

Choi 5

## Work Cited

Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Blackberries." Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2001. 280-81.

(The proportions shown in this paper have been adjusted to fit the space constraints of this book. Follow the actual dimensions prescribed in Chapters 33 and 34 or in your instructor's directions.)

CHAPTER 37

## Writing in the Social Sciences

**37a** How do I gather information in the social sciences?



The social sciences focus on the behavior of people as individuals and in groups. The social science field includes disciplines such as economics, education, geography, political science, psychology, sociology, and at some colleges, history.

The social sciences use several methods of inquiry. They include observations, interviews, questionnaires, and experiments. Some of these methods lead to *quantitative research*, which analyzes statistics and other numerical data, and other methods lead to *qualitative research*, which relies on careful descriptions and interpretations.

Observation is a common method for inquiry in the social sciences. To make observations, use whatever tools or equipment you might need: a laptop or notebook, sketching materials, tape recorders, cameras. As you observe, take complete and accurate notes. In a report of your observations, tell what tools or equipment you used, because your method might have influenced what you saw (for example, your taking photographs may make people act differently than they would otherwise).

Interviews are useful for gathering people's opinions and impressions of events. If you interview, remember that interviews are not always a completely reliable way to gather factual information, because people's memories are not precise and people's first impulse is to present themselves in the best light. If your only source of factors is interviews, try to interview as many

people as possible so that you can cross-check the information. See Box 31-5, in section 31i, on taking notes during interviews.

 **ALERTS:** (1) If you use abbreviations to speed your notetaking, be sure to write down what they stand for so that you'll be able to understand them later when you write up your observations. (2) Before you interview anyone, master any equipment you might need to use so that mechanical problems do not intrude on the interview process (31i). 

Questionnaires systematically gather information from a number of individuals using a pen-and-paper or Internet-based survey. To write questions for a questionnaire, use the guidelines in Box 37-1. When you administer a questionnaire, be sure to survey enough people so that you do not reach conclusions based on too small a sample of responses.

**BOX 37-1 SUMMARY****Guidelines for writing questions for a questionnaire**

1. Define what you want to find out and then write questions that will elicit the information you seek.
2. Phrase questions so that they are easy to understand and will elicit what people are truly thinking. Make sure that your choice of words does not imply what you want to hear.
3. Use appropriate language (20b) and avoid artificial language (20h–20l).
4. Avoid questions that invite one-word answers about complex matters that call for a range of responses.
5. Test a draft of the questionnaire on a small group of people. If any question is misinterpreted or hard to understand, revise and retest it.

Experiments are also sometimes used in the social sciences. For example, if you want to learn how people react in a particular situation, you can set up that situation artificially and bring individuals into it to observe their behavior. People who take part in such experiments are usually called “subjects.”

With all methods of inquiry in the social sciences, you need to be *ethical*. This means that you're required to treat subjects fairly and honestly. In addition, you aren't allowed to treat them in ways that could cause them harm in body, mind, or reputation. In fact, it is standard now for professional social scientists to seek explicit written permission from their subjects, and panels of authority often review research proposals to make sure the studies are ethical.

### 37b How can I understand writing purposes and practices in the social sciences?

The purpose of much writing in the social sciences is explanatory. Writers try to explain both what a behavior is and why it happens. SUMMARY and SYNTHESIS (5e) are important fundamental strategies for explanatory writing in the social sciences.

ANALYSIS (4i and 5b) helps social scientists write about problems and their solutions. For example, an economist writing about financial troubles in a major automobile company might start by breaking the situation into parts: analyzing employee salaries and benefits, the selling prices of cars, and the costs of doing business. Next, the economist might show how these parts relate to the financial health of the whole company. Finally, the economist might suggest how specific changes would help solve the company's financial problems.

Social scientists often also use ANALOGY (4i) to make unfamiliar ideas clear. When an unfamiliar idea is compared to one that is more familiar, the unfamiliar idea becomes easier to understand. For example, sociologists may talk of the “culture shock” that some people feel when they enter a new society. The sociologists might compare this shock to the reaction of someone suddenly being moved hundreds of years into the future or the past.

Social scientists are particularly careful to define their KEY TERMS when they write, especially when they discuss complex social issues. For example, if you are writing a paper on substance abuse in the medical profession, you must first define what you mean by the terms *substance abuse* and *medical profession*. Does *substance* mean alcohol and drugs or only drugs? What defines *abuse*, and how do you measure it? By *medical profession*, do you mean nurses and doctors or only doctors? Without defining such terms, you confuse readers or lead them to wrong conclusions.

In college courses in the social sciences, your goal is usually to be a neutral observer, so most of the time you need to use the THIRD PERSON (*he, she, it, one, they*). Using the FIRST PERSON (*I, we, our*) is acceptable only when you write about your own reactions and experiences. Some writing in the social sciences overuses the PASSIVE VOICE (8o and 8p). Style manuals for the social sciences, however, recommend using the ACTIVE VOICE whenever possible.

### 37c How can I use documentation style in the social sciences?

If you use SOURCES when writing about the social sciences, you must credit these sources by using DOCUMENTATION. The most commonly used DOCUMENTATION STYLE in the social sciences is that of the American Psychological Association (APA). APA documentation style uses PARENTHETICAL REFERENCES in the body of a paper and a REFERENCES list at the end of a

paper. APA documentation style is described in detail in Chapter 34. You can also find a sample student research paper using APA documentation style in section 34h.

Chicago Manual (CM) documentation style is sometimes used in the social sciences as well. (See 32a.)

## CHAPTER 38

# Special Writing

All writing starts with thinking about your PURPOSE and your AUDIENCE. This chapter explains how to write typical business correspondence—letters, memos, resumes, job application letters, and e-mail messages—and how to write essay exams.

### 38a Business Writing

#### 38a.1 How do I write and format a business letter?

Business letters give information, build goodwill, or establish a foundation for discussions or transactions. Experts in business and government agree that the letters likely to get results are short, simple, direct, and human. Following is the most useful advice for writing business letters:

- Address the person by name.
- Tell what your letter is about in the first paragraph.

#### BOX 38-1 SUMMARY



#### Guidelines for business writing

- Consider your audience's needs and expectations.
- Have a clear purpose.
- Put essential information first.
- Make your points concisely, clearly, and directly.
- Use conventional business formats.