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Sociology Students as Storytellers: What Narrative Sociology and C. Wright Mills Can Teach Us about Writing in the Discipline

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Keywords:	Writing across curriculum, Student writing, Scholarship of teaching and learning, Sociological imagination
Abstract:	<p>The Writing in the Disciplines (WID) approach encourages writing instruction in specific majors so that students learn the writing conventions of their discipline. As writing instructors, however, the role of the sociologist is problematic. Not only has standard sociological writing been jargon-laden, it has privileged a clinical style of writing. Thus, we ask whether learning sociology also means learning how to write poorly or at least narrowly. Drawing from narrative sociology, we suggest that mainstream sociological writing should be viewed as a writing genre – one of many genres that students, and sociologists themselves, can choose from. Framing sociologists as both truth tellers and storytellers, we invite sociology instructors to consider at least three alternative genres for assignment in the classroom: life stories, fiction stories, and visual stories. Finally, we offer C. Wright Mills as a model for how to think like a sociologist, while still writing well.</p>

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Sociology Students as Storytellers:

What Narrative Sociology and C. Wright Mills Can Teach Us about

Writing in the Discipline

This paper focuses on a persistent question in the teaching of sociology: how should we approach writing instruction in the undergraduate sociology classroom? This question has generated considerable attention in this journal, most recently a 2013 special issue on writing instruction (*Teaching Sociology* Volume 41, Issue 1). If sociology instructors assign writing, which it appears most of us do (Grauerholz, Eisele and Stark 2013), we instructors expect, or at least yearn for, good writing from our students. But, with notable exceptions, most sociologists themselves do not write very well. Indeed, for decades, sociologists have bemoaned the state of sociological writing (e.g. Mills 1959, Reed 1989). The conclusion of many scholars is that we have learned to write without much clarity and with considerable detachment because we want to establish ourselves as legitimate social *scientists* (Mills 1959; Reed 1989; Richardson 2000). This tendency makes our role as the bearers of disciplinary standards quite problematic. If our task is to teach students how to write like a sociologist, are we destined to teach our students to write poorly?

In this paper, we will delve into this question by considering how the current state of sociological writing came to be, and how it came to be expected in the sociological classroom. We will begin by discussing the Writing in the Disciplines movement, which encourages sociology instructors (and instructors in other disciplines) to consider writing instruction alongside their teaching of disciplinary thought. Writing in the disciplines allows students to synthesize field-specific ideas and learn disciplinary standards and conventions. Hence, the task

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2
3 of the sociology instructor is to socialize students into disciplinary ways of thinking *and writing*.
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5 The second part of the paper examines how the scientific mode of thought came to dominate
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7 sociology, marginalizing more narrative and interpretive approaches. As such, mathematical and
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9 scientific ways of writing and reasoning came to be seen as the most legitimate, if not the only
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11 legitimate way of doing sociology. In the 1980s, a group of sociologists, inspired by the
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13 ‘narrative’ turn in other disciplines, began questioning the hegemony of scientific reasoning and
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15 the detached style of sociological writing. In their view, sociologists were not just scientists; they
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17 were storytellers who used different discourses and genres to speak their truth about the social
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19 world.
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24 In the third part of this paper, we use these insights to suggest a new way of approaching
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26 writing instruction in the classroom. Recognizing that science is just one language through which
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28 we narrate sociological stories, we ask the reader to consider introducing other writing genres to
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30 undergraduate sociology students, namely life stories, fiction stories, and visual stories. In so
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32 doing, students might learn that there is not one way to narrate a story and not one way to do
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34 sociology. In the conclusion of the paper, we turn to C. Wright Mills, who demonstrates how to
35
36 write sociology clearly without the scientific posturing with which the field has been so
37
38 preoccupied. In short, he guides the aspiring sociologist to become a kind of renegade
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40 sociological storyteller – one who knows the disciplinary rules of the game, but breaks them
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42 anyway.
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49 WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINE OF SOCIOLOGY

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51 When the first author began thinking about writing instruction in sociology, she joined a
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53 Writing in the Disciplines (WID) group on campus that was led by the second author, who also
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3 directs the Student Writing Center at [Authors' Institution]. The terrain of writing pedagogy was
4 new and exciting for the first author, but also littered with acronyms that confused rather than
5 clarified how she might approach writing instruction in the classroom. Mastering the acronyms,
6 and hence the approaches to college writing, helped the first author define (and later question)
7 how we teach writing in the discipline of sociology. Thus, before tackling the writing
8 conventions of sociologists and the teaching of these conventions to students of sociology, we
9 begin with some background on the movements informing writing instruction at the university
10 level, and the WID movement in particular.
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21 The WID approach has its roots in the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement,
22 which surfaced in the 1970s and is still very much in vogue today. WAC recognizes that writing
23 is not simply a method of communication or a technical skill, but a “mode of learning” (Emig
24 1977). That is, writing plays a central role in helping students to process, understand and
25 evaluate ideas (Herrington 1981). Because writing is understood by WAC to be central to
26 learning, a key premise of the movement is that writing should not be limited to first-year
27 composition classes and that it should occur *across the curriculum* and beyond the first year of
28 college.¹ WAC, or the ‘writing to learn’ movement, is closely connected to two other approaches
29 to college writing, namely ‘writing to engage’ and ‘writing to communicate’ (also known as
30 Writing in the Disciplines, or WID). ‘Writing to engage’ understands writing as a means to
31 develop critical thinking skills, whereas WID views writing as a means to communicate within
32 the conventions of a particular discipline. Mapping these approaches onto Bloom’s taxonomy,
33 the WAC Clearinghouse associates ‘writing to learn’ (WAC) with types of thinking like
34 remembering and understanding, ‘writing to engage’ with applying and analyzing, and ‘writing
35 to communicate’ (WID) with creating and evaluating (Kiefer et al. 2000-2018).
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[Table 1 here]

