

5. Important Things About Sociology, College, This Course and Exams

Sociology studies the groups and organizations people create and live within, including the people, groups and organizations around us right now.

Like all sciences and academic subjects, people study things sociologically out of curiosity – because it can be flat-out fascinating to learn about the often surprising real world of people, groups and organizations all around us.

Just as important, sociological understandings and perspectives can also be extraordinarily useful to people figuring out how to navigate their way among the complex social environments they face every day – especially among families, friends, co-workers, teachers and employers. The better that individuals understand the institutions, roles, cultures, mechanisms of social control, systems of stratification in the world immediately around them, the more successful they are likely to be in doing and getting what they want.

For those of us beginning a new semester, college itself is among the most obvious and demanding part of the world around us. Sociological perspectives can also help us better understand colleges and universities, including our own.

This required reading reviews some important information about our course, Sociology 101, and some not-always obvious things about liberal arts colleges in general, what they can provide, what they require, and some ways that successful students think about and handle themselves within college.

1. COLLEGE AS A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR PROFESSIONALS

A liberal arts college, like Queens College, is a training program for professional workers, for office or "white collar" professionals (such as teachers, social workers, lawyers, accountants, doctors, business managers, market researchers, government workers, statisticians, chemists, psychologists, health care workers, and so many others). The single most important thing that colleges teach is *how to learn*. College students learn to improve how they find, absorb, retain and use information of all kinds including facts, conceptions, perspectives, understandings, hypotheses, theories. Above all, college students learn how to learn. And they learn how to learn by practicing learning.

A liberal arts college, like Queens College, actually teaches five skills that all professional workers need and use all the time: *reading, writing, research, quantitative skills, and*

public presentation skills. Almost every college course is above all a chance to practice and strengthen those skills.

Contrary to what many people believe, those skills are actually what is most central in a college education -- not the specific content of any course or major. Beyond some limited requirements, nobody at any college cares what courses students take or what they major in. But everybody cares about whether students can read, understand and master the material; whether they can remember what they read and heard; whether they can write sentence after sentence of tight prose; whether they can use the internet, books, newspapers, magazines, journals and the library to do good research; whether they can do some basic calculations and read (and ideally create) tables and graphs; and whether they can speak clearly and knowledgeable about what they have learned.

A college degree is simply a ticket into another contest – to the job and professional market and world, and to a graduate school for more professional training. How well people do in that next contest, in that post-college world, is mostly based on their skill levels and talents. Like their professors and most other people, few students are uncommonly talented in all areas – therefore their success in work and life depends on how well they have developed their essential professional and social skills. *In the world of jobs, careers and professionals, and generally in private and family life as well, people with strong professional and social skills usually win out over people with few of those skills, no matter how talented they may be.*

The sooner high school and college students recognize the importance of those basic skills for professional achievement and success, and work on developing them, the easier doing any kind of white collar work is for them. Fortunately, students have four years of college to practice and strengthen those skills of reading, writing, calculating, researching and speaking. And college graduates almost always continue to develop those skills after college as well. This is how the real world actually works.

a. Reading for pleasure and reading for work

The great pleasures of telling and hearing stories is as old human language. Reading is simply another way to hear great stories, whether fiction or true (non-fiction). Articles in newspapers and magazines are called “stories” and people read them because they are interesting to many people (though not all people).be. Things people choose to read on their own will usually be more compelling and interesting to them than things assigned in their courses.

Reading is also a serious skill. Like other serious skills such as music and athletics, people get better only by practicing. Students who only read classes assignments are never very good at reading efficiently and quickly – just as athletes who never practice are not good at their sport, and musicians who never practice and who try to play only for audiences are bad performers. Successful professionals of all kinds practice by reading newspapers, magazines, non-fiction of any kind, and also novels and short stories. Students who read anything they

like (with many sentences and paragraphs) for half an hour or even fifteen minutes a day are more successful readers and students than those who do not read. Students who read an hour a day for pleasure, even sometimes, do better than those who do not.

