

# 3

## What is a social science essay?

- The structure of a basic social science essay
- What is distinctive about a social science essay?
- Common errors in essays
- Three golden rules for writing a social science essay

In the previous chapter we explored the various criteria that can be said to comprise an effective essay in the social sciences. In this chapter we consider what is distinctive about essay writing in the social sciences and what social science essays look like.

### 3.1 The structure of a basic social science essay

---

There are different types of social science essay, and essays of different lengths require slightly different approaches (these will be addressed later). However, all social science essays share a basic structure. At its simplest, a social science essay looks something like this:

- *Title* – Every essay should begin with the title written out in full.
- *Introduction* – The introduction tells the reader what the essay is about.

- *Main section* – This section develops the key points of the argument in a ‘logical progression’. It uses evidence from research studies (empirical evidence) and theoretical arguments to support these points.
- *Conclusion* – The conclusion reassesses the arguments in order to make a final statement in answer to the question.
- *List of references* – This lists full details of the publications referred to in the text.

### 3.2 What is distinctive about a social science essay?

As you are no doubt aware, essay writing is a common feature of undergraduate study in many different subjects. What, then, is distinctive about essay writing in the social sciences? There are particular features that characterize social science essays and that relate to what is called the *epistemological* underpinning of work in this area (that is, to ideas about what constitutes valid social scientific knowledge and where this comes from). Among the most important of these characteristics are:

- the requirement that you support arguments with *evidence*, particularly evidence that is the product of systematic and rigorous research (see section 7.2);
- the use of *theory* to build explanations about how the social world works (see section 7.2).

*Evidence* is important in social scientific writing because it is used to support or query beliefs, propositions or hypotheses about the social world. Let’s take a specific example. A social scientist may ask: ‘Does prison work?’. This forms an initial *question*. To answer this question, the social scientist will need to formulate a more specific *claim*, one that can be systematically and rigorously explored. Such a claim could be formulated in the following terms: ‘Imprisonment reduces the likelihood of subsequent reoffending’. This claim can now be subjected to systematic research. In other words, the social scientist will gather *evidence* for and against this claim, evidence that she or he will seek to interpret or *evaluate*. This process of evaluation may tend to support or refute the original claim, it may be inconclusive, and/or it may generate further questions. Together, these processes of enquiry can be described as forming a ‘circuit of social scientific knowledge’. This circuit can be represented as in Figure 1.

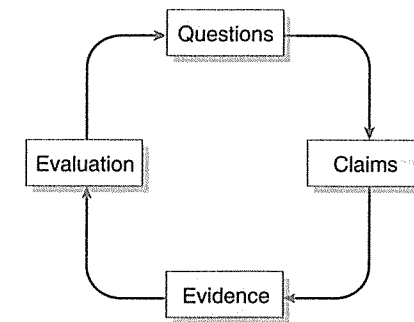


Figure 1 The circuit of social scientific knowledge

Source: Sherratt et al., 2000, p. 18

Clearly, when writing undergraduate essays, particularly on less advanced courses, it is not often (if at all) that you will be asked to conduct your own research. Generally, the expectation will be that you will identify and evaluate evidence from existing research findings. However, the principle holds good: in writing social science essays you should not make claims that cannot be supported by research evidence.

*Theory* is important in social scientific writing because the theoretical orientation of the social scientist will tend to inform the types of question she or he asks, the specific claims tested, the ways in which evidence is identified and gathered, and the manner in which this evidence is interpreted and evaluated. In other words, the theoretical orientation of the social scientist is liable to impact upon the forms of knowledge she or he will produce.

Take, for example, the research question we asked above, ‘Does prison work?’. A pragmatic, policy-oriented social scientist may seek to answer this question by formulating a specific claim of the sort we identified, ‘Imprisonment reduces the likelihood of reoffending’. She or he may then gather evidence of reoffending rates among matched groups of convicted criminals, comparing those who were imprisoned with those who were given an alternative punishment such as forms of community service. Evidence that imprisonment did not produce significantly lower rates of reoffending than punishment in the community may then be interpreted as suggesting that prison does not work, or that it works

only up to a point. However, another social scientist might look at the same research findings and come to a different conclusion, perhaps that the apparent failure of prison to reduce reoffending demonstrates that its primary purpose lies elsewhere. Indeed, more 'critically' oriented social scientists (for example, those informed by Marxism or the work of Foucault) have sought to argue that the growth of prisons in the nineteenth century was part of wider social attempts to 'discipline', in particular, the working class.

The issue here is not whether these more 'critical' arguments are right or wrong but that a social scientist's theoretical orientation will inform how she or he evaluates the available evidence. In fact, it is likely that a 'critical' social scientist of this sort would even have formulated a different research 'claim'. For example, rather than seeking to test the claim, 'Imprisonment reduces the likelihood of reoffending', the critical social scientist might have sought to test the proposition, 'Prisons are part of wider social strategies that aim to produce "disciplined" subjects'. The point for you to take away from this discussion is, then, that the theories we use shape the forms of social scientific knowledge we produce (see Figure 2).

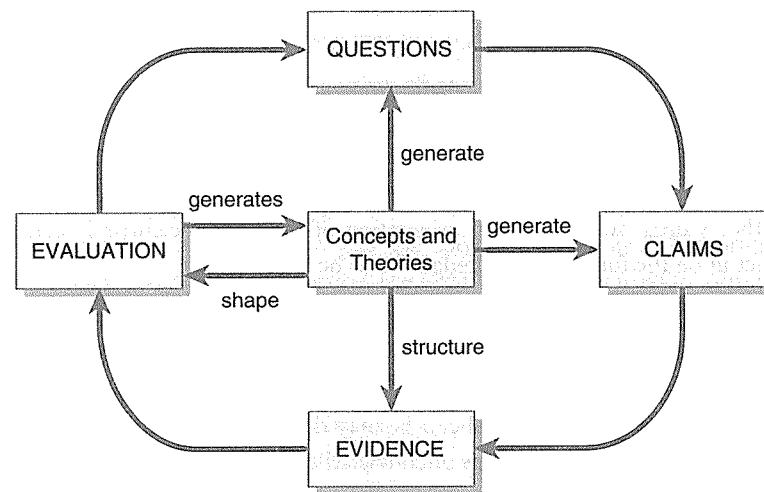


Figure 2 Concepts and theories shape, and are shaped by, the circuit of knowledge

Source: Adapted from Sherratt et al., 2000, p. 18

There is considerable debate within the social sciences about the exact relationship between theory and evidence. To simplify somewhat, some social scientists tend to argue that evidence can be used to support or invalidate the claims investigated by research and thereby produce theoretical accounts of the social world that are more or less accurate. Other social scientists will tend to argue that our theoretical orientations (and the value judgements and taken-for-granted assumptions that they contain) shape the processes of social scientific enquiry to such an extent that we can never claim to produce a straightforwardly 'accurate' account of the social world. Instead, they suggest that social scientific knowledge is always produced from a particular standpoint and will inevitably reflect the assumptions of this.

Some of the implications of these points are discussed further in section 7.2, 'Using evidence to support your argument'. For now, what you need to grasp is that essay writing in the social sciences is distinguished by its emphasis on the use of research evidence to support arguments and its emphasis on theory as central to the process by which we build accounts of the social world. Your own writing will need to engage with both elements.

### 3.3 Common errors in essays

Having identified what distinguishes a social science essay we can return to the more practical task of how to write one. This process is elaborated in the chapters that follow, but before getting into the details of this, we should think about what commonly goes wrong in essay writing.

Perhaps the most common mistakes in essay writing, all of which can have an impact on your marks, are:

- failure to observe the word limit (where this is specified);
- failure to answer the question;
- poor structure;
- poor use of social scientific skills (such as handling theory and evidence); and
- poor grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Although less common, one further error is also worth mentioning since it can result in an essay failing:

- failure to write using your own words.

Let's think about these in more detail. As you will probably realize, observing the word limit is more difficult than it sounds. Further advice on this matter is available in section 10.1 but the simplest advice is always to check whether there is a word limit and what this is, and then to be ruthless with yourself, focusing only on the material that is most pertinent to the question.

