

Writing a Great CSI Essay

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Introduction / How to Use this Guide

Comparative Social Inquiry is a key part of Yale-NUS College's Common Curriculum. Taught in students' first semester at the College, the course introduces students to a multidisciplinary, social scientific approach to studying the social world and individual human behavior within this world. One of the course's specific learning objectives is to teach students how to write social scientific papers based on secondary research. This objective requires a student to learn multiple skills:

1. How to choose an essay topic and research question that directly addresses the essay prompt,
2. How to conduct a bibliographic search to source reliable and relevant academic material related to the student's chosen research topic and question,
3. How to write an academic essay that clearly states their topic and thesis, and cogently defends their thesis using the various pieces of secondary research they have collected, and
4. How to properly cite their sources both in-text as well as in their bibliography.

In order to help students achieve these writing outcomes, the CSI team works closely with the Yale-NUS Library and Writers' Centre to mount workshops on some of the above topics. In the classroom, CSI faculty discuss writing strategies, share advice with students, and also organize in-class peer review sessions of essay drafts. Outside the classroom, CSI faculty meet with students individually during office hours to talk about their papers. Over the years, CSI faculty have observed that first-year student writers tend to encounter similar issues when it comes to writing a social science research paper. We often find ourselves repeating the same advice to students year after year.

This booklet is a compilation of the tips and advice we have given previous cohorts of CSI students, alongside anonymized excerpts of students' CSI essays through the years to provide concrete examples of what to do and what not to do when it comes to social science writing.¹ The examples of great writing are in **blue**, while the examples of writing that need additional work are in **orange**.

All of us can benefit from reading others' writing to learn what works and what does not. So use this guide in a targeted fashion as you work on your own CSI essay. You can read it from start to finish if you like, or you can look at the Table of Contents for specific aspects of essay writing that you may be struggling with.

There are many advanced academic writing techniques that are not covered in this guide. As you become more comfortable with your writing, you will hopefully develop more sophisticated ways to present and analyze secondary social science evidence in your essays. But this guide is a useful first place to start, especially for students who are completely unfamiliar with academic writing in the social sciences.

Happy reading and writing!

¹ The excerpts have been edited to correct grammatical and citation errors.

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1. THE UNIQUE NATURE OF A CSI ESSAY

Your CSI essay is meant to be a social science paper based on secondary research and grounded in a specific case study. The goal of this writing assignment is to give students an opportunity to practice building an argument (their “thesis”) based on evidence they have collected through bibliographic searches of the existing academic literature and other valid sources of information (e.g. academic book chapters, journal articles, newspaper accounts, government statistics, CSI readings, etc.) on the topic/case study of their choosing.

CSI faculty will be assessing how well you are able to present a coherent, defensible answer (their thesis) that responds to the question prompt, and how well you are able to defend/support this thesis through the marshaling and analysis of relevant evidence drawn from your bibliographic searches.

The evidence your CSI essay relies on is not meant to be primary data (evidence that you collected firsthand from an original data source). Instead, we are asking you to use secondary data (collected and published by some other person for some other purpose, but that is still relevant to your particular argument). We will also expect you to draw on relevant CSI readings that can help substantiate your argument, or provide a framework for approaching your topic.

A CSI essay must be grounded in an empirical case study and use empirical data (drawn from secondary sources) to support your thesis. What this means is that a CSI essay should not be a political philosophy essay that relies only on ideas and deductive or normative logic. Instead, a CSI essay has to be argued using empirical evidence drawn from journal articles, academic books, etc. For example, a CSI essay about why people commit crimes might rely on statistical evidence about crime rates in different parts of the world, studies that analyze various social factors that encourage or discourage crime, ethnographies of repeat offenders, etc. In contrast, a philosophy essay about why people commit crime might focus instead on different philosophical traditions that offer varying accounts of human nature.

2. THE CSI ESSAY WRITING PROCESS

The CSI essay writing process begins with students choosing one of two writing prompts provided by their professors. One writing prompt frequently used in CSI is: *“What part of our behavior and beliefs, if any, is truly our own? Anchor your paper in a particular case study or population.”*

Students must next choose a topic/case study in which to anchor their essay. For example a student might choose to write about smoking behavior, or fashion choices, or voting patterns.

Once they have chosen their topic, students should conduct bibliographic research to locate relevant material that speaks to their topic and the essay prompt. (The Yale-NUS Library offers workshops on how to make your bibliographic searches as productive as possible.)

After reading and reflecting on this material, students should craft their answer to the essay prompt. For instance, if they determine that our smoking behavior is a completely independent choice that each of us makes on our own, they will need to identify 2-3 arguments to support this claim. Or if they determine that our smoking behavior is heavily influenced by various social factors, they will need to identify 2-3 social factors to focus on in their essay e.g. the influence of peers, the influence of advertising, the influence of movies, etc.

Having outlined the basic thrust of their essay, they are now in a good position to write their thesis statement on the degree of agency involved in an individual’s decision to pick up smoking.

3. CHOOSING A GOOD TOPIC

Given the relatively short word limit for CSI essays, choose a topic that is well-defined and can be tackled within 1500-2000 words. One way to set certain limits on your topic is to choose a particular population, time period, or world region to focus on.

For example, K. chose to write about the ongoing popularity of smoking despite widespread knowledge of its harmful effects, but he decided to only focus on smoking patterns in the United States. This allowed K. to focus his bibliographic searches to data and studies coming out of a single country and a part of the world where a significant amount of research on this topic has already been conducted and published. In his introduction paragraph, K. also indicated that he would only focus on “what draws people into a habit of smoking,” and not “what keeps smokers smoking.” In this manner, he ensured that he was able to adequately tackle the topic in the limited word-space he was allotted.

In contrast, another student, A., opted for a topic – terrorism - that is incredibly broad and then made the further mistake of not setting any limits on his analysis of this phenomenon:

When faced with acts of terror, one’s personal reaction is typically one of horror, moral revulsion and condemnation. Nonetheless, our global war against terrorism is characterised by solidarity. A common trait across all these reactions is the collective defence for our communal values, many of which are even transcendent beyond national borders. Why do we, around the world, believe that terrorism is such a prevalent threat to every society?