Students who are used to reading for themselves and for their own pleasure find reading for courses more natural and enjoyable and much easier. When daily readers of newspapers or anything else encounter assigned readings that is difficult, they know it is the material that is challenging. College reading is *work*, it challenges and stretches students. Students who find the work enjoyable disproportionately also know and daily experience the pleasure of reading for its own sake. Students who do not regularly read for pleasure find that reading for college courses is slow, difficult, laborious and ultimately discouraging. Unfortunately, it is usually not possible for people to get good doing things they often find difficult and unpleasant. However, when students read for pleasure on their own, when they practice, then assigned reading for courses – for work – is far easier, quicker, more efficient, and more fun. And they rapidly get better at their course work.

b. The importance of writing for professional work

The single most useful skill students can learn and strengthen in college is how to write well. There is nothing more useful or important for job success than the ability to craft tight, clean sentences and paragraphs, one after the other. Every job that a college education can open to someone requires writing. People need to write to apply for a job. Every professional job requires emails, memos, reports and other kinds of writing that ask individuals to summarize and present in words on paper or electronic files things they have learned and know. In the long run, promotions, advancement and professional success depend more upon the ability to write well than any other academic skill.

Unfortunately, other than exams, many courses at Queens College and elsewhere do not require students to write very much if at all. This is entirely due to funding and economics. Everybody knows that writing instruction is crucial for high school and college students, but it is expensive to teach writing properly, which mainly involves students writing a great deal and paying someone competent to read and comment on their writing. Writing-intensive classes need to be small, and small classes are costly to run. It takes much money to hire competent professional professors and instructors (even poorly paid ones), and it is much cheaper to put many students in one big class (like this one) than to divide them into lots of small classes. It costs serious money to hire many instructors to read and make comments on essays and papers in small classes. At expensive private high schools and colleges, there may be enough funding to create small classes and hire instructors who will read and comment on papers and essays. All public universities like CUNY and SUNY have many large classes and only a limited supply of small writing-intensive courses.

Therefore, the most successful students at public universities like Queens College and CUNY actively seek out and take courses that require them to write. Like music, athletics, and reading, people get better at writing from practice, lots and lots and lots of practice. It is sometimes said that writing cannot be taught, but that it can be learned. Most everyone,

including professors, mainly learns to write by working steadily on their own with help and feedback from friends and knowledgeable instructors when they can find them. For example, the professor in this class writes every day and is constantly learning new things about writing, and he's been doing it for more than a thousand years.

Successful students write on their own. They develop serious email relationships and write emails with whole sentences and paragraphs and with proper spelling. They write emails and letters to friends and lovers. They write descriptions of things they know well, places that they like, or striking things they have seen or experienced. Better students keep a notebook or computer files and write things to themselves about they have learned and think about anything at all. One very good and essential piece of advice is to write, write, write. Write every day if possible, but write. And read, because those who don't read don't know what good writing looks like.

2. PREPARING, NOT STUDYING

As much as possible one should do things in college courses similar to what successful professionals do for the rest of their lives. In this course we read articles and chapters from journals, newspapers, magazines, and books of the sort that professionals read all the time. In that spirit, it is recommended that students think of what they do in their courses and exams as *preparing*, not studying.

"Studying" is an ambiguous and confusing term; hardly any real-world professionals use it to describe most of what they do. In the professional world, the word "study" is most commonly used as a synonym for "research," especially a kind of focused, extensive research – as in: "I am currently studying (or researching) photosynthesis, especially among ferns and other leafy plants in western Costa Rica." Or: "We're studying the organization and beliefs of a small group of religious fanatics and terrorists, especially those who might be interested in blowing up buildings and subways in New York City." When people are doing that kind of research, they are "studying" something.

