Sample Essay-Writing Process
Jessica Wills, 4th year Student, York University

This is a sample of an essay outline and an early draft of the paper that includes comments by the author as well as a writing tutor the author visited on campus. Writing tutors are excellent resources available for free to help you with your research and writing.

Description of Assignment
This assignment will be an analytical paper on one of the following two topics:

1. “It is men, who in developing their material intercourse, change, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but in consciousness by life” (Marx & Engels, The German Ideology).

2. “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish).

The paper should be 8-10 pages double-spaced, plus a works-cited page. More details will be given in class.

This assignment will test your ability to apply your sociological knowledge to an analysis of a topic of your choice within the context of the sociology of knowledge. Utilizing ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ as your theory and method, you may focus on a wide variety of issues and ideas emerging from fields such as globalization, religion, terrorism, war, poverty, healthcare, AIDS, Gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, etc.

Notes:
What you will see below are scans of the documents Jessica made while she was working on her paper. Her working thesis is rough, and you will see that she has used the mind-mapping technique to generate ideas. Whatever method you use to generate your ideas is up to you (not everything works for everyone), but this process is often quite helpful when you are trying to decide what to do with your assigned essay topics.

Her draft has been edited both by Jessica herself and by a writing tutor. Note the extensive additions and deletions that had to happen before this paper was in the shape it needed to be in to hand it in.
Working Thesis Statement:

I argue within this essay that knowledge is constructed by dominant ideology groups in society. I will explore the existing power relations present which allow these dominant groups to achieve social control by creating docile bodies through social regulation. I will also analyze how knowledge the knowledge of those who are part of the dominant group is marginalized and subjected.
Mind Map:

This is the mind map used to organize the paper’s arguments in support of the thesis statement.

Mind Map:

This is the mind map used to organize the paper’s arguments in support of the thesis statement.

Mind Map:

This is the mind map used to organize the paper’s arguments in support of the thesis statement.

Mind Map:

This is the mind map used to organize the paper’s arguments in support of the thesis statement.

Mind Map:

This is the mind map used to organize the paper’s arguments in support of the thesis statement.
Draft:

This is an early draft of the essay. Notes are by Jessica and one of the writing tutors she visited while she was preparing this essay. Notice how much work has gone into the editing process.
According to Foucault, the relationship between power and knowledge is “reciprocal” (Koopman, 2010: 550). That is, power and knowledge exist in light of one another, constantly referring back to each other. For Hall, Foucault was concerned with how knowledge evolved through discursive practices in specific institutional settings in order to regulate the conduct of others (Hall, 2001: 26). Foucault argued that the “power/knowledge nexus” operated within an “institutional apparatus and [with the assistance of] technologies (techniques)” which always involve power and always linked to certain types of knowledges (Hall, 2001: 26). What Foucault meant by apparatus was a system or structure in which processes occur that involve technologies such as laws, rules, regulations, surveillance, etc. Essentially, Hall argues that Foucault believed that “knowledge was always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct” (Hall, 2001: 26). According to O’Brien and Szeman, the nexus of knowledge and power ultimately legitimates forms of social control over particular groups in society (O’Brien and Szeman 41). This type of control is captured through a particular discourse.

Discourse, O’Brien and Szeman acknowledged, is the “context of speech or writing, including who is officially permitted to speak on particular subjects and what kind of authority particular kinds of speech (and speakers) carry” (O’Brien and Szeman, 2004: 41). Kramer clarifies how discourses arise from the operations of powerful institutions of control and coercion in the form of what Foucault called “specialized knowledge, which is produced by experts” (Kramer, 2011: 11). Such experts could be professors, doctors, teachers, judges, and police officers. According to McCarthy, Foucault strove to disturb the normalization of discourses and sought to get individuals to think about what they know and how they know it (McCarthy, 1996: 40). Knowledge, according to Foucault’s concept of discourse, is constituted

> Foucault is arguing that individuals have agency and the power to exercise that agency. He is suggesting that individuals do not have to accept dominant discourse and can call it into question.
through relations of power, which determine what is true, what value is accorded to particular kinds of knowledge, and, by extension, what material effects that knowledge will have in the world” (O’Brien and Szeman, 2004: 41). O’Brien and Szeman assert that knowledge is power to be true has been constructed by complex power relations and that it comes into being through the operations of power and it exercises power by working with the desire to achieve social control and social regulation (O’Brien and Szeman, 2004: 41).