Because each approach to college writing is related to different types of learning, the kinds of assignments associated with each approach vary (see Table 1). Typical assignments associated with the ‘writing to learn’ approach might be reading journals or one-minute papers, which offer students time and space to work through course material (Karcher 1988). These are not the kinds of formal writing assignments that demand that students produce a polished piece of writing. Rather, they are low-stakes writing assignments that help students grapple with basic concepts and ideas. Writing to engage might include more focused writing assignments, such as reflection papers and critiques. Given that WID is about teaching disciplinary conventions, WID-related writing assignments vary by discipline. They may include lab reports, case studies, literature reviews, or research proposals. Regardless of format, these assignments are intended to help students grapple with disciplinary thought, as well as disciplinary language and writing conventions.

Theoretically, writing in the sociology classroom might involve all three approaches to writing instruction. An in-class writing prompt in Introduction to Sociology, for example, might help students work through the idea of racial formation, which would typify the ‘writing to learn’ or WAC approach. Other ‘writing to learn’ assignments that have been documented in *Teaching Sociology* include: focused freewriting (Coker and Scarboro 1990; Hylton and Allen 1993; Kaufman 2013), informal writing (Hudd, Smart and Delohery 2011), and journal writing (Hylton and Allen 1993; Karcher 1988; Picca, Starks and Gunderson 2013). For the ‘writing to engage’ approach, a sociology instructor might assign a formal response paper to a reading assignment, which might help students hone their reading comprehension and ready them for serious in-class discussions. Examples of ‘writing to engage’ in *Teaching Sociology* typically come from writing

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3 intensive courses (Grauerholz 1999). Finally, a research proposal might help introduce students
4 to the language, style and format typical of sociological writing. This assignment would fall into
5
6 the WID camp to the extent that its purpose is to familiarize students with disciplinary
7
8 conventions. In another example, Coker and Scarborough (1990) discuss a Sociology of Religion
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10 course wherein students are asked to attend a religious event and write up field notes of their
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12 observations, mimicking the kind of writing that researchers do in the field.
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17 Of the three approaches to writing in the sociology classroom, we are concerned with the
18
19 last approach. Not only does the WID approach reflect disciplinary ways of thinking and writing,
20
21 but it also reflects the institutional priorities of the discipline. Articles in *Teaching Sociology*
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23 emphasize the crucial role of sociology instructors as “socializing agents”, teaching students how
24
25 to think and write like a sociologist. According to Hudd, Sardi and Lopriore (2013:33-4), for
26
27 example, sociology instructors should help students “recognize and then replicate disciplinary
28
29 discourse conventions” and offer them “guidance on the style and forms of writing that are most
30
31 commonly used in the discipline.” Likewise Anderson and Holt (1990:183) argue: “When we
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33 relegate [the responsibility for teaching writing] to English departments, we lose the opportunity
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35 to socialize students into sociological writing.” These ideas echo the American Sociological
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37 Association, which identifies learning to “write in an appropriate social science style” as a key
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39 disciplinary objective (2005:62). But what exactly does it mean to write like a sociologist?
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45 On a conceptual level, writing like a sociologist demands “a deeper contemplation of
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47 invisible systems” (Hudd, Sardi and Lopriore 2013:36), or the invisible social forces that
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49 influence people’s life choices and life chances. On a rhetorical level, it demands a writing
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51 format and style that is *conventional* to the discipline. Most sociologists write academic books,
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53 journal articles, and research reports. Thus, it is not uncommon for sociology instructors to
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3 assign literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, and research papers, which mimic the look
4 and feel of academic writing (Hudd, Sardi and Lopriore 2013: 40). Each of these assignments is
5 an example of *transactional* writing, which requires that students synthesize, evaluate, and
6 analyze (Britton 1978; Grauerholz 1999).² Transactional writing is characteristically detached
7 from its subject matter and devoid of emotional reasoning (Grauerholz, Eisele and Stark
8 2013:48). It can also be downright stodgy and decidedly obtuse, which is why sociologists are
9 often criticized for not writing very well. C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000) offers perhaps the
10 strongest (and most famous) critique in this regard:

21 As you may have noticed, turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social
22 sciences. I suppose those who use it believe they are imitating ‘physical science’, and are
23 not aware that much of that prose is not altogether necessary. It has in fact been said with
24 authority that there is a ‘serious crisis in literacy’ – a crisis in which social scientists are
25 very much involved (p. 217).

33 The complaints of sociological writing did not end with Mills. A 1987 editorial in the *Journal of*
34 *Health and Social Behavior* bemoaned the manuscripts coming into the journal, observing that
35 much of the writing in them was “verbose, jargon-laden and harder to understand than its
36 intrinsic content requires” (Journal of Health and Social Behavior 1987:vi). “Few disciplines,”
37 note Anderson and Holt (1990:179), “have been so frequently lampooned for their prose.”

