

WRITING WORKSHOP BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to Writing SOCIAL THEORY

Introduction

Critical theory is a method of analysis that spans over many academic disciplines. Here at Wesleyan, we find ourselves with an array of courses that explore a variety of theoretical texts. The Certificate in Social, Cultural, & Critical Theory can attest to this, boasting an extensive list of courses hailing from over fifteen departments. Theory is important, and we study it because it helps explain our world and our realities. Given its pervasive nature, you are likely to encounter it at some point in your college career (math and science people, you are not exempt—string theory! Number theory! Evolutionary theory! Relativity theory! Quantum theory!) and be asked to write about it.

The key to writing about theory is to read and fully understand the argument that the theorist in question is making. Prose, on the other hand, is not only more accessible, but also doesn't necessarily require you to understand the author's intent. Reading a theoretical work can be just as challenging as writing about it, and it is essential, of course, to read the theory you are attempting to discuss. Many of us have never encountered classic theory before college, and at first tackling these works may be daunting. The mastery with which scholars such as Marx or Freud or Locke write is certainly intimidating; they seem to transcend the bounds of pedantic "academese" writing that we as students so often fall into. This guide will provide tips on how to parse through dense theory, particularly sociological theory, and how to approach writing a theoretical paper.

Reading Theory

Consider the well-known, classical text by Emile Durkheim: *Suicide*. It was the first book that studied a social fact in a societal context. It was written in 1897, and in French; for a college student living in the United States in the twenty-first century, the context in which *Suicide* was written is probably not the most relatable. This brings us to one of the first major things we should be asking when beginning to read: **what is the context of this work?** The following questions are important to keep in mind and think about before and after reading:

- **What is the historical context of the work?** Where was the theorist living at the time? What was the current political climate?
- **What is the purpose of the work?** What is the author or theorist trying to prove or accomplish? What is the author's reason for publishing?
- **How is the work organized?** Can you identify a structure or any patterns? Is it broken up into chapters or parts?
- **What are the author's assumptions?** Most theories begin by assuming facts—what are these facts?
- **How does this piece relate to other works you have read in the class?** Comparing this work to other works may elucidate more meaning.

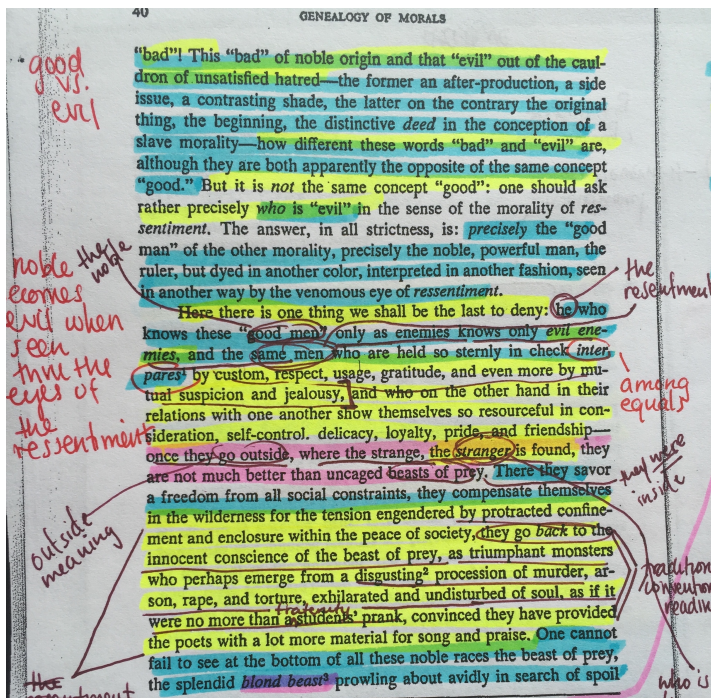


Active Reading

Reading on a computer or your laptop may seem more convenient and environmentally efficient—some of the texts you are likely to read are very lengthy—but using a hands-on approach is very helpful. In my social theory class, **Prof. Jonathan Cutler advised us not to hold back in marking up our pages** in order to track the progression of the work. We should try to map the text and follow its progression. Here are some things to highlight:

