

## Reading and writing for the social sciences: How to interpret and marshal the literature, rather than be terrorized by it

N.A.J. Taylor\*

Undergraduates are seldom taught how to be a student of the Social Sciences. The lack of emphasis on teaching Social Science as a language is an oversight of many scholars to equip their students with the skills necessary to usefully approach the existing literature. Quite apart from many excellent courses in research design for final year honours students, I argue that all students should be afforded an opportunity to engage and reflect on what it is to be a social scientist as they do its theories and findings. This note aims to empower the student with confidence in interpreting and marshalling the literature, by dipping into a select number of texts that usefully ask: how do I sustain a reasoned argument? I argue it is through developing effective reading and writing skills that penetrate texts to uncover their central meaning, so that one is not 'terrorized by the literature'.

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*"As a member of an academic community, you should consider yourself as a communicator of a truly great language"<sup>1</sup>.*

Mills also claimed that, "To write is to raise a claim for the attention of readers".

Lack of ready intelligibility has to do almost entirely with confusion by the academic writer about his/her status. The 'young academic' often puts his/her own claim for status before the claim for the reader's attention.

Don't get caught in this trap! How difficult and complex after all is my subject? The answer is often: not so difficult and complex as the way in which you are writing about it. Technical terms and concepts should be used with precision; the writer must get the reader's 'circle of meaning' (what the reader understand by what the writer has said) to coincide with their own.

The language of the discipline must be engaged, understood and adopted, however not at the sacrifice of clarity of expression and/or argument.

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*"What is destructive about admiration of the classics, then, is the halo effect, the belief*

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\* N.A.J. Taylor is doctoral researcher in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, and research associate at La Trobe University's Centre for Dialogue.. Email: [naj.taylor@uq.edu.au](mailto:naj.taylor@uq.edu.au)

1 Mills C.W., 'On Intellectual Craftsmanship', *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959).

*that because a book or article is useful for one purpose, it must have all the virtues".<sup>2</sup>*

You are not hostage to the writer, rather you are often bound by his/her stature – if the writer is not clear, make your personal reading notes so!

Remember, scholars must say something new, whilst connecting it to what's already been said. In this way, academic discourse resembles a 'scientific puzzle', which has been built and learned over (in some instances) centuries. When academics are communicating with each other, there is often a lot of 'assumed knowledge' that might seem impenetrable to the lay reader. Acknowledge that you can overcome this – with time, but more importantly with perseverance.

Zina O'Leary addresses the issues of different *forms* of literature quite neatly – there's a difference between a journal article, a chapter in an edited book, an excerpt from a book, and a graduate introduction to a topic.

If you are being 'terrorised by the literature' (see Howard Becker) that is set, gravitate toward the chapters in edited books, or graduate introductions to subject areas – these more often than not present well-rounded arguments, from introduction to conclusion. Don't just be put off by one difficult journal article or excerpt – persevere... And consult your tutor / lecturer for conceptual help and/or additional readings that might make another approach to the work less daunting!

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*"The literature has the advantage of what is sometimes called ideological hegemony over you".<sup>3</sup>*

If you reject the existing scholarship, you have to explain why you haven't asked those same questions and gotten those same answers – it is *their* approach that seems natural and reasonable, not (necessarily) yours. (This also reiterates the above point on 'assumed knowledge').

Consider your university studies as *cumulative* – linkages between studies and building blocks across studies. Key to utilising this more effectively is: thematic and focussed note taking... C Wright Mills calls this 'a journal', but perhaps it's better termed 'active reading notes'...

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2 Stinchcombe A.L., *Stratification and organization: selected papers*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.363.

3 Becker H.S., 'Terrorised by the literature', *Writing for Social Scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article*, Chicago, US: University of Chicago Press.

*Having done 90% of the work, you can improve the impression your essay makes by 50% by putting in a bit of extra effort.*

Once you've read the readings and done some extra research and thinking, it's time to assemble your notes and formulate your argument – for a presentation, an essay or policy brief.

Most books focus on 'skills of expression', neglecting 'skills of construction'. More basic = content; get the structure and development of your argument right – this includes the integration of argument and evidence. The suggested reading 'on writing' overleaf tries to focus on the latter. (The Malcolm Gladwell review of Charles Tilly is a wonderful piece on reasoning, as well as the beauty of engaging alternate views.)

Recognise that first drafts are often: drowning in detail, forgetting the larger rationale; loose generalisations and propositions; defensive vagueness; formalistic wordiness; verbose language.

When reviewing your work, set aside a chunk of time and adopt a 'cold-eye'. Go for a walk, have a sleep, or simply have (another) stiff drink!

Work down from whole to individual paragraphs, sentences and words. Cogent, focused, developing arguments: focus and progression.

Focus especially at key passages – introduction, conclusion, linking passages. Intro = gives significance (both substantive and scholarly), grab interest; advance thesis or what is to follow, how will tackle problem, then proceed. Conclusion = integrate what has gone before; be substantial and strong – don't rehash passages, but utilise the evidence; lift horizons.

Make the implicit, explicit. And proof read!!!

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Fundamentally, recognise that the literature is penetrable, and only needs to be interpreted – not replicated. Approach it with purpose, and accept that you may formulate the answer, the reading might not 'give it to you'.

Rewrite difficult readings in a way that *you* understand – and start to accumulate these notes in a useable fashion so they become cumulative. Harvest your 'own style' of speaking and writing, and please if you're having trouble, just ask!

## **Further reading:**

“The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses, behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road long before I dance under those lights”.

Muhammad Ali

## ***On reading***

Mills, C Wright (1959), ‘On intellectual craftsmanship’ in *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press.

Gladwell, Malcolm (2006), ‘Here’s why. A sociologist offers an anatomy of explanations,’ *The New Yorker*, review essay on Charles Tilly’s *Why?*

Becker, Howard (1986), ‘Terrorized by the literature’, in *Writing for Social Scientists. How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article*, University of Chicago Press.

O’Leary, Zina, ‘Working with Literature’, in *The Essential Guide to Doing Research*, Sage Publications.

## ***On writing***

*(these concern argument construction, for a guide on expression, find a copy of: Strunk and White, 1979)*

Evans, Harold (1972), ‘Good English’, in *Newsman’s English*, Heinemann Publishers.

Williams, Joseph (1990), ‘Emphasis’, in *Style. Toward clarity and Grace*, University of Chicago.

Strunk, William Jr. & EB White (1979), ‘Elementary Principles of Composition’, in *Elements of Style*, University of Chicago.

Orwell, George, ‘Politics and the English Language’ in Mayer (ed).

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For a brilliant essay on the importance of reasoning in forming arguments and retelling of stories, I highly recommend:

Tilly C., *Why?*, New Jersey, US: Princeton University Press, 2006.