



General Advice and Key Characteristics¹

Taking a Sociological and Criminological Perspective

Criminology is a cross-disciplinary field that examines the making of laws, the nature and extent of crime, the causes of crime, and society's effort to control crime through the criminal and juvenile justice systems. Research and theories in criminology draws from the social sciences (e.g., economics, political science, psychology, and sociology) history, philosophy and biology. Students in this field come to understand the difference between criminal justice (government definitions, perspectives, and responses to crime) and criminology (theories of causation).

Criminology is considered a sub-discipline of sociology; therefore, criminology students must write from a sociological perspective. Sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts. Since human behavior is shaped by social factors, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture. Sociology students write to describe, analyze, and explain social phenomena. Sociological criminology students write to describe, analyze, and explain crime and criminal justice.

Argument and Thesis

Writing in criminology most often means constructing well-documented arguments. Strong criminological writing has a defensible thesis that is supported by evidence. Effective thesis statements are:

- clear, concise, and easy to understand;
- complex enough to require that the writer demonstrate its validity;
- relevant, and in response to an ongoing academic discussion;
- shaped and supported by evidence and research, rather than bias or opinion.

Summary, Synthesis, and Application

As a student writing in criminology courses, you will be asked to *summarize* articles, *synthesize* source material, and *apply* theories to particular cases. These three main tasks—summary, synthesis, and application—characterize not only the take-home essays you will be assigned but also the in-class essay exams you will write. Summary requires that you identify the key main points of the source article and that you condense and reorganize the original content in your own words. Synthesis requires that you put source material into conversation, using the source material to make broader observations about trends in the literature. Application requires that you analyze a particular case through a theoretical lens, an act that requires that you first have a strong understanding of the theory.

Note that all three of these writing tasks require that you become a careful, critical reader. Reading takes practice and requires that you develop specific reading strategies.

¹Handout Sources:

Cullick, Jonathan S. and Terry Myers Zawacki. *Writing in the Disciplines: Advice and Models*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. D-31-38. Print.

Johnson, William A.; Richard P. Rettig; Gregory M. Scott; and Stephen M. Garrison. 2006. *The Sociology Student Writer's Manual*. 5th ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Evidence

As an empirical field, criminology accepts documented and carefully collected evidence. Whether you are making a critical argument about a text or set of texts, a theoretical argument, or a data-oriented argument, you must substantiate your argument with evidence. *Ask yourself, "how do I know this?"*

Criminological evidence is drawn from the social sciences (e.g., economics, political science, psychology, and sociology) history, philosophy, law, and biology. Accepted evidence generally falls into two categories. Even if you are writing a paper whose argument is based on reading of secondary texts, you should be aware of these types of data:

- Quantitative data measure subjects' or objects' behaviors or characteristics that differ in quantity. Quantitative data are expressed numerically and often are based on experiments, content analysis of written documents, surveys, and statistics. For example, you might look at how many people in a particular group commit crimes or at incarceration rates.
- Qualitative data focus on variables that differ in quality rather than kind. Qualitative data—often based on observation, interviews, and texts—express qualities of behavior and can be used to understand patterns descriptive of a behavior. For example you may look at gang members' perceptions of gang membership or at the experience of probation officers in rural areas.

Generally, personal opinion or personal anecdotes are not appropriate evidence in a sociological argument; emphasize the research you or others have done, not your own experiences.

Documentation

Writers in sociology use the American Sociological Association (ASA) format for citation. Developed by professionals in the field, this documentation style allows writers to document consistently those aspects of source materials that most matter to the discipline. For example, ASA style places importance on authorship and on time and its passage. Because ASA format for citation is a complex and strict citation system, refer to a style guide such as the *American Sociological Association Style Guide* (4th ed.).

Using proper ASA style for citation allows you to:

- join a community of writers and readers who share certain values and a common citation system.
- build your credibility as a writer and researcher.
- provide readers access to your sources.
- make clear where your ideas end and another's begin. Whether you are quoting, summarizing, or paraphrasing in your own words, you *must* cite your sources. Even if you do not intend to plagiarize, if you do not properly cite your sources, you have plagiarized.

Common Writing Tasks

Summary: Annotated Bibliographies and Short Summaries

Upper-division course work in criminology often requires writing an annotated bibliography that includes brief summaries of the literature. Annotated bibliographies include a correct citation in ASA format, as well as a summary of the source, including the findings, the methodology, and any limitations. A well-written annotated bibliography is an excellent tool for managing your sources and identifying their potential roles in research-based papers.

Synthesis: Literature Review

Researching a criminological question or topic starts with the literature. Literature refers to the research and writing that has investigated a similar question or topic. What do other researchers have to say about the issue? What is already known? What isn't known? Most important, the literature review moves

beyond summary of each individual source—the writer synthesizes the source material to demonstrate broader trends. The literature review focuses on these broad trends, not on the individual sources.

Synthesis: Research Paper Based on Readings

Identifying a question or problem

A key step in writing a research paper is identifying a question or problem worth investigating, a step that requires a lot of reading and note taking. Good researchers ask questions that avoid simple yes/no answers. For example, you might formulate questions that ask:

- What is the impact of mobile technologies on the jury's decision making process?
- To what degree are mentorship programs an effective model for reducing recidivism?

