

# Reading and Writing Social Research



Mary Cassatt: Children Playing on the Beach, 1884



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 1. Introduction

- For most studies, even those using grounded theory, the researcher wants to know what others have found regarding a topic.
  - The accumulation of knowledge is a hallmark of the success of science in guiding human decision-making.
  - From a literature review the scientist learns about theoretical and methodological approaches that have been attempted regarding a topic.



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 1. Introduction

- The researcher also learns about previous findings from a literature review.
- In a sense, scientific investigation is an ongoing system of loans and repayments.
  - The researcher learns from others prior to conducting a study.
  - The researcher learns more from conducting a study.
  - The researcher repays the community of scholars by reporting results of his/her study.



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 1. Introduction

- The researcher learns from a wide variety of sources:
  - Refereed journal articles.
  - Books.
  - Online resources (sure, scientists Google!).
  - Unpublished papers presented at meetings.
  - Conversations with other scientists.



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 2. Journals versus Books

- Journal articles always are refereed.
- Books are reviewed, but not necessarily refereed.
- This difference does not necessarily mean that scientists give more weight to the information provided in journal articles than they do to information presented in books.



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 3. Reading a Journal Article

- Journal articles contain an *abstract*, or brief (about 250 words) summary of the article. The abstract gives an overview of the research question, the methods, and the findings.
- Journal articles then follow a pattern kinda like this:
  - Introduction, Literature Review, Theory, Methods, Findings, Conclusions.
- Articles often point out limitations to the study and suggestions for future research.



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 3. Reading a Journal Article

- One might want to:
  - Read the abstract.
  - Read the conclusions.
  - Skim the article.
  - Carefully read all of the article.
  - Skim it once more.
- It is very important to take notes throughout this process.
  - Type them and save them.



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 4. Reading a Book

- The book, or research monograph, obviously will be longer and cover materials much more in-depth than the journal article, which in sociology is about 10-15 pages in length.
- The process of reading a book is about the same as reading an article:
  - Skim, read carefully, **always** take notes.



# Organizing a Literature Review

## 5. Evaluation of Research Reports

- The Earl Babbie textbook contains many excellent features.
- This section, which suggests questions to ask when reading research reports and evaluating methods is an exceptional guideline.
- We will cover it in class, but not repeat this lengthy section on these PowerPoint slides.



# Using the Internet Wisely

## 1. Some Useful Websites

- The World-Wide-Web has become an exceptional source for all types of information, including scientific materials.
- Babbie offers a list of useful sites for:
  - obtaining data,
  - learning how to analyze data, and
  - conducting literature reviews.



# Using the Internet Wisely

## 2. Searching the Web

- Search engines, such as Google provide the means to efficiently scan a large number of websites for needed information.
- The “Advanced Search” feature on search engines can reduce the amount of time it takes to locate information.
- This feature allows the researcher to search for specific strings of text located on websites, or to exclude text strings that distract a search from its main purpose.



# Using the Internet Wisely

## 3. Evaluating the Quality of Internet Materials

- The WWW—bless its heart—contains all kinds of information from all kinds of sources with all kinds of agendas.
- For scientific purposes, the researcher needs to pay special attention to the source of the information provided.



# Using the Internet Wisely

## 3. Evaluating Quality (Continued)

- The researcher might want to ask these questions about materials posted to the WWW:
  - Can the source be trusted.
  - Does the presentation seem biased or sloppy.
  - Does the site focus upon just one point of view (this is ok; as long as the researcher recognizes it as such).



# Using the Internet Wisely

## 3. Evaluating Quality (Continued)

- Is the information up-to-date?
- Are the data official?
- Is it a university website?
- Does the information seem consistent with information presented at other reputable websites.



# Writing Social Research

## 1. Audience

- Is the audience scientific or general?
  - Scientific presentations require technical information to pass peer review.
  - General audience presentations might present technical information in an Appendix, but will keep the text at a level for most readers.



# Writing Social Research

## 2. Form and Length of the Report

- The *research note* reports very specific information, typically regarding a well-known area of research, within about 1-3 pages.
- *Working papers* might be 10-12 pages in length and provide a detailed outline of work in progress or intended in the future.



# Writing Social Research

## 2. Form and Length of the Report (Continued)

- *Professional papers* might be up to 20 pages in length. They are similar to manuscripts intended for submission to a refereed journal, but are presented at professional meetings for initial, informal review. The researcher often seeks opinions for revisions at this point.



# Writing Social Research

## 2. Form and Length of the Report (Continued)

- *Professional manuscripts* might be up to 20 pages in length. They are the final written product of a study. They are technical and intended for a scientific audience. Once published, they are referred to as *articles*.
- The website for this course labeled, [MS#08-084](#), presents the series of letters passing between researchers, reviewers, and the Editor of a refereed journal related to the review of a professional manuscript.



# Writing Social Research

## 3. Organization of the Report

- Seemingly obvious, but often ignored, is the need to state the purpose of a study near the beginning of a report.
- “Tell them what you’re going to tell them; tell them; and tell them what you told them.”
- The literature review should be placed near the beginning of a report.



# Writing Social Research

## 4. Plagiarism

- Plagiarism—the theft of another’s words or ideas—can result in very serious penalties for a professional sociologist.
- Typically, it is grounds for dismissal from a job and a formal reprimand from the American Sociological Association.
- Avoiding plagiarism is not always as easy as it might sound!



# Writing Social Research

## 4. Plagiarism (continued)

- When taking notes while reading literature, for example, the researcher might confuse what someone else wrote with notes he/she added while reading [I like to place my thoughts in brackets].
- Paraphrasing the text of others can be tricky business. In some cases, even as few as three consecutive words taken from another person's writing is considered to be plagiarism.



# Writing Social Research

## 4. Plagiarism (continued)

- One can plagiarize oneself! Once published, the journal owns the copyright to an article.
- The Council of Writing Program Administrators has posted an excellent primer on how to avoid plagiarism.
- Also, the Babbie textbook provides excellent suggestions, including examples labeled as “unacceptable” and “acceptable.”



# Writing Social Research

## 4. Plagiarism (continued)

1. Write using your own words. It might seem like a waste of time when someone else said it so well, but it comes out better overall.
2. If you use words even something close to what someone else wrote, cite them.
3. If you use someone else's ideas, cite them.
4. If you note someone's else's findings, cite them.
5. If you quote someone else, cite them.



# Writing Social Research

## 5. Study Design and Execution

- The next section of the report describes the research design and methodology.
- Depending upon the journal and the nature of the methodology (i.e., well-known or not, different or common, complicated or simple), this section will need to be brief or lengthy.
- Typically, reviewers pay a lot of attention to this section of the report because they want to know if scientifically sound procedures were followed.



# Writing Social Research

## 6. Analysis and Interpretation

- As with the methodology section, reviewers pay close attention to the quality, appropriateness, and completeness of the data analysis.
- Interpretation should remain within the bounds of the study. That is, all statements in this section should be supported by findings.



# Writing Social Research

## 7. Guidelines for Reporting Analyses

- Know your audience.
  - An academic audience will demand much detail about sampling procedures, research design, data collection, and data analysis.
  - A general audience does not need to know and usually does not want to know much detail. Instead, they want a clear and concise presentation of the methodology.



# Writing Social Research

## 7. Guidelines for Reporting Analyses (Continued)

- For an academic presentation, a key question to ask yourself is, “Could someone else replicate my procedure from the information I have told them?”
- Including supporting materials into a Technical Appendix can be very helpful in reports to a general audience, where most persons do not care about these details but a few others will want to look at them.



# Writing Social Research

## 8. Going Public

- By “going public” Babbie means to submit a paper to a professional meeting or to a refereed journal.
- Yes, even undergraduate students can and do present papers at professional meetings. And students who aspire to graduate school should consider doing so.



# Writing Social Research

## 8. Going Public (Continued)

- Before submitting an article to a professional journal, it is a good idea to explore which journals are most likely to publish papers with similar topics as yours.
- The “peer review” process of a refereed journal involves submitting a copy of your paper (more and more so, electronically) to the journal.



# Writing Social Research

## 8. Going Public (Continued)

- The Editor will send it to reviewers, who will give advice about how to improve the paper and their opinions about whether it should be published in the journal.
- For an example of this process, see the exchange of letters regarding [MS#08-084](#).



# Writing Social Research

## 9. Summary and Conclusions

- Tell them what you told them.
- Note the limitations of the study.
- Offer speculations about theory and methods.
- Offer suggestions for future research.

**Questions?**