44 According to Reed (1989:4), the causes of poor writing in sociology are varied and
45 include “not knowing how to communicate clearly” or simply being indifferent and “not taking
46 pains.” He also suggests that sociologists are simply not rewarded for good writing, a claim
47 echoed by Becker (1986:72), who notes: “Editors and professors reject papers that use statistics
48 incorrectly, but only sigh over those badly written.” But by far the most troublesome cause, one
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3 that has been suggested by Mills (1959), Reed (1989) and Becker (1986) alike, is that
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5 sociologists want to show that they are credible social *scientists*. Thus, “a clotted, ponderous,
6
7 stereotyped style is a rhetorical device, a badge meant to signal that one is an initiate, entitled to
8
9 speak with authority” (Reed 1989:5-6). Or, as Becker (1986:34) explains: “If we write in a classy
10
11 way, then, we show that we are generally smarter than ordinary people, have finer sensibilities,
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13 understand things they don’t, and thus should be believed.” (We will turn to Mills’ thoughts in
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15 this regard later in this article.)
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19 The idea of adopting a particular writing style to prove one’s belonging in a sociological
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21 community is critical to our discussion of sociology students, who we have already observed as
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23 undergoing a process of socialization in the sociology classroom. If jargon-laden writing and
24
25 “polysyllabic prose” are key markers of the sociological initiate, we might be equating good
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27 sociology with poor writing (hence the title of Michael Billig’s 2013 book *Learn to Write Badly:*
28
29 *How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*). Indeed, Roberts (1993:320) suggests that sociology
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31 instructors are often appalled by their students’ writing precisely because students are trying to
32
33 mimic us! How do we socialize students into the discipline of sociology, then, when its writing
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35 conventions are so problematic? We suggest that a focus on good sociological storytelling might
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37 offer a way out of this conundrum. For this, we turn to another intellectual movement that
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39 acknowledged the importance of narrative to the discipline.
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47 THE SOCIOLOGIST AS STORYTELLER

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49 As the 1970s WAC movement blossomed, another intellectual movement was underfoot
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51 that has relevance for our discussion. By 1980, many academic disciplines had taken a narrative
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53 turn, which questioned scholarly ways of knowing and various methods of representation.
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3 Critiques of scientific authority and experiments in new modes of writing emerged as a result.
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5 Narrative scholarship had a decidedly postmodern bent, asserting that there was no “true”
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7 representation of reality. As Orbuch (1997:466) explains, “For narrative scholars, there is no
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9 ‘real’ event ... Instead, narratives are ‘real’ events as presented, and narrative analysis pays
10
11 special attention to the form, coherence, and structure of these stories.” Science was, in this
12
13 sense, just one way of constructing and telling a story about the world. In this intellectual milieu,
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15 narrative sociology emerged, borrowing heavily from the discipline’s symbolic interactionist and
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17 feminist traditions.³ Narrative sociology called into question the conventions of scientific
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19 reasoning and writing in sociology, offering alternative analytic frameworks and narrative
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21 formats for representing the social world.
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26 According to narrative sociologists, mainstream sociologists write in the scientific
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28 tradition in order to claim legitimacy or authority. As societies modernized, the state and social
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30 institutions came to view quantification and the language of science and mathematics as the most
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32 authoritative voice. In this process, stories were delegitimized, “viewed as imprecise, ambiguous,
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34 evocative, and metaphorical” (Maines 1993:19). Here, in the rationalization of Western culture
35
36 and the rise of modern disciplines, we see the sharp demarcation between the social sciences and
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38 the humanities. It was not simply that these lines were drawn. A kind of hierarchy developed
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40 with the hard sciences on top, the social sciences in the middle, and the humanities on the
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42 bottom. In the words of Richardson (2000:925): “Fiction was ‘false’ because it invented reality,
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44 unlike science, which was ‘true’ because it purportedly ‘reported’ ‘objective’ reality in an
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46 unambiguous sense.” In short, the more logical, scientific and mathematical the writing, the more
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48 credible, authoritative and esteemed it could claim to be. Hence, in his 1935 article in the
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50 *American Journal of Sociology*, Read Bain asserted that “the only certainties transcending
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3 common sense in sociology...are statistical in nature. The degree to which such methodology
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5 can be applied to social data will determine whether sociology is to become a natural science or
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7 remain forever a bastard discipline” (p. 486).
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10 Jerome Bruner’s distinction between narrative and logico-scientific modes of thought
11
12 (1986) is useful here. According to Bruner, the *logico-scientific* mode of thought is rooted in
13
14 verifiable truth and formal rules of inquiry to produce consistent results. In contrast, the
15
16 *narrative* mode of thought “consists of believable stories or accounts and focuses on action,
17
18 agency and consciousness, which are processed by a story structure” (Maines 1993:28). As the
19
20 discipline developed, sociology embraced the logico-scientific mode of thought over the
21
22 narrative. Maines (1993) argues that this was not always the case and points to Thomas and
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24 Znaniecki’s *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-20) as an example of a time when
25
26 the discipline once held narrative data in higher esteem. The use of narrative data was
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28 delegitimized in the 1930s, however, as the discipline tried to assert itself as a social *science*.
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30 After that time, the discipline adopted a particular way of thinking and writing that was grounded
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32 in numerical reasoning and positivist logic.
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38 We can view the numerical reasoning that sociologists came to favor not simply as a
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40 particular way of thinking, but also as a literary device or rhetorical choice. Historically, of
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42 course, scientific writing was seen as devoid of or distinct from rhetoric. Gusfield (1976) points
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44 to the “windowpane theory,” which held that scientific writing was just about representing the
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46 world as it was, as if seen through a clear windowpane. Rhetorical devices, in contrast, were seen
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48 as belonging to the world of politics, advertising, and literature. But scholars came to question
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50 the distinction between research and rhetoric, exposing scientific writing as a kind of literary
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52 genre with its own rhetorical conventions. In the words of Gusfield (1976):
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3 To be scientific is to exercise a definite form over the language in use, to write in a
4 particular way, which shows the audience that the writer is ‘doing science.’ The writer
5 must persuade the audience that the results of the research are *not* literature, are *not* a
6 production of the style of presentation. The style of non-style is itself the style of science.
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12 There is a literary art involved in scientific presentation (p. 17).
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14 To write scientifically was (and is) to write for peer-reviewed journals, to highlight methods and
15 data, to document institutional affiliation and credentials, and to adopt a clinical and detached
16 tone. Describing the tone of the social scientist, Gusfield (1976:21) writes: “His [sic] language
17 must not be ‘interesting,’ his descriptions colorful or his words a clue to any emotion which
18 might be aroused in the audience... The language is flat, prosaic and descriptive without
19 imagery.” Gusfield (1976) also emphasizes how social scientists write passively, taking
20 themselves out of the text in ways that make invisible how their own biases and choices
21 influence research. And this is not simply in studies of a quantitative design; it also occurs in
22 qualitative writing. As Richardson (2000:928) notes, ethnographers historically have used third-
23 person voice to distinguish their studies from travelers’ and missionaries’ reports. The authors
24 exist only for a brief moment in the preface of the study to establish their “‘I am a researcher’
25 credentials” (Richardson 2000:928). Acknowledging the rhetoric of science, argues Gusfield
26 (1976:31) does not render science “corrupt and useless.” It simply recognizes that science frames
27 and represents the world in a particular way, and this “interpretation involves theater – it
28 involves a performance” (p. 32).
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49 Sociologists, then, are not simply truth tellers, devoid of personal, methodological and
50 rhetorical standpoints. Narrative sociology views sociologists more as storytellers, as “spinners
51 of professional tales that we call theories”, and as “practitioners who are skilled at arranging
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3 narrative elements into what we call journal articles and research reports” (Maines 1993:32).
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5 And if journal articles and research reports are but one way of telling a story, they may not be the
6
7 only form the sociological story can take. An approach to sociology grounded in the narrative
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9 rather than the logico-scientific tradition might look like some subgenres of ethnography or life
10
11 history, which depart from the hypothesis-driven and theory-building orientation of mainstream
12
13 sociology (Maines 1993:34). The narrative approach holds that the scientific and narrative modes
14
15 of thought are equally valid. That is, both are “‘rational’ ways of making meaning” (Richardson
16
17 1990:118) and an “interpretive process, which differ only in how those processes are formatted”
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19 (Maines 1993:28). Richardson (2000:927-8) admits that the scientific conventions of
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21 sociological writing “hold tremendous material and symbolic power over social scientists,”
22
23 increasing the “probability of one’s work being accepted into ‘core’ social science journals.”
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25 But, she continues, “they are not prima facie evidence of greater – or lesser – truth value or
26
27 significance than social science writing using other conventions” (p. 928).
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33 If the scientific and narrative modes of thought are equally valid, they are also equally
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35 suspect. Both are just as good, but neither can fully capture the truth. For this reason, Maines
36
37 (1993) argues that sociology can only be a science of interpretation. Indeed, one of the values of
38
39 the narrative turn in sociology is that it exposes how knowledge gets constructed. It peels back
40
41 the curtain on scientific production to show that everything is just an interpretation, a
42
43 representation, a story. Some narrative sociologists take this to the extreme, arguing that there is
44
45 no objective reality – just different ways of representing reality. Like Reed (1989:9), who
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47 describes himself as “just an old, country positivist”, we would like “to stop well short of that”.
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49 One does not have to be a postmodernist to appreciate the value of narrative approaches, which
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51 offer a window into the complexity of social life while using familiar storytelling conventions. In
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3 any event, an emphasis on storytelling might help orient our students to the fact that even the
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5 most advanced statistical pieces published in the *American Journal of Sociology* are just
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7 “stories” that we tell about the world. And those stories might take other forms.
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10 11 12 THE STORIES WE TELL 13

