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5 Ways to Motivate Your Students About Writing and Speaking Assignments

The way your students feel about writing and public speaking will shape the quality of their work and their ability to improve. Some students may find writing easy, while others can face fears that limit their learning process. By creating an environment conducive to learning, making the class topic interesting and relatable, and being clear about expectations, you can help your students improve in their writing and public speaking abilities. During this session, we will go through the different steps of the writing process, preparing for public speaking, and grading to share tools for use in your classroom. This session will give you concrete advice that can encourage your students to put their best effort into their assignments.

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- 1. Setting the stage: discuss writing challenges and work habits**
- 2. Encourage connections with personal interests and experience**
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- 5. Be clear about expectations and feedback**

Main takeaways on how to motivate students about writing and speaking assignments:

1. Setting the stage: help students with writing challenges and work habits

Good writing and public speaking, like many other activities (playing an instrument, driving, etc.) can be learned through practice and identifying key skills. Discussing techniques that make writing and public speaking easier, while encouraging students to use them as they see fit, can be useful to address common challenges. The following are examples of questions I pose at the beginning of the class for students to discuss in pairs and then share with the rest of the class:

What are good techniques to avoid procrastination?

What steps do you follow to write a paper? Have you found strategies that make it easier?

What are things to avoid in public speaking? Follow up question after listing them on the board:
What are ways to avoid these issues?

What do you do when you're writing a paper and get "stucked"?

I use these questions, as well as more fun ones (e.g. If you could learn one skill in an instant, what would it be?) to start the class to get the conversation going and to make the discussion of course content more fluid. What are other questions you could pose at the beginning of your class?

2. Encourage connections with personal interests and experience

While different courses allow different levels of freedom to choose a research topic, here are several approaches you can use, depending on the structure of your class:

- If your students get to choose a topic for their research paper:
 - Have them fill out a concept map about their interests.

What about current society excites you?

- 1.
- 2.

What about current society concerns you?

- 1.
- 2.

What about people fascinates you?

- 1.
- 2.

What are your academic interests?

- 1.
- 2.

Given your responses,
What about human society would you most like to understand?

What historical phenomenon do you find most interesting?

- 1.
- 2.

What topics do you most enjoy reading about?

- 1.
- 2.

What topics do you most enjoy talking about?

- 1.
- 2.

What are you most passionate about?

- 1.
- 2.

- Walk students through how to study topics they are interested on, through the lenses of your discipline. Discuss what are the characteristics of the discipline/field and present examples of topics that would fit the assignment.
- Discuss news pieces or current events in relation to class topics.
- Encourage students to make short presentations (for participation points or for speaking assignments) on something that connects them with the natural/social/literary (or whatever is the focus of your class) world.

3. Show that you care about your students

- Make accommodations: For most students, showing interest, empathy and respect is enough to let them know you care. However, there are often a few students struggling with deadlines, attendance, etc. I have found really useful to reach out to them by email or at the end or beginning of the class to ask how they are doing and how can I help. I usually make the necessary accommodations, such as extending deadlines, walking them through the online submission process, etc.
- Give a list of outlets where they can publish their work and encourage students to submit their writing. Here is part of a handout I give my students:

Publish Your Research!

Take advantage of opportunities to present and publish your research projects at conferences, symposiums and other venues. There are student paper competitions in tons of hidden places at universities and through online channels. You could be recognized for your hard work and maybe win additional rewards.

UW Resources

- Holtz Center Undergraduate Paper Competition (*Deadline @ April*)
- Alpha Kappa Delta, Sociology Honors Society Paper Competition (*Deadline @ March*)
- Undergraduate Research Symposium (*Spring Semester*)
- Archive: A Journal of Undergraduate History
- Illumination: The Undergraduate Journal of Humanities
- Journal of Undergraduate International Studies

External Opportunities

- Wisconsin Sociological Association Paper Competition (*Deadline @ September*)
- Critical Theory and Social Justice Journal of Undergraduate Research (Occidental College)
- Eleven (University of California, Berkeley)
- Habitus (Yale University)
- Journal of Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Excellence (Colorado State University)

What are other ways to show students you care about them?

4. Structure assignments in an effective way

- *Locally Sourced* has valuable guidelines about how to design assignments in an effective way. Two particularly useful ones are:
 - *Sequencing Assignments Over the Course of a Semester*, p. 11
 - *The Anatomy of a Well-Designed Writing Assignment*, p. 46

- For more examples, see the attached overview of assignments and the guidelines for short writing assignments in Survey of Sociology.

5. Be clear about expectations and feedback

- Discuss rubric in class

- Give examples of successful work (ask if there is a folder with examples in your department or request them from previous TAs). I bring an example to class and have them grade it with the assignment rubric. Then, we go through the paper and make notes of what should improve, according to the rubric, to make sure the students and myself are on the same page about grading expectations.

- Recognize and compliment improvements. See attached feedback example.

