

### “THE DATA SUGGEST”

What are the broader implications of the work?  
Why does it matter?

- ▶ Can the results be generalized beyond the system that was studied?
- ▶ What are the work’s practical implications?
- ▶ What questions arise from the work?
- ▶ Which experiments should be done next?

The examples in this chapter show that scientists do more than simply collect facts; they also interpret those facts and make arguments about their meaning. On the frontiers of science, where we are probing questions that are just beyond our capacity to answer, the data are inevitably incomplete and controversy is to be expected. Writing about science presents the opportunity to add your own arguments to the ongoing discussion.

## “ANALYZE THIS”

### *Writing in the Social Sciences*

ERIN ACKERMAN



**SOCIAL SCIENCE** is the study of people—how they behave and relate to one another, and the organizations and institutions that facilitate these interactions. People are complicated, so any study of human behavior is at best partial, taking into account some elements of what people do and why, but not always explaining those actions definitively. As a result, it is the subject of constant conversation and argument.

Consider some of the topics studied in the social sciences: minimum wage laws, violence against women, tobacco regulation, the 2000 election, employment discrimination. Got an opinion on any of these topics? You aren’t alone. But in the writing you do as a student of the social sciences, you need to

**ERIN ACKERMAN** is a professor of political science at John Jay College, City University of New York. Her research and teaching interests include American and comparative constitutional law, women and law, the law and politics of reproductive health, biomedical policy, and American political development.

## “ANALYZE THIS”

write about more than just your opinions. Good writing in the social sciences, as in other academic disciplines, requires that you demonstrate that you have thought about what it is you think. The best way to do that is to bring your views into conversation with those expressed by others and to test what you and others think against a review of data. In other words, you'll need to start with what others say and then present what you say as a response.

Consider the following example from a book about contemporary American political culture:

Claims of deep national division were standard fare after the 2000 elections, and to our knowledge few commentators have publicly challenged them. . . . In sum, contemporary observers of American politics have apparently reached a new consensus around the proposition that old disagreements about economics now pale in comparison to new divisions based on sexuality, morality, and religion, divisions so deep as to justify fears of violence and talk of war in describing them.

This short book advocates a contrary thesis: the sentiments expressed in the previously quoted pronouncements of scholars, journalists, and politicians range from simple exaggeration to sheer nonsense. . . . Many of the activists in the political parties and various cause groups do, in fact, hate each other and regard themselves as combatants in a war. But their hatreds and battles are not shared by the great mass of the American people. . . .

MORRIS P. FIORINA, *Culture War?  
The Myth of a Polarized America*, 2004

In other words, “they” (journalists, pundits, other political scientists) say that the American public is deeply divided, whereas Fiorina replies that they have misinterpreted the evidence—

## Writing in the Social Sciences

specifically, that they have generalized from a few exceptional cases (activists). Even the title of the book calls into question an idea held by others, one Fiorina labels a “myth.”

This chapter explores some of the basic moves social science writers make. In addition, writing in the social sciences generally includes several core components: a strong introduction and thesis, a literature review, and the writer's own analysis, including presentation of data and consideration of implications. Much of your own writing will include one or more of these components as well. The introduction sets out the thesis, or point, of the paper, briefly explaining what you will say in your text and how it fits into the preexisting conversation. The literature review summarizes what has already been said on your topic. Your analysis allows you to present data—the information about human behavior you are measuring or testing against what other people have said—and to explain the conclusions you have drawn based on your investigation. Do you agree, disagree, or some combination of both, with what has been said by others? What reasons can you give for why you feel that way? And so what? Who should be interested in what you have to say, and why?

### THE INTRODUCTION AND THESIS: “THIS PAPER CHALLENGES . . .”

Your introduction sets forth what you plan to say in your essay. You might evaluate the work of earlier scholars or certain widely held assumptions and find them incorrect when measured against new data. Alternatively, you might point out that an author's work is largely correct, but that it could use some qualifications or be extended in some way. Or you might identify a gap in our knowledge—we know a great deal about topic

## "ANALYZE THIS"

X but almost nothing about some other closely related topic. In each of these instances, your introduction needs to cover both "they say" and "I say" perspectives. If you stop after the "they say," your readers won't know what you are bringing to the conversation. Similarly, if you were to jump right to the "I say" portion of your argument, readers might wonder why you need to say anything at all.