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15 If sociologists are storytellers who are theoretically and rhetorically equipped to tell
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17 different kinds of narratives about the social world, what other writing styles and formats might
18
19 we explore? To put this more directly, if we are not constrained to writing research reports and
20
21 using a detached, clinical style of writing, what other kinds of writing might we ask of ourselves
22
23 and of our students? Richardson (2000:929) gives us some ideas that fall under what she calls
24
25 “creative analytic practices.” As opposed to expressive and transactional writing, these practices
26
27 would constitute a form of writing that Britton (1978) calls *poetic writing*, which engages both
28
29 creative and analytic modes of thought. Grauerholz (1999) argues that poetic writing may be
30
31 even more beneficial for developing a sociological imagination than transactional writing
32
33 because it requires that students connect the personal and the social, and that they develop a
34
35 more empathetic and culturally aware stance. Yet in their analysis of what types of writing are
36
37 assigned in the sociology classroom, Grauerholz, Eisele and Stark (2013) found that less than
38
39 one percent focused on creative writing. Below, we provide an overview of three alternative
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41 writing formats that sociologists might incorporate into their classroom, which might develop
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43 students’ analytic *and* creative abilities. Then, we suggest how these formats provide sociology
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45 instructors the opportunity to engage students in open dialogue about how to write and how to do
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47 sociology.
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53 54 *Life Stories* 55 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Having students write life stories, in which they sociologically analyze pieces of their
4 biography, has a counterpart in the sociological literature, namely autoethnography.

