

How to Read Sociological Texts

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This chapter offers suggestions on how to read different types of sociological texts. I hope that you approach your reading in an active and questioning way, seeking in a book or article the “aha” experience that will help you understand some aspect of your own life and social world that surrounds it. I am realistic enough, however, to recognize and appreciate the fact that you will sometimes find reading tiresome and boring. There may be several reasons for this: your previous education and life experience have not equipped you with the skills in and habits of reading complex texts; you are reading particular material in which you have little interest; the reading assumes that you have knowledge which, in fact, you do not yet possess; it is written in a dry and tedious style or is full of jargon. So, in giving you advice on how to read I will keep in mind that, as Howard Becker and his colleagues have found, students are often interested primarily in “making the grade.” I hope this chapter will help you make a better grade. That said, I also know that many students are avid readers, and that a well-written sociological text can be entertaining as well as informative. A good ethnography that tells a story and reads more like a novel is fun to read, especially if it has to do with your life (e.g., Donna Gaines’ book *Teenage Wasteland* about middle class white kids committing suicide in suburban America, or Douglas Foley’s *The Great American Football Ritual* about high school sports in a small town). When reading less approachable texts, it helps if you read in an active, critical manner and

tell yourself that the payoff may not be immediate.

It may be that you, like myself and many of my students brought up in our dazzling television, film, and electronic culture, find reading to be less stimulating, perhaps even dull and boring. Given the choice between seeing an exciting film like *Pulp Fiction* and reading Bebe Campbell’s novel *Brothers and Sisters* you would find the film more enjoyable. Or your idea of entertainment is more likely to be watching the season premier of *Seinfeld* rather than reading the newest edition of *Harpers*. When books have to compete with film and TV they often lose. This holds true for me as well. I love TV and movies, but I also read. I don’t see them necessarily as competing with each other – in fact, the activities take place in different arenas. At home I watch TV in the living room and I read in the study, bathtub and the bedroom. They are two different forms of pleasure. So, the second part of what I want to accomplish in this chapter is to try and explore some ways to get more pleasure from reading.

One argument given for why we prefer to watch rather than read is that watching is often thought to be an easier activity – the viewer is defined as passive, while the reader is often defined as active. I think this argument is unreliable. Some viewing may be passive, but certainly not all. When we talk back to the television or radio, when we discuss the merits of a television documentary or the moral of a movie with our friends, when we yell at our favorite soap opera victim “Don’t believe him,

he’s lying to you,” this indicates that in fact we are actively engaged in the viewing process. Moreover, if we view with what bell hooks calls an “oppositional gaze” then we are viewing critically, viewing to see how the media and the images it presents are shaped by the Anglo-dominant, patriarchal, capitalist society. The oppositional gaze requires that we think about who is behind the camera presenting these images to us and who in society benefits from representing reality in this manner. For example, watch the evening news in America with an oppositional gaze to see how the concept “crime” is defined in our culture. Crime is something that happens on the street, not something that happens in corporate offices. Crime is often shown with a dark face in the USA. Actions are most often defined as crime when we can point to a specific victim (e.g., a homicide) rather than a vague more general destruction of human life (e.g., toxic waste dumping). Viewing with an oppositional gaze is an active, not passive process. Furthermore, when we watch TV and think to ourselves, “this guy has it all wrong, people don’t dress this way in real life,” or “people of my class [race, gender] don’t talk this way” then we are viewing actively. When we view with an eye that says “this guy has it right” or “this woman has it wrong” then we are viewing critically.

In fact, I think in some cases people are much more passive as readers, in part because there is a (false) blanket legitimacy invested in the printed word. People believe that if something is in print, and if the teacher assigned it, then it must be important and true. On the other hand, TV is much less legitimate. We know that a lot of junk is on TV, so we watch TV with an eye that distinguishes between good shows and junk. I want to suggest that we should do the same thing with reading. We need to read critically, and by this I mean we need to read with a mind that says I accept or reject some or all of this. We need to read with the attitude that bad stuff is published and that teachers do not always make wise decisions in what they assign. We need to read with the idea that some people (and many sociologists) are bad writers, and that they don’t always get