- *The Danger of Faceless Terrorists*

This student is tackling a topic of great current interest but, by asking such a broad question without setting any limits on his analysis, he is being both too vague and too ambitious. It would have helped if this student had grounded his analysis of reactions to terrorism in a particular country context, rather than “around the world,” so that he could dig deeper into the reasons why people react the way they do to acts of terrorism. He could have also limited his attention to a particular kind of terrorism. As it currently stands, the scope is so large that it becomes impossible for the student to adequately make his case.

4. THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF ANY CSI ESSAY

A CSI essay is a piece of academic, not creative, writing. This means that it tends to have a uniform structure:

- **Introduction** (which contains the “hook” to draw in your reader, motivates the paper, states your research question and thesis/argument, and outlines how you are going to be proving your thesis is correct)
- **Background** (which provides the necessary context, statistics, or history about your case study – the social phenomenon, policy, behavior that is the focus of the essay)
- **2-3 Body Sections** (which are the paragraphs that contain the points you are making to support your thesis and your analysis of the evidence you have found to support your thesis. Each body paragraph should contain only one main point/idea)
- **Conclusion** (which wraps up your essay by recapping your argument and reflecting on the implications of what you found, or the limitations of your analysis, or pointing to additional questions that still need to be addressed by future scholars)

If each of these sections is roughly 250 words, you would have reached 1,500 words, which is the usual length of a CSI essay (not counting your reference list).

You may want to use section headings to clearly signal to the reader what the structure of your essay is going to be.

Consider this outline for a CSI essay written by S. on the social factors that influence female adolescents’ body image:

Introduction

Background:

- Defining body image
- Explaining how negative body image manifests itself
- Statistics and reports on the rise in negative body image among female adolescents

Section 1:

- Parental influences on body image

Section 2:

- Influence of romantic partners on body image

Implications:

- Consequences of negative body image on adolescent behavior

Conclusion

5. THE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

5.1. Start with a good hook

Your essay needs to have a good “hook,” an opening that draws the reader in and makes them want to keep on reading. You might start with an evocative example that is related to your essay topic. Or you might start with a statistic that speaks to your topic. Or you might start with a thought-provoking question. However you decide to start your essay, make it compelling.

Consider Y.’s opening paragraph below. She decided to write about the practice of dog-meat eating and how it is reviled in some countries and seen as perfectly normal in others. But rather than simply stating this variation in eating habits, she began with an anecdote about the celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain.

On his global culinary tour in 2001, Anthony Bourdain ingested live cobra heart and boiled iguana. Yet he repeatedly and publicly talked about how he would never consume dog meat. What makes eating other animals more acceptable than eating dogs? Why is a normative food choice in one social context so stigmatised in another?

- Whatever Opinion you have on Dog Meat—Is It Your Own?

5.2. Motivate your paper

Even though you are answering an essay prompt for a class assignment, that is not enough to motivate your paper and your choice of topic. You need to be able to convince your reader that the topic you have chosen is worth researching and reading about. Why is it important? One way to motivate your paper is to offer statistics to show how the phenomenon you are writing about is widespread. Another is to take a normative stance, by showing how the phenomenon you are writing about is wrong (and therefore needs to be studied to understand why it is occurring).

Student A. chose to write about undergraduate drinking in the United States and used statistics that highlighted both the prevalence of the phenomenon as well as the negative consequences of binge drinking among American college students, to motivate his paper. This motivation folded into his hook very well:

Drinking in college in the United States has long been equated as a rite of passage. A recent report by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) conducted in 2014 showed that 60% of American college students drank during the past month while “two out of three of them engaged in binge drinking within the same time frame” (NIAAA 2015, 1). The consumption of alcohol has resulted in 1,825 deaths and more than 696,000 assault cases (NIAAA 2015, 1). At the same time, studies clearly highlight the consequences of binge drinking: students report missing classes, having suicidal thoughts, and having health issues, among others (NIAAA 2015, 1). This poses the question: Why are so many American college students drinking despite the adverse effects?

- *Alcoholism: How Social-Economic Forces Shape Normative Drinking Habits Among College Students in the United States*

A. was able to motivate his paper by highlighting both the prevalence of college drinking in the United States as well as its negative consequences in terms of deaths, poor performance in school, increased crime, and health issues. The bottom line here is that you have to be able to answer the “So what?” question. The reader is going to be thinking, “Why should I care?” about whatever topic it is that you are writing about. You need to be able to answer that question, before you outline your argument/thesis statement.

5.3. The essential elements of your introductory paragraph(s)

All introductory paragraphs need to contain the following elements:

- A hook (discussed in section 5.1),
- A motivation (discussed in section 5.2),
- The research question being asked in the essay,
- The student’s thesis statement (which is their answer to the research question, discussed in section 5.4), and finally,
- A sentence or two outlining how the student plans to support/defend your thesis.

In the sample below, student V. has chosen to write about the increasing popularity of veganism, and her introductory paragraph covers all the elements outlined above:

Introduction

In recent years, veganism has gained significant traction in mainstream culture. One sign of the times: a quick search in YouTube today for vegan recipes yields nearly four million videos, of which a growing number are posted by creators who dedicate their entire channels to promoting veganism. This begs the question: why are so many people becoming vegan? Even more importantly: why do we eat what we eat? This paper explores the role that social forces play in food consumption and the extent to which individuals exercise personal agency in their food choices. I will first explain the forces that influence food consumption, focusing on socioeconomic forces for the sake of brevity. I will then discuss the recent emergent vegan movement and examine whether individuals who adopt veganism truly exercise personal agency in their decision. My argument will be that although individuals possess the capacity to reconstruct their eating behavior and exercise some level of agency in that decision, they ultimately exist within an inescapable system of social controls that shape their dietary habits.

The diagram illustrates the structure of the introductory paragraph with four callout boxes:

- Hook + Motivation:** Points to the first sentence: "In recent years, veganism has gained significant traction in mainstream culture. One sign of the times: a quick search in YouTube today for vegan recipes yields nearly four million videos, of which a growing number are posted by creators who dedicate their entire channels to promoting veganism."
- Research question:** Points to the sentence: "This begs the question: why are so many people becoming vegan? Even more importantly: why do we eat what we eat?"
- Order of argument:** Points to the sentence: "I will first explain the forces that influence food consumption, focusing on socioeconomic forces for the sake of brevity. I will then discuss the recent emergent vegan movement and examine whether individuals who adopt veganism truly exercise personal agency in their decision."
- Thesis statement:** Points to the final sentence: "My argument will be that although individuals possess the capacity to reconstruct their eating behavior and exercise some level of agency in that decision, they ultimately exist within an inescapable system of social controls that shape their dietary habits."

