



AICE Long Essay Structures

And Other Writing Advice

EVALUATING A CLAIM

Example: 'Human agency is the most important influence on human identity.' To what extent is this statement true?

You may be asked to evaluate a claim such as the one above. Remember, you are being asked to evaluate a claim from the point of view of a sociologist. You are not making an historical argument, or a psychological argument, or even an economic argument. You want to approach this as a sociologist. To do this you must incorporate a sociological theory to help you validate your evaluation. Better still to consider two or even three theories to really nail it down.

Take a look at the claim above. Human agency is the most important influence on human identity. You have two interactants here--Human agency and human identity. Start with human identity. That is the topic being influenced. What is the general sociological understanding of the influences on human identity? Well, sociologists approach human identity as being shaped by socialization and interaction. What do sociologists mean by "agency"? Agency means the individual makes decisions for herself.

So right off the bat you see a conflict in sociological thinking. On the one hand there's socialization. Socialization is explained through Functionalist and Conflict theories, the structuralist theories. There's not a lot of room for individual decision making when it comes to socialization. So approaching this from a structural perspective would suggest that human agency is not the most important influence.

On the other hand, theories grounded in interactionism and postmodernism would suggest that human agency is very important in shaping human identity. If you want to evaluate this claim from a sociological perspective, you must incorporate some combination of these theories. You must then elaborate on their strengths and weaknesses and then draw a conclusion based on support from the theories. That's why I suggest using the [Magic Box](#) method before you start writing.

So a good outline structure should look something like what you see on the next page. Remember, each row of the structure can be interpreted as a paragraph, but that is not the only, nor even the best way to write a quality essay. It is, however, a good way to write an essay that will get you points on the AICE Exam.

EVALUATING A CLAIM ESSAY STRUCTURE

Component	To be Included	Example from Above
<p>Introduction</p>	<p>Identify the subject Identify and clarify key terms Highlight Major Debates Summarize your approach Thesis Statement: Take a Position</p>	<p>Subject: Human agency and its influence on identity Terms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency: Making personal decisions <p>Debates: Structural approaches to identity via socialization vs. Interactionist approaches My Approach: Interactionist Thesis Statement: Human agency is the most important influence on human identity, but not the only influence.</p>
<p>Primary Argument Supporting your Thesis</p>	<p>P: Make a single point E₁: Provide Evidence (Theory, Data and/or Reason) E₂: Evaluation (Strengths and Weaknesses) L: Link to the question</p>	<p>P: Interactionist Perspective E₁: Mead: Role Taking E₁: Cooley: Looking Glass Self E₂: Strength: Emphasizes interactions and relationships. Weakness: Does not explain how they get reproduced E₁: Structuration: E₂: Links interaction with structures L: Human Agency is exercised by making choices about which roles to take and which behaviors to subject to the “looking glass”.</p>
<p>Secondary Argument Supporting your Thesis</p>	<p>P: Make a single point E₁: Provide Evidence (Theory, Data and/or Reason) E₂: Evaluation (Strengths and Weaknesses) L: Link to the question</p>	<p>P: Postmodernist Perspective E₁: Lyotard: Replacing metanarratives with personal narratives. Greater freedom to express oneself E₂: Strength: Emphasizes personal freedom and expression. Weakness: Contradicted by Foucault Governmentality. L: Postmodern society is defined in terms of increased personal freedom to define one’s self and one’s own actions.</p>
<p>Antithesis: Argument contradicting your Thesis</p>	<p>P: Make a single point E₁: Provide Evidence (Theory, Data and/or Reason) E₂: Evaluation (Strengths and Weaknesses) L: Link to the question</p>	<p>P: Structuralist Perspectives E₁: Functionalism: Agencies of Socialization and Value Consensus E₂: Strength: Explains why identities tend to conform to expected norms and values. Weakness: Does not explain deviance or diversity. L: Structuralists define identity in terms of a function of larger social structures.</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>	<p>Overview of what was examined Summary of Possible Conclusions Offer the strongest conclusion and explain Alternative directions not explored Link to a larger relevant idea</p>	<p>The association between Human agency and identity Human agency is either not important because identity is shaped by socialization, or it is important because identity is shaped through interaction or by individual choice. Human agency is the most important influence on human identity as supported by the Interactionist Perspective. This is reinforced by the Postmodernist Perspective. Socialization is important as a means of learning consistent norms and values How does race, gender or subordinate status influence one’s human agency and thus one’s identity. Identity is an important issue in society as we see the normal, traditional influences on identity breaking down and new media for shaping identity, like the internet and mass media, rising.</p>

EVALUATING A THEORY

Example: Overall, the Functionalists offer the best explanation for human socialization. To what extent is this statement true?

Sometimes you will be asked to evaluate a theory. This will most likely not be a specific theory like “The Looking Glass Self Theory.” Rather, it will be a general theoretical perspective like “The Functionalist Perspective” or “Marxist Perspective”. You can certainly use more specific theories as support for the position you take.

You’ll be asked to evaluate the theory as it relates to addressing a certain sociological phenomenon. For instance, in the example above, you are asked to evaluate the Functionalist Perspective as it relates to human socialization. First, you need to understand the Functionalist approach for explaining human socialization. Functionalists see human socialization as taking place within social structures called “Agencies of Socialization” or Institutions. So it’s a really great idea to tie in theorists who deal with these phenomena, like Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton.

On the other hand, you want to look at a minimum of one other theory with which to contrast the Functionalist argument. Remember, all AICE Sociology essays are premised around a debate. One debate on this topic is that between the Functionalist explanation of human socialization and the Conflict/Marxist explanation. The functionalists see human socialization taking place within Agencies of Socialization, but Conflict/Marxists see human socialization taking place largely between the marketplace, or the economy and what Marx called a Superstructure, the non-economic elements of the society. For Functionalists, participation within the Agencies of Socialization is a largely positive thing that helps create a value consensus between individuals within a society. For Marxists, the market and the superstructure are largely coercive, or a bad thing. Socialization between the workers and the economic elite takes place within the marketplace, and this is a mostly exploitative relationship. Socialization within the superstructure, on the other hand, instills in people a false consciousness by which they do not see or may even justify their own exploitation.

Another debate related to this issue is that between the Functionalists and the Interactionists. Here Functionalists explain human socialization as largely determined by larger social structures, the Agencies of Socialization. On the other hand, Interactionists explain human socialization in terms of interactions. These interactions are repeated and habituated, becoming practices. If you are feeling especially bold, you might tie in Structuration or Social Constructionism.

EVALUATING A THEORY ESSAY STRUCTURE		
Component	To be Included	Example from Above
Introduction	Identify the Key Terms Explain the major sociological debates behind the theory Strengths and Weaknesses Summarize your Approach Thesis Statement: Take a Position	Terms: Socialization: Process by which individuals learn the norms and values of a given society and put those norms and values into practice. Debates: Functionalism vs. Conflict; Functionalism vs. Interactionism; Choose one debate or incorporate both. I think I'll choose Functionalism vs. Conflict. Conflict Approach: Socialization is largely coercive Thesis: The Conflict Perspective offers a better explanation of human socialization than does the Functionalist Perspective.
Characteristics of the Theory mentioned in the Prompt	Assumptions or approaches of the Theory as it relates to the prompt Principles of the Theory Focus	The functionalist perspective makes the assumption that the structures in a society serve the function of creating a stable and orderly society. Functionalists see human socialization as being organized by Agencies of Socialization or Institutions. Parsons AGIL, Merton Functions of the Institution. Focus: Macro Level, Top Down, Deterministic
Positive Evaluation of the Theory	Supporting Evidence Major Theorists Examples Studies	Durkheim: Value Consensus, Division of Labor in Society, Suicide Parsons: AGIL, The family Merton: Manifest, Latent, and Latent Dysfunctions
Critical Evaluation	Weaknesses of the theory	Assumes that everyone benefits from human socialization Ignores Power and Status discrepancies Does not address the consequences of victimization, exploitation, inequality or exclusion.
Alternative Theory	Assumptions or approaches of the Theory as it relates to the prompt. Principles of the Theory Focus	Conflict/Marxist Theory Concedes to the fact that human socialization is functional Recognizes that that human socialization is not necessarily beneficial to everyone in the society. Some are the victims of the system, not the beneficiaries. Marxist: Dialectical Materialism, Marxist: Superstructure/Alienation
Conclusion	Overview of what was examined Offer the strongest conclusion and explain Alternative directions not explored	Conflict does a better job explaining human socialization because it concedes to the points made by Functionalists, but also addresses inequality. Alternatives: Dubois Cultural Oppression, Feminist Patriarchy Both of these support the Conflict approach

Remember, you don't have to agree with the prompt. In my case, I chose to disagree with the prompt. If you disagree with the prompt, you must offer an alternative argument. If you agree with the prompt, you still need to address the alternative (at least one, but you must explain why the prompt is the best explanation despite the alternative argument.

