



Tips and Tools for Sociologists

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CONSIDERATIONS WHEN COMMENTING ON THE WORK OF OTHERS

(adapted from Bill Reimer, Honours Seminar 1990-91)

1. CONSIDER THE QUESTION ASKED

- are there concepts which require clarification?
IF YES: suggest alternative ways in which they might be defined and from where your confusion arises.
- are there contradictions or tautologies implied by the question or does it "beg the question" in some way?
IF YES: clarify the problem and suggest alternative ways to deal with it.
- could it be more precisely formulated?
IF YES: suggest some alternative formulations, with an indication of the advantages they provide.
- is it likely to be answerable using the normal methods of social science research?
IF NO: indicate why, and suggest alternative formulations to make it possible.

2. CONSIDER THE APPROACHES TO THE QUESTION WHICH HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED

- are they clearly represented?
IF NO: identify where the ambiguities lie and suggest alternative formulations.
- are there other approaches which are possible?
IF YES: identify them clearly, providing an indication of the sources, where appropriate, and make clear why these other approaches should be considered.

3. CONSIDER THE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION WHICH HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED

- are they clearly represented?
IF NO: identify where the ambiguities lie and suggest alternative formulations.
- are there other answers which are possible?
IF YES: identify them clearly, providing an indication of the sources, where appropriate.
- could some of the answers be made more manageable by splitting them into two or more?
IF YES: suggest how they might be split, and indicate how this will improve the original formulation.
- could some of the answers be made more manageable by combining them?
IF YES: suggest how they might be combined and indicate how this will improve the original formulation.
- does the formulation of another author's answer misrepresent the original author?
IF YES: clarify the nature of the misrepresentation, and revise it.
- do the answers answer the question?
IF NO: indicate how the answers are inappropriate, and suggest others which are more appropriate.

4. CONSIDER THE CRUCIAL PROPOSITION(S) IDENTIFIED

- is it (are they) clearly represented?
IF NO: identify where the ambiguities lie and suggest alternative formulations.
- do you consider it (them) to be the most crucial?
IF NO: indicate why and make clear why the specification of other proposition(s) would be a better way to answer the question.

NOTE: when considering whether the proposition(s) are the most critical, evaluate them in terms of:

- their centrality to the logical structure of the answer to which they are associated
 - the evidence currently available to support them
 - whether they are open to empirical investigation or validation
 - the implications that they have for other research questions
- does it (do they) logically follow from the framework(s) provided?
IF NO: identify the logical inconsistencies, or missing steps in the logic, suggesting how these problems may be overcome.

5. SUGGEST AT LEAST ONE WAY IN WHICH THE PROPOSITION(S) MIGHT BE INVESTIGATED

6. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS TO KEEP IN MIND

- it is less threatening to use the first person when commenting on the work of a close colleague
- do not forget to mention the strengths of the work
- when commenting on the weaknesses, do not forget to suggest alternatives