriptive, predictive, or causal inference – then an academic source is probably more authoritative than a popular source.

What is an “academic” source? Until you become familiar with the journals (e.g., *American Political Science Review*), the publishing houses (e.g., Cambridge, Oxford), and the academics writing in your field (who often post important material on their own web sites), this will remain somewhat mysterious. However, it is a tip-off if the piece is written in an academic style, in an academic setting (if the source is a journal rather than a newspaper or magazine), and if the author him- or herself is a professor. Anything you find on JSTOR is academic; most of what is available on Lexis/Nexis is not.

Although most sources are in written form, they may also be in the form of personal communication with the author (interviews, discussions, and so forth). This raises a final, but extremely important, point: if you talk with friends and classmates about your paper and this discussion leads to an exchange of ideas (substantive ideas, not just stylistic/organizational ones) you need to cite these sources just as you would a book or article. So, if you got the idea for an argument from Cindy Walker, Cindy Walker should appear in a citation where this argument is presented. Otherwise, you are plagiarizing.

To clarify, I encourage you to discuss your work with others, and to read and give feedback on each others’ rough drafts. But keep track of the exchange of ideas. If we find significant similarities between papers (without proper attribution) we will bring plagiarism charges against you. For a discussion of this process, and of plagiarism, consult Boston University’s Academic Conduct Code [[www.bu.edu/cas/undergraduate/conductcode.html](http://www.bu.edu/cas/undergraduate/conductcode.html)]

How many sources/citations are necessary? This is the oft-repeated question. My oft-repeated response is: it depends. It depends on what it is you are trying to prove, on what sources are out there, and on whether it is possible to cite one or two sources as examples of what is out there. Citations, like pages of text, are not to be judged by their quantity. More is not necessarily better. There are over-referenced papers and under-referenced papers. However, you are more likely to be sanctioned for the latter than for the former. So, if you must err, err on the side of over-referencing.

Note that if you find a well-referenced article or book that reviews the academic literature on a subject it may be sufficient to cite this one source, rather than all the additional sources that are cited therein. You may indicate in your citation that this particular source offers a good review of the literature (for a comprehensive review of the literature see Smith 1989).

## **CITATION FORM**

List the author’s name in parentheses, followed by the year your edition of the work was published, followed by the page number of the quotation or idea you are citing (Thomas 1965: 54). If you are citing a whole book, which is to say an idea or argument that consumes an entire book, then you may omit the pagination (Thomas 1965). Information from several sources may be combined in a single parenthetical note (Thomas 1965; Washington 1945). Within a parenthetical citation, author last names are alphabetized (Thomas comes before Washington). A work with multiple authors should cite each author (Thomas, Wilson, and Crane 1965) unless the number of authors is greater than three, in which case cite only the first author followed by *et al.* (Thomas et al. 1965). Citation drawn from a source without an author (*Economist* 2004: 45). Information obtained from a personal communications should be cited in a footnote and needn’t appear in your bibliography: (E.g., *Footnote*: Arthur

Thomas, personal communication (5/31/65).) When a person has authored several pieces in the same year these may be distinguished by letters (Thomas 1965a, 1965b, 1965c). Very long lists of citations, or extensive substantive comments of a parenthetical nature, should go into footnotes. Do not use endnotes.

At the end of your paper include a bibliography of all works cited, with complete citations, as follows.

*Books:*

Thomas, Arthur. 1965. *The Wandering Eye*. New York: Random House.

*The same author with several works published in the same year:*

Thomas, Arthur. 1965a. *Jokes are Funny*. New York: Farrar Straus.

Thomas, Arthur. 1965b. *Jokes aren't Funny*. New York: Random House.

Thomas, Arthur. 1965c. *Yes They Are*. New York: Farrar Straus.

*Edited books:*

Vanhanen, Tatu (ed). 1992. *Strategies of Democratization*. Washington: Crane Russak.

*Book chapter in edited volume:*

Wilson, Edward. 1992. "The Sage's Revenge." In Tatu Vanhanen (ed), *Strategies of Democratization* (Washington: Crane Russak) 55-66.

*Works with multiple authors:*

Thomas, Arthur, Lee Epstein, Georgia O'Keefe. 1965. *Infinitely Funny*. New York: Farrar Straus.

*Works without authors (collective authorship):*

"Everybody Loves to Laugh." 2004. *The Economist* (August 15) 44-46.

*Translated works:*

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1965. *The Confessions*, trans. Edward Wilson. New York: Farrar Straus.

*Newspaper articles:*

Thomas, Arthur. 1965. "The Wandering Eye." *New York Times* (May 31) 44-55.

*Journal articles:*

Thomas, Arthur. 1965. "The Wandering Eye." *American Political Science Review* 11:1 (June) 44-55. [11 refers to the volume#; 1 refers to the issue#; 44-55 is the pagination.]

*For the web:*

Work that has appeared, or will appear, in printed form (e.g., the New York Times on the web), can be cited as if it were printed material (as above). If there is no printed version, or the printed version has different pagination or is otherwise altered from the web version, construct a bibliographic entry that approximates your entry for books and articles. At the end of the entry, give the exact web address from which you downloaded the material.

## **SUMMARY**

The most important criteria of all expository prose may be summarized in the following three questions: 1) Is there a thesis (an argument)? 2) Is the thesis significant? 3) Is the thesis adequately argued or proven (within the constraints posed by time, resources, and sources)? 4) Is the essay well-organized, clear, and grammatically-correct? Flaws in one of these categories may be compensated by virtues in others, but generally speaking an essay must satisfy all four in order to fall into the 'A' range.

