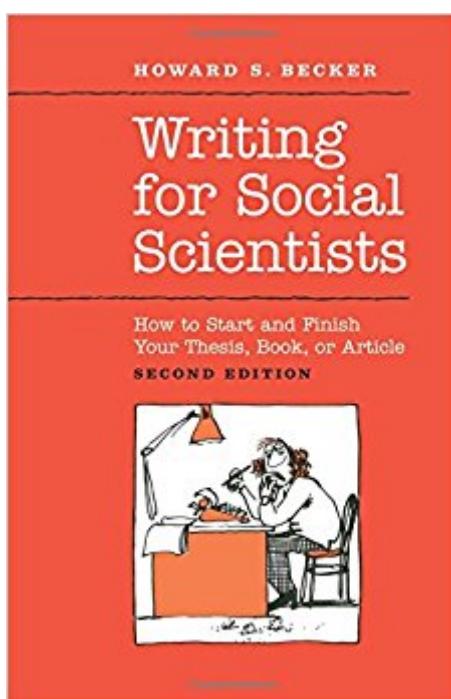


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Writing For Social Scientists: How To Start And Finish Your Thesis, Book, Or Article: Second Edition (Chicago Guides To Writing, Editing, And Publishing)



Synopsis

Students and researchers all write under pressure, and those pressures—most lamentably, the desire to impress your audience rather than to communicate with them—often lead to pretentious prose, academic posturing, and, not infrequently, writer's block. Sociologist Howard S. Becker has written the classic book on how to conquer these pressures and simply write. First published nearly twenty years ago, *Writing for Social Scientists* has become a lifesaver for writers in all fields, from beginning students to published authors. Becker's message is clear: in order to learn how to write, take a deep breath and then begin writing. Revise. Repeat. It is not always an easy process, as Becker wryly relates. Decades of teaching, researching, and writing have given him plenty of material, and Becker neatly exposes the foibles of academia and its “publish or perish” atmosphere. Wordiness, the passive voice, inserting a “the way in which” when a simple “how” will do—all these mechanisms are a part of the social structure of academic writing. By shrugging off such impediments—or at the very least, putting them aside for a few hours—we can reform our work habits and start writing lucidly without worrying about grades, peer approval, or the “literature.” In this new edition, Becker takes account of major changes in the computer tools available to writers today, and also substantially expands his analysis of how academic institutions create problems for them. As competition in academia grows increasingly heated, *Writing for Social Scientists* will provide solace to a new generation of frazzled, would-be writers.

Book Information

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"Humane, wry, reflective, gentle, wise....A primer in the sense that it teaches the elements of good writing [and] a shrewd and subtle essay on the social organization of scholarship." - Kai Erikson, Contemporary Sociology "This little book is must reading for any would-be writer, social scientist or not, who has sat in front of a blank piece of paper...and wondered whether the plants have been watered lately." - Jane Delano Brown, Journalism Quarterly"

Both the means and the reasons for writing a thesis or article or book are socially structures by the organization of graduate study, the requirements for publication, and the conditions for promotion, and the pressures arising from these situations create the writing style so often lampooned and lamented.

Becker's message for his readers is to set aside their fears, relax, and do it. As unimpressive as that advice may sound, it is laid out in very modest, clear, practical terms and, like all good analyses, it is hard to implement because it goes to the heart of the matter and questions the assumptions that guide people's writing practices, mostly without them realizing it. It helps that Becker has been grappling with similar problems for 30+ years as a writer, teacher, and editor. I will try to give a bullet list of what I took away from the book. That fails to do justice to the book, predominantly for two reasons: Firstly, the proof is in the pudding. If Becker is critical of citation practices, his own relatively short bibliography is rich and thought-provoking. Secondly, he has a knack for situating the problem in its context. Along the way, he appears to sociological gems of analysis like the dichotomy between head and hand, "the corruption of indicators," "pluralistic ignorance," etc. Some of the conclusions are a little too quick, but, overall, this is quality sociology applied to a common problem. Some of the practical advice:- What if I cannot organize the chaos of my thoughts in the form of an attractive product that I can then "export" to my readership? This concern rests on a misleading dualism between thinking and writing, where writing is understood as the product of thinking rather than a process of thinking in its own right. Students tend to believe that, unlike them, adept writers simply sit at their desks and transcribe their perfectly orchestrated thoughts into well-structured compositions in one go. The dualism also blinds us to the complexity of the writing process and the different demands of, say, a first vs. final draft.- Like accents, people's writing style

