Writing a term paper in sociology is often thought of as a linear process: first you get the assignment, then you think of a topic, then you go to the library and “do the research,” then you write up your ideas, usually a day before the paper is due, leaving editing and proofreading to the last minute (if at all). In reality, writing a research paper is a reiterative process. You go back and forth between the steps. Here is a list of seven steps. Think of these steps as a roadmap. Follow the roadmap, and you will be able to navigate successfully from assignment to completed paper—a long trail that circles back and forth, not a trail that simply goes in a straight line from one place to another.

Step 1. Managing time.
Start at least ten days before the paper is due. This is the minimum amount of time necessary to go back and forth between the various steps—and to take a day or two off in the middle of the project, so you can return to it with fresh eyes and sharpen the writing and the analysis.

Step 2. Selecting a topic.
This is the easy step. Based on the course readings or assignment, what bothers you about what others have said? What did you think about after class? Is there a problem with how other people are thinking? Be certain to allow your personal experiences and beliefs to play a part in your scholarship. Doing so will make your research original while also incorporating research.

Step 3. Researching existing literature.
Finding good sources is easy, if you start with the subfields of sociology relating to your question. Then look for what issues are being discussed in the subfield. Think in terms of field and subfield/topic: for example, crime, and then gangs; or family, and then child custody, etc.

Step 4. Developing a specific question of a manageable scope.
The research question comes from your original ideas and experiences, and from reading what others have said about similar issues. A manageable question is specific (smaller than an issue). Not: why are crimes committed? (an issue, but too broad) But: what opportunity factors lead to corporate theft? (specific as to the cause and effect, using facts).

Step 5. Brainstorming and free writing.
Allow yourself to write down random thoughts, to free associate, to “journal” or write as if sending an email to a friend. Make lists, and draw diagrams. Do not think what you’re writing has to end up in the final paper. Explore the ideas until you discover a set of key points that can give shape to a paper.

Step 6. Developing and structuring an argument with relevant points.
Use your brainstorming notes to find the best ideas. Discard the rest. Reorganize the points to make a logical argument.

Step 7. Editing and proofreading.
How can you be more concise? Allowing yourself enough time to develop an argument that is not a first draft—this means going back and forth between steps 3, 4, 5 and 6. The research should shape the question and make it more specific. In the end, proofreading is about following the ASA format, rewriting the introduction to match the conclusion, and making sure that the transitions between paragraphs guide the reader through the key points that give shape to the argument. If you are someone who is often criticized for being wordy, then split long sentences into a series of shorter sentences. If you are someone who is often told that you have grammar errors, then schedule time to consult with the Writing Center, and brush up on your skills. And finally, be sure to print out your paper and proofread it in hard copy. Proofreading in the computer is much more likely to result in typos and other mistakes!

EXAMPLE OF THE BACK-AND-FORTH PROCESS. At least ten days before the paper is due, you start with a general topic that interests you from class. You read a few articles to see what other scholars have said. You’ve gone through steps 1, 2, and 3. Now, you need to move on to step 4: developing a specific question of manageable scope. To complete step 4, however, you will need to move back and forth between steps 2 to step 3 (general topics and existing research). You also might need to jump to step 5 (free writing). As you write out your thoughts in a journal or email, you start to develop a set of key points and to discard the vague or uncertain ideas. This is a move from step 5 to 6, but you then realize that there was a related topic addressed in the literature, so you move back to step 2, and look at more research materials. This is the natural progression of research: moving back and forth, from thinking to research to writing, and back around. If you start early enough, you will have enough time to develop a paper that you actually enjoyed writing—and a paper others will want to read.