it right all the time. For example, when we read a chapter about crime and deviance in a sociology textbook ask yourself how crime is being constructed – does it include corporate or white-collar crime? does it spend an excessive amount of space discussing minorities and crime? Don’t be awed by the authority of the written word and a writer with a lot of credentials. Even when you like a book, you need to read with a critical eye. I myself forget this sometimes. For example, in my reading group we were discussing Mitchell Duneier’s book, *Slim’s Table*, which focuses on working-class black men in Chicago. I loved the book, and because I have a particular interest in the topic of working-class culture I sort of swallowed the book without really reflecting on it. I accepted it as a “good” book simply because it discussed working-class culture – a topic I feel given too little attention in sociology these days. At our discussion group, however, one member was very critical of the book. She found it offensive that the author spent so much time showing us that working-class people are honest, respectable, and dignified, as if he was surprised to find this. Moreover, she pointed out that there was almost no mention of women in this book, which she perceived as a gross oversight, and asked “how can you explain the lives of men without discussing their familial relations?” This women demonstrated the type of critical approach to reading that I am suggesting you adopt.

To summarize, I write this chapter with the assumption that you are reading sociological texts because you are a student concerned with your grades. This is not a bad thing – it shows that you are rational intelligent beings. Grades do matter, and our educational system puts a premium on grades. In addition, even those of you who love reading will probably concede that you enjoy reading non-academic material more than academic material. Finally, many of you read passively. In the remaining sections I examine several types of sociological writing and show you how to read them to improve your grade, to get more enjoyment out of reading (or at least minimize the pain), and to read critically. Not all writing is the

same, so all reading should not be the same. Sociologists write for different purposes and to different audiences; you should read for different purposes and recognize that you were not always the author's intended audience. The different types of reading discussed are textbooks, books, ethnographies and articles. In the final section I will tell you how to use these different texts to help you do research and write papers.

Textbooks

Textbooks are often boring. Writers have tried to make textbooks more accessible to students by using everyday language and examples and including pictures. These attempts, however, do not counteract the boring nature of textbooks which stems from their efforts to present a diverse group of viewpoints and place them within a unifying framework. The middling effect that results from this process takes out some of the excitement found in the production of knowledge. The controversial topics, the newer (more explosive) theories that are not yet confirmed, and the radical thinkers on both sides are usually given, at most, a passing nod. Textbooks, because of the goal of presenting a lot of material, end up glossing over controversies, homogenizing diverse ideas, and "ironing out" the wrinkles of contradiction in a particular field. Many professors are loath to use textbooks but do so anyway for several reasons: they feel the textbook gives a good summary or survey of the literature in a field; the ratio of students to teacher is too high and textbooks with their test banks and teaching guides helps the time-stressed professor; it is less expensive for the student to buy one expensive book rather than six or seven moderately priced books. For these reasons, and others, textbooks are used.

The first thing you need to know when you are assigned a textbook is how you will be tested on the material. If you have in-class exams with lots of multiple choice questions then you will read differently than if there is a take-home exam with a few essay questions. Assuming the first type of exam, which is the

easiest way for teachers to test students on this material, you will have to read with the goal of remembering certain things: new words (concepts and their definitions), key theorists or the scholars who use these words, and facts in the form of numbers and dates. Read a textbook quickly, most chapters can be read in less than an hour. Moreover, you do not have to read it all in one sitting; this is the sort of writing that can be broken down into parts. You can read one section on the bus or train (a good reason to take mass transit) and another section between classes. Your concentration level does not have to be perfect. Read actively – by highlighting certain points, but also by thinking of your own examples for the concepts as they are being presented. Write your examples in the margin of the text (only do this if it is your own textbook, please do not mark up library materials). Highlight only the key things; try not to underline complete sentences, just the key words. Remember that the textbook is designed to give you a little bit of information about a lot of things. You can minimize the pain of reading boring textbooks by learning to read them quickly to get an overview of the concepts, names and facts.

