How to Write an "A" Paper for this Course

Being able to write a good paper is a skill that will not only serve you well in this course, but it is also a skill that will serve you well your entire life. At many times in your life you will be required to summarize and synthesize material in a logical, clear, concise, and critical fashion. This will be for memos, project reports, proposals, grants, evaluations, etc. The following are some guidelines to help you succeed in writing papers in this course.

The following are some of the elements of a good paper:

1) Don’t simply “jump in.” Assume your reader knows nothing about what you are talking about in your paper. While its not necessary to include the “classic introduction,” it is important that you at least make clear exactly what the topic of your paper is about. Within the discipline of sociology and others as well, one term or idea can mean a variety of different things for the writer as well as the reader. So, it is very important that you lay a foundation for your argument and one way in which to this is by defining that which you are talking about.

2) Correct spelling and grammar. It is imperative that your reader know exactly what it is you mean to say. If sentences are put together incorrectly or words are spelled incorrectly, it is difficult for your reader to understand what it is that you are trying to say. Incomplete sentences, improper pronouns, incorrect verb tenses etc. are all distractions for your reader and detract from the important things you are trying to get across to your reader. This includes your instructor.

3) Do not discuss article by article by article. It is necessary that you integrate the material into some sort of meaningful statement. As much as is possible, organize your paper according to themes rather than individual articles. While the individual articles are important, what is more important is the content of the articles.

4) Watch your paragraph length. Paragraphs that are a page long are boring, to be quite frank. Your reader is only going to really read the first part of the paragraph and then they will get tired. Uncle Bill's stories about W.W.II are surely interesting, but when they go on and on and on without any end in sight, we all start to zone out, waiting for the major point. Paragraphs are also this way. Say what you want to say in that paragraph and then move on. Each point you make in your paper deserves its own paragraph. Don't hide its importance with everything else that is important.

5) At the end of your paper, summarize what you have talked about in your paper in a few sentences. This creates a nice end for your reader and then they can look back and say, “hey, yeah...this is what it all comes down to.” Leave your reader with some sort of summary statement about the wonderful and exciting things you have just told them about.

7) Be sure to give credit to the source of your information. Citing sources is definitely a skill and a hard one to learn. However, it is incredibly important that you learn to do this successfully. Otherwise, you can be accused of plagiarizing which is a very serious charge. Scholars have failed classes and lost jobs because of this, so it is very important. If you are unsure of whether or not something needs to be cited, cite it. It is much better to err in terms of too many cites than it is to err on the side of too few citations. Later on in this guide will be examples of how to cite sources in your paper.

Also, always be sure to include a list of references at the end of your paper. This allows your reader to say to himself/herself "hey, this person really knows what they are talking about because they have all of these people to back up what they have said in their paper." Later in this guide will be examples of how to reference the variety of sources that we will be drawing upon in this course.

Examples of citations:

If you are simply discussing the idea or finding of an article, simply place the author's last name and the publication year within parentheses like this:

Low self-esteem may not necessarily be the cause of aggressive behavior (Baumeister 2000).

If you want to provide a direct quote or are paraphrasing someone's article (and only changing a few words), simply place the author's last name, the publication year, and the page number within parentheses like this:

Halo effects refer to the tendency “of our general or overall liking for a person to influence our subsequent assessment of more specific traits of the person” (Michener and DeLamater 1999, 108).

A note about citing articles from your reader: When citing articles from your reader, the publication date should be the publication year of the reader, not of the book or journal that published the article originally.
References:

The following are some examples of how to create your reference list. (The articles, books, etc. should be in alphabetical order by author's last name.)

To reference a book:


To reference an article from a scholarly journal:


To reference an article from a "reader" or edited volume: