

Tips on How to Write Theoretical Papers

What is a why-question?

Actually, why and how are two ways to explain things. Consider an explanation of the form, A implies B which, in turn, implies C.

a) “Why C?” is answered by noting first that B implies C, and because A implies B one concludes C whenever A is the case. That is, the explanation proceeds from conclusion to assumption(s). (E.g., Why does it rain? Rain happens whenever water in the atmosphere condenses, and water in the atmosphere condenses when the atmosphere’s humidity is sufficiently high relative to its temperature.)

b) “How C?” is answered by first defining A (such that it is clear that A implies B), then by defining B (such that it is clear that B implies C). That is, the explanation proceeds from assumption(s) to conclusion. (How does it rain? The atmosphere contains water at varying humidity and temperature. If its humidity is sufficiently high relative to its temperature, water in the atmosphere condenses. Rain is this condensed water.)

Note that inductive, why-like, and deductive, how-like, accounts are both operational explanations (i.e., explanations that require a specific sequence of factors, each of which causes the next). In contrast, why-questions are not answered in terms of such causal sequences. When a sociologist asks why a person acts a certain way, it is the person’s **reason for acting** that is being requested. Unless one adopts a mystical view of the physical world, it seems silly to speculate about the reason why water may have decided to become rain. Yet it is always legitimate to ask why people behave as they do.

Every social theorist assumes that people’s acts are guided by a specific rationale—a basis for action, or what I shall refer to during the course as a “motivational mechanism.” When reading their writings, you should try to infer why theorists think people behave as they do. Why do people tolerate being exploited? Why do they cooperate? Why do they pollute their planet?

These are examples of theorists’ why-questions. Sometimes different theorists ask the same why-question, but answer it in entirely different (possibly even contradictory) ways. On the other hand, virtually all theorists address numerous why-questions, yet in providing answers each applies a single theoretical language. Your challenge in this course is to make the grammars of these languages explicit, and thereby to understand the common theoretical grounds each theorist uses in answering various why-questions. Once you understand these grounds for more than one theorist, you will be able to explain precisely why their theoretical grammars (i.e., their axioms) and their conclusions differ.

Do’s and Don’ts when it comes to theoretical explanations

1a) Do NOT give operational explanations of theorists’ ideas. That is, do not simply repeat theorists’ words in the same sequence that they did. This would be like speaking a language after only having memorized a set of phrases (e.g., “What does this cost?”, “Which way to the toilet?”)

and so on). Such writing merely demonstrates your ability to reproduce a theorist's vocabulary. It does not demonstrate that you understand the grammar that the theorist applies to this vocabulary. 1b) DO give theoretical explanations of theorists' ideas. This involves getting into the minds (i.e., the motivations) of the types of people their theories are about. Please be aware that I would be happy (even overjoyed) to learn a way of interpreting a theorist that is different from my own. At issue here is that you convince me that your reading of each theorist (as evidenced in your application of their respective grammars) is defensible. What this means is that you must think of yourself as arguing (not merely repeating) each theorist's position. Doing this will help you in exposing theorists' underlying premises, and in drawing contrasts among them.

2a) Do NOT bring different theorists (or different schools of theorists) to bear on each pivotal concept (i.e., each theoretical issue) discussed in your term paper.

2b) DO distinguish among the same theorists (or schools of theorists) on how they address three or more theoretical issues. Not doing this risks a shift in your objective from distinguishing among theoretical perspectives to exploring the "true" nature of the theoretical issues under consideration. Keep in mind that your term paper should NOT consist of theoretically integrated discussions of concepts; it should draw clear distinctions among theorists' approaches to pivotal theoretical issues.

3a) Do NOT summarize articles in isolation.

3b) DO relate articles to the theoretical issues that you are addressing. Only mention aspects of the articles that are relevant to these issues.

4a) Do NOT synthesize theorists' thoughts into a "true" understanding of how society works. This does not mean that you should never point out theoretical similarities. Instead, it means that your primary objective in this course should be to understand and analyze others' theories, not to get the instructor to understand your theory.

4b) DO compare theorists whose perspectives have contradictory assumptions, and make these assumptions (and thus their fundamental differences) explicit. All theorists begin from assumptions that may contradict the assumptions made by other theorists. Your primary objective should be to expose inconsistent assumptions, or premises, among theorists (or possibly among groups of theorists, with each group having its own set of consistent assumptions). You should make these contradictory premises explicit in the your term paper's conclusion.

5a) Do NOT organize your term paper into sections devoted to concepts that are not pivotal (i.e., that do not differentiate your theorists). The fact that social scientists define terms differently does not necessarily mean that their respective theories are based on fundamentally inconsistent assumptions.

5b) DO organize your paper into sections devoted to pivotal concepts (i.e., to theoretical issues linked to why-questions that your theorists address in inconsistent ways). In your notes and during class, we shall repeatedly use pivotal concepts to differentiate theorists' positions. Note: Be sure that your theorists address these concepts in distinct ways, and that your renderings of theorists' positions comprise integrated logical arguments (i.e., not just lists of disjoint observations).