In the real world of work and daily life, professionals of all types routinely speak not about "studying" but more modestly and accurately about "*preparing*" – so they will be knowledgeable and ready for demands of their work. Lawyers read and write to *prepare* for court. Business people make demos, slide shows and rehearse to *prepare* to make presentations and meet with important clients. Physicians closely review files, test results and medical writing to *prepare* for surgery. Scientists and researchers *prepare* to give lectures by making notes, graphs, slides and writing out speeches, and teachers prepare for their classes. "Preparing" has a goal and its completeness can be measured.

Like other professionals, students in college courses *prepare* to speak and write about the material they read and hear in class. When they read and take reading notes, they *prepare* for class. When reading, taking notes, and reviewing to take an exam, they *prepare* for the

exam. Except when working on a research project, forget about "studying" (even though other students and professors will constantly use the word). Instead, talk to yourself about *preparing*. In college, successful students *prepare* for their classes, *prepare* for their exams, and *prepare* for the rest of their lives.

Preparing For This Class (And Any Other)

There are readings every week in this course. It is important to do them every week. Lectures will discuss the readings and additional topics. Attendance may not be taken but students are paying good money to take this course and should come each time. Besides, this is your life and you don't want to screw it up. So come to all classes. If you must miss a class, find someone hardworking and smart (and not just convenient friends) to explain to you at length what was discussed. And like successful physicians, lawyers, business people and other professionals, come to work prepared – first of all by doing the reading and by thinking seriously about it.

Words are the primary tools we have for describing the world around us. To understand the world sociologically requires us to use language accurately and carefully in order to carve out bits to examine and describe. We want to use words with precision, as razor-sharp knives and scalpels. Good sociological description is like surgery or dissection. This is always the case when, as in this course, we seek to describe the world truthfully, to say carefully what is and what is not true.

We want to remember the titles, subtitles and authors of everything we read in any course, especially this one. We want to *fully* understand the meanings of the titles and all the words in them. Competent students and professors frequently check a title's words in a good dictionary or online web site (such as dictionary.com), even if they think they know what a word means. Looking up the central words in a title cements their precise meaning more firmly in our brains and dictionaries include associations we are not aware of. A good title is like a bit of poetry, a summary of a central theme of the reading. A good title is something worth meditating upon.

Good students and professors pay attention to headings and subheadings, and to words that are in bold, italics or underlined and make sure to fully understand them. If something is put in a title, heading or subheading, or if it is in an emphasized font, it is important and worth writing down, thinking about, and remembering.

Life requires some memorizing. Most people do not have very good memories and so we all have to work at it. We all remember things by doing them over and over. Professional actors learn their lines by writing them out. Writing puts things in memory much better than just orally repeating them. To help remember things, especially for this class, write them down. Then write them again. And again. However bad our memory, the more we write what we want to remember, the easier it will be to recall it in class, in an exam, under pressure, anytime.

Vocabulary, words, concepts, are central to a college education and central to this course. It is difficult to explain things without the words to carefully and precisely say what we mean. All academic fields must use language carefully. In everyday life we must also use language, words, to explain what we mean and to understand other people accurately. In sociology vocabulary is even more important because we often use common or at least familiar terms but in a more precise and specialized way.

To a large extent sociology as a field, or science, is based on and organized around its vocabulary, its terms, its concepts. In the very first weeks of reading we discover a number of such words: *rituals, magic, religion, taboo, culture, uses or functions (of something), hypothesis, science, liberal arts college, social (and social life), organizations, institutions.* Over the course of the semester we will encounter and need to know and understand many other such terms, words, vocabulary, concepts. These include: *roles, ethnicity, socialization, internalization, social structure, corporations, norms, values – and especially in the second half of the course, social control and social roles.*

Get a separate notebook, or a section of a large notebook, for each course. Write down important things that are said in class. Write down things you need to remember or remind yourself of. Taking notes is a skill that we get better at by regularly doing it. Get a notebook you like. Get pens or pencils you like to use. These are tools of your craft, your profession. Splurge on them. You deserve it.

3. PREPARING FOR EXAMS

In the first part of the course we read about 25 articles on a broad range of sociological topics including about: The culture of the Nacirema; the magical beliefs of baseball players; India's sacred cow, two huge corporate scandals; the policing of minor offenses including arrests for possessing small amounts of marijuana; teenage pregnancy and abortions; wealth and income in the U.S., and more.