Failure to answer the question also sounds easy enough to avoid but you might be surprised how easy it is to write a good answer to the wrong question. Most obviously, there is always the risk of misreading the question (suggestions on how to avoid this can be found in section 5.2). However, it is frequently the case that questions will 'index' a wider debate and will want you to review and engage with this. Thus, you need to avoid the danger of understanding the question but failing to connect it to the debate and the body of literature to which the question refers (this point is discussed more fully in 'Highlighting major debates and signposting the content of the argument' in section 6.1). Equally, particularly on more advanced undergraduate courses, you are likely to be asked to work from an increasing range of sources. The dangers here include failing to select the most relevant material and failing to reorganize the material in a way that best fits the question. In consequence, make sure that you take time to read the question properly to ensure that you understand what is being asked. Next, think carefully about whether there is a debate that 'lies behind' the question. Then be sure to identify the material that addresses the question most fully.

An effective structure is important because the person who marks your essay will need to understand what is going on. For instance, a list of unconnected ideas and examples is likely to confuse, and will certainly fail to impress. The simplest way to avoid this is to follow the kind of essay writing conventions outlined in later chapters of this guide. Chapter 7 is particularly relevant here but you will also need to keep in mind the importance of a well-written introduction and conclusion to an effectively structured argument (see Chapters 6 and 8).

While a well-structured argument is central to any essay, social science essays also need to demonstrate an effective use of social scientific skills. Perhaps the most

obvious of these skills is the ability to deploy theory and evidence in an appropriate manner (as you saw in the previous section, this is what distinguishes social scientific essay writing from that in other fields). However, particularly as you move on to more advanced undergraduate courses, you should also keep in mind the need to demonstrate such things as confidence in handling social scientific concepts and vocabulary; an awareness of major debates, approaches and figures in your field; the ability to evaluate competing arguments; and an awareness of potential uncertainty, ambiguity and the limits of knowledge in your subject. These are important because they indicate your ability to work creatively with the tools of the social scientist's trade (these issues are addressed throughout the following chapters but see, in particular, sections 7.2 and 7.3).

Social scientific skills are things you can expect to learn in your undergraduate studies. The ability to spell, punctuate and use grammar correctly is, generally speaking, something you are expected to have mastered prior to embarking on a degree-level course. As section 10.4 explains, this is really a matter of effective communication. While it is the content of your essay that will win you the most marks, you need to be able spell, punctuate and use grammar effectively in order to communicate what you have to say. Major problems in this area will inevitably hold down your marks so, if this is an issue in your work, it will be a good idea to seek further help.

Finally, it is important to write in your own words because this is the best way in which you can come to understand a topic, and the only way of demonstrating this understanding to your tutor. How to avoid 'plagiarism' (or copying what someone else has already written or said) is dealt with in detail in section 10.5. The important point to remember is that if you do plagiarize, your essay risks receiving a fail grade. You must therefore always put arguments in your own words except when you are quoting someone directly (in which case you must use the appropriate referencing conventions, discussed in Chapter 9). The positive side of what might seem like a draconian rule is that you will remember better what you have put in your own words. This ensures that you will have the fullest understanding possible of your course. If there is an end-of-course exam, such an understanding will be a real asset.

In the light of all the above, we can identify three golden rules for effective social scientific essay writing.

### 3.4 Three golden rules for writing a social science essay

---

*Rule 1:* Write your answer in your own words.

*Rule 2:* Answer the question that is asked, observing any word limit.

*Rule 3:* Think about content, structure and social scientific skills.

#### SUMMARY

- A basic social science essay has the following: a title, an introduction, a main section, a conclusion, and a list of references.
- Essays in the social sciences are distinguished by their emphasis on the use of evidence to evaluate arguments and the use of theory to build accounts of the social world.
- There is some debate in the social sciences on the relationship between theory and evidence.
- There are three golden rules of essay writing:
  - 1 Write your answer in your own words.
  - 2 Answer the question that is asked.
  - 3 Think about structure and social scientific skills as well as content.