PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The earliest antecedent for this book dates from 2001, when one of us (Anne Murcott) set up a writing group for PhD students and junior research fellows in the social sciences while holding a visiting position in New Zealand at CSAFE, University of Otago. On returning to the United Kingdom she then set up a similar group in Science & Technology Studies at IGBIS, University of Nottingham. This second group met monthly for close on a decade, attended at one time or another by something like thirty PhD students, of whom the other of us (Andrew Balmer) was one.

It is he who devised this book, created its shape and developed it especially for undergraduate students taking courses in sociology. Although our combined experience of teaching, supervision and management runs up to post-doctoral level, we have tailored the book towards undergraduate essays and dissertations in order to provide a solid grounding for developing basic techniques of writing, not simply to help students completing their first degree but also to provide a foundation for whatever direction they take after graduating. We are well aware that there are many books for students about how to write (and list a selection in the Appendix): advice about writing in general has a long, varied and often opinionated history, including ‘classics’ by Robert Graves, George Orwell and Margaret Atwood in the last hundred years alone. We have aimed this book at a very specific literal and metaphorical gap – the space beside the laptop during the very doing of an essay – in which it may sit ready to be consulted as the actual work of putting an essay together unfolds.

We are heavily indebted to fellow members of both original writing groups, but to the Nottingham one in particular for their commitment, collegueship and great good humour – as well as for inventing the informal name of the group which we have impertinently purloined for the title of this book. We are also very grateful to undergraduate

students who have given us permission to use extracts from their essays and dissertations to illustrate our discussion (and to whom we have randomly referred as 'she' or 'he' to help conceal their identity). We wish to thank everyone at Manchester University Press who helped us with this book, but especially Tom Dark, our editor, for his support and for extremely helpful discussions at critical stages of the book's preparation. Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript. And we would like to record our appreciation to many colleagues and friends for conversations about writing over as many years, including, in particular, Paul Atkinson, Wendy Bottero, Kate Bulpin, Hugh Campbell, Sara Delamont, Robert Dingwall, David Evans, Ian Jack, Hilly Janes, Lindy Sharpe and David Woodhead.

We alone, however, are responsible for errors or misconstructions in the final text.