- **Patterns, common words, repetitions of structure, loops** back to earlier notions.
- Any **splits or opposing concepts**. Social theory often explores a dichotomy—the private and the public for example, or the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.
- **Specific terminology** necessary to understand the text: Durkheim’s “anomie,” Debord’s “spectacle,” Arendt’s “polis” – color code different words and concepts, and keep track of where they appear throughout the text.
- Note when words like “but” and “although” appear, as they imply **tension and counterargument**.

It’s okay to be confused the first few times you read something through. A lot of theoretical texts, not only in sociology but also in other disciplines, sometimes feel like they were intentionally written esoterically. A good amount of sociologists and theorists that make up the classical canon are not American; these works have been translated into English from French or German and don’t read like contemporary prose.



In Hannah Arendt’s *Human Condition*, I distinguished between the “public” and the “private” realms, which inform the rest of this section of the piece and can be mapped on to other binaries such as the “polis” and the “household.”

In this excerpt of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I identified two opposing forces: good and evil. Another binary that appears is “inside” vs. “outside.” I then tried to identify recurring terms, such as “evil enemies,” “inter pares,” “resentment,” “the stranger,” etc. It can also be helpful to make note of pronouns and subjects to make sure you know who the actors and receivers are that the writer is discussing.

society. The distinction between private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state. Social realm disrupts the separate spheres of the polis and the sphere of household and family, and finally, between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life, a division upon which all ancient political thought rested as self-evident and axiomatic. In our understanding, the dividing line is entirely blurred, because we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping. The scientific thought that corresponds to this development is no longer political science but “national economy” or “social economy” or Volkswirtschaft, all of which indicate a kind of collective house-

Writing About

Now that you (sort of) understand the text, you need to figure out how to go about writing your paper. There are a few common types of theory papers that your professor might assign:

Evaluating or critiquing an argument or theory.

You might be discussing, evaluating, and/or critiquing the literature as it pertains to a specific topic, or exploring a question through the lens of a theory.

- Identify strengths and weaknesses of the argument or theory
- Discuss what is important rather than extrapolating on small details
- Be sure to separate the theorists' opinion from your own if you are not being asked for your own opinion.
- Anticipate counterargument.
- Consider that if you see an obvious flaw in the argument, the author may have purposely omitted it—try to figure out why.

Application of a theory. Here, you might be asked to actively test a theory in the real world, or simply apply your knowledge of the theory to actual social phenomena. An example of a question from Professor Rob Rosenthal's Introductory Sociology class that falls under this category: "Using sociological theories and processes discussed in class and readings, explain the process that led to you becoming a student at Wesleyan."

- Clearly state the theory and its basis.
- Choose an appropriate phenomenon or case to apply the theory to; it shouldn't be too similar to the case the original theory was based on because that will be reinventing the wheel, but also not so far-fetched that you will be jumping through hoops to prove its application.
- Strong analysis is important; the better your analogy is, the better the paper will be.

RESEARCH PAPERS

Research papers often follow a standard structure, with critical review of the literature as the grounds for your research question. Your question will likely take form of a hypothesis or an application of something.

More Resources for Writing and Formatting Research Papers:

- ❖ Purdue OWL's guidelines for formatting in sociology using ASA Style
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/583/01/>
- ❖ A guide to writing research theses in sociology from Princeton University
http://sociology.princeton.edu/files/undergraduate/soc_ug_writing_guide.pdf
- ❖ Trinity College's guide to writing research papers across all disciplines, but hones in on theoretical and social science papers
<http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/research.html>

What TO Do

- **Explain the theory.** Before you critique a theory, you need to “discover” it, and bring it into being in the context of your paper. Establish its context and purpose, and delineate its main argument. Consider the questions you asked yourself while reading.