V. started her essay by highlighting the rising popularity of veganism, using the growing number of Youtube videos featuring vegan recipes. From that anecdote, which serves as both a hook and a motivation for her essay, she transitions to her research question: “Why are so many people becoming vegan?” but also frames her question as offering an insight into the broader question of why people eat what they eat. Note how S. has rephrased the original CSI essay prompt to tailor it to her specific topic/case study. So rather than the broad “What part of our behavior and beliefs, if any, is truly our own?”, she has rephrased the question to suit her essay topic: “Why are so many people becoming vegan?”

From there, V. offers the reader the order in which she is going to be arguing her case, outlining the specific social institutions she will be analysing in the main body of her essay. And she finally ends her introduction by stating her thesis: “My argument will be that although individuals possess the capacity to reconstruct their eating behavior and exercise some level of agency in that decision, they ultimately exist within an inescapable system of social controls that shape their dietary habits.”

Note that V. outlined the order in which she was structuring her essay before stating her thesis. She could have just as easily stated her thesis first, and then provided the outline of her rest of her essay. Either approach is acceptable.

Another student S. also manages to squeeze all the essential elements of an introduction into her opening paragraph:

“What is the difference between a bench and a Malay father? A bench can support a family.” While often passed off as a tongue-in-cheek quip, such racially-charged jokes reveal a veiled problem of ethnic stereotyping in Singapore. It betrays a racial reality, acting as a microcosm of broader issues prevalent in today’s society -- the lower socioeconomic status of Malays and problematic societal attitudes held towards this ethnic demographic. This thus raises the question: What does it mean to be an ethnic minority in a society hegemonized by the Chinese? Focusing on the local Malay community, this paper explores the social structure of race and its relationship with social stratification. I will first explain how the “deviant” cultural ideology of the Malay community and their vernacular disadvantage produces socioeconomic issues by creating the consensus that Malays are capital deficient. Then, I will address how government intervention can be enabling, but is ultimately ineffective as these pre-existing, deeply entrenched disadvantages undermine upward social mobility. Therefore, although government intervention can be enabling for the Malay community, long-held, intergenerational customs and public perceptions of their ethnic identity ultimately limits their upward social mobility.

- *Regardless of Race, Language or Religion?*

Note how S. starts with a common racist joke in Singapore as her hook, and then lays out the current racial divide in Singapore and the marginalized position of Singaporean Malays to motivate her paper. Then she introduces her exact research topic which is the relationship between race and social stratification, but very clearly delimits her analysis to the Malay population in Singapore, ensuring that she will not be taking on too much in her essay. After this, she outlines how she will be approaching this topic, and finally ends with what her overarching argument is going to be: That, “although government intervention can be enabling for the Malay community, long-held, intergenerational customs and public perceptions of their ethnic identity ultimately limits their upward social mobility.”

5.4. The thesis statement must be precise

Note that a thesis statement can not be a bland vague statement of cause and effect e.g. “In this essay, I will show that behavior X is affected by social forces.”

In your thesis statement, you need to be clear and also precise in asserting which social forces are at work, and how they are affecting behavior X. Again, look at S’s paper in section 5.3. Her thesis statement is not simply that race influences one’s social mobility in Singapore. Instead, she is very specific and writes that “although government intervention can be enabling for the Malay community, long-held, intergenerational customs and public perceptions of their ethnic identity ultimately limits upward social mobility.” She has identified three different social factors at work – government intervention, traditional Malay customs, and public perceptions of Malays – as influencing the social mobility chances of Singaporean Malays, and signalled that her essay will be organized around these three points. This thesis statement thus clearly outlines what her argument is going to be in the remainder of her paper.

Contrast this with student L.’s paper which focuses on the high caffeine consumption rate among college students. After introducing her topic, the student begins to outline her research question and argument:

To better understand why caffeine has such a high prevalence among college students, a key question is: which external factors, if any, are acting upon them which increase their caffeine intake? This paper explores the role that social interactions and commitments within social institutions play in caffeine intake of college students and the extent to which they exercise personal agency in their consumption patterns.

I seek to resolve the question by drawing upon existing literature on the social behavior of college students. Firstly, I will analyze the three main reasons and corresponding social factors for students’ caffeine consumption through coffee and energy drinks. Thereafter, I will discuss the extent that one’s decisions can influence their exposure to social influences on college campuses. Finally, I contend that while exercising personal agency in consumption choice initially is possible, college students are inevitably bound by social forces that encourage them to consume caffeine as they engage with the college community.

- College Students’ Consumption of Caffeine – Forced or Free Willed?

Note how the student writes that she exploring “the role that social interactions and commitments within social institutions play” in influencing students’ caffeine intake. This is very vague. She also writes that she will be analyzing “three main reasons” behind college students’ caffeine consumption, but does not outline what these three reasons are. And in her last sentence in this excerpt, where she writes her

thesis statement, it continues to be very vague: “I contend that while exercising personal agency in consumption choice initially is possible, college students are inevitably bound by social forces that encourage them to consume caffeine as they engage with the college community.” The student provides no further information about what these “social forces” are that encourage caffeine consumption.

Now some students may fear that by outlining their identified social forces in the first paragraph or two of their essay, they will effectively spoil the element of surprise for their reader. The truth is that in social science writing (as opposed to creative writing), you do not want to give your reader these kinds of surprises. You want to signal early on what your main argument is going to be, and then you want to use the rest of your paper to prove it using relevant evidence.

6. BACKGROUND TO AN UNFAMILIAR TOPIC OR POPULATION

Often students are drawn to writing about topics that may be very familiar to them. Singaporean students tend to write about Singapore's system of meritocracy in education, or its multiculturalist policies, or national service, etc. However, they should not assume that their reader will be as familiar as they are about this institution or population. Students have to provide some background history, statistics, or just explanation to bring the reader up to speed.

In the example below, R. writes about the Hmong in the United States, and how American social and legal institutions constrain first-generation Hmong immigrants' ability to maintain their traditional practices. In his introductory paragraph, he briefly mentions that the Hmong moved to the United States because of "domestic unrest" but provides no other information about this population. As a result, the reader is left at sea as the essay progresses.

"To see a tiger is to die; to see an official is to become destitute." This quote reflects the Hmong people's dislike of state power (Newman 2013, 70). The Hmong were historically mountain peoples who resisted the power of the state by geographically separating themselves from the state. However, domestic unrest has forced the Hmong to migrate and live in countries like the United States, where the state apparatus enforces enormous power over the individual's actions and beliefs (Caitlin 1997, 69). In the face of Westernisation and globalisation, how have the Hmong continued to resist the adoption of new cultural norms? Have Western social structures and beliefs constrained the Hmong's practice of their traditional rituals, or provided them with the necessary capital and resources to reconnect with their Hmong identity? I argue that for the Hmong, social structures restrict their execution of Hmong rituals and beliefs within the United States, but have also enabled the Hmong to adopt new ways of cultural preservation and documentation.

- *The Tension between Freedom and Structure: The Migrant Hmong in America*

It would have helped R. if he had given the reader some history of the Hmong, where they are from in Southeast Asia, how big their population is in the United States, when they arrived in the United States, under what conditions, etc. Some overview of their cultural background is also necessary so that readers understand the cultural divide that existed between them and mainstream American society.

Now consider the following example on multiculturalism in Singapore. The author, a Singaporean, does not assume that the reader will be familiar with the multicultural policies of the Singapore government and uses his background paragraph (excerpted below) after his introduction to give just enough historical context to this policy to allow the reader to properly engage with his argument.

Historical Context and Practical Benefits of Multiculturalism

In Singapore's tumultuous thrust into independence, multiculturalism was conceived as a way to build a national identity and ensure racial harmony. It allowed for the creation of an imagined community (Anderson 1983, 6) through the combination of distinct ethnicities, especially since there was no pre-existing Singaporean identity that the state could lay claim to (Moore 2000, 344). This was done through the creation of the CIMO (Chinese, Indian, Malay, Other) scheme which designated each Singaporean a specific race (Chua 2003, 60). With these categories, each ethnicity was weaved into a grand national narrative, forming ties between disparate communities in an "imagined community." It formed the central ideal of ethnic diversity, a "cultural glue" (Migdal 2001, 238), that pulled fragmented migrant communities together in a complementary yet common identity.

- Multiculturalism in Singapore: Historical Underpinnings and Modern Constraints

With just a few sentences in this second paragraph, the student provides enough background (well-supported with multiple citations from relevant sources) so that the reader will be ready to engage with his subsequent body paragraphs.

7. EVIDENCE IN YOUR ESSAY

More than anything else, your CSI Research Paper assignments are asking you to demonstrate your ability to support an argument using evidence you have collected through secondary bibliographic research. However, in order to do this successfully, you need to find relevant articles/books/statistics, cite them appropriately, and then weave their findings into your narrative in a way that links back to your original argument. This is perhaps the biggest challenge for first-year student writers.

7.1. Provide evidence to support every claim you make

Students often assume that the reader will not need to be convinced of the existence of some social phenomenon because it is so obvious. Singaporean students in particular may imagine that they do not need to explain some particular facet of Singaporean society because Yale-NUS is in Singapore. This would be a mistake. Do not assume that your reader is aware of certain trends or patterns in society; instead, include a citation to back up your assertions.

In the passage below, N. assumed that the reader would be completely familiar with the intense stress that primary school students face in Singapore. So he made several statements without providing any evidence to support his claims or show that what he had personally observed was in fact representative of broader Singapore society. This could have been avoided by referencing newspaper articles or journal articles that speak to the widespread nature of this phenomenon.

There is a culture of striving to get into certain good secondary schools because of the belief that those schools can provide a better path for one's future. Students are thus under immense pressure to get results due to the hierarchy that exists among the different schools available.

- *Do We Have Agency in Choosing the Schools we Go to?*

N. speaks of a “culture of striving” and the “immense pressure” that Singaporean primary school students face, due to the “hierarchy” of secondary schools in Singapore. But there are no citations of published research to support any of these claims, weakening N.’s authority in the eyes of the reader.

7.2. Showcase different types of evidence

Your essay needs to demonstrate that you have read widely to source for information related to your chosen topic. You should be citing from a range of sources, whether books or journal articles, survey data or interviews, historical information or current newspaper articles. Do not just use a single book as your sole source of evidence. Likewise, do not only rely on newspaper articles.

In his paper on college drinking in the United States, A. drew on multiple multi-sited academic studies conducted on college campuses about the drinking habits of American college students. But he also drew on theories of social pressure (such as the Asch line study and the Berger reading) that had been introduced in CSI, and a national report published by a government institute.

7.3. Provide relevant methodological details of the research studies you draw from

When you draw extensively on the findings from a particular research study to support your argument, you should provide at least a few pertinent details about how the study was conducted so that the reader is able to judge whether or not the study is reliable and relevant to your paper. Listed below is an example from a paper by student S. where he provides details (but not necessarily useful ones) about how a study was conducted:

Psychologists Seidler et al. who examined six electronic databases for evidence on the effects of masculinity on men, found that “conformity to traditional masculine norms can increase men’s likelihood of experiencing distress and decrease their willingness to seek help” (2006, 1115).

- *I’ll Make a Man Out of You*

It is not clear what these “six electronic databases” are, or how Seidler et al. could draw that particular inference from those databases. As such, this detail about the study does not help the reader.

Later in his paper, S. cites another study, but this time, he does a much better job at providing the pertinent details of the method used in this empirical research paper:

Emslie et al. (2005), through interviews with 16 mentally ill men, found that depression was conceived as “an ordeal from which the hero emerges a strong man: no pain, no gain’.”

- *I’ll Make a Man Out of You*

In this case, S. offers just enough information about the research method (interviews) and sample population and size (16 mentally ill men) that the reader has a clear sense of what Emslie et al. did in terms of their research methodology and how they came to make the assertions they did.

