

contexts

author guidelines

(Updated February 12, 2008)

Thank you for considering *Contexts* as a forum for your work. We accept proposals from sociologists working in any field, professional freelance writers, professional freelance photographers, and anyone else with a smart, accessible take on a sociology-related topic of interest to our audience—the educated lay person (read: non-sociologist).

Contexts is both academic journal and popular special interest magazine. Feature articles by sociologists are peer-reviewed. All our articles are written from an angle that demonstrates the impact sociologists and those working in the field, or the field itself, have on the day-to-day lives of the average person. They're written without professional jargon and in a style that grabs and engages the reader with a compelling story from start to finish.

Contexts accepts proposals and full submissions for several departments of the publication, including *Features*, *Exchanges*, *Culture Reviews*, *Trends*, *Book Reviews*, *One Thing I Know*, *Discoveries*, and *Reflected Appraisals*. See the information that follows for specific information about each section.

I. Writing Features for *Contexts*

a. *What makes a good Contexts feature?*

In general, tell a story. Tell a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. Tell a story that brings into focus what the field knows about something, what you know about it, what that all means, and how we move forward in light of it all. The topic should be timely and fascinating. Remember you're writing not as much for the field as for the educated non-sociologist or lay person with a keen interest in understanding society.

Topics might be policy issues of pressing concern (crime, inequality, politics, education, human rights, etc.), or they might be subjects of personal concern or curiosity, such as contemporary cultural changes, ways of life in other times and places, or quirks of human behavior. In that vein, *Contexts* will generally not publish on topics of solely internal, professional concern such as theoretical debates, methodological developments, or the politics of the profession (unless the author can make such a topic meaningful to the lay reader). Articles will be news to both non-specialist social scientists and the general public, even if it is not news to experts in the particular field of research.

Contexts publishes articles that present excellent scholarship. Whether articles are summaries of research or present specific findings, they must meet the same high standards reflected in other American Sociological Association publications.

The best advice we can give with regard to writing a good *Contexts* feature is to read past issues and pay close attention to the types of topics covered, how they are treated by the sociologists, and the style, tone, and language authors' use.

More specifically:

- The 50-word descriptor you submit with your proposal (see below) should be incorporated, in some similar form, within the first few paragraphs of your piece as your "nut graph." This is the short paragraph that quickly and clearly brings into focus for readers, in the beginning of your article, what it is you're trying to tell them or what's so important that you're writing about it, so they have something of a roadmap for your article.

- Features should include a relevant discussion of what the field knows about your topic to provide context for your argument. Reveal the conventional—or not-so-conventional—wisdom. Clearly tell the reader what’s missing, controversial, or up for debate, and then what you’re adding to it.
- Your analysis—what you’re adding to the debate—should be clear to the reader and well-reasoned.
- Write in a style that engages the reader. This is not a typical academic journal so you shouldn’t write your article in that style. Read previous issues and pay attention to the tone and style authors have used in feature articles.
- Attribute your sources. You can’t say 70 percent of dogs are good without attributing the information to the researcher that studied them or the publication that printed this information. That goes for academic research as well as news reports in popular media. Readers want to know how you know something is true, the editorial team needs to be able to check the facts to ensure it’s really 70 percent and not 71 percent, and researchers deserve to have their hard work properly attributed. We do not use citations, footnotes, or endnotes.
- Shoot for an article of no more than 3,000 words. Our word limit is strict.

Features are not for the presentation of:

- Reports of as-yet-unpublished studies
- Results of preliminary research
- A long-form op-ed
- An excerpt of your upcoming book

Feature articles by sociologists are peer-reviewed. Please note that authors will be asked for a \$25 processing fee upon submission of a first draft that is sent to review. This fee is waived for student submissions and revised works that have already been through the review process.

b. Sending your proposal

Send us a two-page proposal that includes a 50-word descriptor of the crux of the article, the first few paragraphs, a summary of what you plan to present and argue, the subheads you’ll likely use in the main body, and three to five other key works you plan to discuss in your article. This will provide us information to evaluate how well-developed your idea is, as well as help us ensure we’re selecting articles that take a variety of approaches to a variety of important issues facing us today.

Follow the guidance here and then send your submission to editor@contexts.org.

c. Our review process

Once we receive your proposal the editorial team will review it within two weeks. We’ll inform you whether you should write and submit the entire piece or whether it would be more appropriate for another publication.

Contexts uses a double-blind review process. With your full submission, please include the article’s title, your name, and your contact information on the first page, then the title of your article on the first page of the text. Please also number your pages and include a list of potential reviewers.

After we receive your full submission, we will evaluate whether to send it for review. Within three months we aim to decide, with reviewers’ help, if submissions are rejected, should be revised and resubmitted, conditionally accepted, or accepted outright. You will receive comments from the editorial team in line with the decision.

Once a revised draft has been received and accepted for publication with no further changes, we aim to publish it within one year.

II. Other Sections in *Contexts*

We also accept proposals for the array of reviews in the other sections of the publication. These are not peer-reviewed. They should be written in the same style described above and for the same audience, and will be judged on the same standard of high scholarship and accessibility to the lay reader.

Exchanges: This section will feature interesting conversations with both sociologists or non-sociologists who have something interesting to say about something going on in or relevant to the field. Follow the guidelines on style and tone from the above feature section.

Culture reviews: We and the contributing editors who coordinate the section have a broad view of what falls under this heading. Typical and welcome submissions would cover an art opening, new album, television show, movie, performance, popular book series, etc. They might also include a look at a contest, an ultra-unique travel opportunity, or a gathering of people that could happen anywhere in the world. The key is to tie the event to sociology and the daily life of an average citizen of the world and make it interesting to anyone.

Trends: While we have a contributing editor who coordinates this section, we welcome submissions for it that examine a trend in society from a sociological perspective. The topic and your treatment of it should have mass appeal. Submissions should use high-quality, publicly available data sources to document the trend(s) described in the text.

Book Reviews: We accept books for review and welcome potential authors with expertise in specific areas who would like to be on our list of go-to experts to review books as they become available. We welcome sociologists commenting on mainstream books as well as mainstream media writers commenting on sociologists' books. We leave the model of sociologists commenting on other sociologists' books to the journals that do it better than we. Reviews should be between 1,000 and 1,600 words, may include a discussion of more than one new book on a related topic, and should address the strengths and weaknesses of the authors' style and arguments, as well as provide a clear message about the importance of the text to the field. It should also be written so that it has mass appeal.

One Thing I Know: This 700-word essay should address a cogent idea or observation that the public needs to know but doesn't. That is, if people just knew this, they'd think of things differently. The back-page is not a place for narrow debates within a literature, but for 700 words about something the field of sociology tells us *ought* to be common sense, but isn't.

Other Sections: We also accept short (two paragraphs) timely suggestions for inclusion in our *Reflected Appraisals* (sociologists or the field making big news in very visible media or in high-impact ways, driving home to the lay reader how sociology is affecting, or can affect, their day-to-day lives) and *Discoveries* (interesting, new, and published [or soon-to-be] research) sections. The latter should come from authors or editors who have publication dates for articles already accepted by other journals; they will be penned by the *Contexts* Graduate Student Board at the University of Minnesota.