

WRITING A SENIOR THESIS IN SOCIOLOGY

Writing a thesis is the capstone experience of the sociology major. It allows students to put the skills and knowledge acquired in class to practical use, to learn the craft of doing original, in-depth research, and to emerge from four years of undergraduate studies with a tremendous sense of intellectual achievement and accomplishment.

Although writing a thesis requires discipline and patience, and takes up the better part of the senior year, it develops skills that will last a life time. These skills include creativity, analytical thinking, independence of ideas, and writing. Such skills are essential for nearly all pursuits following graduation, whether they be graduate school, professional school, business, the arts, education, or the non-profit sector.

As a practical matter, employers will be impressed by your research experience and will want to peruse your thesis as a writing sample. Your initiative will also not go unnoticed by professors, who will be happy to provide guidance and feedback on your project when it overlaps with their areas of expertise.

HOW IT WORKS

1. Students enroll in the Senior Research Seminar, Sociology 398-1 and 398-2, during the fall and winter quarters. These are required courses for the major for students writing a thesis. If there is a conflict in scheduling, discuss this with the professor of the thesis seminar *prior* to the senior year, in the spring quarter of the junior year.
2. Although the schedule varies depending on the professor, typically students will meet as a class for the first several weeks of the quarter and then meet with the professor on an individual basis thereafter. The professor of the seminar is the main advisor of the thesis, and therefore is the main reader of the thesis as well. However, students can seek out assistance from other faculty members who have expertise relevant to the thesis.
3. Students should have a relatively well defined area of research in mind by the start of the fall quarter. It will be useful to have carried out background reading on the topic over the summer. Meeting with professors in the spring quarter of the junior year will help refine the topic and define a reading list for the summer. It is not required that students engage in primary research during the summer prior to the senior year, but that would certainly provide a significant leg up in the process.
4. The fall quarter is usually devoted to converting a research area into a research question, conducting a formal literature review, defining the empirical component of

the project, obtaining approval for the empirical research if necessary, obtaining funding for the empirical research if necessary, and beginning the data collection process.

5. Many different methods of data collection and analysis are possible, including archival research, analysis of documents (e.g., legal, media), survey analysis (e.g., GSS, Census data), interviews, participant observation, and so on. The only requirement is that the thesis be an original piece of empirical research.
6. The winter quarter is devoted to analyzing data and writing the thesis, which is typically 35-50 pages in length.
7. Once the thesis is complete, the Undergraduate Committee, composed of faculty (other than the professor of the seminar) and graduate students, evaluates the theses for distinction, honors, and other awards. For further information, see <http://www.sociology.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/honors-awards.html>.

USEFUL TIPS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

1. Study abroad is often a fruitful source of ideas for a senior thesis. Even if you did not conduct research during your study abroad, and didn't embark on study abroad in order to formulate a senior thesis topic, often times you emerge from the experience with fresh ideas in need of further research.
2. You can apply for grants to do research during your junior year, such as Summer Research Grants, or during the early part of your senior year, such as the Undergraduate Research Grants. We encourage students to obtain grants.

Writing a grant proposal is an excellent skill to develop, and the writing lab and fellowships office are eager to help out. The university enthusiastically supports undergraduate research and offers substantial resources to carry out research projects. Visit the fellowships office web site for more information at <http://undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/research-opportunities>. Also visit sociology's information page about funding opportunities at <http://www.sociology.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/funding.html>.

3. Take advantage of library resources. You may obtain a library carrel if you are writing a thesis and you can consult the social sciences librarian, Kathleen Murphy, about the wealth of interesting data available on social science topics. For more information, visit <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/libraries-collections/evanston-campus/government-information/social-science-data-services>.
4. For information on writing a thesis in two programs, see <http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/honors-awards/honors-two-departments.html>.