One way this can be done is to define the theory using an aside:

Marx’s theory of dialectical materialism—the notion that our ideas are a reflection of society’s events—characterizes his approach to societal change.

- **Define terminology.** Even though your professor knows the terminology being used by the author of the text you are analyzing, it is important to introduce these terms and bring them from the theorist’s world to our own.

The idea that catalyzes and gives way to the core of Heidegger’s argument is “enframing.” Enframing is the force that causes man to “challenge forth”—to exploit nature, in this case using technology, for mass production.

- **Use the active voice.** Not only is it more interesting, but using the passive voice also seems inherently not sociological, as it eliminates a main actor of the situation.

It has been suggested by Charon through a variety of perspectives that humans do not have the free will they think they have.

Might turn into...

Charon suggests, through a variety of perspectives, that humans do not have the free will they think they have.

- **Trim the fat.** Theoretical texts are complicated enough. There is no need to use flourishes and overdone language when it isn’t natural. Clear and concise language is the way to go.

American society is constructed by a complex and powerful hierarchical framework

Might turn into...

American society has a strong hierarchy.

A good thesis statement:

- Tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- Is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper
- Directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. It must offer a way to understand the subject.
- Makes a claim that others might dispute.
- Is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

What NOT TO Do

- **Don't just repeat the theorists' argument.** This will only prove that you can use the theorists' vocabulary. You need to explain *why* the author is claiming what they are claiming; try to justify their theory rather than simply stating it.

In Weber's view, the most important characteristic of society is its bureaucracy: states that adopt bureaucracy would advance beyond those that do not because bureaucracies function efficiently due to the principles of hierarchy.

This example has two parts; it tells us what Weber's idea is, and then proceeds to explain the idea's importance.

- **Don't make grand statements about society.**

"Modern society is a subject of relentless criticism. Georg Lukacs, Guy DeBord, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt grapple with society's flaws through their own unique lens, but in comparing the four critics, similarities in thought can be drawn."

This paragraph opener is just as strong, if not stronger, without that first sentence.

- **Avoid over-celebrating the theorist.**

Karl Marx, the lauded and exemplary thinker, illustrates the world's transformation into capitalist society in his quintessential *Capital*.

Telling your reader that Marx is lauded and exemplary does nothing for this sentence; you can pretty much assume that they, in most cases your professor, know that Marx is one of the most famous theorists in history.

COMMON FLAWED ARGUMENTS

The first thing to remember in writing a sociological argument is to be as clear as possible in stating your thesis. Of course, that is true in all papers, but there are a couple of pitfalls common to sociology that you should be aware of and avoid at all cost. Three types of flawed arguments are particularly common: the "individual argument," the "human nature argument," and the "society argument."

- The "**individual argument**" generally takes this form: "The individual is free to make choices, and any outcomes can be explained exclusively through the study of his or her ideas and decisions." While it is of course true that we all make our own choices, we must also keep in mind that, to paraphrase Marx, we make these choices under circumstances given to us by the structures of society. Therefore, it is important to investigate what conditions made these choices possible in the first place, as well as what allows some individuals to successfully act on their choices while others cannot.
- The "**human nature argument**" seeks to explain social behavior through a quasi-biological argument about humans, and often takes a form such as: "Humans are by nature X, therefore it is not surprising that Y." While sociologists disagree over whether a universal human nature even exists, they all agree that it is not an acceptable basis of explanation. Instead, sociology demands that you question why we call some behavior natural, and to look into the social factors which have constructed this "natural" state.
- The "**society argument**" often arises in response to critiques of the above styles of argumentation, and tends to appear in a form such as: "Society made me do it." Students often think that this is a good sociological argument, since it uses society as the basis for explanation. However, the problem is that the use of the broad concept "society" masks the real workings of the situation, making it next to impossible to build a strong case. This is an example of reification, which is when we turn processes into things. Society is really a process, made up of ongoing interactions at multiple levels of size and complexity, and to turn it into a monolithic thing is to lose all that complexity. People make decisions and choices. Some groups and individuals benefit, while others do not.

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