6a) Do NOT list isolated insights.

6b) DO present your arguments (and those of others) in full. Include all logical steps needed to follow your (and others') ideas.

7a) Do NOT assume that your reader already knows theorists' technical vocabularies.

7b) DO define each of your technical terms as well as those of each of the theorists you discuss.

8a) Do NOT presume that the reader accepts the accuracy of your interpretation of a theorist.

8b) DO give page references for each of the theorists' key arguments. This ensures that your reader understands why you have interpreted the theorist as you have. When giving page references indicate your source and page number as follows: (Wilson, Sawyer, and McDonald 1992:123). Direct quotations (in modest numbers) should be either between quotation marks or, if longer than a single sentence, double-indented (without quotation marks) and single spaced.

9a) Do NOT give numerous, lengthy quotations from the articles. Moderation is called for here.

9b) DO feel free to paraphrase the arguments of other authors, however. You can explain their points clearer than they can in most cases, since you are putting their ideas into your context.

10a) Do NOT search the Internet or reference other secondary sources to discover what a theorist is "really" talking about. Moreover, you should not draw distinctions among theorists that the theorists draw among themselves in our readings. The theoretical issues addressed in your term paper should be ones you (not an Internet or reference-book source, or even the theorists themselves) choose.

10b) DO argue for your own interpretation of the theorist's ideas via references to the theorist's words. Note that you will NOT lose credit if the instructor (and possibly all Internet and published authorities) have an interpretation that differs from your own! In this course you are an authority-in-training, not a clerk who meekly caves in to the opinions of the first self-proclaimed authority that comes along. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this point. This course is about making your own interpretations. So don't be a pushover. Have the courage to try out someone else's world for a while. Then when you are back in "our world," try sharing with us what you experienced when you were there.

Some general tips

1) DO NOT WRITE ANYTHING THAT YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND! See your instructor first. Then keep pressing me for answers until you do.

2) Make your term paper interesting. Choose a challenging topic and pursue it energetically. Avoid a superficial paper. Get to the heart of the problem and grapple with it.

3) Do not ask questions in your writings! Argue for your position.

4) Do not use contractions (e.g., “I’ll,” “can’t,” etc.).

5) Never use the word “prove.” (Science never “proves” anything.) And only speak of “causality” in a conditional sense. E.g., “Their argument suggests that X may cause Y.”

6) Refer to yourself (e.g., we, our, us, etc.) as little as possible. And never mention your instructor. (It will not improve your grade.)

7) Speak of dead theorists in the past tense, and of living theorists (including yourself) in the present tense. E.g., “Marx argued that . . . “ but “Patricia Hill Collins (1993) assumes that . . . “

8) In your writing do not refer to things as if they were people (i.e., do NOT anthropomorphize). Consider these two examples of misuse of the English language:

- “The theory tells us that . . .” -- Theories tell you nothing, although you may infer from them. If you must use this form, then state that the theory “indicates” or “suggests.”
- “The question raised above asks . . .” -- Questions do not ask; people do. Please choose your words carefully!

9) Beside anthropomorphisms (e.g., “society approves,” “norms expect,” etc.), you should also avoid nontheoretical information (e.g., history, personal evaluations, theorists’ personal accomplishments, etc.), value statements, and metaphors. Instead, focus on demonstrating “the skill” (i.e., your ability to identify theorists’ core ideas, and how they use them to account for ongoing social interaction).

10) Do not say what you “want” or “are trying” to do. Also do not write about what you expect or about what you think you reader might expect.

11) When you refer to authors, do not report your opinions on what they “think,” “believe,” “want,” “intend,” “expect,” or “are attempting.” You have no way of actually knowing their thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, or expectations. Also replace the words “say” and “state” with more informative words like “suggest,” “claim,” “assert,” “deny,” “indicate,” etc.

12) Be sure to render theorists' ideas accurately, and NOT to read your own ideas into their words! In theoretical writing one must become a neutral medium (i.e., one with as little distortion as possible) through which theorists' ideas are brought to life.

13) Proofread your work before handing it in to ensure no silly grammatical errors have been made.

14) Avoid these "fatal errors":