Sometimes you join the conversation at a point where the discussion seems settled. One or more views about a topic have become so widely accepted among a group of scholars or society at large that these views are essentially the conventional way of thinking about the topic. You may wish to offer new reasons to support this interpretation, or you may wish to call these standard views into question. To do so, you must first introduce and identify these widely held beliefs and then present your own view. In fact, much of the writing in the social sciences takes the form of calling into question that which we think we already know. Consider the following example from a 2001 article from *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*:

Fifteen years ago, Milton Friedman's 1957 treatise *A Theory of the Consumption Function* seemed badly dated. Dynamic optimization theory had not been employed much in economics when Friedman wrote, and utility theory was still comparatively primitive, so his statement of the "permanent income hypothesis" never actually specified a formal mathematical model of behavior derived explicitly from utility maximization . . . [W]hen other economists subsequently found multiperiod maximizing models that could be solved explicitly, the implications of those models differed sharply from Friedman's intuitive description of his "model." Furthermore, empirical tests in the 1970s and 1980s often rejected these rigorous versions of the permanent income hypothesis in favor of an

## Writing in the Social Sciences

alternative hypothesis that many households simply spent all of their current income.

Today, with the benefit of a further round of mathematical (and computational) advances, Friedman's (1957) original analysis looks more prescient than primitive . . .

CHRISTOPHER D. CARROLL, "A Theory of Consumption Function, With and Without Liquidity Constraints," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2001

This introduction makes clear that Carroll will defend Milton Friedman against some major criticisms of his work. Carroll mentions what has been said about Friedman's work and then goes on to say that the critiques turn out to be wrong and to suggest that Friedman's work reemerges as persuasive. A template of Carroll's introduction might look something like this: Economics research in the last fifteen years suggested Friedman's 1957 treatise was . . . because . . . . In other words, they say that Friedman's work is not accurate because of . . . , . . . , and . . . . Recent research convinces me, however, that Friedman's work makes sense.

In some cases, however, there may not be a strong consensus among experts on a topic. You might enter the ongoing debate by casting your vote with one side or another or by offering an alternative view. In the following example, Shari Berman identifies two competing accounts of how to explain world events in the twentieth century and then puts forth a third view.

Conventional wisdom about twentieth-century ideologies rests on two simple narratives. One focuses on the struggle for dominance between democracy and its alternatives. . . . The other narrative focuses on the competition between free-market capitalism and its rivals. . . . Both of these narratives obviously contain some truth. . . . Yet both only tell part of the story, which is why their common

## “ANALYZE THIS”

conclusion—neoliberalism as the “end of History”—is unsatisfying and misleading.

What the two conventional narratives fail to mention is that a third struggle was also going on: between those ideologies that believed in the primacy of economics and those that believed in the primacy of politics.

SHARI BERMAN, “The Primacy of Economics versus the Primacy of Politics: Understanding the Ideological Dynamics of the Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 2009

After identifying the two competing narratives, Berman suggests a third view—and later goes on to argue that this third view explains current debates over globalization. A template for this type of introduction might look something like this: In recent discussions of \_\_\_\_\_, a controversial aspect has been \_\_\_\_\_. On the one hand, some argue that \_\_\_\_\_. On the other hand, others argue that \_\_\_\_\_. Neither of these arguments, however, considers the alternative view that \_\_\_\_\_.

Given the complexity of many of the issues studied in the social sciences, however, you may sometimes agree *and* disagree with existing views—pointing out things that you believe are correct or have merit, while disagreeing with or refining other points. In the example below, anthropologist Sally Engle Merry agrees with another scholar about something that is a key trait of modern society but argues that this trait has a different origin than the other author identifies.

Although I agree with Rose that an increasing emphasis on governing the soul is characteristic of modern society, I see the trans-

For more on different ways of responding, see Chapter 4.

## Writing in the Social Sciences

formation not as evolutionary but as the product of social mobilization and political struggle.

SALLY ENGLE MERRY, “Rights, Religion, and Community: Approaches to Violence against Women in the Context of Globalization,” *Law and Society Review*, 2001

Here are some templates for agreeing and disagreeing:

- ▶ Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept his overall conclusion that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ Although I disagree with X on \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, I agree with her conclusion that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ Political scientists studying \_\_\_\_\_ have argued that it is caused by \_\_\_\_\_. While \_\_\_\_\_ contributes to the problem, \_\_\_\_\_ is also an important factor.

In the process of examining people from different angles, social scientists sometimes identify gaps—areas that have not been explored in previous research. In a 1998 article on African American neighborhoods, sociologist Mary Pattillo identifies such a gap.