Some students ask if they have to provide the methodological details for every single research paper they cite, and the truth is that they should not. Judging when to provide methodological details of a research paper is more of a craft than a science. However, a general rule of thumb to follow is this: Whenever you are working with an academic source that you rely on a great deal to further your own argument, you should provide some details about the methods by which your source found their evidence.

7.4. Describe in sufficient detail the key findings of studies you cite

When drawing on empirical research that relies on primary data collection, it is worthwhile to explain the empirical findings of the study so that the reader can judge for themselves whether or not they trust the overall conclusion or implication that the study's authors make. In the example below, student A. describes the results of a statistical study, explaining how these results support her argument that religious schools play a role in encouraging Catholics to remain faithful.

Paul Perl and Mark M Gray, sociologists who focus on American Catholics and their relationship with religion, conducted studies to assess the “effectiveness of Catholic schooling at instilling religious commitment.” Their research showed that individuals who received at least 8 years of Catholic schooling were more likely to attend mass regularly and be involved in the Catholic community. Individuals who attended 3-4 years of Catholic schooling were 50% as likely as non-Catholic educated Catholics to switch to a different faith, and 44% as likely to switch to no religious affiliation (Perl and Gray 2007, 275). This strong correlation between Catholic education and subsequent religiosity as adults suggests that our school community can strongly influence our decision to remain within the Catholic church even in adulthood, when one is said to be more independent in decision-making.

A. introduces Perl and Gray and their research specialization, and then outlines the key findings of their study by breaking down the statistics presented in their paper. And then, after presenting these statistics, she explains why they are relevant to her argument. Now, A. could have done more to explain how Perl and Gray conducted their study, and she did not provide page numbers to support her quote at the start of her excerpt, but she still did a good job presenting and then explaining these statistics to the reader.

7.5. Consider rival interpretations or criticisms of your evidence

Most students are able to source evidence to support their argument, but in their presentation of this evidence, they do not always take the time to assess its validity and/or relevance to their argument. It is important to carefully engage with rival interpretations of the evidence, or potential criticisms that could be lobbed against it. Doing so signals to the reader that you are objective enough to weigh all sides of a debate before arriving at your own conclusion.

One way in which these rival interpretations can be presented is by offering both pieces of evidence one after another in a paragraph, and then ending with your own assessment of which interpretation is more valid. In the example below, S. discusses how the official policy of multiculturalism in Singapore may constrain portrayals of the nation because only those that contain the full spectrum of the four “official” races that make up Singapore are deemed to be valid. He cites as evidence the controversy over the lack of non-Chinese faces in *Crazy Rich Asians*:

A full representation of Singapore’s main races is seen as proper and morally obligated in state-linked performances (1976, 121). This concern for the deliberate showcase of multiculturalism has surfaced in local critiques of the movie “Crazy Rich Asians”, which centres on opulent Chinese families in Singapore. A *New York Times* article remarked that some Singaporeans felt the film did not represent the other minority races in Singapore and only casted Chinese people, the majority race. Mathews, a senior research fellow based in Singapore, gives an opposing viewpoint in the article, arguing “I think most fair-minded Singaporeans would see this film as a work of fiction and not expect a high level of realism and accuracy in cultural portrayals,” (Ives 2018). I concur with his opinion. The film was not meant to be a documentary on Singapore identity; it instead focuses on and even satirizes the “crazy rich” Chinese in Singapore. This is the nuance it carries. It seems like some Singaporeans are constrained by their over-racialized view of what Singapore is, or rather, what it should be. This creates a tendency to problematise racial representation, causing them to overlook context and nuance. Public criticism on the lack of representation of the film may also affect artistic representation in Singapore. Artists may be too concerned about “proper” racial representation and whether their art is “multicultural” enough, disrupting their creative vision. By embedding race too deeply into national identity, Singaporeans constrain their understanding and portrayal of the many different realities.

- *Multiculturalism in Singapore*

In the above excerpt, S. weaves two opposing pieces of evidence into his paragraph, setting them up against each other, and then introduces his own assessment of their relative merits. He first discusses the criticism the film received in Singapore, but then follows this up with an alternative viewpoint expressed by a Singaporean academic. After presenting both points of view, the student then shares his own opinion and provides a detailed justification backing it up.

7.6. Engage with CSI material

Each CSI essay prompt requires students to incorporate a minimum number of readings from CSI. The reason behind this requirement is to allow students a chance to demonstrate their understanding of CSI material and their ability to critically apply a social science concept or theory to their chosen topic/case study. For instance, a student writing about the effects of a state's social policies that reinforce discrimination and inequities along racial lines, should be engaging with CSI concepts such as the different dimensions of power (Lukes), social control (Berger), stereotype threat (Steele), the historical basis of racial categorization (Hirschman), etc. These CSI concepts and theories should be discussed and connections should be drawn across these ideas to defend and support the paper's claims.

In writing about how the social structure of the Amish community in present-day United States constrains the life chances of an individual member of that community, student A. opted to write about the low vaccination rate within this community. In doing so, he drew upon not only empirical studies that showed the low vaccination rate, but also the work of Robert Cialdini on the power of injunctive and descriptive norms. In this way, he brought in CSI concepts and applied them in a novel manner to his chosen essay topic.

However, perceived social norms still minimize the attention that medial issues are given amongst the Amish. For example, vaccination rates of the Amish are very low, and a study conducted on a sample of 215 Amish children found that roughly 92% of them suffered from vaccine-preventable diseases (VPD), compared to 17% of non-Amish children (Williamson, Ahmed, Kumar, Ostrov and Ericson 2017). While the reasons for this trend are not entirely clear as they generally have easy access to vaccinations, we can ponder that this trend is rooted in societal attitudes. Renowned psychologist, Robert B. Cialdini, distinguishes between two perceived norms in messaging: descriptive and injunctive norms (Cialdini 2003). Descriptive norms account for perceptions of what is performed, while injunctive norms involve perceptions of which behaviors are typically approved and disapproved. We could imply that a lack of initiative of Amish communities as a whole, which is the descriptive norm, and the fact that engaging with the outside world is looked down upon, which accounts for the injunctive norm, discourage the individual from engaging actively with medical institutions. The individual trades off their potential wellbeing in return of being perceived as "normal."

