

Preparing to Start Your Senior Thesis

To start your senior thesis in the fall, there are two things you need to do right now:

(1) Decide whether you will start your research over the summer. You are not required to conduct research over the summer, but IF you do, you must contact Professor Prasad immediately (m-prasad@northwestern.edu). There is a lot of preliminary work you have to do before you can start researching, so don't delay.

(2) Choose a topic. You will be expected to have a general topic in mind on the first day of class. In the first weeks of the quarter we will spend a lot of time proceeding from the general topic to a specific research question, and I will ask you to think smaller and more precisely about what you want to do. But for now, I want you to think big: what is the biggest picture formulation of your question? Why does your topic *matter*? Why should anyone else care about your topic? On the first day of class, I will ask you to write down on a piece of paper two things: your potential topic, and why it matters.

Here are some ways people commonly choose topics:

- Has something that seems unjust happened to you or someone you love? This can be one of the most powerful motivations for a sociological research project, but the trick here is learning to be objective and thinking scientifically about something so important to you. If you can do that, the senior thesis can be a transformative experience.
- Is there a social issue that you are passionate about, or a social problem that you would like to solve—genocide? Climate change? Racism? Sexism? Abortion? There is a sociological way to study anything, so you can let your passions guide you. For now, don't worry about precisely *how* you will study this—just write down the topic. Don't be afraid to sound naïve. Even if you don't in fact end up solving poverty, it helps to articulate the ultimate goal.
- Is there a sociological book or article that you love, or a class that has piqued your interest in a subject? Lareau's Unequal Childhoods? Hocschild's Second Shift? Duneier's Sidewalk? Bourdieu's Distinction? Skocpol's States and Social Revolutions? Think about adopting either the subject or the research method for your senior thesis.
- Is there some sociologically fascinating research site or data that you have access to—are you part of a unique community? Have you worked for an organization that will give you inside data? Do you have a rich extracurricular life that you can draw on for the senior thesis?
- Do you have clear plans for your life after graduation, and can the senior thesis help you in achieving those plans? For example, if you are going to med school, you might consider a thesis on inequalities in medical care. If you are going to law school and interested in international law, you might consider a thesis on human rights. Etc.
- Is there something that just intrigues you, for no reason that you can name? Is there some question that has always nagged at you? This is the time when you can devote concentrated attention to it—something that you might never be able to do again in your life.