gives away the kind of person they want to be. Classy locutions mostly have a ceremonial, rather than a semantic, purpose and, by dropping them, your writing gains clarity and loses pretense. "To overcome the academic prose, you have to overcome the academic pose." Writing style can also signal allegiance to a theory or school.- Experiment with ritualistic behavior when writing. While it may be interpreted as neurotic and obsessive, crazy habits that you stick to can help relieve stress, especially in a process such as writing where you do not, however much you wish, exert total control over the product.- Write first drafts "quickly and carelessly" precisely because you know you will be returning to revise it multiple times later.- Collect pre-fabricated parts of text for use in the future if it sounds intuitively promising and remotely related to your research interests.- Be frugal with your bibliography and citations. A bibliography was originally supposed to be about specific further information that the reader might find useful if your research interested them. For instance, a book that contains information in a generally similar area is not a good candidate for inclusion in your bibliography.- Choose your metaphors judiciously. Trite and tired metaphors such as "a body of literature" do not mean much unless you are willing to say what the heart, brain, and other organs of that body map to in your metaphor. Otherwise, it is superficial, lacks seriousness, and is best left out. Metaphor, in this sense, is "a serious theoretical exercise," not a literary device to make your prose sound more flowery. This advice, obviously, does not apply to metaphors that are permanently built into our language.- "Evasive beginning"s that are so common in scholarly writings are misleading and risk confusing the reader, if not the author. Rather than being suspenseful and Conan Doyle-ish, tell your reader where you are headed in the beginning. This does not mean that evasive, vacuous, almost meaningless sentences cannot be used in early drafts. On the contrary, committing to words can help you crystalize your thoughts in an iterative process. But such sentences have to be flagged and revised before you get your writing out the door. Some of the insights (greatly expanded on in the book):- Verbosity and "bulls*** qualifications" that shun explicit specification arise because writers want to avoid attributing causality or agency. Unnecessary words occur because writers want to hedge and avoid big claims or sound profound.- Abstract words sometimes mean nothing in themselves, but "mark a place that needs a real idea." General words such as "relationship" or "complex" are good cases in point.- The stories you can/choose to tell are more important than the theories you use to explain them.- Rules are never as clear and unambiguous to have only one interpretation. This means there are no absolute rules for editing and the process is largely done "by ear."- An outline might help in the early stages, but only if there is a dynamic interaction between it and the text. Writing frequently sends the author back to the drawing board.

I bought the first edition of this book about 20 years ago and found it very helpful. I long ago misplaced my copy and so was happy to order the new second edition. On reading the book again, I found Becker's advice to be as good as I remembered, but I was disappointed that he had made so few changes in the "second edition." Essentially, the first edition has been reprinted verbatim--even typos weren't corrected--with a relatively few pages of additional material added to the last two chapters. Chapter 9 now contains Becker's general thoughts on recent software that he considers useful to writers. This discussion would have been more helpful if he had been willing to mention specific programs. I guess he decided not to either to avoid giving free advertising or to avoid dating the discussion. The last chapter gives some interesting, if brief, observations on the place of writing in modern academic life. In short, if you already have the first edition, there's not much point in buying the second edition. If, on the other hand, you haven't encountered this book before and you would like some useful tips on academic writing, it's well worth the price.

Reading this for one of my classes. Wish I had read it in the first semester of my doc program. Would have saved me some stress and many hours of writer's block. Academic writing can be very intimidating. Becker does a great job making us see that we're not alone in our insecurity & quirks about writing. This book and its themes are timeless.

Needed it for class.

Excellent text to dispel the fears and challenges, internal and external, to becoming a professional writer. Becker is witty and informative and indeed hopeful.

Here Becker offers a series of essays about various aspects of the academic writing process, and the life of the academic while all of this is going on. Part writing and life skills advice, part cautionary tale in how the whole process might get off track, part encouragement for the newer writer, this is an interesting supplement to one's writing project--and perhaps an interesting piece to read while one is going through a phase of classic avoidance behavior (we all do it).

This is an easy to read beautifully written book, which made me realise that the difficulties I have writing are not unique, on the contrary, they are pretty much the norm. I feel encouraged to believe that my methods will eventually yield success, even though my field is not actually sociology and

quite a bit of the advice was a bit irrelevant to my concerns. I'm very glad I bought this book.

My son-in-law is writing his undergraduate thesis (his school actually requires a thesis to graduate with a B.A.). I was attracted to the title based on his and my daughter's strong interest in sociology (her major) and their relentless research into why people do the things they do. He was thrilled with the book and feels like it will help him.

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