The research on African Americans is dominated by inquiries into the lives of the black poor. Contemporary ethnographies and journalistic descriptions have thoroughly described deviance, gangs, drugs, intergender relations and sexuality, stymied aspiration, and family patterns in poor neighborhoods (Dash 1989; Hagedorn 1988; Kotlowitz 1991; Lemann 1991; MacLeod 1995; Sullivan 1989; Williams 1989). Yet, the majority of African Americans are not

### “ANALYZE THIS”

poor (Billingsley 1992). A significant part of the black experience, namely that of working and middle-class blacks, remains unexplored. We have little information about what black middle-class neighborhoods look like and how social life is organized within them. . . . this article begins to fill this empirical and theoretical gap using ethnographic data collected in Groveland, a middle-class black neighborhood in Chicago.

MARY E. PATTILLO, “Sweet Mothers and Gangbangers: Managing Crime in a Black Middle-Class Neighborhood,” *Social Forces*, 1998

Pattillo explains that much has been said about poor African American neighborhoods. But, she says, we have little information about the experience of working-class and middle-class black neighborhoods—a gap that her article will address.

Here are some templates for introducing gaps in the existing research:

- ▶ Studies of X have indicated . . . . It is not clear, however, that this conclusion applies to . . . .
- ▶ . . . . often take for granted that . . . . Few have investigated this assumption, however.
- ▶ X’s work tells us a great deal about . . . . Can this work be generalized to . . . . ?

Again, a good introduction indicates what you have to say in the larger context of what others have said. Throughout the rest of your paper, you will move back and forth between the “they say” and the “I say,” adding more details.

### Writing in the Social Sciences

#### THE LITERATURE REVIEW: “PRIOR RESEARCH INDICATES . . .”

In the literature review, you explain what “they say” in more detail, summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting the viewpoints to which you are responding. But you need to balance what they are saying with your own focus. You need to characterize someone else’s work fairly and accurately but set up the points you yourself want to make by selecting the details that are relevant to your own perspective and observations.

It is common in the social sciences to summarize several arguments at once, identifying their major arguments or findings in a single paragraph.

How do employers in a low-wage labor market respond to an increase in the minimum wage? The prediction from conventional economic theory is unambiguous: a rise in the minimum wage leads perfectly competitive employers to cut employment (George J. Stigler, 1946). Although studies in the 1970’s based on aggregate teenage employment rates usually confirmed this prediction, earlier studies based on comparisons of employment at affected and unaffected establishments often did not (e.g., Richard A. Lester, 1960, 1964). Several recent studies that rely on a similar comparative methodology have failed to detect a negative employment effect of higher minimum wages. Analyses of the 1990–1991 increases in the federal minimum wage (Lawrence F. Katz and Krueger, 1992; Card, 1992a) and of an earlier increase in the minimum wage in California (Card, 1992b) find no adverse employment impact.

DAVID CARD AND ALAN KRUEGER,  
“Minimum Wages and Employment: A Case Study of the  
Fast-Food Industry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania,”  
*The American Economic Review*, 1994;

## “ANALYZE THIS”

Card and Krueger cite the key findings and conclusions of works that are relevant to the question they are investigating and the point they plan to address, asking “How do employers in a low-wage labor market respond to an increase in the minimum wage?” They go on, as good writers should, to answer the question they ask. And they do so by reviewing others who have answered that question, noting that this question has been answered in different, sometimes contradictory, ways.

Such summaries are brief, bringing together relevant arguments by several scholars to provide an overview of scholarly work on a particular topic. In writing such a summary, you need to ask yourself how the authors themselves might describe their positions and also consider what in their work is relevant for the point you wish to make. This kind of summary is especially appropriate when you have a large amount of research material on a topic and want to identify the major strands of a debate or to show how the work of one author builds on that of another. Here are some templates for overview summaries:

- ▶ In addressing the question of \_\_\_\_\_, political scientists have considered several explanations for \_\_\_\_\_. X argues that \_\_\_\_\_. According to Y and Z, another plausible explanation is \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ What is the effect of \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_? Previous work on \_\_\_\_\_ by X and by Y and Z supports \_\_\_\_\_.

Sometimes you may need to say more about the works you cite. On a midterm or final exam, for example, you may need to demonstrate that you have a deep familiarity with a particular work. And in some disciplines of the social sciences, longer, more detailed literature reviews are the standard. Your instructor and the articles he or she has assigned are your best guides

## Writing in the Social Sciences

for the length and level of detail of your literature review. Other times, the work of certain authors is especially important for your argument, and therefore you need to provide more details to explain what these authors have said. See how Martha Derthick summarizes an argument that is central to her 2001 book about the politics of tobacco regulation.