5
6
7 Autoethnography is defined by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) as “an approach to research
8 and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*)
9 in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (paragraph 1).⁴ Autoethnographies are equal
10 mix autobiography and ethnography, but are distinct from both to the extent that they reflect
11 systematically and analytically on some autobiographical experience. Autoethnographies have
12 oft been associated with post-modern approaches to sociology. But as Anderson (2006) argues,
13 autoethnographies need not forsake theory-building and knowledge claims. Indeed, elements of
14 this genre have a long history in the discipline. In the Chicago School of Sociology, for example,
15 many ethnographers studied cultural settings and workplaces of which they were members,
16 though they rarely featured themselves in their texts (Anderson 2006). Given this history and the
17 possibilities for this genre, Anderson (2006) distinguishes between ‘evocative’ and ‘analytic’
18 autoethnography. The former rejects the traditional objective of developing theoretical insight,
19 instead focusing solely on developing an emotional experience for the reader. Analytic
20 autoethnography, in contrast, is committed to analyzing and theorizing about social phenomena,
21 using one’s personal experience as a point of departure.
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42 Autoethnographies are rarely assigned as texts in the sociology classroom. But *Teaching*
43 *Sociology* documents many instances of using some rendition of the autoethnography as a
44 writing assignment (Adams 1986; Cook 2014; Ingram 1979; Kebede 2009; Nichols 2004;
45 Powers 1998; Ribbens 1993; Riedmann 1991; Stephenson, Stirling and Wray 2015; Stoddart
46 1991). Though the authors do not always refer to these writing assignments as autoethnographies
47 – Stoddart (1991), for example, calls them “lifestories” and Kebede (2009) “sociological
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3 autobiographies” – all of the assignments involve applying sociological ideas to one’s life
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5 history. In almost all cases, the authors are drawn to assigning sociological biographies because
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7 it allows students to practice sociological thinking using data with which they are most familiar,
8
9 namely their life story. These assignments appear not simply in Introductory Sociology courses
10
11 (Adams 1986; Riedmann 1991; Stephenson, Stirling and Wray 2015, Stoddart 1991) but in
12
13 courses like the Sociology of Religion (Ingram 1979) and the Sociology of Education (Powers
14
15 1998). The specific details of the assignment vary. Adams (1986), for example, has students
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17 construct a literal timeline in which they connect their personal and family histories to larger
18
19 socio-cultural trends. King (1987), in contrast, assigns a retrospective autobiography, wherein
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21 students imagine themselves at age 72 to probe how their family and work lives might evolve.
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23 Finally, Stoddart (1991) has everyone in the class write their life stories, which are then
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25 distributed to other students in the class (with names redacted) to analyze sociologically.
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31 Among the advantages of the life story assignment is that it often sparks interest in the
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33 course material (Ingram 1979). On a broader level, the assignment helps students move beyond
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35 individualist and psychological explanations of human behavior to consider social-structural
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37 forces at work in their lives and the lives of others (Cook 2014; Powers 1998; Stephenson,
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39 Stirling and Wray 2015). Finally, the assignment allows students to write dramatically and in
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41 first-person (Ribbens 1993). As Richardson (2000:931) explains, autoethnography requires “such
42
43 fiction-writing techniques as dramatic recall, strong imagery, [and] fleshed-out characters.”
44
45 These techniques give life stories a literary quality that makes them typically more compelling to
46
47 write (and read) than a clinical research report. In this regard, the sociological autobiography
48
49 assignment may contain elements of both the evocative and analytic autoethnography described
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51 by Anderson (2006). Grauerholz and Copenhaver (1994:321) caution that it may be unethical
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3 and unwise to ask students to write about their life experiences when it means disclosing and
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5 dealing with traumatic parts of their past. There is also the related concern of how to ensure
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7 confidentiality in the assignments (Grauerholz and Copenhaver 1994). As such, Stephenson,
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9 Stirling and Wray (2015) require students to complete the ethical approval process so that
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11 students do not risk over-exposure in their autobiographical study. In any case, the life story
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13 assignment offers a way for students to exercise their sociological imaginations while honing a
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15 personal and creative writing voice.
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18 19 *Fiction Stories*

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21 As Rinehart (1998) contends, fiction can often convey lived experience far better than
22
23 scientific language can, making fiction a fertile ground for sociological analysis and writing.
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25 Though there is a long history of studying fictional literature in the discipline, fewer sociologists
26
27 have tried their hand at writing sociological fiction. Among the exceptions is Patricia Leavy, who
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29 has written novels (e.g., *Low-Fat Love*, *American Circumstances*, *Blue*) that draw on
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31 sociological research and themes. Leavy also edits the series *Social Fictions*, which includes
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33 fiction pieces that are informed by sociological research. Finally, fictional stories have been used
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35 by Diversi (1998) to explore the lives of Brazilian street children and Richardson and Lockridge
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37 (1991) to explore the intersection of ethnography and fiction. Sociological writers of fictional
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39 stories usually set their stories in a cultural setting with which they are ethnographically familiar.
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41 Stylistically, they may use “devices such as alternative points of view, deep characterization,
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43 third-person voice, and the omniscient narrator” (Richardson 2000:923). But, again, it is more
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45 common to find sociologists using fiction for theoretical purposes. Sociologists, for example,
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47 have argued for the use of literature as a means to reflect on theoretical questions and even
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49 confirm theoretical insights (Beer 2016; Coser 1972; Longo 2016).
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3 In the sociology classroom, it is not uncommon to assign fictional literature as a way to
4 illustrate and apply sociological concepts (Clowers and Mori 1977; Cosby 1997; Hendershott
5 and Wright 1993; Laz 1996; Moran 1999; Sullivan 1982). Many scholars examining the value of
6 literary fiction in sociology focus on science fiction in particular since both science fiction and
7 sociology probe problems of the social world and visions of a better future (Gerlach and
8 Hamilton 2003; Laz 1996). In most cases involving fiction in the sociology classroom, literature
9 acts as a kind of sociological data with which students might apply concepts learned in class
10 (Sullivan 1982). Fiction can also help bring sociological ideas to life (Gordy and Peary 2005;
11 Moran 1999). Weber (2010), for example, integrates literary fiction into a social theory course,
12 arguing that “literature provides a passionate entryway into the theoretical texts that can initially
13 feel devoid of the energy and emotion that matter to students” (p. 353-354). Finally, fiction can
14 confirm sociological evidence of inequality and introduce a broader diversity of life experience
15 to the classroom, thereby allowing “students to transcend the limits of their particular
16 biographical situation” (Moran 1999:112). In general, reading literature in the sociology
17 classroom has been shown to enhance student learning (Cosbey 1997; Hendershott and Wright
18 1993; Laz 1996; Sullivan 1982).