Research based on readings

Some research papers may invite you to familiarize yourself with the literature and to perform an analysis of this literature to argue for a particular perspective on a social issue. For example, a professor may ask you to present one potential solution to the problem of online bullying or may invite you to investigate and analyze current law with regard to a specific issue. These papers require careful reading and synthesis of textual evidence from acceptable sources.

Application: Application or Testing of a Theory

Some criminology writing assignments ask you to apply a theory (sometimes called an argument or perspective) to a particular case. For example, you may be asked to apply Rational Choice Theory or Conflict Theory to a particular case. Before you successfully can *apply a theory* to a case study, it is imperative that you have a good understanding of the theory, under what conditions it originally was constructed (e.g., is it only supposed to apply to a certain type of behavior or crime?), and what it attempts to explain. Once you have a good understanding of the theory, you can apply the theory to a specific case study that focuses on a particular unit of analysis (i.e. social group). When applying a theory to a particular example, keep in mind that you must analyze the example as it compares to the theory. That is, what does the theory help you to understand about the example? What does the theory fail to help you understand (where is it not a good fit)?

The *testing a theory* paper is similar to the applying a theory paper except that your purpose in testing a theory is to determine the veracity and usefulness of the theory. Do particular case studies confirm, disconfirm, or partially confirm the theory? You are therefore taking an evaluative approach in both types of papers: application papers evaluate a case study through the lens of a particular theory; testing papers evaluate a theory by trying it out on case studies to determine whether or not the theory's hypothesis holds.

Some Tips

The Writing Center

Good writers take advantage of readers who give thoughtful feedback. A tutor from the Writing Center can be helpful at any stage of the process: understanding your assignment, brainstorming ideas, organizing your research, addressing professor feedback, and editing your prose. Visit www.umt.edu/writingcenter or stop by Lommasson 271 to schedule an appointment.

Questions to Ask of Your Draft

As you write and receive feedback on your papers, consider asking the following questions (not all questions are applicable to all types of assignments):

- Have I presented facts in an objective and balanced manner?
- Does my paper present an argument in which I support a certain perspective, claim, or conclusion? Do I make my thesis clear?
- Does my paper demonstrate that I did the necessary reading?

- Do I use evidence from reading or research to support my claims?
- Does my essay have meaningful organization? Does my paper smoothly transition the reader from one idea to the next?
- Do I waste space on excessive summary of sources? Do I make purposeful choices about when to summarize, paraphrase, and quote primary and secondary sources?
- Do I distinguish my ideas from those of the authors/theories/articles I discuss? Do I make it clear where other's ideas end and where my ideas begin?
- Do I use proper ASA format for my paper and in documenting sources? Are the headings and subheadings correct? Is everything formatted the way it should be?
- If I am writing a data-oriented research paper, does my paper follow the accepted format for a sociological research paper: Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, References?

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

When writing a paper for a criminology course, take care to avoid the following common pitfalls:

- *Flawed arguments* – Avoid three common flawed sociological arguments: arguing only from the perspective of the individual while ignoring social conditions, attributing patterns in behavior to “human nature,” and explaining behavior as caused by “society” in general without looking at the societal processes at work.
- *Excessive summarizing/lack of analysis* – Your task is to move beyond mere summary to help a reader understand your evaluation and analysis of the texts or data.
- *Lack of an adequately complex thesis* – A good thesis moves your reader beyond a simple observation. It asserts an arguable perspective that requires some work on your part to demonstrate its validity.
- *Lack of adequate support* – A well-crafted thesis requires substantiation in the form of acceptable evidence. Often, if your thesis doesn't make a complex, arguable claim, the act of substantiation becomes difficult. Take care to develop a thesis that will require purposeful use of evidence.
- *Plagiarism* – Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work or ideas, in any form, without proper acknowledgement. Whether you are quoting, summarize, or paraphrasing in your own words, you *must* cite your sources. Even if you do not intend to plagiarize, if you do not properly cite your sources, you have plagiarized.
- *Use of unreliable electronic sources* – Take care to rigorously evaluate your sources, particularly ones from the Internet. Ask who authored the information, who published or sponsored the information, how well the information reflects the author's knowledge of the field, and whether the information is accurate and timely.
- *Use of personal opinion or anecdotes* – Personal opinions or anecdotes generally do not qualify as rigorous and appropriate sociological evidence in support of a claim. Your opinion does not qualify as data.
- *Improper use of a theory* – If you are applying or testing a particular theory, be sure you have a good understanding of this theory.
- *Excessive quoting* – When quoting a source in order to provide evidence, use only the relevant part of the quotation. When you establish a claim/assertion and provide textual support, be sure to explain the relationship between the quotation and the assertion. Your reader can't read your mind.
- *Shifting verb tense* – Take care to shift verb tense only when necessary. Science's strong sense of timing requires that you accurately reflect that research was performed in that past and that certain knowledge is current.
- *Passive voice* – Use active voice as often as possible. Active voice generally is more concise and lively than passive voice and makes the social actors explicit.
- *Reference to the author by his/her first name* – It is customary and respectful to refer to the author using his/her last name.