Guidelines for Writing Draft and Final Responses to Discussion Questions in SOCI 215, Fall, 2012
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One of the reasons I post discussion questions is to be sure that at least some of the students in class have thought about the readings and are prepared to stimulate discussion. This is why your response must be written and posted on Blackboard before class if you wish to revise your answer and submit a final draft at the end of the week for credit. If you post a response, I expect you to be energetic about discussion in class. This might happen when we project responses from Blackboard on the screen. It might happen when the instructor calls on those who have responded. It might happen because you are outgoing about asking questions and offering observations as we discuss materials. You should be ready to discuss the question thoroughly and thoughtfully and you should play a leadership role in class discussion.

Discussion questions that will be posted for most of the classes this semester are the basis for that portion of students’ grades allocated to exams—midterms and finals. Thus, students must approach the final versions of responses with the same orientation one would bring to completing a take-home exam. I will grade them with as though they are exam questions.

Strong question responses will have the following characteristics:

1. **You must follow a correct format.** This means to begin that the full text of the question you are answering must appear at the top of the first page. You also must be careful that the response is correct in terms of spelling and grammar. Since you will submit these questions electronically, use Microsoft Word or a word-processing program compatible with Microsoft Word. If your text cannot be open or if the question you are answer is not stated it is hard for the instructor to grade the paper.

2. **Draw on readings in a full and complete manner.** When responding to essay exam questions in any sociology class you should refer to readings, both those specifically assigned and other materials covered in class or even in other classes. Part of the task is to show that you have read things, thought about the material, and that you are putting this background to work. While accurately recapitulating the reading is part of the task you can go overboard. It is more important to explain the key points, to give a critical or analytic response to the reading, and to use the reading to set up an analytic framework that helps you and us to understand and discuss an issue or question.

3. **Provide an analytic framework in the opening paragraph.** Usually I prefer an opening statement that tells what you will state or argue in your essay or question response. Question
responses often are stream of consciousness productions where the topics wander or students figure out what they really are saying at the end. This is realistic in terms of how we go about writing but you may have to do a revision that provides a clear statement in the opening paragraph and that shows how the parts of the question go together.

4. **Present your ideas sociologically.** I don’t want you to go overboard on this one so that your presentation becomes overly formal or too general. But this is an advanced sociology class so you ought to be able to bring sociological concepts into the discussion, even if you do so informally. (You can use plain speech to give a sociological viewpoint as an alternative to giving an extended presentation of a theorist we might not have read in our class.) You ought to make a special effort to think about how a sociologist would respond to a question, in contrast to how a psychologist or epidemiologist or journalist might respond. When the question refers to an empirical situation (it may not refer to a text assigned for class), tell what sociological issues are in play. If you ignore this part you are likely to give a response that is not particularly sociological and as a result you are likely to leave out major issues that ought to enter into your thinking.

5. **Answer the question.** This is pretty straightforward but there are two aspects. First, once you have given a response you ought to go back and check to see that you actually did the analysis the question asks for and that your response is full and complete. Second, students often answer questions by giving a common sense answer rather than a sociological answer. If your response is one someone could give walking in off the street without ever having done our readings or having participated in class discussions then it will be inadequate. Remember that these are questions that examine your knowledge about our class. Often there is an issue or problem for our class that a question is meant for you to think about and discuss. Do that. Common sense answers to questions usually by-pass that task.