Below is some general writing advice that will help you focus. If you want more you can also go to [Mr. Andoscia's Classroom Writing Advice Page](#).

Seven Golden Rules



1. Answer the question: Stay on track. Do not chase the rabbit.
2. Write in your own words. (avoid 1st "I think..." and 2nd "You see..." Person)
3. Provide Theory and Evidence to support your statements: Andoscia's Rule of Three
4. Ask Critical Questions as you write: Does this make sense? What is my best argument?
5. Structure your essays. (write well)
6. Keep your eye on the clock. Again, leave that rabbit alone
7. Take a couple of minutes to outline. Use your "Magic Box."

Andoscia's Rule of Three

For every statement you make, you should have at least three factual, theoretical and/or logical supports.

What are you talking about "rabbits?"

The rabbit is a really cool and fluffy idea, often inspired by your prompt or essay question, that you want to chase and catch. Rabbits are awesome when you are brainstorming ideas for research papers or story lines and such. However, they are distracting and destructive on timed essays. Chasing a rabbit often leads you into dense conceptual forests, which may be exciting, but are far removed from the actual prompt you are tasked with addressing. Chase rabbits all you want in your free time. For your timed exams, however, leave the rabbit alone.

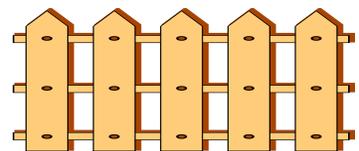


Andoscia's Maxim on Essays

A long essay is not necessarily a good essay, but a short essay is probably a bad essay.

Don't Straddle the Fence

Straddling the fence happens when you analyze polar arguments as if they were of equal value. This avoids the whole having to take a position thing and maybe hurt someone's feelings. It also leads to squishy thinking. After all, if you approach two opposing ideas as if they are of equal value, you don't have to argue any one position well. You will have a stronger argument if you take and support a position over all



others. Ask yourself, what is the strongest argument and why. You bring up other arguments as a way of being honest about the limits of your position, however, you favor one argument over another. Think of how ridiculous it sounds to write something like the following..."The Holocaust had both positive and negative consequences." Um...no. The holocaust was clearly negative, even if the Holocaust had some benefits for different groups within Germany at the time, the negative consequences clearly take precedent. Your writing will be stronger if you take a position.

Be Nice to the Prompt. Give it What it Wants

The Prompt just wants to be addressed. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Be careful in reading the prompt. There are two rules:

1. Read the prompt fully. If the prompt has two elements, you must address both elements. *Eg. The family is a necessary institution for the successful functioning of the state. Assess and Evaluate.* Here you want to talk about the family as an institution as well as the functioning of the state and how they are related. If you only talk about family, you are not addressing the prompt. Another related problem is to address any specifics in the prompt. If the prompt asks about a Conflict analysis with regard to schools, you must address the Conflict perspective, the role of schools and how they are related.
2. Don't read more into the prompt than is there. *Eg. Assess the view that the family is a basic unit of society.* If you spend your whole essay talking about nuclear families, then you are giving a more specific answer than the prompt requires.

Just because "some may say" something, doesn't mean you should write about them

One of the best things you can do to improve your writing is to eliminate the phrase "some may say" or any variation of this theme from your lexicon. As you know from surfing the net, some people may say just about anything. That doesn't mean you should include them in your essay. Some people may say that a pocket full of Guinea Pig pellets will ward away smallpox. Are you sure you want to write about them? No.

A good rule for yourself: If you are inclined to write some variation of "some may say" into your essay, specify who is saying it. For instance, take a look at the two excerpts and identify which is the strongest:

1. Some may say that capitalism is the best way to organize a market, but others say that capitalism is exploitative...
2. Functionalists hold that capitalism is a functional way to meet the needs of society, but Marxists claim that capitalism is inherently exploitative...

Shotguns are Dangerous!



So, here's a strategy that I call the Shotgun Method or the Sticky Spaghetti Method. It works like this. I read the prompt and then I just throw every theory I know at it with hopes that at least one of the points I make will "hit the mark" (shotgun) or "stick to wall" (spaghetti). Either way, this is a bad strategy. At best, you will demonstrate that you know a lot of theories. The point of the paper, however, is to see if you know how to use these theories to help you think about and evaluate the issues. You will not pass the AICE Exam using this strategy. You'll only shoot yourself in the face or end up with a mess you need to clean up.