

Paper 2: Writing Guidelines

Assignment for Paper 2: Implications of Social Neuroscience

Choose a topic of research in the new subfield of “Social Neuroscience.” We recommend that you choose one of the topics addressed in class and readings, such as morality, empathy, trust, distrust, love, reciprocity, etc. (choosing a different topic is fine, but in that case you will need to do a modest amount of outside research). In your paper, describe how emerging brain research reinforces, unsettles, or changes traditional popular understandings and attitudes about the chosen topic, and reflect on the following questions: What controversies does/could the research stimulate? What social interests or political agendas does/could it support? How might its research questions and directions be influenced by such interests and agendas?

6-8 pages, Due March 30th, start of class.

How do I start?

Pick a topic that interests you. One of the keys to successful writing is to pick a topic that you’re excited about. This will help you maintain your energy and focus throughout the writing process. If none of the topics we treated in class appeal to you, you may choose one of your own. Just be sure to run it by one of us before you start writing. The topic you choose **MUST** be the subject of research in the neurosciences.

Once you have a topic, brainstorm. Take some notes (or do research) on how people have thought about this topic before it came under neuro-scientific scrutiny. Here you may draw on historical material, media, or you may poll friends or family members. The point is to come up with a good idea of the common understanding of the topic you have chosen.

Next, find materials on the neuroscience research. These can be scientific articles, popular press reports, or both.

Once you have collected enough material, consider what controversies might arise from the research, and why. How might research results contradict, enhance, or otherwise modify the common understanding? Who might benefit from the research? Who might get hurt by it? What is at stake if the technology becomes commonplace? What will change? Will we have to reconsider anything that we now take for granted? Who is, or might be, pushing for the research, or against it? Why? How do, or would, such interests shape the research?

Then start by making an outline of the paper. This will help you organize and structure the paper. Put all the things that go together in the same place. Make up some subheadings and put your thoughts into an order where one thought follows from another in a way that you think is logical.

Writing the Introduction

Your introduction is where you convince the reader to want to read the rest of your paper. There are several ways to do this. You can present a puzzle, a contradiction, or an unusual observation, and offer the paper as your effort to (re)solve it. You can, but don’t have to, engage the reader by using the first or second person. You can also build solidarity with the reader by presuming a sense of community with your audience, and announce that you’re going to write about something that you share with the reader.

Once you have laid out your example or observation, you should very briefly hint at the resolution, and then propose the order of the steps by which you're going to get there. Your introduction **MUST** include a thesis statement that summarizes the claim you are going to make or the position you will take. If you have used a special method to arrive at your conclusions, then the introduction would be the place to mention this as well.

The Body of the Paper

This is the part of the paper where you take the reader through the steps of your argument. If your argument is complicated, then it might help to sub-divide the paper into several sections, each with its own sub-topic. Each sub-heading should deal with one section in your outline, and each paragraph should contain a facet of your main argument.

How to make a strong case

For an argument to succeed, it must speak to reason and logic, it must be internally consistent, and it must be presented in an appealing form. It is **NOT** appropriate to insult the side you disagree with, to distort the other side, to make overgeneralizations without backing them up, or to overstate your case. To make your case as strong as possible, it is good practice to take the arguments for the other side into account, and either to refute them, or to show why they may be discounted in this particular instance.

Writing the Conclusion

Your conclusion should briefly summarize your findings, ideas, or opinions. Like the introduction, a strong conclusion can also take several forms. You could, for example, end the paper by pointing out future areas of concern that no one is thinking about yet. You could also hint at areas where more research is needed. Or you could link your topic to another topic where solutions have already been proposed, and suggest how they might apply here.

We realize that students come to this course from very different disciplines, and may have internalized a variety of ways to approach a topic. There is, therefore, no one right way to write a paper or address an issue. We are looking for evidence that you have absorbed at least some of the ideas and concepts used in the course, that you can lay out an issue clearly, and that you can make a convincing argument using the appropriate evidence and sources.

A Note on Style

In scientific writing, authors often use the passive voice ("It has been shown that ...") in order to take individual agency out of the writing, and to give the paper an aura of facticity by eliminating anything that might be construed as subjective. This is not our aim, so it's ok for the author (i.e., you) to appear in the text. In fact, writing is stronger and more readable if you use the active voice ("I have shown that ..."). This does not mean that you should write everything in a first person, over-casual chatty style. Imagine that you are writing for your well-informed peers in class, and adopt a tone that is direct and engaging.

Please contact any of us if you have further questions.

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