Foucault’s illustration of power and knowledge can demonstrate how the two notions are interconnected. Kramer suggests that Foucault uses the convention “power/knowledge to symbolize the interconnectedness of ideas and practices; of specialized knowledge(s) and power” (Kramer, 2011: 11). For Foucault, specialized knowledge assume power and power assumes a kind of specialized knowledge which creates a tension. However, “the problem for Foucault is that we find ourselves increasingly unable to negotiate these tensions” (Koopman, 2010: 546).

Koopman discusses the effects of negative power relations and refers to it as “a technology of power that drives out, excludes, banishes, marginalizes, and represses” individuals and groups (Koopman, 2010: 555). This power results in producing what Foucault calls docile bodies which are compliant and submissive persons. To a degree, large, individuals are required to comply with norms, rules, and regulations in order for society to operate in an orderly manner. However, the manner in which power and knowledge is exercised today produces negative effects where individuals and groups fail to even realize that they are being oppressed.

According to Green, the existence of modern power, disciplinary power, transforms “docile bodies into disciplined subjects, including subjects of the state, subjects of medicine and
psychoanalysis, and subjects of empire” (Green, 2010: 317). Individuals and groups are regulated beings organized on dominant norms, ideologies, and discourses that manifest power.

In addition, Foucault discusses that the field of power and knowledge can produce positive social outcomes in which individuals and groups are inspired, enabled, and encouraged.

According to Wandel, Foucault’s greatest contribution to the critical theory project is his conception of power as positive. This notion is formulated on the idea that “power produces, makes, and shapes rather than masks, represses, and blocks” (Wandel, 2001: 369). This conception supports the belief that knowledges of various kinds can be legitimated and powerful in shaping individuals. For Wandel, after analyzing Foucault’s work titled The Order of Things, Foucault claimed that there was a pressing need for individuals to “unmask and reveal a hidden order of things, an order of knowledge” which Foucault opposed to power (Wandel, 2001: 378). For Foucault, he wanted individuals to go in question the structures of domination and the mechanisms of power found in all societies.

After analyzing various literature concerning Foucault and the examination of the relationship between power and knowledge, I agree with the above scholars’ interpretation.

Although there are scholars who take on a different interpretation of Foucault’s work, I believe that Foucault’s exploration of power and knowledge was to interrogate how knowledge is produced, reproduced, and constant in society, who constructs knowledge and why, how knowledge is produced through discourse, and how knowledge is entangled in history and social conflict.

Like the above scholarly interpretation of Foucault’s quote from Discipline and

Parish, that power and knowledge are connected to each other and exist interdependently of one another. I believe that Foucault is conveying that knowledge is power because to know gives
one the ability to act, enforce, and command. Similarly, power is knowledge because to have power one needs the ability to access certain forms of information, facts, and principles. Therefore to act, enforce, and command, one needs information, facts, and principles and vice versa. However, the relationship is not simple. There are various factors that complicate this relationship, such as dominant norms and values. If the relationship between power and knowledge was simplistic, I would argue that everyone in society can achieve knowledge and at the same time power, or vice versa, because everyone is capable of developing knowledge and exercising the power of that knowledge. But, what we see when analyzing Foucault’s work is that certain people and certain institutions are privileged and therefore able to use the authority that power and knowledge produces to exercise control and domination. It becomes evident after reading Foucault’s original work and the interpretations of his work that he is greatly concerned about the dominant knowledges in society, the knowledge that serves the interest and values of institutions which are powerful agents in society, and which create docile bodies. However, although I discussed agents, no Foucault failed to discuss the ways in which the power/knowledge relationship can be deconstructed. I argue that the interdependence of the power/knowledge nexus can be challenged and agree with I mean that diverse knowledges can be emancipated from this relationship by encouraging critical analysis. Foucault discusses both negative and positive power where power can be either debilitating and incapacitating or creative and enabling. However, I argue that in today’s society power is predominately debilitating and incapacitating due to dominant norms and values that shape and construe knowledges. I will demonstrate how Foucault’s notion of power and knowledge is still relevant in today’s society and explore how the relationship of the nexus can be specifically seen in educational institutions, particularly schools. Schools worldwide are sites
According to Wang and Phillion, determining the knowledge that is included in school textbooks is a worldwide issue as many countries debate what knowledge is most appropriate and the knowledge that students should learn in schools. The knowledge that is presented in school textbooks is considered to be truth even though the knowledge is often distorted or constructed for a political purpose (Wang and Phillion, 2010: 567). Like Foucault, the authors suggest that we examine whose knowledge is being presented, in what form, how it was selected, and by who to achieve what ends (Wang and Phillion, 2010: 567). Wang and Phillion argue that knowledge is selected and constructed based on the interests of dominant groups which results in school textbooks mislead students and socialize them in dominant culture.

