Writing Conventions in the Disciplines:

Writing in the Social Sciences

Basic Purpose/Approach: Dean Ward identifies the tensions that make writing in the social sciences particularly challenging as "1) the need for an objective, scientific voice versus the need for an authoritative, personal voice; and 2) the need for convincing, scientific data versus the need to qualify the data and recognize that it cannot validate social scientific laws" (150).

Passive Voice: Passive voice is often accepted as part of the writing strategy in the social sciences, because social scientists may be reluctant to identify agents or causes of the complex conditions they observe. Using passive voice frees them to make points and later return to discussion of agents and causes as is appropriate to their organizational style and focus.

Diction: Social scientific writing is marked by a mingling of various levels of diction, frequently passing back and forth between formal, discipline-specific jargon and everyday, conversational language. The choices writers make here are largely dependent on audience and the writer's own authority within the field.

Pronouns: Social scientists may use passive voice to avoid attributing knowledge to themselves, just as natural scientists do, but they also frequently use "we" and "I" in the subjects of their sentences. Social scientists make choices about whether to suggest their work is impersonal and objective, collective, or individual and subjective based on the situations and audiences of their written work.

Tenses:

Past:

• describes what the social scientists did. *We began*...

• refers to published work of individuals. *In his book on rural poverty, Thompson showed* <u>Present:</u>

- describes the claims they're making. *I show*...
- refers to previously published information. Thompson's work demonstrates...

Present perfect:

refers to published work of individuals. Thompson has demonstrated...

Qualifiers:

Social scientists often qualify their writing, because in these disciplines there is rarely a shared body of accepted knowledge that would confirm the absolute truth of a claim. However, they tend to use qualifiers which reinforce the strength of their claims, even as they qualify them. So, a social scientist won't say, "Thompson's findings are inaccurate and misleading, because...," but rather, "Thompson's findings, we would contend, are inaccurate and misleading because...."