The idea that governments could sue to reclaim health care costs from cigarette manufacturers might be traced to “Cigarettes and Welfare Reform,” an article published in the *Emory Law Journal* in 1977 by Donald Garner, a law professor at the University of Southern Illinois. Garner suggested that state governments could get a cigarette manufacturer to pay the direct medical costs “of looking after patients with smoking diseases.” He drew an analogy to the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, under which coal mine operators are required to pay certain disability benefits for coal miners suffering from pneumoconiosis, or black lung disease.

MARTHA DERTHICK, *Up In Smoke: From Legislation to Litigation in Tobacco Politics*, 2005

Note that Derthick identifies the argument she is summarizing, quoting its author directly and then adding details about a precedent for the argument.

You may want to include direct quotations of what others have said, as Derthick does. Using an author’s exact words helps you demonstrate that you are representing him or her fairly. But you cannot simply insert a quotation; you need to explain to your readers what it means for your point. Consider the following example drawn from a 2004 political science book on the debate over tort reform.

The essence of *agenda setting* was well enunciated by E. E. Schattschneider: “In politics as in everything else, it makes a great

### “ANALYZE THIS”

difference whose game we play” (1960, 47). In short, the ability to define or control the rules, terms, or perceived options in a contest over policy greatly affects the prospects for winning.”

WILLIAM HALTOM AND MICHAEL McCANN, *Distorting the Law: Politics, Media, and the Litigation Crisis*, 2004

Notice how Haltom and McCann first quote Schattschneider and then explain in their own words how political agenda setting can be thought of as a game, with winners and losers.

Remember that whenever you summarize, quote, or paraphrase the work of others, credit must be given in the form of a citation to the original work. The words may be your own, but if the idea comes from someone else you must give credit to the original work. There are several formats for documenting sources. Consult your instructor for help choosing which citation style to use.

### THE ANALYSIS

The literature review covers what others have said on your topic. The analysis allows you to present and support your own response. In the introduction you indicate whether you agree, disagree, or some combination of both with what others have said. You will want to expand on how you have formed your opinion and why others should care about your topic.

#### “The Data Indicate . . .”

The social sciences use data to develop and test explanations. Data can be quantitative or qualitative and can come from a number of sources. You might use statistics related to GDP growth, unemployment, voting rates, or demographics. Or you could use surveys, interviews, or other first-person accounts.

### Writing in the Social Sciences

Regardless of the type of data used, it is important to do three things: define your data, indicate where you got the data, and then say what you have done with your data. In a 2005 journal article, political scientist Joshua C. Wilson examines a court case about protests at an abortion clinic and asks whether each side of the conflict acts in a way consistent with their general views on freedom of speech.

[T]his paper relies on close readings of in-person, semi-structured interviews with the participants involved in the real controversy that was the *Williams* case.

Thirteen interviews ranging in length from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 50 minutes were conducted for this paper. Of those interviewed, all would be considered “elites” in terms of political psychology/political attitude research—six were active members of Solano Citizens for Life . . . ; two were members of Planned Parenthood Shasta-Diablo management; one was the lawyer who obtained the restraining order, temporary injunction, and permanent injunction for Planned Parenthood; one was the lawyer for the duration of the case for Solano Citizens for Life; two were lawyers for Planned Parenthood on appeal; and one was the Superior Court judge who heard arguments for, and finally crafted, the restraining order and injunctions against Solano Citizens for Life. During the course of the interviews, participants were asked a range of questions about their experiences and thoughts in relation to the *Williams* case, as well as their beliefs about the interpretation and limits of the First Amendment right to free speech—both in general, and in relation to the *Williams* case.

JOSHUA C. WILSON. “When Rights Collide: Anti-Abortion Protests and the Ideological Dilemma in *Planned Parenthood Shasta-Diablo, Inc. v. Williams*,” *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society*, 2005

### “ANALYZE THIS”

Wilson identifies and describes his qualitative data—interviews conducted with key parties in the conflict—and explains the nature of the questions he asked.

