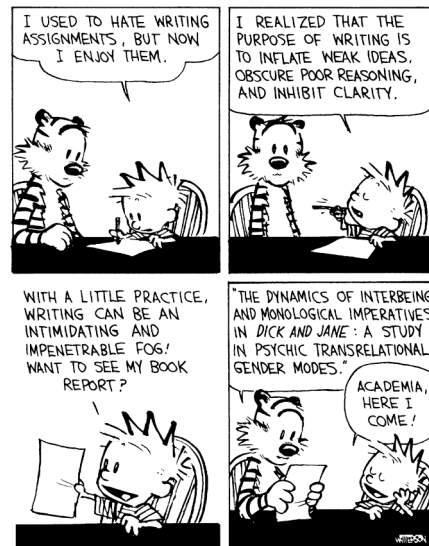


Writing Sociology
Sociology/Rural Sociology 875
Spring, 2005
2 or 3 credits

Michael M. Bell
michaelbell@wisc.edu

Thursdays 1 to 2:20
Room 38 Agricultural Hall



Got writer's block? Feel your writing is like a block—wooden, heavy, lifeless, and square? Worried this is a permanent condition for the academic, and especially for the sociologist?

Especially for the sociologist. Ours is, after all, among the most reviled of disciplines by writers and readers. “Thou shalt not commit a social science,” commanded W. H. Auden. Not without reason. It takes only a moment's idle flipping through the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, the *American Sociological Review*, and other repositories of our endeavors to see what he meant. Sociological writing, all too commonly, is an oxymoronic practice.

If these are your concerns, have I got the course for you. For it is indeed without reason that sociologists write so poorly, and so often take so little joy in this most basic of sociological acts. Sociology can be written well. Sociology should be written well. Sociological writing does not have to be painful.

At least such are the premises of this course. We will take a simple approach. After a few weeks of reading and talking about writing, we will spend each session helping a different seminar member in turn through the craft of some writing project she or he has underway. That member will hand out paper copies of the work in the week before the group meets to discuss it, and the other members will write reviews of the manuscript as a piece of writing. Then we'll have a good chat about it. That's all.

For this you get two or three credits, plus the chance to hone your writing, that crucial tool of sociological engagement. Writing sociology well is surely vital to righting both sociology and society. Or to lefting them. If either direction of action sounds to you like a good thing, then welcome, welcome, welcome.

Fire Pot

One of the traditional dishes of northern China is called “fire pot,” a kind of Mongolian fondue in which diners dip meat and vegetables into a pot of boiling sauce in the center of the table. But in fire pot, there are two sauces—one a spicy yang sauce and the other a sweeter yin sauce—divided by a metal barrier down the middle of the pot, curved along the gentle lines of the yin-yang sign. Each week, we will begin class with a kind of literary “fire pot” session in which one participant brings to class copies of two contrasting pages of sociological writing that exemplify a difference in narrative approach—passive versus active writing, say, or authorial distance versus authorial engagement, perhaps. We will all dip our thoughts into this yin and yang, reading the pages in class and discussing our reactions to their qualities.

A Sociological Poem

As a way to shake out the stiffness in the pen, long schooled into the standard manners of academic presentability, have a go at writing a sociological argument in the form of a poem. These will be due as email attachments by noon on February 3rd, and we will discuss them in class on February 10th.

Reviews

For each workshop session, the members of the seminar will write brief (roughly 300 to 500 words) reviews of the manuscript, as a piece of writing. Together, we will serve as external reviewers of a sort, although we will not be concerned with the theoretical and empirical validity of the manuscript, except in passing. Rather, our focus will be on constructive critique for improving the expressive craft of the manuscript. In order to make our critiques more relevant, we will ask the author ahead of time to name the ideal venue—the *American Journal of Sociology*, for example—for the piece, and we will write our reviews from that point of view.

The reviews will also be my main way of providing feedback on each seminar member’s progress. Save a copy of each review you write. I will periodically collect them, and review your reviews. To write is to read, and I will use your reviews as ways to suggest some pointers about the eye-hand coordination of your own craft.

Another thing: You don’t have to write your reviews in the “external reviewer’s” typically impassive voice. Take the reviews as opportunities to experiment with your narrative technique. Write them as poems too, if you like. Or write one deliberately violating the norms of good writing—with only passive constructions, say—as a way to highlight for yourself what you don’t want to do normally. Whatever. In other words, use these reviews as opportunities for your own literary development, as well as that of the workshop presenter.

Participation

As this is a seminar, your in-class participation is important to all of us. That participation can be expressed as much in the quality of your listening as in the quality

of your vocal comments. So don't feel compelled to talk. But I do expect that you will endeavor to be "there," in every sense of the word. And of course, you will be expected to participate through presenting a workshop and a fire pot session.

Evaluation

For 2 credits: you do the readings, review student papers each week, present a workshop yourself, write the poem, and present one fire pot session.

For 3 credits: you do all of the above plus submit at the end of term a substantially revised version of your paper, based on the comments you received from the class, along with a letter of explanation (such as you might send to an editor in response to a "revise and submit") of the changes you made and the changes you did not make.

Your grade will be based the seriousness with which you apply yourself to the writing exercises (the reviews and the poem, plus the revised paper and letter if you are taking the 3-credit option), minus deductions for inadequate participation (evidence of not being "there," such not doing a fire pot, or evidence that you're not reading the workshop papers very carefully). In other words, there is no invisible standard of craft that everyone is expected to attain in the course. The goal is progress from wherever you are at now, and my expectation is that you will apply yourself to the class exercises in the hope that they do indeed help you along. Your grade will be based on the degree of your application to the exercises, not your performance on them.

Readings

Becker, Howard. 1986. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Bell, Michael M. 1997. "The Ghosts of Place," *Theory and Society*. 26:813-836.

Bell, Michael M. 2002. "Sentences and Commitments," *International Journal of Humanities and Peace*, 18(1): 58.

Kleinman, Daniel Lee. 2003. *Impure Cultures: University Biology and the World of Commerce*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

University of Chicago Press. 2003. *The Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Course Schedule

Date	Topic/Activity
1/20	Introduction
1/27	Writing and Risking <i>Read</i> Becker (1986)
2/3	Imagining the Sociological Narrative <i>Read</i> Kleinman (2003), at the least the first chapter, and Bell (1997)
2/10	Re-Imagining the Sociological Narrative <i>Read</i> Bell (2002) and the poems of everyone in the class
2/17	Workshop 1
2/24	Workshop 2
3/3	Workshop 3
3/10	Workshop 4
3/17	Workshop 5
Spring Break	
3/31	Workshop 6
4/7	Workshop 7
4/14	Workshop 8
4/14	Workshop 9
4/21	Workshop 10
4/28	Workshop 11
5/5	Workshop 12