- *The Amish – A Contradiction of Individual and Communal Realities*

7.7. After analysing each new piece of evidence, tie it back to your thesis

When you introduce a new piece of evidence (from your secondary sources) into your essay, you first need to analyse it to make sure your reader understands its meaning and implications. But before you move on to your next point, you need to add at least one more sentence linking this evidence back to your thesis statement.

In the passage below, S. has a lengthy paragraph explaining how hegemonic masculinity can have a detrimental effect on men's childrearing practices. He introduces his source material (a study of single fathers), analyzes the findings from the study, and the implications of these findings. But he ends there. What is missing is one additional sentence at the end, tying these implications to his original thesis which is on hegemonic masculinity as a whole, and not simply single fathers.

Men find themselves discouraged from taking on caregiver roles within families, and they often find themselves stigmatized or patronized for doing so. Parke (2013), a psychologist from the University of California, Riverside, conducted a study on single fathers that found that although they are just as competent as women at child-rearing, face "skepticism and doubt that single men are up to the task of parenting alone". Fathers, by all means, should be as integral a part of the child-rearing process as mothers are. In the case of single fathers, they are even more important. However, they are almost always seen as either "super dads", which is patronizing, or as "needy and perhaps even incompetent fathers", which is demeaning (75). This perception is rooted in the belief that men, being the aggressive, powerful party, must be breadwinners in their families and that women are far more nurturing. These perceptions will make single fathers, or even fathers that are merely naturally predisposed to caregiving, ashamed of their perceived feminine qualities (Parke 2013).

- I'll Make a Man Out of You

Now imagine if he had ended this paragraph with one additional sentence: "In this manner, we can see once again the constraining nature of hegemonic masculinity on men's lives, even as they transition from single life to family life."

Consider this other example from R. who is writing about the power of new information and communication technologies to allow isolated Hmong immigrants in the United States to privately capture their traditional practices and share them online with Hmong around the world, thereby creating an online imagined community. While he makes this point effectively, he does not tie it back to his thesis statement which is about the ways in which social structures both constrain and enable the Hmong in America.

... [T]hese new mediums connect Hmong from different parts of the world, promoting a new sense of identity. Prior to migrating into the U.S., most Hmong

were separated geographically and rooted their identities in the spaces they came from. With the advent of films that capture scenes of Hmong rituals in a space other than the one a Hmong person hails from, such as Vietnam, China or Myanmar, migrant Hmong “interpellate [...] into a globally diasporic sensibility” (Schein 2008, 197). Media not only provides the means for Hmong to feel connected to prior conceptions of identity, but also connect with other migrant Hmong who they may have never met. One way this is done is through the generalisation of place in film, where “the focus is on [...] lifestyle [...] rather than the actual details of any one village or individual” (Koltyk 1993, 442). This allow films to resonate amongst many migrant Hmong communities, thus establishing a group identity across different geographical areas.

- *The Tension between Freedom and Structure: The Migrant Hmong in America*

It would have helped if R. had added one more sentence at the very end of this excerpt, explaining what this point has to do with his broader thesis.

8. QUOTATIONS

8.1. When first drawing from an unfamiliar author's work, introduce them briefly

This introduction of an author whose work you are drawing from is necessary in order to signal to the reader that this author has legitimacy. In the excerpt below, S. draws on the work of "Van Gennep" in her essay on hazing rituals, but provides no further information about who this person is:

In his book *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep observes that hazing achieves the integration and socialization of new members, and reinforces the solidarity of the group.

- *The Devil Made Me Do It*

S. does mention Van Gennep's book *Rites of Passage*, which is a good first move, but she could have also hinted at his authority as a scholar. She could have mentioned that he was a French ethnographer writing in the first half of the 20th century, and the first scholar to identify the universal nature of initiation rituals to mark transitions between different life stages. The mistake here was to assume that the reader would be so familiar with either Van Gennep or *The Rites of Passage* that no introduction would be necessary.

8.2. When introducing a scholar, focus on the relevant parts of their biography that add to their legitimacy

When introducing scholars whose work they are citing, students often find it difficult to choose which aspects of the scholar's biography to mention. A useful guide is to mention their discipline and their research expertise as it pertains to the topic the student is writing about. Mentioning the university they are affiliated with, or that they are a professor, is not as relevant. S. used the following sentence to introduce a scholar:

As defined by Donaldson (1993), a sociologist from the University of Wollongong, hegemonic masculinity has three main characteristics.

However, it doesn't really matter to the reader that Donaldson is from the University of Wollongong. It would have been better for S. to have written: "As defined by Donaldson (1993), an Australian sociologist who has published widely on the lives of ruling- and working-class men, hegemonic masculinity has three main characteristics."

8.3. Analyze the quotation before moving on to the next point

Do not use hit-and-run quotations. Instead, after including a quote, take the time to analyze the quote and explain its relevance to the broader point you are making in that particular paragraph. Do not assume that the quotation is so clear that your reader will automatically understand its connection to your argument.

In the example below, E. is arguing that the popularity of the white wedding dress in the Western world is partly due to the synergy of injunctive and descriptive norms. She draws on Robert Cialdini's work but acknowledges that his research on the power of different social norms was not conducted in the context of wedding dress fashions.

The white wedding dress maintains its dominance in the Western psyche by the unification of injunctive and descriptive norms. The proliferation of the white wedding dress has created a descriptive norm; women are aware that other brides current and previous have chosen white dresses. The bridal industry has also excelled at utilizing injunctive norms, that is the "perceptions of which behaviors are typically approved or disapproved" (Cialdini 2003, 105). Although Cialdini's research is focused on the usage of norms to create effective environmental messaging, the conclusions he reaches can be applied more generally to successful societal messaging. Humans are likely to follow the path which is both popular and socially approved.

- *'The Memory They're Going to Keep of You, Frozen in Time': The White Wedding Dress in Western Society*

In the paragraph above, E. only quotes a sentence fragment from Cialdini's original paper so that she is not overly reliant on his words. In addition, after quoting from Cialdini, she adds her own sentence acknowledging that his research was conducted in a very different context and for a very different purpose. But she convincingly argues that his findings on the power of social norms can still be generalized to her context as well.