- a) *Pointing out similarities.* The objective in your term paper is to draw key distinctions between theorists. If theorists belong to the same school of thought, you should, of course, establish their membership in this school by pointing out their common characteristics. Yet finding similarities should always be a MINOR aspect of your paper. In many of your other courses you have been "trained" to write syntheses of peoples' ideas. In this course you should intentionally avoid such syntheses. Your objective is not to combine ideas into something "closer to the truth." It is to expose differences between theorists that are irreconcilable.
- b) *Discussing a theory's strengths vs. weaknesses.* The only way such an analytic strategy can be effective is if done "through the eyes of" a different theory. Otherwise you are claiming to have a "measuring stick" for theories that is not itself embedded in a theory. Although some theorists make this claim, you (like they) will have a hard time defending it. Thus for the purposes of this course, you are strongly advised not to presume that you can "objectively" (i.e., independent of any theory) evaluate a theory's strengths and weaknesses.
- c) *Imposing your presuppositions on theorists, without being able to find anything in their writings to support these presuppositions.* For example, Goffman and Blumer are commonly grouped together under the heading, "Symbolic Interactionists." Yet these theorists have very few theoretical ideas in common. Do NOT ignore differences between theorists when you find them! "The skill" calls for giving authority to theorists' writings, rather than to your presuppositions about their writings. Please allow the theorists (not your own) ideas to drive your analysis. To not do this is truly to make a fatal error. The following are two special cases of this error:
 - a. *Assuming that two theorists use the same term identically without finding support for this in their writings.* For example, both Simmel and Merton refer to the "tension" people experience. Yet the meaning of "tension" differs greatly between the two.
 - b. *Integrating the ideas of distinct theorists by ignoring subtle differences in their perspectives.* For example, it is tempting to argue that Freud's "id" is the same as Mead's "I." It is not.
- d) *Writing a vacuous conclusion.* For example, "This paper has contrasted the theoretical positions of theorist X and theorist Y. Their ideas are quite different. By pointing out these differences, I have exposed the fundamental distinctions between them." Your closing paragraph(s) should list the differences discussed in the body of your term paper, make explicit fundamental theoretical distinctions that you find in common among these differences, and use these distinctions to draw contrasts among the theorists you are comparing.

What's the point?

A century ago scientists commonly believed that there is a unique overarching theoretical framework in terms of which all theorists' ideas can be understood. Since then it has become clear that there are many such frameworks (i.e., overarching is OK; unique ain't). There was a time when the vast majority of American sociologists happily interpreted all social phenomenon in functionalist terms. Nowadays rational choice theorists predominate. Looking beyond academia one notes that the reigning framework in Cuba is Marxist, whereas the one in Iran is Islamic. One key lesson that I hope students take away from this course is an appreciation that when comparing many of these frameworks one finds basic premises that are logically inconsistent.

Note that every social scientist who has learned this lesson is left with only two ways to work with sociological theories. On the one hand, one can embrace a logically consistent subset of these frameworks, and either ignore other frameworks or interpret them in accordance with this subset. On the other hand, one can acknowledge the inherent inconsistencies among the various frameworks that comprise contemporary sociological theory, and begin speculating about the social conditions under which these various frameworks apply. Make sure that your term paper does NOT exemplify the former approach. Your assignment is to write a term paper that takes the latter one. You will find that doing this will inevitably require that you demonstrate "the skill" (i.e., the ability to identify and clearly state the contradictory premises at the foundations of theories that are mutually inconsistent). If you know a theory's underlying assumptions, you know the social conditions under which it is appropriate. Whether or not it "applies" under those conditions is an empirical question, and is thus beyond the objectives of a theory course. That's why a course in theory is about "the skill," not about whether or not the theory is empirically true.

As a final bit of assistance, you will find on the next page the checklist I shall be using when correcting your term paper.

Name _____

Soc 401 Term Paper Grading Criteria

1. General format
 - a. At least 2 theorists with distinct theoretical positions.
 - b. Concise syntheses of each theorist being compared.
 - c. At least 3 pivotal concepts are used to develop distinct arguments from the theorists' ideas.
 - d. Conclusion in which theorists' axiomatic inconsistencies are demonstrated.
 - e. Bibliography: 5 references from Readingspage; 5 references to outside theoretical readings.

2. Content
 - a. *Defined terms*: Theorists' (not your) definitions are given for all key terms.
 - b. *Logical consistency*: Arguments are provided step-by-step, without logical gaps.
 - c. *Clear English*: Work was carefully proofread, thereby avoiding reader-confusion.
 - d. *Accurate representation of theorists' ideas*: Citations of theorists make clear why you interpreted them as you did, thereby avoiding indefensibly misrepresenting them.

3. Errors
 - a. Anthropomorphism (e.g., "Society expects . . .")
 - b. Referencing a secondary source, and not developing your own interpretations.
 - c. A work cited in the body of your term paper is not listed in the paper's bibliography.
 - d. A work listed in your bibliography is not referred to (always with author, date, and page number) in the body of your term paper.
 - e. Instead of incorporating cited works into logical arguments, summaries (book reports?) of the works are given.

4. Risky strategies to be avoided
 - a. Asking questions, rather than answering them.
 - b. Speculating about why a theorist wrote what s/he did.
 - c. Arguing that a theorist is inconsistent or unclear on some point.
 - d. Developing your own theory (e.g., "common ground among your theorists").
 - e. Giving your personal evaluations of a theory (e.g., its strengths and weaknesses).
 - f. Using lengthy and/or numerous quotations. (You are graded on your words only.)
 - g. Assuming that things need not be explained because your reader already knows them.

5. Fatal strategy: Plagiarism

Term paper grade _____

Grade for the course _____