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40 There are far fewer instances of instructors assigning students to write social science
41 fiction, though there are some exceptions. Lackey (1994), for example, assigns students to write
42 short stories of science fiction. Gordy and Peary (2005), in turn, ask students in a Sociology of
43 Work course to write fiction about themselves as employees ten years in the future. In this
44 assignment, students are asked to develop themselves as a character, explore the future
45 workplace in detail, and apply concepts like alienation, occupational prestige, and work-family
46 conflict. As Gordy and Peary (2005:396) ask: “What better way to show one understands a
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3 discipline and a society than to use sociological knowledge to create a context in which
4 characters interact, reflect and observe their social context?” Asking students to focus on
5 character, setting, and dialogue helps students hone their observational skills, as well as their
6 appreciation for how people are caught up in webs of social relationships and meaning (Gordy
7 and Peary 2005; Lackey 1994). Given the emphasis on social theory and the background
8 research expected of students in each of these assignments, “students learn to connect abstract
9 theories and scientific research to concrete real-life situations” (Lackey 1994:172). Indeed,
10 Lackey (1994) uses this assignment in place of the traditional term paper, contending that
11 students develop the same information literacy and sociological competency in social science
12 fiction writing. Arguably, writing fiction pushes students even further. “Writing fiction,” writes
13 Lackey (1994:166), “requires more than familiarity with sociological knowledge and the
14 situations which illustrate that knowledge. The student-as-author must put herself or himself into
15 the characters’ shoes and live imaginatively in their world. In short, the student-as-author must
16 take the role of the other.”

35 *Visual Stories*

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37 Visual stories are careful observations of the social world through visual means. Often
38 referred to as “visual essays” (Grady 1991, Pauwels 2012) or “visual ethnographic narratives”
39 (Harper 1987), visual stories can take the form of photographic essays, documentary film or
40 interactive webpages that utilize the visual to document the social. Like the autoethnographic
41 genre, visual sociology has a long but lesser known history in sociology. Photographs, for
42 example, occurred often in early articles of the *American Journal of Sociology* (e.g., Bushnell
43 2001). They disappeared from the journal by 1920, however, as the discipline attempted to
44 establish itself as a “legitimate” science (Chaplin 1994; Harper 1988). In most cases, the visual
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3 essay is not just a collection of images. It is sociologically informed, intentionally curated, and
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5 analytically annotated in such a way that the images constitute a sociological analysis. As
6
7 Pauwells (2012:10) explains, images, words, layout and design all “add up to a scientifically
8
9 informed statement.” Douglas Harper’s study of tramps (1981), for example, contains a large
10
11 number of photographs, not as illustrations, but as key elements of Harper’s analysis. And his
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13 visual material is enhanced – in much the same way that a statistical analysis might be – by text
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15 surrounding the images that offer up a keen sociological analysis.
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19 The time for a visual sociology may well have arrived given that our current culture is
20
21 saturated with visual imagery. Knowles and Sweetman (2004) note some of the forces leading to
22
23 this saturation, including the development of inexpensive digital technologies and the
24
25 proliferation of accessible ways of distributing visual material (e.g. social media platforms). For
26
27 this reason, there have been numerous published reports of incorporating visual material into the
28
29 sociology classroom in recent years. By far the most popular classroom exercise that utilizes
30
31 visual material is the analysis of magazine advertisements to understand gender stereotypes
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33 (Curry and Clarke 1983).⁵ But a growing number of courses are incorporating photography into
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35 classroom assignments, as well (Eisen 2012; Grauerholz and Settembrino 2016; Mount 2018;
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37 Sargent and Corse 2013; Whitley 2013). Most of these photography assignments have taken
38
39 place in large survey courses, though Eisen (2012) and Sargent and Corse (2013) suggest ways
40
41 that their assignments may be modified for advanced seminars. All of the assignments involve
42
43 students using photographs to illustrate some course concept or idea. With the exception of
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45 Grauerholz and Settembrino (2016), students must annotate these pictures, providing a
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47 sociological analysis of the scene, object, or person depicted in the photo. In most cases, students
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3 are expected to take the photographs themselves (e.g. Grauerholz and Settembrino 2016),
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5 although Whitley (2013) allows students to find photos on the Internet if they cite them properly.
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8 Assessments of the above assignments suggest high student enthusiasm, appreciation for
9
10 the creative nature of the assignment, and better understanding of sociological concepts and their
11
12 application to the real world (Eisen 2012; Mount 2018; Sargent and Corse 2013; Whitley 2013).
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14 One of the drawbacks of photography, however, is that the ethics of photographing other people
15
16 can be murky. These ethical challenges have been resolved by not displaying the photographs
17
18 publically, restricting students to photographing objects rather than people, and having class
19
20 discussions about the ethics of photographing (and doing research on) marginalized people
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22 (Eisen 2012; Grauerholz and Settembrino 2016; Sargent and Corse 2013; Whitley 2013).
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26 Another issue with using photography in the sociology classroom is that it is seen as un-
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28 sociological, owing perhaps to the fact that photography has an evocative element (Becker 1995;
29
30 Rose 2016). Like more narrative approaches to sociology, it uses character, scene and drama to
31
32 tell a story and does not always “provide the kind of closure and determinacy that sociologists’
33
34 image of science requires” (Grady 1991:35). But this is precisely why photography can be an
35
36 invaluable tool to the sociological storyteller. In short, it does something *different* than a large
37
38 quantitative data set, or even a more conventional qualitative analysis, by “evok[ing] lived
39
40 experience and augment[ing] a sociologist’s own storytelling abilities” (Wynn 2009:450).
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44 Richardson (2000:930) suggests that these and other genres (e.g. drama, museum
45
46 displays, etc.) may become “the most valid and desirable representations, for they invite people
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48 in; they open spaces for thinking about the social.” The purpose, she contends, is not to turn
49
50 sociology students into fictional writers or photographers. It is to encourage students to “accept
51
52 and nurture their own voices” (Richardson 2000:936) while learning sociological insights.
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3 Playing with new writing genres also forces our students to clarify their audience, their objective,
4 and, of course, their words. In this respect, Richardson (2000) urges instructors to ask students to
5 analyze different types of sociological writing – articles published in mainstream sociology
6 journals, articles published in qualitative sociology journals, and pieces presented in alternative
7 outlets. Who is the presumed audience? How is authority claimed? Where is the author? And
8 how is language used? As students consider different genres of sociological writing, they might
9 begin to question the methodological and rhetorical choices of sociologists, to peel back the
10 curtain and see how sociology gets done and how it gets written.
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21 Indeed, there is another profound rationale for including a larger diversity of writing
22 genres in the sociological classroom, namely that it helps demystify the social sciences. By
23 interrogating the scientific discourse of mainstream sociology, science becomes less a monolithic
24 authority that students do not think to question or engage. Students learn better how science gets
25 done – how it is practiced, written up, and polished into ‘facts.’ It involves making choices about
26 who or what to study, how to study it, and how to interpret the results. Its messiness and
27 construction become altogether clearer to the student of sociology. By teaching students that
28 science is simply one type of story, we do not have to forsake our quest for truth or objective
29 representation. We simply have to admit that social science has individual sociologists’
30 handprints all over it.
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47 THE LEGACY OF C. WRIGHT MILLS 48

