

Clarke

ON WRITING AND CRITICISM

Writing well is difficult, but the returns for learning how to do it are very high. The key to writing well is extensive editing. First drafts have one function: to get basic ideas on paper. After the first draft is written, successive editing creates organization, style, and clarification. Some planning is necessary at the outset, usually in the form of an outline. An outline serves as a general measure of progress, and should be structured around the biggest ideas you have about a topic. Once you finish the first draft, discard the outline and start editing. As you edit, you see different ways of arranging the argument, places where it is incomplete, or where it is vague. It's amazing how many ideas arise when you are actually writing. There are no born writers, editing is the only way.

One reason it is hard to edit is because higher education rewards bad writing. Professors require students to write in-class exams and students delay writing papers until soon before assignments are due. Both of these practices require that students be evaluated on first drafts, although we all pretend the drafts are final products. It is a pedagogical paradox that professors teach this way because none of them use the procrastinating method to write papers. We never share our first drafts with our colleagues, because first drafts are confused, have dumb statements in them, and are little more than a stack of notes we've written to ourselves. The document you are reading was edited at least ten times.

Clarity is the goal of good writing, and therefore of editing (and clear writing directly indicates clear thinking). Some good sources of information on clarity are:

- *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White (author of *Charlotte's Web*), NY: Macmillan. You can read this book (85 pages) in 2 hours, and savor it for a lifetime.
- *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing* by Jacques Barzun, Chicago: University of Chicago press. Another short one (130 pages) with clear advice and examples.
- *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* by Howard S. Becker, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. A joy to read. Especially helpful are Chapters 1 (Freshman English for Graduate Students), 3 (One Right Way), and 5 (Learning to Write as a Professional).
- *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* by Peter Elbow, NY: Oxford University Press, 1981.

CRITERIA FOR CRITICISM

Learning to criticize effectively is enormously difficult, and one of the most important skills we are supposed to learn in graduate school. Effective critique is a functional prerequisite for thinking clearly about your own work, for identifying what is important in others' work, and for competently reviewing

for journals and publishers.

Let me be a bit more specific about this. Writing and thinking are interwoven. Muddy writing is a sign of unclear thinking, and much muddy thinking is clarified through clear, straightforward expression. More, writing and thinking are inherently social, that is to say interactive, things. Even when you write and think alone at your desk in the middle of the night your product is a social one. This is so in several ways but the one most relevant here is this: when scholars fail to tell their audiences the relations between what they're claiming and what others have claimed they fail to provide readers with a key standard of judgment. And they fail to make a case for why what they're claiming is important and interesting. Figuring out others' arguments, and the holes in those arguments, is therefore fundamental to scholarly creation.

Please use the following guidelines in writing your critical papers.

Don't summarize material beyond three or four sentences to highlight your argument. Often, even that much is unnecessary. You have a limited number of pages, so don't waste time and space telling me things I already know. Assume I have read the material.

Don't praise the material. If I didn't think there were important ideas in it, I wouldn't have assigned it. Don't criticize the writing, presentation, or style. Those things are important, as noted, but we are mainly interested in the argument. Don't use heavy irony, ad hominem arguments, or political criticisms. Such devices are not effective criticisms in this context; indeed generally they are in bad taste.

Avoid, also, rhetorical questions. If such a question is so darned important, go ahead and answer it. Rhetorical questions imply the author missed something you think is important, but they are snide devices that say, with a wink, "You and I know something the author should have known. How foolish of that author." Example: "By ignoring social class, can Clarke's theory really explain chocolate addiction?" This is not an argument but a lazy way to call someone names.

The most effective criticism points out what difference it would make if the author did what you think should have been done, or examined other examples, or used different methods or assumptions. This is the most important point in a critical piece. To simply say something such as, "Marx didn't consider the rise of the middle class" is cheap criticism unless you then say what would happen to Marx's theory if he had anticipated the rise of the middle class. To say something such as "Mills ignores power, conflict, cooperation, etc." is also cheap because all theories leave out things. But to demonstrate how leaving out something might affect Mills' theory or conclusions is a very good criticism. In general, saying "she left out" or "he didn't" doesn't say much without an accompanying argument about the effects of the omissions on the author's argument, findings, or conclusions.

Search for internal contradictions. Try to work primarily with the material

the author presents. Sometimes you can't, but this is the place to start. By doing this you stay on solid ground – criticizing authors with their own evidence or logic. (It is also the best way to understand and puzzle out a theory.) For example, a criticism might go like this: On page 115 Clarke says “_____” This implies_____ But on 119 he says “_____” and this contradicts his argument because_____ This suggests (his concepts are unclear; his data are poor; his theory is incomplete or wrong, etc.)

The first step in a critical analysis is to find two or three major points (or even one) and build a case for them (or it) rather than a shot-gun approach that may not get at the basic problem with the author's position. Clearly identify the question you wish to deal with.

Try to begin your critical analysis with: “The problem with_____ is that_____” Minimize warm ups; they can usually be cut completely from second drafts.

The points of this exercise are to (1) thoroughly understand an author's position, (2) develop good critical abilities, rather than relying on cheap shots and hasty dismissals, (3) develop a terse, analytical writing style in place of a long, rambling one where your instincts might be on target, but the point is not clearly and sharply expressed. As always, this means redrafting, editing, and redrafting again.

A helpful tool is to draw pictures of the author's argument; draw arrows between concepts, or between conceptions and evidence. These are for your purposes only; don't turn them in. Also, try to think through what you consider acceptable criteria for a sociological argument. Does the argument under review stack up? In what ways? Is it interesting? Is it important? And by what standards do you answer such questions?

CRITICAL PAPERS SHOULD BE NO LONGER THAN 3 DOUBLE SPACED PAGES.