## **WHY YOU SHOULD SPEND YOUR PRECIOUS TIME WRITING, RE-WRITING,...**

In the context of a particular class, you are likely to feel the importance of learning its particular subject matter (Congress, the judicial system, political parties,...). However, it is the skills that you acquire in college, not the particular bits of knowledge, that will serve you best in later life, regardless of the career path you embark upon. In fact, the current educational division of labor assumes that almost all of the special knowledge that you need to practice a trade will be learned in post-graduate work or in on-the-job training. What you should be worrying about in college, odd as it may sound, is learning basic skills.

Writing is the most important basic skill that the social sciences and humanities impart, and the basic skill upon which the liberal professions (law, medicine, academics) and business still depend. Getting good grades at Boston University, getting into the graduate or professional school of your choice, and succeeding in that line of work will rest, in part, on your ability to put your thoughts on paper clearly and persuasively.

While Freshman English classes give you a start on the road to good writing, they don't do much more than that. Writing must be practiced continually, or the skill atrophies. (A recent study of college writing showed that the best writing was produced by Freshmen and Sophomores -- those who had most recently taken English classes.) All of this is by way of saying that it is in your interest to pay attention to writing as a craft, and to practice that craft whenever possible.

But whatever its career potential, good writing is also inherently rewarding. The reward involved in good writing is not the same as that experienced in the free-flow of class discussion, or in the expression of personal taste. It is not, in this sense, immediately gratifying. It is creativity channeled in a highly disciplined form -- your opportunity to explore a question in a focused and systematic fashion.

## RESOURCES

### BOOKS

- Becker, Howard S. 1986. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [written for graduate-level students]
- Booth, Wayne C. et al. 1995. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crews, Frederick. [various years] *The Random House Handbook*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lunsford, Andrea and Robert Connors. [various years] *Easy Writer: A Pocket Guide*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Strunk, William, Jr., and E.B. White. [various years] *The Elements of Style*. [Also on-line at Bartleby.com]

### WEB SITES

- Harvard Writing Center: [fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/html/tools.htm](http://fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/html/tools.htm)
- Bartleby.com (various resources)
- Dictionary.com* (on-line dictionary and thesaurus)
- WorldHistory.com*: [www.worldhistory.com/](http://www.worldhistory.com/)
- Google Scholar*: [http://scholar.google.com/advanced\\_scholar\\_search](http://scholar.google.com/advanced_scholar_search). Supposedly limited to scholarly works. I don't know what their decision-rule is, so you should not take it for granted that if a source is included it is "scholarly." But it seems like they have a good selection and wide coverage.

### BU LIBRARY RESOURCES

Web catalogue: <http://library.bu.edu/search/d>

If you type in “political science”, you get 276 subject areas (e.g. “[Political Science -- History -- 20th Century](#)”) and 91 related subjects, oftentimes each one will have as much as a thousand entries. Being more specific will be more useful for you. It can be useful to browse around through these kinds of entries.

General library guides: <http://www.bu.edu/library/>

Indexes and databases: <http://www.bu.edu/library/research/indexes.html>

Research guides: <http://www.bu.edu/library/guides/index.html>

Political science sources: <http://www.bu.edu/library/guides/polsciweb/index.html>

*A Dictionary of Contemporary World History*

*A Dictionary of Geography*

*A Dictionary of Political Biography*

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*

*A Dictionary of Psychology*

*Dictionary of the Social Sciences*

*A Dictionary of Sociology*

*The Oxford Guide to the United States Government*

*Encyclopedia Britannica*: [www.bu.edu/resources/#computing](http://www.bu.edu/resources/#computing)

*Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*: [www.bu.edu/resources/#computing](http://www.bu.edu/resources/#computing)

If you want to find out whether a particular article or journal is available through BU’s e-journal collection, go to [www.bu.edu/library/eresources/election.html](http://www.bu.edu/library/eresources/election.html). Choose *Charles River Campus* (or one of the other links) and then type in the name of the journal. You will find out which issues of that journal – if any – are available in full-text format. The largest collection is called JSTOR, but this usually doesn’t include the most recent issues of a journal.

Keep in mind that the most useful source in looking for sources is often to be found the bibliography of the book or article *that you have already found*. One book or article leads to another. Make it a practice to skim bibliographies for additional sources. (This is particularly helpful if the source is recent and well-documented.)

For help in locating sources your final resource is the reference librarian. At Mugar call 353-3704 or email. If they don’t know how to find something then you may conclude that it is, for all intents and purposes, impossible to find.

## THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER AT BU

*From the ERC’s web site (<http://www.bu.edu/erc/services/index.html>):*

*Peer Tutoring* is available to complement students' classroom experiences, as well as to provide insight into becoming successful and organized learners. *LanguageLink* conversation groups facilitate practice of foreign language skills with native speaking leaders. *Freshman Resource Advisors (FRAs)* provide peer support to College of Arts and Sciences students throughout their first year at the University to enhance their integration into the University and Boston communities. Learn how to maximize your academic performance with ERC Workshops on topics such as study and writing skills, time management, and test-taking strategies.

At the ERC's *Writing Center* graduate Writing Fellows assist students individually with the process of writing, from brainstorming and getting past writer's block to organizing thesis papers, developing a topic, improving clarity, structure, and other stylistic issues. *Writing Fellows* are available for individual sessions of 40 minutes per session. Three sessions per week are allowed with a maximum of twelve sessions per semester. To schedule an appointment, please call 617-353-7077 or stop by our office.