For instance, James Loewen, a professor at the University of Vermont, surveyed twelve leading high school American history textbooks at the Smithsonian Institution and reveals that much of what is written as fact throughout the texts is actually misinformation. Loewen argues that textbooks omit the passion, ambiguity, and conflict of America’s past and “are so Anglocentric that they might be considered Protestant history” (Loewen, 1996: 313). He also articulates that the education institution, as an agent of socialization, “tells people what to think and how to act and requires them to conform... to accept the rightness of our society” (Loewen, 1996: 307). Foucault would argue that schools have the privilege and authority to exercise dominant knowledge which structures an individual’s knowledge and perspective. For Foucault, a school objective would be to create disciplined bodies which act and think in relation to what they are told. According to Loewen, much of what is written in textbooks is driven by
rationalism and political objectives in order for individuals to be ‘proud of America’ (Loewen, 1996: 15). Various public schools in the United States are no longer trusted to successfully educate students. However, how knowledge is constructed in schools is a worldwide issue and can be seen in countries such as China.

In China, textbook knowledge is constructed by the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) which reflects the culture and ideology of the Han group. Textbooks are created using the knowledge of the dominant groups which legitimizes their culture, ideology, and worldview while minority knowledge is excluded and subjugated. Foucault would argue that textbooks are technologies used by dominant forces in society to ensure social regulation and cohesion. For Foucault, textbooks would achieve the means through which rationalities – any systematic way of thinking about government – are carried out and made possible (Lippert and Park, 2011: 176).

In addition, Foucault would explain that textbooks are technologies that “guide the self, by the self” (and Park, 2011: 176). For Wang and Phillion, “textbooks are not only the carrier of ideologies, values, cultures, and morality but also the arena in which dominant groups maintain their power over knowledge selection and construction and reproduce the power structure” (Wang and Phillion, 2010: 570).

Wang and Phillion conclude a study which reveals how the dominant Han group, selects and constructs textbooks in elementary schools for the purpose of maintaining the status quo and reproducing mainstream knowledge and values while marginalizing indigenous knowledges.

From grades one to six, twelve textbooks about Yu Wen (Chinese), twelve textbooks about Shi xiang pin de (Moral Education), and six textbooks about She hui (Social Science) were read and analyzed. The school textbooks were classified into the following categories: minority, Han, and international. Under each group, the examination of the texts in the school textbooks is
concentrated on seven issues: heroism, patriotism, morality, women, disability, science and technology, and culture. The authors tallied the number of texts related to each of the above. The authors used language and story-line analysis to examine if the texts contribute to the social reproduction of the dominant Han ideology and therefore subjigate minority knowledge.