8.4. Do not be overly reliant on quotations from other scholars

Large chunks of quotations from other scholars reduces your legitimacy as a budding scholar or indicates that you are too lazy to try explain an idea in your own words. You should not have large excerpts quoted wholesale from other scholars' works. Instead, try to paraphrase their ideas and then provide an in-text citation.

In the example below, S. has two long quotes from the same set of authors (Aronson and Mills) when there is nothing in what they say that she could not have written herself.

Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance posits that we have the compulsion to maintain harmony in our beliefs, attitudes and actions. This means that "persons who go through a great deal of trouble or pain to attain something tend to value it more highly than persons who attain the same thing with a minimum of effort" (Aronson and Mills 2004). According to Aronson and Mills (2004): "If [an individual] has undergone an unpleasant initiation to gain admission to the group, his cognition that he has gone through an unpleasant experience for the sake of membership is dissonant with his cognition that there are things about the group that he does not like."

- *The Devil Made Me Do It*

Rather than such a big block of quotes from Aronson and Mills, the student should have rewritten this text in her own words. She should also have included page numbers for her in-text citations!

Consider this example from E. instead. In explaining how the white wedding dress embodies upper class norms, she includes an excerpt from an article about the power of the wedding industry to encourage brides to take on debt in order to fund their wedding dreams. Note how she does not include a full sentence from her source (Ingraham 2008) but instead only uses a sentence fragment. This targeted approach is a clever way to maintain your authority as the writer. Also note how, after including this excerpt, E. elaborates on this point by bringing in additional supporting evidence from another source and then analyzing the implications of both pieces of evidence together.

In addition to heterosexuality, the white wedding dress is a potent executor of class norms. It is the ultimate status symbol. When purchasing gowns women often spend beyond their means, as the wedding industry "increasingly [targets] upper-level income groups or [encourages] a significant level of wedding debt for what has become a compulsory ritual" (Ingraham 2008, 11). This compulsory spending is empirically supported by Currie's (1993) interviews with brides, as many reported feeling swept away by the process, and ended up spending significantly more than they could afford because they felt as if they should. As they strive to symbolically

increase their status, the expenditure of lower-income brides to create an artificial escape from class stratification ironically further entrenches them within it. It is fiscally straining, yet the purchase of a splendid white gown is nonnegotiable for many brides.

- *'The Memory They're Going to Keep of You, Frozen in Time': The White Wedding Dress in Western Society*

9. CONCLUSIONS

Ending your research paper may be the hardest part of the writing process for some students. The most common mistake is to use your final paragraph to simply recap your argument. This is a wasted opportunity, and an indication that you have run out of steam.

In contrast, consider how student, S., chose to end her essay. Her essay focused on female politicians in Western societies and the multiple pressures on them to emphasize their masculinity as a way of demonstrating their leadership potential. In S.'s final paragraph, she quickly summarizes the argument she had made but then hints at other areas that have yet to be explored.

Overall, female politicians who break out of one of Berger's concentric circles of social influence often find themselves at the mercy of many others. The great extent to which social forces, rather than individual agency, determine our behaviour is demonstrated by the urge of female politicians to, like Elizabeth I, de-emphasise their womanhood. That being said, we cannot assume these standards to be universal. For one, the expectations of female politicians can differ between cultural contexts. Female politicians in South Asia, for example, are expected to continue to demonstrate feminine virtue as dutiful wives and mothers (George 2012, 28). Another phenomenon worth further examination is the emerging trend of female politicians who embrace their femininity in the political spotlight. The recent US midterm elections saw numerous women "rewriting the playbook" on the campaign trail and emphasising their womanhood in their choice of dress, speech topics, or campaign videos (Zernike 2018). The issue of women in politics is a highly complex one, and while there remains much to be studied and much to be done, perhaps we may soon see a political landscape where female politicians can proclaim themselves to have the "heart and stomach" of a woman, and still cement for themselves a long-lasting legacy.

- *The Boxed Cake Versus the Boxing Ring*

Note the various rhetorical devices that S. uses to sow new ideas in the reader's mind. She summarizes her argument in a few short sentences but then writes, "That being said" to draw the reader's attention to the limitations of her argument and new developments that might indicate that past trends may be changing. She ends her essay with a quote about female politicians being able to one day proclaim that they have the "heart and stomach" of a woman, which is a direct throwback to the start of her essay where she had used that quote from Queen Elizabeth I to kick off her argument. In this manner, she is able to come back full circle to the start of her essay, giving her ending a lovely feeling of symmetry and completeness.

10. GENERAL WRITING RESOURCES

Below are various resources you can use to improve your academic writing:

1. Billig, Michael. 2013. *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. 2014. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company
3. Eco, Umberto. 2015. *How to Write a Thesis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
4. Becker, Howard S. 1986. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
5. Turabian, Kate L. 2010. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

11. SAMPLE CSI ESSAY

The following CSI essay was written by Zhiying (Vivien) Su, Class of 2021. The essays uses many of the rhetorical moves described earlier.

Veganism: How Socioeconomic Forces Shape Normative Eating Behaviors

Introduction

In recent years, veganism has gained significant traction in mainstream culture. One sign of the times: a quick search in YouTube today for vegan recipes yields nearly four million videos, of which a growing number are posted by creators who dedicate their entire channels to promoting veganism. This begs the question: why are so many people becoming vegan? Even more importantly: why do we eat what we eat? This paper explores the role that social forces play in food consumption and the extent to which individuals exercise personal agency in their food choices. I will first explain the forces that influence food consumption, focusing on socioeconomic forces for the sake of brevity. I will then discuss the recent emergent vegan movement and examine whether individuals who adopt veganism truly exercise personal agency in their decision. My argument will be that although individuals possess the capacity to reconstruct their eating behavior and exercise some level of agency in that decision, they ultimately exist within an inescapable system of social controls that shape their dietary habits.

Socioeconomic Determinants of the Choice of Diet

Arguing the limitations of nutrition as an approach in studying eating habits, Patricia Crotty (1993) wrote that there exists a “domain of behaviour, culture, society and experience” surrounding food consumption that goes unexamined in nutrition studies (109). Indeed, the scientific discipline of nutrition has largely ignored the social nature of dietary choices, which is a central component of how individuals decide what to eat. The health benefits of a plant-based diet (Craig 2009), for example, are insufficient in explaining changes in normative eating behaviors. One study conducted by Marcia Hill Gossard and Richard York (2003) concluded that meat consumption is “a practice embedded within a complex of social forces” (7). In the following paragraphs, I will explain how socioeconomic determinants specifically have contributed to existing eating norms.