49 In “Toward a Sociology of Writing” (1993), Keith Roberts uses the ideas of C. Wright
50 Mills to orient student writing in the sociology classroom. He argues that using Mills’ distinction
51 between personal troubles and public issues can help students understand the distinction between
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3 writing as a private act (expressive writing) and writing as a public conversation (transactional
4 writing). In an ideal world, students would learn how to write for an audience – or, in a symbolic
5 interactionist sense, to view their writing from the vantage point of the ‘other.’ As Roberts
6 (1993:322) explains, “This is precisely what writers do in transforming and revising their work.”
7
8 In short, writing is like any other social act; it is “shaped by the norms of writing and by the
9 social context in which it is produced” (Roberts 1993:319). These norms include rules about
10 grammar and syntax. But in sociology, it also means conforming to particular norms of scientific
11 writing. In either case, students of writing need to become “audience-sensitive” in their writing
12 such that they conform to the conventions expected of them and thereby make sense to others.
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24 But if we were to understand writing as an act of symbolic interaction and view the
25 discipline of sociology as a kind of culture with norms that are imposed on student writers, we
26 must also accept that norms are broken in the process of social change. Roberts himself
27 acknowledges this point, although he does not carry it through to its logical conclusion:
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33 Although we sociologists often are quite iconoclastic and sympathetic to deviants, we are
34 also uncompromising enforcers of the current structure when it comes to composition.
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37 Our red ink blazes across the page and we complain bitterly about the nonconformity of
38 our students to writing conventions. How much more tolerant we are of other types of
39 deviance! (1993:323).
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45 Mills, of course, was hardly one to enforce the sociological conventions of his day; he detested
46 most sociological writing, becoming what Gane and Back (2012:405) call a “thorn in the flesh of
47 the thoroughly conformist sociological establishment.” Indeed, he was “deviance incarnate” and,
48 in this sense, he was “in but not of the academy” (p. 405).
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3 Mills offers us both a role model for how to be embedded in the sociological discipline,
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5 but remain critical of sociological conventions – to think sociologically, but also write well. He
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7 was an intellectual who stood on the edge of academia, urging sociologists to embrace the
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9 sociological imagination but to eschew its scientific posture. In short, he knew how to follow
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11 enough rules to be part of the conversation, but he knew when to break the rules to speak plainly
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13 and broadly on the social issues of his day. In this regard, C. Wright Mills gave his own set of
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15 writing conventions to follow. These were guidelines really. And they are laid out beautifully at
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17 the end of *The Sociological Imagination* in an appendix he titled “On Intellectual
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19 Craftsmanship.” Mills doles out many pieces of advice in this appendix and we cannot cover
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21 them all. But three guidelines in particular might help us and our students to write sociology
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23 well.
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28 First, Mills urged the sociologist to commit to clear prose. He was, of course, a critic of
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30 unintelligible writing that used big terms and convoluted sentences to get a point across, arguing
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32 that this style of writing conveys to the reader: “I know something that is so difficult you can
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34 understand it only if you first learn my difficult language” (Mills [1959] 2000:220). Like others,
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36 he contended that sociologists write this way in order to bolster their authority and legitimacy as
37
38 scientists. Thus, for Mills, sociologists had to reject academic posturing: “To overcome the
39
40 academic *prose*,” he wrote, “you have first to overcome the academic *pose*” (Mills [1959]
41
42 2000:219). Extending this argument to the issue of sociological writing assignments, we
43
44 conclude that focusing too much on sociological socialization encourages academic posturing
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46 and, hence, bad writing. Sociology instructors need to nurture students’ identity as writers as
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48 much as their identity as sociologists.
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3 Second, in order for sociology to be relevant beyond the academy, Mills reasoned, we
4 had to experiment with different styles of writing. In later writing, he would use the term
5
6 “sociological poetry,” by which he meant “a style of experience and expression that reports
7
8 social facts and at the same time reveals their human meanings” (Mills 2000:112). In *The*
9
10 *Sociological Imagination*, Mills talks about developing a voice, which is a necessary foundation
11
12 for developing sociological poetry. In this regard, he acknowledges two voices in writing. One is
13
14 “a man who may shout, whisper, or chuckle – but who is always there” (Mills [1959] 2000: 220).
15
16 The other is “not a ‘voice’ at all. It is an autonomous sound. It is a prose manufactured by a
17
18 machine” (Mills [1959] 2000: 221). Of the two, Mills encourages the former, which gives
19
20 writing both a personality and a sense of authorship. Developing a voice requires responsibility
21
22 for the ideas that are conveyed in our writing. Thus, sociology instructors might encourage active
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24 rather than passive voice in at least some writing assignments, which has the effect of forcing
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26 students to develop their own voice and make their own claims, which is the cornerstone of
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28 critical thinking.
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35 Finally, the question of audience is crucial to Mills. “To write is to raise a claim to be
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37 read, but by whom?” (Mills [1959] 2000: 221). In sociological writing, we always have a
38
39 particular audience in mind, though sociology instructors rarely coax students into considering
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41 who that audience is or might be. Proponents of public sociology (Burawoy 2005) and narrative
42
43 sociology (Reed 1989), not to mention C. Wright Mills himself, contended that our audience
44
45 must be broader than simply other sociologists. Mills suggested writing for an educated lay
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47 public, urging the sociological writer to assume “you have been asked to give a lecture on some
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49 subject you know well, before an audience of teachers and students from all departments of a
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51 leading university, as well as an assortment of interested people from a nearby city” (Mills
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3 [1959] 2000: 221). But as Burawoy (2005) points out, there are many types of publics – from an
4 informed national public of the ilk that Mills imagined, to specific groups, organizations and
5 movements to whom a sociologist might speak. Each public represents a different audience who
6 has a different set of expectations about writing. To write effectively for an audience, then,
7 requires that students be exposed to a variety of types of sociological writing (e.g., opinion
8 pieces, research reports, personal essays). And sociology instructors might consider drawing on
9 these different types of sociological writing as both reading and writing assignments.
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19 In the end, Mills called on sociology to have literary ambitions – to fuse the creative and
20 critical mind. Lest we think a sociology with literary ambitions would ruin the discipline, Reed
21 (1989:13) points out that the vast majority of the most persuasive and well received books in the
22 discipline’s history have been as much “literary as scientific.” Hence, Reed (1989:9) encourages
23 us to feel free to be “good writers”, “to express ourselves clearly, to be interesting, even
24 entertaining.” As for Mills, he celebrated a study of the social world stripped of its disciplinary
25 conventions and professional preoccupations. There is, of course, nothing wrong with such
26 conventions. Given the trends of our day, most students and the university administrators that
27 cater to them demand professional skillsets that students can list on their resume. Running
28 statistical analyses, deploying social scientific vocabulary, and writing a research report are skills
29 in high demand in the workplace and our students would be well served to master them. But
30 learning to simply mimic the language of science without understanding who our audience is and
31 what the numbers can and cannot tell us is only mastering the crudest part of the social scientific
32 enterprise. Ultimately, how we represent the social world is open for discussion and
33 experimentation. As Howard Becker (2007:285) explains at the end of his book *Telling About*
34 *Society*: “I’m convinced that there is no best way to tell a story about society. Many genres,
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3 many methods, many formats – they can all do the trick. Instead of ideal ways to do it, the world
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5 gives us possibilities among which we can choose.”
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For Peer Review