Books

There are different types of books. Most of them are about a particular topic based on some type of research. Authors have agendas for their books; that is they have a point to make. They often provide logical arguments and evidence to convince you that what they say is true. You should read these books as if you are a juror – have they convinced you beyond a reasonable doubt? The burden of proof is on them. Sometimes they are not very skillful in presenting the material – they may be bad writers and their main ideas may be buried in the middle of a text. Other times they may be masterful rhetoricians (that is they can use words skillfully and persuasively) but they do not have very good evidence. They may tell you over and over in convincing terms that a point is true, but they do not really give you enough evidence to support it. Simply ask

yourself if the data presented convinced you. If not, try to figure out why. Don't be fooled by the use of a lot of numbers and statistics – numbers are no more legitimate than words. If you do not understand the statistics or a particular table in a book ask your professor or tutor to explain it. Question, don't just accept! Furthermore, when you read books, make note of what the authors are not saying as well as what they are saying. Remember the example of my colleague's comment that the author did not discuss the women or families in his discussion of working-class men.

When I sit down to read a book I start by guessing what the author is going to do. I first read the back jacket cover or the title and guess. For example, when I picked up Cornell West's book called *Race Matters* I immediately thought of a book written more than a decade before by William Julius Wilson called *The Declining Significance of Race*. Wilson's book argued that by the 1970s class (rather than race) was playing a more significant role in determining life chances for African-Americans. Wilson's book sparked controversy among some black scholars who argued that race still mattered for middle-class African-Americans. So, even before I began reading West's book, by the title alone, I guessed he was somewhere in this argument. What I did was place the book in context – something that teachers can do better than students *simply because they have read more*. Teachers can help students by giving them this context. Sometimes my students treat these introductory remarks as not worthy of note-taking, thinking that the teacher is just warming up to the lecture). Authors, however, often provide the context in the first chapter of the book. The first chapter will explain why the book was written, what the current debate is, and to whom they are responding; this chapter reveals to the reader the intended audience, the main debates, and the author's position. Read this chapter carefully!

Sometimes readers misunderstand the thrust of an author's argument. They will start by saying "Many people believe X" and discuss the merits of X theory. But then, ten pages later, the author says "X is wrong and I

propose theory Y." Still, some students will come into the classroom (or exam) believing the author supports theory X. They show me the passages where the author is in fact talking about theory X. They did not see the rhetorical device the author was using; they did not understand that authors have to build a context for their work; they did not understand that knowledge is produced in a community. Scientists are always writing off of other people's work – we borrow people's theories; we reject theories and suggest new theories; we take bits and pieces of theories to build our own theories; we say that everyone before us has gotten it wrong; or that everyone before has gotten it right (a much less interesting book). So the first thing about reading a book is to figure out what community of scholars the author lives in.

Also in the first chapter(s), authors will tell you how they are going to support their point, how they collected the data, and what the following chapters are going to show. This becomes their contract with the reader. When you read the subsequent chapters you should continually be asking yourself, do I believe this?, is there enough evidence?, what are they leaving out?, and hey, what about those other theories dismissed in the beginning? When you read in this way you are reading in an engaged active way. Sometimes authors present exhaustive examples of one point. You do not have to read every single example. Once you have figured out the main idea of a section, move on (especially if the exam is tomorrow).

Reading books requires a different level of concentration than textbooks. Usually longer blocks of time are necessary. At least, you should try to read a whole chapter in one sitting, and sometimes it's useful to set an agenda of trying to read the whole book in a couple of days. Doing this will help you understand the main arguments and see the book as a whole.

There are different kinds of books. Some books are based on standard research practices which include quantitative, qualitative or historical data (e.g., Émile Durkheim's *Suicide*, Lillian Rubin's *Worlds of Pain*, or

Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions*). These authors are writing for other social scientists who study in this particular field, and as a result they use theoretical arguments and sociological terms (much to the dismay of students). These books are difficult to read if you do not have a large store of knowledge about this area. Keep the book at a distance – don't get hung up on each word, but try to grasp the overall theme. They are the opposite of textbooks in that they often present a lot of information about a narrow topic. As a result, authors will repeat ideas and use an assortment of data. Read these books to see the forest rather than the trees.

Another type of book is referred to as an ethnography. The work is based on data collected through fieldwork or participant observation – which I think of as sociologists acting like anthropologists (e.g., William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* or Elijah Anderson's *Street Wise*). These books are very readable. They usually tell a story about a group of people (e.g., an ethnic group or urban community) and describe the way this group sees the world. Similar books are those that provide a journalist's account of something – usually an event (e.g., William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights* which describes the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina during the civil rights movements). The authors of these books are not always social scientists. They write for a broader audience, and as a result they have few (if any) theoretical arguments in the book. Nonetheless, they usually still try to make a point; that is, they have an agenda. Why was the book written? In the political climate of the day (always note what year the book was written), what does the book mean? Whose side is the author on?