If your data are quantitative, you will need to explain them similarly. See how political scientist Brian Arbour explains the quantitative data he used to study for a 2009 article in *The Forum* how a change of rules might have affected the outcome of the 2008 Democratic primary contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

I evaluate these five concerns about the Democratic system of delegate allocation by “rerunning” the Obama-Clinton contest with a different set of allocation rules, those in effect for the 2008 Republican presidential contest. . . . Republicans allow each state to make their own rules, leading to “a plethora of selection plans” (Shapiro & Bello 2008, 5) . . . To “rerun” the Democratic primary under Republican rules, I need data on the results of the Democratic primary for each state and congressional district and on the Republican delegate allocation rules for each state. The Green Papers ([www.thegreenpapers.com](http://www.thegreenpapers.com)), a website that serves as an almanac of election procedures, rules, and results, provides each of these data sources. By “rerunning” the Democratic primaries and caucuses, I use the exact results of each contest.

BRIAN ARBOUR, “Even Closer, Even Longer: What If the 2008 Democratic Primary Used Republican Rules?” *The Forum*, 2009

Note that Arbour identifies his data as primary voting results and the rules for Republican primaries. In the rest of the paper, Arbour shows how his use of these data suggests that political commentators who thought Republican rules would have clarified the close race between Clinton and Obama were wrong and the race would have been “even closer, even longer.”

### Writing in the Social Sciences

Here are some templates for discussing data:

- ▶ In order to test the hypothesis that \_\_\_\_\_, we assessed \_\_\_\_\_. Our calculations suggest \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ I used \_\_\_\_\_ to investigate \_\_\_\_\_. The results of this investigation indicate \_\_\_\_\_.

### “But Others May Object . . .”

No matter how strongly your data support your argument, there are almost surely other perspectives (and thus other data) that you need to acknowledge. By considering possible objections to your argument and taking them seriously, you demonstrate that you’ve done your work and that you’re aware of other perspectives—and most important, you present your own argument as part of an ongoing conversation.

See how economist Christopher Carroll acknowledges that there may be objections to his argument about how people allocate their income between consumption and savings.

I have argued here that the modern version of the dynamically optimizing consumption model is able to match many of the important features of the empirical data on consumption and saving behavior. There are, however, several remaining reasons for discomfort with the model.

CHRISTOPHER D. CARROLL, “A Theory of Consumption Function, With and Without Liquidity Constraints,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2001

Carroll then goes on to identify the possible limitations of his mathematical analysis.



## “ANALYZE THIS”

Someone may object because there are related phenomena that your analysis does not explain or because you do not have the right data to investigate a particular question. Or perhaps someone may object to assumptions underlying your argument or how you handled your data. Here are some templates for considering naysayers:

- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_ might object that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ Is my claim realistic? I have argued \_\_\_\_\_, but readers may question \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ My explanation accounts for \_\_\_\_\_ but does not explain \_\_\_\_\_. This is because \_\_\_\_\_.

## “Why Should We Care?”

Who should care about your research, and why? Since the social sciences attempt to explain human behavior, it is important to consider how your research affects the assumptions we make about human behavior. In addition, you might offer recommendations for how other social scientists might continue to explore an issue, or what actions policymakers should take.

In the following example, sociologist Devah Pager identifies the implications of her study of the way having a criminal record affects a person applying for jobs.

[I]n terms of policy implications, this research has troubling conclusions. In our frenzy of locking people up, our “crime control” policies may in fact exacerbate the very conditions that lead to crime in the first place. Research consistently shows that finding

## Writing in the Social Sciences

quality steady employment is one of the strongest predictors of desistance from crime (Shover 1996; Sampson and Laub 1993; Uggen 2000). The fact that a criminal record severely limits employment opportunities—particularly among blacks—suggests that these individuals are left with few viable alternatives.

DEVAH PAGER, “The Mark of a Criminal Record,”  
*The American Journal of Sociology*, 2003

Pager’s conclusion that a criminal record negatively affects employment chances creates a vicious circle, she says: steady employment discourages recidivism, but a criminal record makes it harder to get a job.

In answering the “so what?” question, you need to explain why your readers should care. Although sometimes the implications of your work may be so broad that they would be of interest to almost anyone, it’s never a bad idea to identify explicitly any groups of people who will find your work important.

Templates for establishing why your claims matter:

- ▶ X is important because \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ Ultimately, what is at stake here is \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ The finding that \_\_\_\_\_ should be of interest to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the complexity of people allows us to look at their behavior from many different viewpoints. Much has been, and will be, said about how and why people do the things they do. As a result, we can look at writing in the social sciences as an ongoing conversation.

### “ANALYZE THIS”

When you join this conversation, the “they say / I say” framework will help you figure out what has already been said (they say) and what you can add (I say). The components of social science writing presented in this chapter are tools to help you join that conversation.

# READINGS