End Notes

¹ For a fuller history of WAC, see “An Introduction to Writing Across the Curriculum” from the online WAC Clearinghouse (<https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/wac/intro/>).

² Using syllabi published by the American Sociological Association Teaching Resource Center, Grauerholz, Eisele and Stark (2013) surveyed undergraduate sociology courses to determine the kinds of writing assignments that students encounter. The authors found that the traditional research paper was assigned in only 14 percent of classes. More common were essay exams and short reflection papers (fewer than five pages). If most courses in this study did not introduce students to the typical writing format in the discipline (i.e., the research paper), they did introduce students to the language and style of sociological writing in that most of the assignments required ‘transactional writing.’

³ In feminist circles in the 1970s, feminists staked a claim for their own personal stories as a basis for social analysis and theory. In the words of Richardson (2000:927): “women talking about their experience, narrativizing their lives, telling individual and collective stories became understood as women *theorizing* their lives” (emphasis in the original).

⁴ For a review of prominent autoethnographies, see Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) and Ellis and Bochner (2000).

⁵ The Web site *Sociological Images* suggests a number of classroom exercises using its platform, which offer an updated rendition on this exercise (<https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/tag/sample-assignments/>).

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Table 1: Characteristics of College Writing Approaches			
	Writing to Learn (WAC)	Writing to Engage	Writing to Communicate (WID)
Goal of writing	To help students learn concepts and understand material	To develop students' reading and critical thinking skills	To familiarize students with disciplinary conventions
Types of Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remembering • Understanding • Applying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding • Applying • Analyzing • Evaluating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying • Analyzing • Evaluating • Creating
Types of assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading journals • One-minute papers • Discussion responses • Annotations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection papers • Brief reports • Critiques • Comparisons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lab reports • Case studies • Literature reviews • Research proposals
Source: WAC Clearinghouse (Keifer et al. 2000-2018)			