Peter L. Berger (1963) characterizes the class system determined by economic criteria as “[the] most important type of stratification in contemporary Western society” (79). Citing Max Weber, Berger (1963) explains that “one’s class position yields certain probabilities, or life chances, as to the fate one may expect in society” (79). This socioeconomic reality also affects food consumption. Studying the relationship between social class and diet quality, Nicole Darmon and Adam Drewnowski (2008) found that groups of higher socioeconomic status (SES) were more likely to consume whole grains, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, and fresh vegetables, while “the consumption of fatty meats, refined grains, and added fats was associated with lower SES groups” (1109). The two suggested that the “observed SES gradient in diet quality may be mediated by” the lower costs of

unhealthy foods, the lower accessibility to grocery stores in lower-income neighborhoods, as well as the lack of nutritional knowledge and interest in cooking within lower SES groups (1111). In light of this realization, it comes as no surprise that in Gossard and York's study (2003), subjects "in laborer occupations eat both more beef and total meat than those in either service or professional occupations" and "people with more education eat less beef and total meat" (6). Social class exerts substantial influence on meat consumption, as a lower SES is more conducive to unhealthy eating habits.

This relationship between social class and meat consumption highlights the existence within lower SES groups of a descriptive norm regarding meat consumption, which Robert B. Cialdini (2003) claims is a highly persuasive social force. A 2013 study (Prinsen, de Ridder, and deVet) confirms Cialdini's argument about descriptive norms in the context of food consumption—when subjects saw previous participants selecting healthy foods, they were more likely to choose healthy foods. As a result, since individuals of lower SES groups view eating meat as what people of their social class typically do, they consume increased levels of meat as compared to those from higher SES group.

It is important to note that another determinant of meat consumption is the economic and political power that the meat industry has gained over the years. As Gossard and York (2003) commented in their study, "the economic elite control consumer preferences through means of social, psychological, and cultural manipulation—for example, by the use of advertising" (2). The meat industry, in other words, exerts the second and third dimensions of power as coined by Steven Lukes (1974), because it shapes the very wants of consumers. In this sense, meat-eating norms have been largely determined by the meat industry's corporate interests. It is thus unsurprising that meat consumption for much of the world is a "deeply engraved social norm and habit" (Raphaely and Marinova 2016, 268). Just as individuals' socioeconomic statuses control the foods that they can afford to consume and contribute to the normative eating patterns within their social class, external forces exerted by the meat industry also establish and reinforce normative eating habits of the general public.

Veganism and Personal Agency

With this understanding of socioeconomic determinants and normative eating behavior in mind, we can now examine the recent growth of veganism. Kathryn Asher and Che Green's survey (2014) revealed that more than fifty percent of vegans and vegetarians cited health, taste preferences, animal protection, or environmental concerns as reasons for their dietary decisions. To add, food photographer Maria Siriano confesses, "the hardest part of going vegan hasn't been cravings, which are surprisingly few..., [for] me, the social ramifications of going vegan were far more discouraging" (Siriano 2017). Asher and Green's study along with Siriano's comment underline an important fact: on a microlevel of analysis, the individual does exercise some level of personal agency in their decision to become vegan. Cutting out animal products for personal and altruistic reasons requires tangible sacrifice and independent action, especially when meat consumption is the norm. In line with the previous analysis of socioeconomic forces, individuals of lower SES groups exercise even more personal agency when they decide to become

vegan, as meat consumption is a greater descriptive norm within their social class. In this sense, individuals do possess personal agency and exert pressure to their social milieu in their dietary decisions.

On the macro-level of analysis, however, individuals are still part of a greater system of socioeconomic controls, and their decision to become vegan does not remove them from this system. The reality is that the main demographic group of vegans and vegetarians in the United States are “middle-class and upper-class individuals” (Lindquist 2013). Asher and Green’s survey (2014) also displayed an obvious positive relationship between education level and identification as vegan or vegetarian. Essentially, when an individual from a higher SES group makes the decision to become vegan, there exists an illusion of personal agency, because, in fact, the individual is acting within the boundaries of their socioeconomic reality. The implications of these studies are similar for individuals from a lower SES group, who are also constrained by the realities and norms of their social class when they make decisions about their diet. Rather than an illusion of personal agency, however, their location in the class system yields norms that discourage them as a whole from choosing plant-based diets. Moving beyond the scope of socioeconomic forces, the fact that veganism is now trendy also contributes to the idea that individuals’ decision to become vegan is the result of greater social forces. According to the Plant Based Foods Association, plant-based food companies in the United States is growing faster in sales than the entire food business in general (Strom 2016). This trend isn’t restricted only to North America; data from Google Trends shows a spike in “vegan” searches over the past five years in countries like Israel, Australia, and Germany (2017). We refer again here to Asher and Green’s survey (2014), which found that 63 percent of former vegan and vegetarian subjects disliked the fact that their diet made them “stick out from the crowd” (10). Although this observation explains why former vegan and vegetarians opted out of their lifestyle, it supports the overarching argument that individuals’ eating habits are heavily shaped by their social context. We can assume that individuals are less likely to adopt veganism if it was not trending, because there would exist less social forces (i.e. desire to be part of a fad) pushing the individual to exert pressure against meat-eating norms and incentivizing them from sticking out from the crowd.

Conclusion

The role that social structure and personal agency plays in shaping food consumption is perhaps best illustrated by the analogy of a dog’s toy ball (Haslanger 2015, 114-115). After a treat has been stuffed into a hole in the ball, while it is free to move within the ball and exert some levels of pressure against the ball, its behavior is determined by the ball’s movement. In the same way, although individuals are able to exercise some levels personal agency in their dietary habits, their behavior is still bounded by the parameters of the social structure in which they live. My analysis mainly highlighted the effects that socioeconomic forces have upon normative eating behavior, but, as I tried to show in the previous paragraph, there also exists other factors that represent other limits to our behavior as individuals. This understanding of social forces and food consumption creates further implications for public health and environmental studies as it provides the social impetus of unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable eating habits.

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