How to write practically\*

Bryan Turner

Like many of my generation, I was and remain deeply influenced by C. Wright Mills's ‘On Intellectual Craftsmanship'. I was impressed because Mills appeared to have an overall project which was to write a comprehensive political sociology of American society resulting in such classics as The Power Elite and White Collar. He proposed to write this macro-sociology of power without resort to verbiage or Grand Theory, and finally he had very practical advice to students about what to do and not to do. His practical advice about the craft of writing included keeping files, cross-classification, designing hypothetical empirical projects, and creating basic theoretical schemes that can be tested by empirical data. Your PhD thesis hopefully is the beginning of a project. Perhaps one discovers one's master project only late in one's career, but better late than never. In retrospect I think my project has been to develop the sociology of the body as a way of reflecting upon disease, on rights, on ageing and above all upon religion. In the process, I have made some contributions to sociological theory. The weakness of my research is probably that I have not used empirical data as creatively as Mills, but I have always insisted that sociological theory should be about something, where that ‘something' is not just another social theory or theorists. This ‘doctrine' is outlined in the introduction to the New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory. For me, that ‘something' includes the historical development of citizenship as a framework for democratic participation and human (embodied) vulnerability as an ontological basis for common claims against society.

Following Mills's good example, I shall produce a list, not about ways to stimulate ‘the sociological imagination', but simply about how to write sociology practically.

1. You need constant and endless practice. Most PhD students read too much, hide behind their literature review and never start the job of writing until it is too late (for example until their grant runs out). I try to get my students to write sociology everyday following my mother's advice ‘practice makes perfect'. Most of my PhD students have finished on time following this advice; many have published before thesis completion.

I normally start writing every morning at 7.00 am and don't stop until lunch time. I often write all afternoon if I am not teaching or in committees. By this endless practice, I aim to write at least 2,000 words everyday or around 14,000 every week. I normally re-write everything at least three times before I am satisfied. Fortunately for me writing is therapeutic, but I suspect that by writing everyday it becomes therapeutic rather like jogging every day. Select a target in your range such as 350 words per day.  
  
Because I take the body seriously as a practical project, I start the morning with a large bowl of porridge and a large pot of green tea. I normally have noodles at 10.00 am. Don't work on an empty stomach and don't work late at night; the results will always be poor. For my students, I recommend plenty of sleep.

If you are not a native speaker of English, I recommend you buy Fowler's Modern English Usage, The Concise English Dictionary and The Oxford Companion to the English Language. These should be your bed-time reading. We all need to learn the actual mechanics of good prose. Most of us native speakers in fact have a very limited vocabulary. Try to expand your range; read dictionaries.

1. When I was younger , I selected various role models in order to develop my writing style and my way of thinking. Try to select somebody who writes simply and clearly about very important issues. I find unfortunately that my students tend to choose sociologists who write in a complex and verbose manner about things that are not very important. The best social theories tend to be parsimonious, elegant, verifiable, if initially counter-intuitive, and accessible. My personal selection over the years has in social philosophy included Ernest Gellner, Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Richard Rorty; in sociology proper, Daniel Bell, Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Mann, Perry Anderson, Jeff Alexander and Richard Sennett; and among political theorists, Sheldon S. Wolin, Mary Kaldor, Charles Taylor and Isaiah Berlin.

Read the classics; otherwise you will just reinvent the wheel.  I have been reading Max Weber consistently for the last four decades. Nobody would accuse Weber of having a parsimonious or accessible style, but the pay-off is that he has important things to say. Try to avoid being fashionable for its own sake, concentrating instead on what you think will last.

1. When I follow an author closely, I try to work out exactly how they get their ideas across - what phrases they characteristically employ; how they construct an argument; what references and how many they use; what is the structure of their work; how they express their own views? To take MacIntyre, he quotes very few sources and these are typically repetitious. He writes simply but always with a strong argument which is stated openly rather than secretly. He clearly writes from a post-Catholic stance that is critical of modern philosophy. His work has a strong historical dimension for example Secularization and Moral Change. He writes with a strong sense of his own tradition especially from Aristotle to Marx. His short publications such as Marcuse and Marxism and Christianity are masterpieces of lucid, condensed argument.  From MacIntyre and thinkers like him, I tried to fashion my own style. The aim of course is eventually to give up being parasitic on the tradition. As you mature, you need to develop your own style and perspective. A mature piece of work has its own voice.
2. I regard writing as a cumulative process. I often start by writing a short book review. This keeps me up-to-date, forces me practice and gives me discipline in quickly summarizing an argument. Often these short reviews become the building blocks for my own work. For example, reviewing Calhoun's Nations Matter was a useful preliminary effort in thinking about nationalism and religion in Asia. However I prefer to write book reviews around 4,000 words. In reviewing Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's The New Spirit of Capitalism and Jeffrey Alexander's The Civil Sphere. I felt that both books, while impressive contributions to modern sociology, neglected religion which is important for understanding modern society (especially France and the United States). I then started to incorporate these reviews into a larger project which is to understand citizenship (or its absence) in Southeast Asia. With two colleagues, I am writing a book about Muslims in Singapore partly building on these reviews. This example is intended to show how a small exercise - completing a short book review - becomes the starting point for a much bigger project. Write your PhD by starting with small building blocks such as notes on your methods.
3. As I have grown older, I tend to read less and allocate more time to actual writing. I suspect that as one matures intellectually one reads less systematically. I depend a great deal on Contemporary Sociology to tell me what is being published. I read the British Journal of Sociology, Political Theory and Sociological Theory on a regular basis.  Your reading should be increasingly focused on your projects. As I have developed, I no longer have much time for leisure reading. Occasionally I might read John Betjeman on English parish churches to remind myself of what good English should look like.

I read a lot on aeroplanes, trains and buses. I carry a small note book to write down ideas and references. I tend to listen to the BBC world news obsessively and read the Financial Times from cover to cover. One needs to learn techniques of reading quickly to free up time for writing. I normally read the final chapter first, scrutinize the index and references very carefully. Read selectively.

I use personal experiences as much as possible to stimulate or illustrate my ideas. Because I have been teaching medical sociology for about the last 30 years, I have made a lot of intellectual use out of my health crises - pancreatitis, diabetes, tropical sprue, a pseudo-cyst, ageing - and personal crises - mainly divorce. I listen carefully to what people say - especially what doctors say. Conversations normally provide good data. The point of this comment is that for a sociologist everything is data. Become a sociological detective.But one cannot depend on such personal experiences alone - hence I try to keep in mind the big picture such as citizenship, human rights, violence, secularization, and civil society. Mills's strategy was to see our personal experiences within the context of social structure.

1. People tend to regard me as a ‘social theorist'. I don't object to this label, provided they realise I am a theorist driven by empirical questions and puzzles. Theory without a strong commitment to empirical observation is likely to be sterile. In fact the decline of sociological theory is in part due it is divorced from on-going empirical projects. Most theory text-books are in fact either about theorists or about ‘schools' (in chronological order).  
     
   I normally refuse to supervise a ‘theory PhD'. Doctoral students need to cut their teeth on something real. In any case, theory must have an appropriate empirical topic and where possible this should be a socially or politically important topic. Much of my work in the past has been trivial. Practice, persistence and some good luck may help me in the long run to say something clearly about something that is important.

\* Health warning. I am clearly obsessive and probably insufferably arrogant. Some are convinced that I suffer from asperger's syndrome. Be careful; reading this article may seriously damage your health.

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