- Plan grading in advance and, as much as possible, avoid grading when you are feeling really tired

- Make sure your students understand your feedback. If there's time, you can have them bring a graded assignment to class, discuss with a classmate what they can improve and make a plan to make improvements for the following assignment. As always when the class is working in groups, I go around talking to each group to clarify questions. I also encourage students to bring questions after class or during office hours.

- When you find issues common to different students, do an in-class writing exercise to address them.

Motivation in practice: Challenging Scenarios

1. Kaan missed the deadline for the first writing assignment. When you reach out to him, he tells you he was not able to complete the assignment because he doesn't know how to do it. He tried to start writing several times, but it made him anxious and could not get himself to start writing. He says he will likely drop the class because he is not good at writing. What would you do to help Kaan approach his writing assignments differently?

2. Jordan does not participate in discussions, is frequently late to class and seems always bored. At the end of one class, you approach her to ask how she feels in the class, and she tells you that the class is ok, but her major is very different from this course, and although she needs to fulfill the Comm-B requirement, she does not think this class will be helpful for her. What can you do to motivate Jordan about the course?

3. You are grading the third writing assignment of the semester. You have provided extensive feedback on the first two assignments, and you realize most of your students have not incorporated your suggestions for improvement. How can you encourage them to take your feedback into account and incorporate suggestions into their future assignments?

4. Tina is frustrated about her grade for the first writing assignment of the semester. She came to your office and wants you to tell her what to do to get an A. How do you direct her to identify strategies to improve her writing?

Overview of Assignments in Sociology 210: Survey of Sociology

In Survey of Sociology we use two of the suggested approaches from "Sequencing Assignments Over the Course of a Semester", in *Locally Sourced*, p. 11: the iterative pattern for short writing assignments, and the divide and conquer approach for the research paper.

1. Short Writing Assignments (20%) (four assignments, 5% each)

You will write four short writing assignments in which you look critically at certain readings assigned for the course. The most important aspect that will be evaluated about your responses is that you make a coherent and convincing argument. You can choose the readings you analyze in each assignment from those assigned for the lectures before each deadline (and that you have not analyzed in previous short writing assignments). Some readings may be excluded, and I will let you know about them during the second week of classes.

2. Research Project and Peer Review (33%)

The research project should present an informed argument about a sociological problem that you choose to study. The paper should be relevant to at least one of the weekly themes of this course. The project will entail the following components. I will provide more specific details on assignments as the semester progresses.

Topic statement (1%): The first step for your research project is to define a topic. The statement should specify: (i) the broad area of study (e.g. "race and ethnicity", "sociology of religion"), (ii) a more specified topic within that area (e.g. "school segregation", "Christian fundamentalism"), (iii) what about this topic is interesting to you and why (1-2 sentences), and (iv) the related research question you plan to study (e.g. "What influences students' decisions to binge drink on the UW campus?").

Annotated bibliography (3%): The annotated bibliography summarizes the key points of the source *in your own words*, as if you are making notes of the literature for your personal reference. Your annotated bibliography should follow the ASA style guide. Using each of your sources (you should have at least 5), address the following questions:

1. What is the main point/idea of this piece?
2. How is this source relevant to your paper?

Outline (4%): An outline is a skeleton in which you briefly present each point and sub-point, and then fill in the evidence. It should include a brief statement of each main idea you will use to develop your argument, and an indication of the evidence you will use to support that point. Your evidence will consist of the research findings you identify in reviewing the literature on your question and should include citations.

First draft (12%): Your first draft is a first serious, (almost) full-length attempt to write your paper. Remember that in your paper you will make an *informed* argument about the sociological problem you choose to study. And it should be persuasive with logical reasoning and empirical evidence. The *analysis* needs to illustrate your sociological appreciation for the complexity of the social issue at hand. This requires you a) take other theories seriously and b) consider all evidence available, even when they challenge your argument. Your paper should be between eight and ten pages, (not including the cover page or references—which are each separate pages), and include at least eight

relevant, peer-reviewed, well-chosen ASA cited sources (your final paper will require ten sources minimum).

Peer review (2%): There will be a peer review draft workshop day in class (tentatively, November 15). You must bring a paper copy of your draft to class and participate in reviewing the paper of one of your classmates (1%). You must also be present for and submit peer reviews for oral exercises (1%).

Final draft (11%): Once you have a first draft and the feedback from a classmate and your TA, the challenge is to fill the gaps in the argument that your draft may still have, and to be willing to revise and edit (that may include re-reading, erasing, revising the structure and rephrasing substantial parts of your paper).

Two Oral Presentations (10%)

a. Research Project Proposal (5%)

You will have five minutes to present to the class your research proposal that includes research using *at least two sociology sources*. In your presentation, you must include a research question, thesis statement, list of researched sources and in-depth analysis of at least two of them (thesis, methods, conclusion), reason for selecting your topic, and further questions you have about the topic. Your peers will write feedback after your presentation that I will discuss with you during a one-on-one conference.

b. Research Project (5%)

You will have five minutes to present your research project. In your presentation you should include a research question, a thesis statement, the sociological perspectives you are relying on to support your statement, arguments supporting the thesis and conclusions. Some guiding questions are: Why is this topic relevant? How have you answered your research question? How do you plan to make your argument? What are the implications (e.g. contribution, questions for future research) of your argument?