Ethnographies are easy and enjoyable reading. You do not have to highlight theorists and facts and the writing is often engaging so ethnographies can be read quickly. Try to read these books in a few long sessions – give yourself an afternoon or a rainy morning to curl up on the couch and take a big chunk out of the book.

Articles

Articles are like books in that authors have an agenda (a thesis) and they usually try to present data to support it. Read the abstract of the article before plunging in to the main text (and again after you have completed the article). The abstract will give you a miniature blueprint to what the article is all about (theoretical argument, methods, findings, and conclusion). I think of it as the skeleton of the article. Read articles in the same way you read the book – trying to find out who the authors' audience is (often other scholars in the speciality field), where the authors are situated in that field (what side of the debate are they are), and which theories are rejected or supported. This discussion is usually found in the very first section. In the next section authors present the methods used to collect data and test theory. This should be noted and understood very generally. Oftentimes there are nit-picking details about the methodology (especially in quantitative studies). Read to get a general idea of the sample (e.g., how large, from what region, age, gender, race group) and how the researchers collected data (e.g., surveys, interviews, secondary sources). The next section is usually a description of the findings. Skim this section. Look at the tables first and try to make sense out of them. Take from this is a general understanding of the findings and not the specifics. Spend more time on the discussion section where the authors use their theories to explain findings. Do the theories fit? Did they prove or disprove their thesis outlined in the first section?

Always read articles in one sitting, in a place and frame of mind that allows you to concentrate. This will decrease the time it takes you to read an article. Reading a scholarly article in front of the TV at 10:30 in the evening when you have been up since 6:30 in the morning will take you twice as long than if you read it at 10:30 in the morning in the library. Reading it as one piece allows you to better see and evaluate how the theory and data hang together.

Finally, conference papers are (if they are

any good) really just draft forms of published articles. They are most useful for getting current information in a field because often it takes several years for an article to get published.

Using these Texts to Write your own Papers

Textbooks are a good first source of information for key concepts, theories and facts. They also help you find more information. Plan to spend a few hours at the library on your first trip there to research for your paper. Find a textbook and make a list of key names and concepts related to your topic and then do a literature search using one of your library's computer systems or the old card catalogue section if your library still has one. Use a reading list supplied by your professor or tutor not only to find particular books or articles she or he suggests but also to look for closely related material on nearby shelves. Do the search and write down the library call numbers. Now look at this list – do you find that several books have similar call number prefixes? This is the mother lode, or key area of the library for this particular subject. Go up to that section of the library. Find some of the books on your list and then look at other books that are around them. Sit on the floor (or at a table if you prefer) right in this section and start reading them; read the table of contents and parts of the introductory chapters – remember that the introduction will tell you what is inside the book. Begin the narrowing process in the library instead of hauling home all the books and deciding later which ones to use.

Two other good first sources are in the *Annual Review of Sociology* and *Current Socio-*

logy which publish overview articles about a specific field. These articles give you the landscape of the debates and research in this area. The article will also provide you with a good bibliography (the best source for finding further sources). Try to narrow down your topic and then choose only a few books and find other journal articles. Articles are often miniature books. You probably will not have enough time to read ten books if you are simply writing a term paper for a course; but you could read a few books (especially if one of them is an enjoyable ethnography) and several articles. Also, make use of a good reference book for numbers (e.g., statistical abstracts) to get some macro level data on your topic.

Some Final Summary Points

First, before you begin to "read" a text, look it over, flip through it, skim the introduction, take note of the chapter headings and any tables. Try to guess what the book is about and what types of data will be presented. After this first quick read, go through the book again in more detail. This is an especially useful way to read articles and even textbook chapters. Read it through once quickly, and then the second time more thoroughly. Second, read in different moods. Quick snatches of time are good for textbooks, bathtub and nighttime reading are good for fun ethnographies, intense periods of reading with high levels of concentration are needed for journal articles and especially the beginning chapters of a book. Finally, read with an attitude of disbelief, with a challenging mind that says, "Prove it to me!"

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