The findings were that the number of texts in the three school textbooks related to minority groups was 12, which comprises about 1.5% of the total texts in the three textbooks. The number of texts related to the dominant Han group was 667, which comprises about 85.2% of the total texts in the three textbooks. It is evident that the Han group prioritizes Han knowledge in school textbooks while minority groups' knowledge and cultures are deemed less important. The selection of knowledge in school textbooks is selected and reconstructed based on the interests of the dominant Han group. Foucault would agree that the Han group controls all institutions and possesses the power to decide what knowledge should be included in school textbooks, such as heroism and morality, and what should be excluded, such as minority knowledge and culture. Foucault would argue that this is an example of the relationship between power/knowledge in that knowledge is “constituted through relations of power, which determine what is true and what value is accorded to particular kinds of knowledge”, which therefore explains the type of material effects that knowledge will have in the world (O’Brien and Szeman, 2004: 41). For example, the textbook Yu Wen, there is a description about the Great Wall. The text discusses how it was the magnificent work of the ancient working people who accomplished the Great Wall. However, the text fails to mention that it was built to prevent the northern minorities from entering the Han dominated region and people were forced to work by the ruling class and died in its construction. Foucault would state that this is an example of how technologies assist to achieve not only regulation, but also bodies by creating normal and
conventional ways of thinking through non-coercive methods. According to Wang and Phillion, “the Han group does not want students to learn that the harsh and cruel ruling class, in ancient times, did not care about working people’s lives and their families” (Wang and Phillion, 2010: 576). There is little social reality included in school textbooks about poverty, unemployment, corruption, and environmental pollution, which gives the illusion that society is perfect.

The knowledge that students learn in school prevents them from examining their social realities and forces them to accept the production and reproduction of dominant knowledges within schools. Minority students begin to lose their access to minority knowledge and culture due to few representations of it, which ultimately leads to a student’s identity to be overtaken by the dominant culture. Loewen discusses how minority group knowledge becomes devalued and underrepresented, and how a social injustice has occurred. It is unprincipled that minority students lack the opportunity to learn their culture, history, and literature and forced to learn the dominant knowledge of any kind. Although China’s political landscape makes it more difficult to combat dominant knowledges and power, there are ways to challenge dominant knowledge. This is something Foucault failed to discuss in his work. I argue, along with Loewen, that once the power/knowledge nexus is fully understood, individuals can counteract the power/knowledge relationship by challenging its existence and effects. Loewen discusses ways in which teachers and students can challenge textbook doctrine by asking five critical questions when analyzing texts. First, why was this written? Loewen suggests that one needs to locate the audience in the social structure and consider what the speaker is trying to accomplish, essentially contextualize the text. Second, whose viewpoint is presented? Loewen suggests that the location of the speaker in the social structure should be analyzed along with his/her ideological interests. In addition, he recommends readers to look for any viewpoints that are omitted. Third, is the account...
believable? Fourth, is the account hacked up by other sources? Last, how is one supposed to feel about the information presented? (Loewen, 1996: 317). If such questions are explored when analyzing images, texts, or video, one has a mechanism for defending themselves against simply complying with the dominant knowledge and power that Foucault discusses.

After interpreting Foucault’s notion of knowledge and power and analyzing the way in which it still operates in communities around the world, it is evident that knowledge and power have a complicated relationship that benefits some and not others. The above scholars that I have mentioned provide an excellent interpretation of Foucault’s power/knowledge nexus and illustrate how it legitimizes the way society operates and the way individuals behave. To refer to any question I posed at the beginning, I believe that Foucault was conveying that power and knowledge operate in a detrimental way as it suppresses and confines people in dominant ideologies. However, once the magnitude of Foucault’s notion is realized, it can be used to liberate those whose knowledges have been suppressed by dominant groups. Although the work of Foucault is at times complicated and ambiguous, his work has had a profound influence in the study of sociology and continues to be insightful when discussing the sociology of knowledge and knowledge production.
What these pictures should show you is that writing – including essay writing – is a process that takes much longer than many students think. In fact, the process is rarely ever finished. From coming up with a working thesis (which Jessica later tweaked) to using a mind map to figure out ideas, to writing a draft and having someone else with expertise look over it, a lot of work went into this essay. If you start to think of writing as a process that is rarely ever perfectly finished, you’ll start to realize that your writing can always get better, and that there are always changes you can make to your writing to make your work stronger. Don’t be afraid to get help, like Jessica did, no matter what year you are in or what subject you are studying.