

6. 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 – to learn about the often surprising real world of people and groups all around us.

Just as important, sociological understandings and perspectives can also be extraordinarily useful. They can help people understand 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, systems of social control and power in the world immediately around them, the more successful they will 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. Beyond some limited requirements, colleges do not care 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 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; whether they can write and speak clearly about what they have learned.

A college degree is 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. *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.*

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)

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. Good sociological description is like surgery or dissection. This is always the case when we seek to describe the world truthfully, to say carefully what is and what is not true.

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.

We want to remember the titles, subtitles and if possible the 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.

Life requires remembering (not 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. 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.

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 especially *Culture* and *Institutions* – the two key terms in the course. But the readings also talk about: *rituals, magic, religion, taboo, culture, uses or functions (of something), hypothesis, science, liberal arts college, social life, corporations, homicide, the criminal justice system and much more*. Over the course of the semester we will encounter and need to know and understand many other such terms, words, vocabulary, concepts. So.....

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 this course we read 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; gun deaths in America and other countries; 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.

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 all the readings and about the lectures and class material. There is a mid-term exam and a final emphasizing the material in the second part of the course.

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. 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.

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, Accepting How Much 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.* Accepting how much time college work takes can be difficult for some individuals. 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 when I have office hours.
