

Sociological Reading and Composition: Imagining Otherwise

Wednesday, 10am-12pm, Hearst Gym 245

Instructor: Kirstin Krusell (she/her)
kirstin_krusell@berkeley.edu

Instructor of Record: Professor Kim Voss
kimvoss@berkeley.edu

Office Hours: Tuesdays 10-11am and Thursdays 2-3pm

Sign up here: https://calendly.com/kirstin_krusell-berkeley/r1b-office-hours

Course Goals

Sociology R1B fulfills the second half of the university's Reading and Composition (R&C) requirement. Building on the skills you learned in R1A, we will work together to cultivate a practice of *analytical reading and writing*.

Our goal is to move from understanding and analyzing the arguments and evidence of others to formulating and expressing ideas of our own. This analytical approach differs in important ways from everyday modes of skimming, scrolling, and communicating. Analytical reading means reading closely and critically. This is what allows us to access and appraise the ideas and evidence of others. In turn, it is through analytical writing that we work out our own ideas and present them in a compelling and credible way. Together, they are essential tools for *thinking and being in conversation* with others.

This course specifically challenges you to apply the tools of analytical reading and writing in order to exercise your *sociological imaginations*...

Course Overview

Today there is a widely shared feeling that we are living through a time of unprecedented uncertainty and existential risk—from pandemics to climate chaos, armed conflict and rising authoritarianism, to the specter of artificial intelligence. These conditions are in some ways novel. But the *feeling* is not. Indeed, it was in 1959 that C. Wright Mills described an intellectual tool for navigating the disorientation of rapid change—the *sociological imagination*.

Sociology, according to Mills, helps us to understand how our personal lives are shaped by social forces—to trace the connections between “biography” and “history.” For example, if you are unemployed, you may feel that it is a personal failure—you didn’t get the right degree, you’re not charismatic enough, you don’t know the right people. But by firing up

our sociological imaginations, we can excavate the social origins of (un)employment trends—from technological change to biased hiring practices to declining union membership.

The sociological imagination allows us to see the present moment as a product of *social choices* made by individuals and groups, and in turn how circumstances might be *otherwise*.

This presents the opportunity for a second act of imagination: visualizing and scaffolding alternative, more liberatory social arrangements. This is what the late sociologist Erik Olin Wright called “envisioning real utopias.” His writing emphasized that through individual and collective action we have the capacity to imagine and create better ways of organizing society—sometimes incrementally, other times radically. For example, when we understand mistreatment at our jobs through the history of capitalist social relations, we can begin to envision other ways of organizing work and allocating resources—like co-ops or universal basic income, to name just two.

Together we will use the tools of analytical reading and writing to (1) develop our sociological imaginations—using evidence to articulate how individual lives and social structures interact, and (2) “imagine otherwise” by proposing alternatives. These are the two intellectual moves we are aiming to make this semester.

We will begin the semester by strengthening our ability to navigate, comprehend, and analyze texts—some dense and difficult, others more straightforward. We will engage with these texts through weekly memos that ask you to practice a particular reading or writing technique. The memos, along with in-class writing exercises and peer review, will help us build the skills necessary to successfully complete the final project—a research paper on a topic of your choice.

Course Format

This course is a writing-intensive *workshop*, which is likely different from previous lecture-based courses you’ve taken. We’ll start each two-hour session by discussing as a group the specific techniques and skills covered in that week’s readings (e.g., when to quote vs paraphrase). Then we’ll transition to workshop time, in which students will *apply* those approaches and skills through a writing or revising activity.

We will frequently be sharing and reworking our ideas and drafts together through *peer feedback and revision activities*. It can feel awkward to share work-in-progress, and to give and receive constructive criticism. But since the purpose of analytical writing is to communicate ideas clearly and persuasively, it is essential to practice in community with others. This approach will also help to make the final project manageable and ensure that we have ample opportunity to learn from our mistakes.

We all come to academic writing with a different set of experiences, skills, and feelings. I hope that through lots of practice with low stakes writing assignments, we can alleviate any anxieties you might have, so that you are able to fully enjoy the satisfaction of writing convincingly about topics that animate your curiosity and creativity.

Assignments

Weekly reading assignments

Each week you will read a selection of texts chosen to help us practice a specific skill related to reading or writing. Most weeks we will read a chapter or two from a writing manual called *They Say, I Say*, along with one to three excerpts from sociological texts. These might include writings on social theory, empirical (i.e., evidence-based) research, as well as journalism or literature that exemplifies sociological thinking. Together, the readings I've chosen exhibit the two intellectual moves I'd like you to make in this class: exercising your sociological imagination and imagining otherwise.

I have tried to keep the quantity of reading to a minimum, so that we can dive deeply into the excerpts with the aim of practicing specific skills. As such, I expect that you will have completed all the week's readings **prior to class on Wednesday**.

Where to find the readings? I know that books can be expensive, so all readings will be available as PDFs in the "Files" section of bCourses. However, I do recommend that you purchase the following volume (6th edition). When you purchase a new physical copy, it comes with a unique code to access an ebook version from the publisher AND a free ebook of *The Little Seagull Handbook*, a grammar reference book. This is a better deal than the Kindle version.

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. (2024). *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (6th ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Weekly writing assignments

Each week you will turn in a piece of writing, some of which you will then revise during class time. These assignments fall into two categories.

- Memos in which you will demonstrate a reading- or writing-related skill (e.g., summarizing a dense theoretical text). Memos should be approximately 500 words (roughly one single-spaced page) and are **due the Tuesday before class at 5pm**. This gives me time to read them before class. I consider these memos to be low stakes opportunities to experiment, make mistakes, and challenge yourselves. Therefore, you will receive full credit for memos submitted on time that exhibit a good-faith effort to meet the requirements of the assignment. The point of these assignments is practice, not perfection.

- Component parts of your research paper. Some weeks there will be no memo, and instead you will turn in a draft component of your final research paper. These include a proposal, annotated bibliography, preliminary literature review, first draft, and revision summaries. More information about each stage will be provided as we move through the semester, including a grading rubric.

Final research paper

All of your work in this course will culminate in an 8–10-page research paper on a topic of your choice, due on **Wednesday, May 14**. This assignment is designed to help you exhibit your sociological imagination, showcase your personal voice, and demonstrate your ability to synthesize multiple sources and defend an argument. Since we will be working on the component parts of the paper throughout the semester, your task during exam week will be revising an already solid draft (not starting from scratch!). More information will follow.

Unless otherwise indicated, all assignments will be uploaded to bCourses for evaluation.

Expectations and Policies

Correspondence

I strongly prefer that you contact me through email and NOT through bCourses. I generally respond to emails within 12-24 hours. However, I try very hard not to check my email over the weekend, *so please plan accordingly*. Please format your subject line as follows: “R1B: Reason for emailing.”

Email should mostly be used for simple clarifying questions and logistical issues. For substantive questions about the readings or to get feedback on your writing, it is better to schedule office hours with me (see below).

Office hours

If you would like to schedule office hours to get feedback on your writing or to discuss anything related to the course, I am available via Zoom on Tuesdays 10-11am and Thursdays 2-3pm. If these times don't work, email me and we'll find a mutually convenient time. Sign up for a 15-minute time slot here: https://calendly.com/kirstin_krusell-berkeley/r1b-office-hours

If at any point you start falling behind in the class, office hours are an ideal place to make a plan to keep you on track. I strongly encourage you to utilize this resource, rather than suffering in silence. I want you to succeed, and communication is key!

Attendance

I expect you to arrive on time (no later than 10:10am), fully prepared to contribute meaningfully to our conversations and activities.

Excused absences: Life happens. If you are ill or have an emergency that makes your attendance impossible, please communicate that to me ASAP. I appreciate being kept in

the loop, mainly so that I can support you in staying on track. I do not require any kind of documentation. You are all adults, and I trust you.

Unexcused absences: If you do not communicate with me, your absence will be considered unexcused, and *a point will be deducted from your final grade*.

Participation

Participation looks different for everyone. But at a minimum it means showing up prepared (having done the readings and assignments), offering your thoughts, reflecting thoughtfully on the contributions of your classmates through peer review, and refraining from side conversations. Additionally, because peer feedback activities are essential to the workshop format of this class, participation includes *submitting drafts on time*. If you come to class without a draft prepared for a peer to review, you've wasted their time as well as your own. Remember, it doesn't have to be perfect—that's kind of the point!

If you feel anxious about speaking in front of the class, I empathize. I hope that even if participation feels hard for you, you will make it a goal to remember that the stakes are low. We are simply here to support each other's learning. On the flipside, if you find that you're frequently the only person answering questions or offering your thoughts, try to make some space for others. Sometimes we need that uncomfortable silence to bring out more participation.

Late assignments

Because peer review is such an essential part of this class, late assignments are a problem. As stated above under "Participation," if you don't submit your assignments on time it means someone in class will not have a partner for peer review.

To discourage this situation, late assignments WILL NOT be accepted without prior approval. Again, if you submit an assignment late and have not received an extension from me, you will not receive credit for the assignment.

That said, illness and emergencies happen! In these cases, I will ask you to submit the assignment as well as a self-revision (instead of a peer review) by a mutually agreed upon deadline.

And finally, remember that *communication is key*. The earlier you get in touch with me concerning issues with deadlines, the better! I can help you make a plan for staying on track.

Grading policy

Writing assignments will account for 70% of your grade, and attendance and participation will account for the remaining 30%. This breaks down as follows:

- Writing Assignments = 70%
 - In-class writing assignments = 10%
 - Memos = 20%
 - Components of research paper = 40%

- Attendance and participation = 30%

If you show up every Wednesday prepared and put effort into all memos and in-class writing assignments (which are all graded on completion), you're well on your way to an A or B in this class!

Please be aware that much of the work that we do *in class* will directly contribute to your research paper. So, if you are not consistently present in class, it will be very difficult for you to satisfactorily complete your final assignment.

Technology usage

Since most of us are accustomed to reading and writing in a digital environment, I expect that everyone will be bringing a laptop to class. However, if I see evidence that you are browsing social media, shopping, doing work for another class, etc., I will mark you as absent for the day and deduct a point off your final grade. Use of phones is not permitted (unless there's an emergency).

Accommodations

If you need disability-related accommodations in this class, please be sure to confirm that I have received a letter from the Disabled Students Program (<http://dsp.berkeley.edu>). Under UC Berkeley policy, instructors cannot provide accommodations until the letter is received.

If you have emergency medical information you wish to share with me (e.g., where to find your EpiPen), or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please inform me immediately (after class, by email, or during my first session of office hours).

Plagiarism and generative AI

Being found guilty of plagiarism is a serious offense and may result in a failing grade for the assignment in question, failing the entire course, or even being expelled from the university.

UC Berkeley's Center for Student Conduct [defines plagiarism](#) as the "use of intellectual material produced by another person without acknowledging its source, for example:

- Wholesale copying of passages from works of others into your homework, essay, term paper, or dissertation, without acknowledgement.
- Use of the views, opinions, or insights of another without acknowledgement.
- Paraphrasing another person's characteristic or original phraseology, metaphor, or other literary device, without acknowledgment."

The College Writing Program has an even more expansive definition addressing generative AI, which I will adhere to when grading your assignments (emphasis mine):

- “Use of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, to write parts of an assignment without disclosing it.
- The use of auto-translation, such as Google Translate, to translate passages from another language into English without disclosing it.
- Submitting assignments written for another class.”

The norms for using generative AI are still evolving. For me, the bottom line is that while these tools are currently useful in limited cases, they have many downsides, which we will discuss further in class. We will also be doing an exercise with ChatGPT, so that you can see for yourselves what its strengths and weaknesses are—when it can help you to be efficient, and when it robs you of the critical thinking and intellectual creativity you are without a doubt capable of!

Discussion guidelines

I hope that this course will provide a space for lively and engaging discussion inclusive of all students. To this end, I will facilitate discussion with an ethic of care and will expect students to uphold each other’s human dignity. I also encourage students to explore the boundaries of relevant social issues honestly and critically. Discomfort can be a good thing in that it fosters new learning and growth. Do not be afraid to say what is on your mind. But be respectful when speaking to your fellow community members.

Course Schedule (subject to change)

The following is a tentative timeline for our readings and assignments. Please be aware, this schedule is subject to change based on student needs and feedback. Any changes will be communicated well in advance via bCourses.

Week 1: January 22—*Introduction to the Course*

Reading Assignment:

- Review the syllabus

Writing Assignment:

- Short in-class essay about your relationship with reading and writing

Week 2: January 29—*The Requirements and Possibilities of Academic Writing*

Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- *They Say / I Say*, “Chapter 18: Writing in the Social Sciences”

- pp. 3-10 in “The Promise,” C. Wright Mills (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*
- pp. 93 – 100 in Erik Olin Wright (2006) “Compass Points: Towards a Socialist Alternative,” *New Left Review* 41(Sep/Oct): 93-124

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Memo #1: Describe the key features of social science writing, according to Erin Ackerman in *They Say / I Say*. Then, explain and illustrate the key ideas from Mills and Olin Wright with an example from your own life (see "Assignments" for full prompt).
-

Week 3: February 5—Grappling with Difficult Texts: Summarizing

Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- *They Say / I Say*, “Chapter 2: The Art of Summarizing”
- *They Say / I Say*, “Chapter 19: When Your ‘They Say’ Is a Bot”
- Handout: “Practical Tips for Reading Efficiently and Critically”
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” in Robert Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd edition).
 - pp. 473-475 (ending with “a most revolutionary part”)
 - Last line of p. 478
 - pp. 479-483

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Memo #2: Summarize the arguments made by Marx and Engels in the above excerpt from “The Communist Manifesto” (see "Assignments" for full prompt)
-

Week 4: February 12— Grounding Your Analysis: Quoting vs. Paraphrasing

Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- *They Say / I Say*, “Chapter 3: The Art of Quoting”
- Purdue OWL, “[Paraphrase: Write It in Your Own Words.](#)”
- Arlie Hochschild (1989) *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (16 pages)
 - Preface, pp xi-xvii
 - Chapter 2, pp 11-13
 - Conclusion, pp. 258-261
 - Afterword, pp. 263, 267-269

- Kristen R. Ghodsee (2023) *Everyday Utopia: What 2,000 Years of Wild Experiments Can Teach Us About the Good Life* (10 pages of eBook edition)
 - Author's Note, pp. 7-9
 - Preface, p. 10
 - Chapter 2, pp. 27-28, pp. 41-43 ("Happy Kids and Collective Chores"), p. 45

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Memo #3: Compare and contrast the two authors' approaches to the gendered nature of work, applying the techniques of both paraphrasing and quoting (see "Assignments" for full prompt)

Week 5: February 19—*Figuring Out What to Research*

Reading Assignment (to read before class):

- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 15: Research as Conversation"
- "Chapter 3: From Topics to Questions" in Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2003) *The Craft of Research*
- Kirschner, "Crafting Good Research Questions"
- Purdue OWL, "[Research: Where to Begin](#)"

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Research proposal (to be workshopped in class)

Week 6: February 26—*Evaluating Sources*

Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- Purdue Owl, "[Evaluating Sources: Where to Begin](#)"
 - Be sure to click through the left-hand navigation column
- UC Berkeley Library, "[Evaluating Resources: Scholarly & Popular Sources](#)"
- Cornell University Library, "[Critically Analyzing Information Sources](#)"
- Joe Galati, "[North Korea is not America's biggest security threat - childhood obesity is](#)," *The Hill*, June 13, 2018
- Sabrina Strings (2019) *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Introduction (pp. 1-11)
- Virginia Sole-Smith (2023) *Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture*, "Fat Talk: An Initiation"
- "[Childhood Obesity: What to Do?](#)" *The New York Times*, February 11, 2023 (responses to Sole-Smith)