Deadlines and important dates from Fall 2017

Assignment	Due Date
Writing assignment 1	29-Sep
Topic Statement	6-Oct
Writing assignment 2	13-Oct
First oral presentation	11, 18-Oct
Annotated bibliography and outline	20-Oct
Midterm Test	26-Oct
Conference week (no section)	30-Oct, 1-Nov
Writing assignment 3	10-Nov
First Research Project Draft	17-Nov
Peer-review	24-Nov
Writing assignment 4	1-Dec
Second oral presentation	4, 6-Dec
Final Test	12-Dec
Final Research Project Draft	15-Dec

Short Writing Assignments

Sociology 210 — Spring 2017

Overview: You will have five opportunities to submit short writings assignments. Only the highest four scores will count towards your final grade. In each short writing assignment, you will look critically at certain readings assigned for the course. The most important aspect that will be evaluated about your responses is that you make a coherent and convincing argument. You can choose the readings you analyze in each assignment from those assigned for the lectures before each deadline (and that you have not analyzed in previous short writing assignments). Some readings may be excluded, and your TA will let you know about them during the second week of classes.

Goals: The purpose of these assignments is to help you make progress in achieving these goals:

- *Critically Evaluate Published Research.* Sociology graduates will be able to read and evaluate published research as it appears in academic journals and popular or policy publications.
- *Communicate Skillfully:* Sociology majors write papers that build arguments and assess evidence in a clear and effective manner.

Guidelines:

- Length: 2-3 double-spaced pages, or 500-750 words, not including the bibliography.
- The reading responses must be in essay form. This means they must have a thesis statement, be organized into coherent paragraphs, and be structured around your analyses of the readings. They should begin with an introduction and end with a conclusion.
- The intended audience for your text is any other undergraduate student, who has not necessarily taken a sociology class. Keep this in mind and explain concepts clearly.
- *Citations are required.* This will give you practice using citations for your Research Papers. Use parenthetical citations (author's last name plus year of publication) within the text of your response paper and include a brief bibliography at the end. See the ASA style guide for more detail on how to do this correctly.
- *Proof read* (i.e. print out a draft and read it over carefully) your papers for spelling, grammar, and organization.

Guide to Critical Reading: Keep these questions in mind as you complete the readings for this course as they will help you contribute to discussion sections, and write your reading response.

- What is the thesis/argument of the reading?
- How does the author support their argument?
- What sociological concepts and type of analysis does the author engage? (macro vs. micro level, ethnographic, statistical, or historical, for example)?
- What types of sources, reasons or evidence does these author use?
- What conclusions does the author make?

Model Approaches

The following models represent suggestions about ways to structure your short writing assignments. You can choose other approaches, in which case you should discuss the structure of your assignment with your TA in advance of the submission deadline.

Model 1, Critique: Focus on *one* of the readings for this week to address the following questions:

- What are limitations of the author's argument that undermine the persuasiveness of their claims? What gaps exist between the claims and the evidence provided to support those claims? In other words, are there points at which the *internal logic* of the argument does not hold together?
- In light of these limitations and consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the reading, how could the argument be reformulated to address these gaps?

Model 2, Apply: Using *at least one* reading from the week:

- Find a newspaper article (from a reputable source) that is relevant to concepts or theories from the reading. How can the application of these ideas to the article improve our understanding of the content? Alternatively, how does the article suggest ways to expand, limit, or alter the conceptual framework from the reading?

Model 3, Contrast: Incorporating *multiple* readings:

- How do these readings, in combination, expand our understanding of a particular topic or perspective? At what points do they connect and at what points do they diverge? How can contradictions between the readings be understood and resolved?

Short Writing Assignment Grading Rubric

Sociology 210 – Spring 2018

CRITERIA	NOTES	POINTS
<p>STRUCTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening paragraph clearly introduces paper topic and includes thesis statement • Thesis statement is clear and concisely previews the paper’s body (in one sentence) • Each body paragraph is focused around one specific idea that supports the thesis statement • Paragraphs use topic sentences to keep the paper organized • Conclusion summarizes main ideas of paper in an original way and provides some additional insight into the significance of the thesis 		(20 points)
<p>ANALYSIS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates an in-depth understanding of sociological concepts/theories • Assertions are fully explained and well supported with examples from the text(s) • Quotations from text are interpreted accurately and used appropriately • Strong logic and reasoning; no gaps between argument and supporting evidence 		(45 points)
<p>STYLE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paragraphs flow well together; uses transition language • Writing is academic (third person, except for personal examples), clear, and concise • Little redundancy; deliberate and diverse word choice • Largely free of grammar, spelling, or mechanical errors—strong proofreading • Follows assignment format (page numbers, double-spaced, 12 pt font, etc.) • Proper citations and bibliography in ASA Style 		(20 points)
<p>ORIGINALITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates a sociological imagination • Creative or authentic approach to subject matter 		(15 points)

TOTAL (out of 100)		/ 100
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General Comments: