

Success in Sociology

Students committed to learning will find many possible paths to success. No path is error free, but the path best for you may not look like the same path as another student. For this reason, students should continuously assess their academic progress in courses and adjust their academic strategies accordingly.

While there is no magic formula, the following suggestions may improve your ability to succeed in sociology and increase your retention of knowledge.

The information was adapted from http://www.ehow.com/how_2074534_study-sociology-exam.html; <https://www.uwsuper.edu/acaddept/si/sociology/skills.cfm>; <https://thesocietypages.org/sociologysource/2012/09/24/how-should-i-prepare-for-my-sociology-test/>

Tips:

1. **Use the SQ4R method of reading:** Reading a book and studying a book are two different things. Before you read, **S**urvey the chapter. **Q**uestion while you survey by turning the title, headings and learning objectives into questions. When you begin to **R**ead, look for answers to your questions, re-read captions and study graphics. **R**ecite by orally asking yourself questions after each section. **R**elate what you have already studied in class – how are these new concepts similar/different? How do they build on one another? **R**eview is an ongoing process.
2. **While reading, pay attention to the learning objectives:** Many professors use test banks prepared by the same company that makes the student textbooks you're required to use. These learning objectives hint at the test questions.
3. **Use different materials:** Sociology uses many different source materials such as a textbook, newspapers, and online information. When reading a book, it is not advised to read a whole chapter the same way you read a novel. Before you read the book, decide why you want to use the information. Are you looking up facts or do you want to get some new ideas? As you read the book, write down any words you do not understand and research in the library or online, review with your study group or instructor. As you read, highlight and underline key concepts that are important to you.
4. **Get started early:** Get started on any research project early and use calendar to back-task mini due dates for yourself, chunking small parts out in advance. Devote the rest of the term to studying for the midterm and final.
5. **Focus on understanding the concepts:** Sociology stresses the application of theory and somewhat abstract concepts to gain a greater understanding of social phenomena. It is often said that sociology is more concerned with formulating the proper question than in obtaining "the answer." There are seldom

Brought to you by the Academic Success Center

Academic Coaching • Psych 131 • Supplemental Instruction • Tutoring Services

1060 Hixson-Lied Student Success Center • 515-294-6624 • www.asc.dso.iastate.edu

black-and-white answers to social questions, and students are evaluated on their ability to understand and apply abstract theoretical concepts.

6. **Sociological jargon:** Sociology, like many other sciences, uses a number of "jargon" words to express complex and specific meanings. In sociology, unlike most other sciences, many of the jargon words and phrases are similar to words and phrases used in every day life. You must always be alert for words in the book or lecture that are used in their specific and scientific meaning rather than their every day meaning. If you fail to take care, you may read entire chapters and think that you understand what is being said, but actually be far afield.
7. **Interrogative combinations technique:** Be aware of is the fact that sociology concentrates on the creation and use of "concepts." Concepts are abstract ideas about society that may be linked together with other ideas to form even more complex ideas or theories. One method that may help you in understanding and using sociological concepts is the interrogative combinations technique. Using this technique, you take two or more concepts and combine them to form a question. You might, for example, take the concept "class" and the concept "power" and combine them in a question: "What is the relationship between 'class' and 'power'?" After doing the appropriate reading you should be able to reply, "Individuals and groups in the upper classes have more power." Similarly, you could ask, what is the relation between class and race? Study should reveal that the lower classes are disproportionately composed of racial minorities. The interrogative combinations technique is an excellent review method because it takes sociological concepts out of isolation and allows them to be used in combinations to help in understanding what happens in the social world.
8. **6 steps of active studying:**
 - a. Understand/memorize a concept's definition (this is where many students stop)
 - b. CORRECTLY rephrase the concept in your own words
 - c. CORRECTLY apply the concept to your life
 - d. Come up with an example of your own/Understand the instructor's or book's examples
 - e. Look for concept pairs (i.e. concepts that are opposites, complementary, etc.)
 - f. If the concept has a pair, compare and contrast the two.
9. **Use study groups:** You often need someone to double check the definitions you rephrase, your applications, examples, and your analysis of concept pairs. That is, if you incorrectly understand the concept, inaccurately rephrase the concept in your own words, misapply the term to your life, etc., then actively studying won't help you. Studying in groups increases the likelihood that studying mishaps will be identified and rectified. This helps you not only learn the material but to quiz each other on it too.

- **Argument:** The first thing to remember in writing a sociological argument is to be as clear as possible in stating your thesis. Of course, that is true in all papers, but there are a couple of pitfalls common to sociology that you should be aware of and avoid at all cost. As previously defined, sociology is the study of the interaction between individuals and larger social forces. Different traditions within sociology tend to favor one side of the equation over the other, with some focusing on the agency of individual actors and others on structural factors. The danger is that you may go too far in either of these directions and thus lose the complexity of sociological thinking.
 - The “**individual argument**” generally takes this form: “The individual is free to make choices, and any outcomes can be explained exclusively through the study of his or her ideas and decisions.” While it is of course true that we all make our own choices, we must also keep in mind that, to paraphrase Marx, we make these choices under circumstances given to us by the structures of society. Therefore, it is important to investigate what conditions made these choices possible in the first place, as well as what allows some individuals to successfully act on their choices while others cannot.
 - The “**human nature argument**” seeks to explain social behavior through a quasi-biological argument about humans, and often takes a form such as: “Humans are by nature X, therefore it is not surprising that Y.” While sociologists disagree over whether a universal human nature even exists, they all agree that it is not an acceptable basis of explanation. Instead, sociology demands that you question why we call some behavior natural, and to look into the social factors which have constructed this “natural” state.
 - The “**society argument**” often arises in response to critiques of the above styles of argumentation, and tends to appear in a form such as: “Society made me do it.” Students often think that this is a good sociological argument, since it uses society as the basis for explanation. However, the problem is that the use of the broad concept “society” masks the real workings of the situation, making it next to impossible to build a strong case. This is an example of reification, which is when we turn processes into things. Society is really a process, made up of ongoing interactions at multiple levels of size and complexity, and to turn it into a monolithic thing is to lose all that complexity. People make decisions and choices. Some groups and individuals benefit, while others do not. Identifying these intermediate levels is the basis of sociological analysis.
- Although each of these three arguments seems quite different, they all share one common feature: they assume exactly what they need to be explaining. They are excellent starting points, but lousy conclusions.
- **Evidence:** First and foremost, sociology is an empirical discipline. Empiricism in sociology means basing your conclusions on evidence that is documented and collected with as much rigor as possible. This evidence usually draws upon observed patterns and information from collected cases and experiences, not just from isolated, anecdotal reports. Just because your second cousin was able to climb the ladder from poverty to the executive boardroom does not prove that the American class system is open. You will need more systematic evidence to make your claim convincing. Above all else, remember

that your opinion alone is not sufficient support for a sociological argument. Even if you are making a theoretical argument, you must be able to point to documented instances of social phenomena that fit your argument. Logic is necessary for making the argument, but is not sufficient support by itself.

Sociological evidence falls into two main groups: quantitative and qualitative.

- *Quantitative* data are based on surveys, censuses, and statistics. These provide large numbers of data points, which is particularly useful for studying large-scale social processes, such as income inequality, population changes, changes in social attitudes, etc.
 - *Qualitative* data, on the other hand, comes from participant observation, in-depth interviews, data and texts, as well as from the researcher's own impressions and reactions. Qualitative research gives insight into the way people actively construct and find meaning in their world.
- **Units of analysis:** The unit of analysis is exactly that: it is the unit that you have chosen to analyze in your study. Again, this is only a question of emphasis and focus, and not of precedence and importance. You will find a variety of units of analysis in sociological writing, ranging from the individual up to groups or organizations. You should choose yours based on the interests and theoretical assumptions driving your research. The unit of analysis will determine much of what will qualify as relevant evidence in your work. Thus you must not only clearly identify that unit, but also consistently use it throughout your paper (e.g. individual human actors, social structures and organizations, cultural objects or social artifacts).