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Memo #4: Evaluate the credibility and effectiveness of each of the above sources (see "Assignments" for full prompt)
-

Week 7: March 5—*Building a Foundation for Your Research: The Annotated Bibliography*Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- Re-read *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 15: Research as Conversation"
- Purdue Owl, "[Searching Online](#)" (be sure to check out all the sections in the left-hand navigation column)
- Lecture slides from class February 26

Writing Assignment

- Annotated bibliography (due Tuesday, March 4 at 5pm)
 - Revised proposal (due Friday, March 7 at midnight)
-

Week 8: March 12—*Evaluating Competing Perspectives*Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- Rebecca Solnit (2009) *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*
 - "Preface," "What Difference Would it Make?" (chapter about Hurricane Katrina), and "Epilogue"
 - *Only the highlighted portions are required reading*
- Douglas Rushkoff (2022) *Survival of the Richest: Escape Fantasies of the Tech Billionaires*
 - "Introduction: Meet the Mindset" (11 pp.)
- Rebecca Elliott (2018) "The Sociology of Climate Change as a Sociology of Loss," *European Journal of Sociology* 59(3): 301-337
 - Introduction (pp. 301-304) and Conclusion (pp.327-330)
- Jeff Brady and Liz Baker, "[Helene recovery is more political online than on the ground](#)," NPR, October 7, 2024
- Nisa Khan, "[Misinformation About the LA Fires Spreads Fast. Here's How to Spot It.](#)" KQED, January 14, 2025

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Memo #5: Compare and contrast how these sources evaluate the potential for solidarity during times of disaster (see "Assignments" for full prompt)
-

Week 9: March 19— *"I Say:" Writing a Lit Review with a Point of View*Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- Purdue OWL, "[Writing a Literature Review](#)"
- Purdue OWL, "[Synthesizing Sources](#)"
- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 14: Reading for the Conversation"
- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 4: Three Ways to Respond"
- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 5: Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say"

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Draft literature review (to be workshopped in class)
-

Week 10: March 26—No class (SPRING BREAK)**Week 11: April 2**—*Finding and Refining Your Voice Through Revision*Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 9: Connecting the Parts"
- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 10: Academic Writing Doesn't Mean Setting Aside Your Voice"
- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 12: Revising Substantially"

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Revision plan for literature review: Describe the changes you intend to make to your literature review, keeping in mind feedback and the techniques described in this week's readings (see "Assignments" for full prompt)
-

Week 12: April 9—*Sketching Your Argument*Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- *They Say / I Say*, “Chapter 8: Saying Why it Matters”
- Purdue Owl, "[Tips and Examples for Writing Thesis Statements](#)"
- Indiana University Bloomington, "[How to Write a Thesis Statement](#)"
- Purdue Owl, "[Developing An Outline](#)"
- Indiana University Bloomington, "[Using Outlines](#)"

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- Outline and preliminary thesis statement (see "Assignments" for full prompt)
-

Week 13: April 16—*Building and Strengthening Your Argument*Reading Assignment (to read before class)

- *They Say / I Say*, “Chapter 6: Planting a Naysayer in Your Text”
- *They Say / I Say*, “Chapter 7: Using Personal Stories to Energize Your Argument”
- *They Say / I Say*, "Chapter 11: The Art of Metacommentary"

Writing Assignment (due Tuesday before class at 5pm)

- First draft of research paper (to be workshopped in class)
-

Week 14: April 23—*Paper Presentations*Reading Assignment

- N/A

Writing Assignment

- Presentation slides due Tuesday, April 22 at 5pm
 - Revision plan for first draft due Friday, April 25 at midnight
-

Week 15: April 30—*Paper Presentations*

Reading Assignment

- N/A

Writing Assignment

- Second draft of research paper **due Friday, May 2 at 11:59pm**
-

Week 16: May 7—*No Class / RRR Week*

Week 17: May 14—Final research paper **due at 11:59pm**