

Sociological Reading and Composition: Imagining Otherwise

Wednesday, 10am-12pm, SSB 54

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Sign up here: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/qozqs>

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 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 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—to uncover and 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. All texts will be available as PDFs on bCourses. 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.

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 at 11:59pm on the Tuesday night 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, December 18. 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 on Thursdays from 10-11am and 2-3pm. If these times don't work, email me and we'll find a mutually convenient time. I typically conduct office hours via Zoom but am happy to meet in person if that is easier or preferable for you. Sign up for a 15-minute time slot here: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/qozqs>

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 and Participation

I expect you to arrive on time (no later than 10:10am), fully prepared to contribute meaningfully to our conversations and activities. I allow every student *two discretionary absences* to utilize throughout the semester, as you see fit. Each subsequent unexcused absence will result in a point deducted from your final grade. Obviously, life happens and 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.

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

As a general rule, assignments WILL NOT be accepted without prior approval. Again, if you submit an assignment late and have not received an extension from me, your assignment will not be accepted. That said, *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 30% of your grade will reflect your participation in class (see above for what "participation" means). 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

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: August 28—Introduction to the course

Reading Assignment:

- Review the syllabus

Writing Assignment:

- In-class survey about your relationship with reading and writing

Week 2: September 4—*The Requirements and Possibilities of Academic Writing*

Reading Assignment:

- “Chapter 18: Writing in the Social Sciences” in *They Say, I Say* (19 pages)
- 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:

- Memo #1: Illustrate the key ideas from Mills and Olin Wright with examples from your own life (see bCourses for the full prompt)

Week 3: September 11—*Grappling with Difficult Texts: Summarizing*

Reading Assignment:

- “Chapter 2: The Art of Summarizing” in *They Say, I Say* (13 pages)
- Handout: “Practical Tips for Reading Efficiently and Critically”
- pp. 473 – 483, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” in Robert Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd edition).

Writing Assignment:

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

Week 4: September 18— *Grounding Your Analysis: Quoting vs. Paraphrasing*

Reading Assignment:

- “Chapter 3: The Art of Quoting” in *They Say, I Say* (9 pages)
- Purdue OWL, “[Paraphrase: Write It in Your Own Words](#)”
- Arlie Hochschild (1989) *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (excerpt TBD)
- Kristen R. Ghodsee (2023) *Everyday Utopia: What 2,000 Years of Wild Experiments Can Teach Us About the Good Life* (excerpt TBD)
- Supplementary reading:

- Kathi Weeks (2023) “Abolition of the family: the most infamous feminist proposal,” *Feminist Theory* 24(3): 433-453.
- Kathi Weeks (2011) *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*

Writing Assignment: Memo #3: Compare and contrast the two authors’ approaches to the gendered nature of work, applying the techniques of both paraphrasing and quoting (see bCourses for the full prompt)

Week 5: September 25—*Figuring Out What to Research*

Reading Assignment:

- “Chapter 3: From Topics to Questions” in Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2003) *The Craft of Research*

Writing Assignment:

- **Research proposal due at 10am** (to be workshopped in class)

Week 6: October 2—*Evaluating Sources*

Reading Assignment:

- Purdue Owl, “[Evaluating Sources: Where to Begin](#)”
- UC Berkeley Library, “[Evaluating Resources: Scholarly & Popular Sources](#)”
- Sabrina Strings (2019) *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Introduction (pp. 1-11) and Epilogue (pp. 205-212)
- Virginia Sole-Smith, “Why the New Obesity Guidelines for Kids Terrify Me,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2023.
- “Childhood Obesity: What to Do?” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2023 (responses to Sole-Smith)
- Supplementary reading:
 - Aubrey Gordon (2020) *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Fat*
 - Stephanie Nolan, “South Africa Runs Out of Insulin Pens as Global Supply Shifts to Weight-Loss Drugs,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2024.

Writing Assignment:

- Memo #4—Evaluate the credibility and effectiveness of each of the above sources (see bCourses for the full prompt)

Week 7: October 9—*“They Say”*: Building a Foundation for Your Argument

Reading Assignment:

- “Chapter 1: Starting with What Others Are Saying” in *They Say, I Say* (9 pages)

Writing Assignment:

- **Annotated bibliography due at 10am** (to be workshopped in class)

Week 8: October 16— *Evaluating Competing Perspectives*

Reading Assignment:

- Ulrich Beck (1986) *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity* (excerpt TBD)
- Rebecca Elliott (2018) “The Sociology of Climate Change as a Sociology of Loss,” *European Journal of Sociology* 59(3): 301-337 (excerpt TBD)
- Rebecca Solnit (2009) *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (excerpt TBD)
- Douglas Rushkoff (2022) *Survival of the Richest: Escape Fantasies of the Tech Billionaires* (excerpt TBD)
- Octavia Butler (1993) *Parable of the Sower* (excerpt TBD)

Writing Assignment:

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

Week 9: October 23— *“I Say”*: Scaffolding Your Argument

Reading Assignment:

- “Chapter 4: Three Ways to Respond” in *They Say, I Say*
- “Chapter 5: Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say” in *They Say, I Say*
- “Chapter 6: Planting a Naysayer in Your Text” in *They Say, I Say*
- “Chapter 7: Saying Why it Matters” in *They Say, I Say*

Writing Assignment:

- **Literature review and draft thesis statement due at 10am** (to be workshopped in class)

Week 10: October 30— *Finding and Refining Your Voice Through Revision*

Reading Assignment:

- “Chapter 8: Connecting the Parts” in *They Say, I Say*
- “Chapter 9: Academic Writing Doesn’t Mean Setting Aside Your Voice” in *They Say, I Say*
- “Chapter 11: Revising Substantially” in *They Say, I Say*

Writing Assignment:

- Memo #6: Revise a previous memo of your choice using the techniques described in this week’s readings (see bCourses for full prompt)

Week 11: November 6— *Feedback and revision workshop*

Reading Assignment:

- N/A

Writing Assignment:

- **Revision plan for literature review due at 10am**

Week 12: November 13— *Feedback and revision workshop*

Reading Assignment:

- N/A

Writing Assignment:

- **First draft of research paper due at 10am** (to be workshopped in class)

Week 13: November 20— *Feedback and revision workshop*

Reading Assignment:

- N/A

Writing Assignment:

- **Revision plan for first draft due at 10am**

Week 14: November 27— *No Class / Thanksgiving*

Week 15: December 4— *Paper Presentations*

Week 16: December 11— *No Class / RRR Week*

Week 17: December 18— **Final research paper due at 11:59pm**

