

REALLY Important Things To Know For This Sociology 101 Course and Beyond

Sociology is the study of the social world, of the world of human beings. Frequently it is the examination of the actual, real world around us. For all of us beginning a new semester, Queens College in New York City is the most obvious, pressing portion of that very real social world.

This document reviews some important information about our course, Sociology 101, and some not-always obvious things about Queens College and liberal arts colleges in general. It briefly discusses what they can provide, what they require, and some ways to think about and handle oneself within college.

Like all sciences and academic subjects, people study things sociologically out of curiosity – because it can be fascinating to learn about the human world around us. But as this class tries to show, sociological understandings and perspectives can also be terrifically useful in figuring out how to navigate our way among the people and social worlds we deal with – especially our families, friends, co-workers, teachers and employers. The better we understand the institutions, organizations, cultures, roles and power relations in the world immediately around us, the more successful we are likely to be in doing and getting what we want.

This course suggests that sociology is not just interesting – at least to some of us. It can also be highly useful in helping us make wiser, smarter choices for ourselves and those we care about. In short, sociological understandings and perspectives can help us to be more successful, satisfied, and happier in our own lives. Welcome to Sociology 101.

1. READINGS AND SUPPLIES FOR THIS COURSE

All readings for the first half of the course are available on the internet at sociology101.net. You can print them at home, on campus, or anywhere on earth. Get a 1/2 inch or 1 inch three-ring binder, and a three-hole puncher, and put the readings in the binder. *The important thing is to have and read the articles ON PAPER.*

In the second half of the course we read a book, *Invitation To Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, by Peter Berger. It costs \$13 new. If you buy a used copy, get one without somebody else's under-linings or highlighting – what somebody else thought important may be distracting or wrong for this class. You can buy the book at Amazon or at Barnes & Nobles online.

Because all the readings for the first half of the course are on line, you do not need to buy any books for the first half of this course. **But you need to print out many pages of readings. So, buy a ream or two (500 sheet packs) of good quality printer paper for about \$7-\$9 a ream.** (I find several kinds of Staples Multipurpose and Copy paper to be good quality and a good buy

– links to that are on the last page of this document). Also buy a complete set of cartridges for your printer, so that when you need to print out things you have paper and printer ink. Paper and printer cartridges are your major expenses for the class.

Having readings and course material available on the internet has several advantages. It allows instant access to the material. It makes the readings substantially less expensive. And it forces us all onto the most important tool of the 21st century for exchanging information: the internet. If you are already a serious computer and internet user, then you are in good shape. If you have not spent much time on computers or the internet, this class will immediately require you to catch up. Don't wait. Get your computer set up and your supplies at the beginning of the course.

2. DOING THE WORK AND PREPARING

Like most college courses, Sociology 101 is not intellectually hard for students with a reasonably good high school education. If you were accepted to Queens College, you can intellectually handle the work. So relax and don't worry about your capacity to do college 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. 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, and the better you will do.*

a. Preparing, not Studying

As much as possible I think one should do things in college courses similar to what successful professionals do for the rest of their lives. In this class we read articles and chapters from journals, newspapers, magazines, and books of the sort that real people read all the time. In that spirit, I strongly recommend you think of what you do for your 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 and appropriately used as a synonym for "research," especially a kind of broad-ranging, focused 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 the buildings and subways of New York City." When you are doing that kind of research, you 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* for meeting 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. “Studying” is open-ended and non-specific. “Preparing” has a goal and its completeness can be measured.

Like other professionals, for your college courses you *prepare* to speak and write about the material you read and hear in class. When you read and take reading notes, you *prepare* for class. When reading, taking notes, and reviewing to take an exam, you *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 you need to *prepare* for your classes, *prepare* for your exams, and (to some extent) *prepare* for the rest of your life.

b. 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 is not taken but you are paying good money for this class 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, and one doesn't dissect well with a thick, blunt club.

You want to remember the titles, subtitles and authors of everything you read (in any course, especially this one). You want to make sure you *fully* understand the meanings of the titles and all the words in them. Check the title's words in a dictionary, even if you think you have a good idea of what a word means. Looking up the central words in a title cements their precise meaning more firmly in your brain. Think hard about the titles of readings. A good title is like a bit of poetry, a summary or condensation of a central theme of the reading. A good title is something worth meditating upon.

In the readings, you will encounter words you are unfamiliar with. Look them up in a good dictionary or a good online web site (such as dictionary.com). When reading, pay attention to headings and subheadings and make sure you fully understand them. If something is

put in a title, heading or subheading, it is important and worth spending time writing down, remembering and thinking about.

As you already know, 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 yourself remember things, especially for this class, write them down. Then write them again. And again. However bad your memory, the more you write what you want to remember, the easier it will be to recall it in class, in an exam, under pressure, anytime.**

Get a separate notebook, or a section of a large notebook, for each class. Write down important things that are said in class. **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.**

2. PREPARING FOR EXAMS

In this course, there is a midterm exam and a final exam. The date of the midterm is on the reading list. The date of the final exam is determined by the registrar and everyone in the college is notified of the final exam schedule about the middle of the semester.

In the first half 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; teenage pregnancy and abortions; racism in capital punishment; health care in the U.S. and elsewhere; fashion and status, Asian Americans, marijuana possession arrests in New York City; wealth and inequality in the U.S., and more.

In the second half of the course we read most of one book about central sociological perspectives. In the second half, we constantly return to the articles from the first half as examples of the material discussed in the book. *Therefore, the final exam is cumulative – it covers the whole semester.*

Every exam in every course really asks you do one central task: Show as well as you possibly can that you read and fully understood all the readings and lectures in this class. Think of midterms and finals 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.** If you read and understand only half of the readings in the first part of the course, and you get an A on that half, then the best grade you can get is a 50 (an F). If you master three-fourths of the articles, the best grade you can get is 75 (a C). If you read eighty-five percent of the material (quite a lot, one might think), the very best grade you can get is a B. And if you don't know all that material perfectly, you 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, reading *everything* is the single best thing you can do for yourself.

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.) In every standard liberal arts (college) course you are training yourself to explain material to other people. You will need this complex set of skills for anything you do in your professional work life, and the ability to do this well will help you in your personal life as well. (Nobody wants an incompetent, unprepared, inarticulate moron as a friend or lover.)

One way to prepare and test yourself is by giving the reading list to another person who calls off the name of an article or chapter. You then explain, 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 do this with somebody who has read and understands the material. But you can get a lot of help from any smart, competent person who is willing to say “I don’t understand” and force you to describe the material more fully and articulately – or send you back to it and your notes to deepen and broaden your understanding. It is an old truth that teaching or explaining something to others is the best way to learn it deeply.

3. 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. The fundamental thing one learns in college is how to learn. How to get good at learning things. The central skills taught at any college and in almost every class are *reading, writing, research, quantitative skills, and public presentation skills*. Nearly every class is above all a chance to practice and strengthen those skills.

One thing that confuses many new students is that beyond some limited requirements, nobody at any college cares what courses you take or what you major in. But everybody will care about whether you can read, understand and master the material, whether you can remember what you read and heard, whether you can write sentence after sentence of tight error-free prose, whether you can use the internet and the library to do good research, whether you can do some basic calculations and read (and ideally create) tables and graphs, and whether you can speak clearly and knowledgeable about what you have learned.

A college degree is not a guarantee of anything. It is simply a ticket into another contest – the job and professional market and world, and a graduate school for more professional training. How well you do in that next contest, in that post-college world, will above all be based on your skill levels and talents. Like your professors and most other people, you are probably not uncommonly talented in all areas. Therefore **your success in college and especially beyond will depend on how well you have developed your skills. In the world of work and jobs, people with strong skills usually win out over people with few skills, no matter how talented they may be.**

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. Articles in newspapers and magazines are called “stories” and people read them because they are interesting to them. Things you choose to read on your own will usually be more compelling and interesting than things assigned in classes.

Reading is also a serious skill. Like other serious skills such as music and athletics, one gets better only by doing it, by practicing. If the only time you read is for classes, you will never be very good at it – just as professional athletes who only played games would not be very good at their sport. So read newspapers, magazines, non-fiction of any kind, and also novels and short stories. One of the important things about the web is that it is filled with words, sentences and paragraphs. Ideally you should read at least an hour a day that is not for school. Reading news and other material on the internet can also be helpful, as long as you mostly spend your time reading.

If you are used to reading for yourself and for pleasure, then reading for classes will be natural, much easier, and enjoyable. When you encounter material for classes that is difficult, you will know that it is the material that is challenging. College reading is work, it should be challenging, it should stretch you. But you should also know and daily experience the pleasure of reading for its own sake. If you do not regularly read for pleasure, then your reading for courses will be always be slow, difficult, laborious and ultimately discouraging. There is no way to become good at something which is frequently difficult and unpleasant. However, if you read for pleasure on your own, then reading for classes – for work – will be far easier, quicker, more efficient, and more fun. And you will rapidly get better.

b. The importance of writing for professional work

The single most useful skill you 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 college can open for you requires writing.** You need to write to apply for a job. Every job will require emails, memos, reports and other kinds of writing that require you to summarize and present in words on paper or electronic files things you have learned and know. In the long run, your promotions, advancement and professional success will depend more upon your ability to write well than any other academic skill.

Unfortunately, other than exams, many courses at Queens College and elsewhere will not require you to write very much. 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. 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 schools and colleges, there may 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 classes.

Therefore, as much as possible, you should actively seek out and take courses that require you to write. Like music, athletics, and reading, writing gets better 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 me, mainly learns to write by working steadily on our own with help and feedback from friends and knowledgeable instructors when we can find them. I write everyday, am constantly learning new things about writing, and I've been doing it for well over a thousand years.

So ... write on your own. Develop serious email relationships and write emails with whole sentences and paragraphs and with proper spelling. Write love letters, descriptions of things you know well, directions to your house or good places you know. Keep a diary or notebook or computer files and write things to yourself about what you have learned, what you think, about anything at all. Write, write, write. Write every day if possible, but write. This is your future we are talking about.

Other Information:

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 on Mondays.

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

The reading list is here: <http://sociology101.net/reading-list.htm>

Click here for the opening page for www.sociology101.net

Invitation to Sociology is at amazon.com here:

<http://www.amazon.com/Invitation-Sociology-Perspective-Peter-Berger/dp/0385065299>

And at Barnes & Noble here:

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?z=y&EAN=9780385065290&itm=3>

And good printer paper at Staples is here:

http://www.staples.com/Staples-Multipurpose-Paper-8-1-2-x-11-Ream/product_513099

Good recycled paper is here:

http://www.staples.com/Staples-30-Recycled-Multipurpose-Paper-8-1-2-x-11-Ream/product_811689

And very good paper is here:

http://www.staples.com/Staples-Bright-White-Multipurpose-Paper-8-1-2-x-11-Ream/product_651659

Again, welcome to Sociology 101.