In the final part of the course we mainly read most of one book about central sociological perspectives. When reading that book we constantly return to the articles we have read as examples of the material discussed in the book. *Therefore, the final exam is cumulative – it covers the readings and lectures for the whole semester.*

Every exam in every college course, really asks people do one central task: Show as well as they possibly can that they read and fully understood all the readings and lectures in this course. Think of exams as “demonstrations.” You get to *demonstrate* what you know.

The exams in this course will ask about all the readings and about the material covered in lectures. **There will be questions about every single reading. The most common mistake students make in this course is not reading and preparing to answer questions on all the readings.** For students who read and understand only half of the readings in the first part of the course, and who get an A on that half, the best grade they can get is a 50 (an F). If they

master three-fourths of the articles, the best grade they can get is 75 (a C). If they read eighty-five percent of the material (quite a lot, one might think), the very best grade they can get is a B. And if they don't know all that material well, they will get an even lower score. Therefore, read, understand and prepare to knowledgeably answer questions on all the readings and material covered in lectures. Along with coming to class – and getting notes from a fellow student for classes you miss – reading *everything* is the single best thing you can do for yourself. And again, *the final exam is cumulative – it covers the readings and lectures for the whole semester.*

One last point: for exams in this course or in any other social science or humanities course, always prepare to explain in words, sentences and paragraphs the readings and lecture material. As we will discuss in class, there is no such thing as preparing for a true-false or multiple-choice test. Whether they know it or not, in every standard liberal arts college course, students are being trained, and are training themselves, to explain things they have learned to other people. They will need this set of skills for anything they do in their professional life, and the ability to do this well certainly will help them in their personal life. Nobody wants an incompetent, unprepared, inarticulate moron as a friend or lover, and we certainly don't want our relatives to be that way.

One good way for students to prepare and test themselves is by giving the reading list to another person who calls off the name of an article or chapter. The student then explains, at length if possible, what the article or chapter says, its important points, and some specific, detailed examples of what it is telling about. Ideally one does this with somebody who has read and understands the material. But we can get a lot of help from any smart, competent person who is willing to say "I don't understand" and force us to describe the material more fully and articulately – or send us back to it and our notes to deepen and broaden our understanding. It is an old truth that teaching or explaining something to others is the best way to learn it deeply.

4. FINALLY, THE TIME IT TAKES TO DO THE WORK.

Like most college courses, Sociology 101 is not intellectually hard for students with a reasonably good high school education. Anyone accepted to Queens College can intellectually handle the work. That's the good news.

The bad news is that this course, like most college courses, takes time – quite a lot of time. **The hardest thing about college work is how much time it takes.** Emotionally accepting how much time college work takes can be very difficult for some individuals, especially those who did not attend very challenging high schools. This is NOT a problem of "time management." Emotionally and intellectually accepting how much time college work takes usually requires NOT doing some other things. This is about time choice, not time management. Once again, welcome to the real world.

Each week, for each course, especially this one, plan for 4 or 5 hours of out-of-class reading and note taking, plus about 3 hours of class time. If you take five courses that is 35 to 40 hours a week. If you take four courses, that is 28 to 32 hours a week. *Full time college is a full time job. Get used to it. The sooner you accept that and arrange your life that way, the better off you will be, the better you will do, the better prepared for life you will be, and the happier you will be.*

Again, welcome to Sociology 101. This is the real world.

The Sociology Department is in Powdermaker Hall 252. My office within the Sociology Department offices, in office #252-O. The best way to reach me is in class. The best time to talk with me is after class. I have office hours after class.

We have a small computer lab open to sociology students. The sociology web site is at: <http://gcsociology.org/> The Queens College web site is at: <http://www.qc.cuny.edu/>

The reading list is here: <http://sociology101.net/reading-list.htm>
Click here for the opening page for www.sociology101.net
