

SOCIOL 398: Senior Research Seminar

Instructor: Anthony S. Chen
Meeting Times: Mon., 9–11:50am
Classroom: Parkes Hall, Room 222
Office: Room 222, Dept. of Sociology, 1810 Chicago Ave.
Office Hours: Mon., 2–5pm; Thurs., 2–5pm; or by appointment.

This is the first course of a two-course sequence leading to the completion of a senior thesis in the Department of Sociology. Students who complete a senior thesis are eligible for departmental honors.

Sociology majors who choose to write a senior thesis often regard the experience as the culmination of their undergraduate education. The thesis itself is basically a paper that tends to run over thirty pages in length. But it is no ordinary paper. It is the product of an original, independent research project supervised by two faculty advisors in the sociology department. This requires students to design, carry out, and write up the results of a research project that adds something new to what sociologists already know, drawing on the advice of their faculty advisors but working largely on their own.

This two-course sequence is designed to help students not only complete a thesis but write a good one. A good thesis is based on a research project that poses a strongly motivated question and presents a credible answer to it. This means that the researcher asks a question that is worth asking. It also means their question is answered with empirical evidence that has been carefully collected and systematically analyzed. A good thesis makes a contribution to the existing stock of sociological knowledge. It might pose a question that had previously gone unasked or unanswered. It might shed new light on a question that has already been studied by other researchers, perhaps by analyzing a novel source of data or analyzing old data in a novel way. A good thesis is also logically structured and clearly written. Writing a good thesis is a challenging intellectual experience, but it is also eminently doable if a student is prepared to plan ahead and work diligently.

FACULTY ADVISORS

Each student will have two advisors over the entire two-course sequence. One advisor will be the course instructor and the other will be another faculty member in the sociology department. The course instructor will assign a faculty member to each student early in fall quarter. All students are expected to work independently, but they are also required to seek out faculty input as they formulate and refine a research question, navigate the scholarly literature, define their original contribution, work out a research design, collect and analyze data, and write up their findings.

ASSIGNMENTS

The main assignment in the fall seminar is writing a thesis prospectus. This is a short paper that describes the main building blocks of a student's research project and provides a detailed blueprint of a student's research plans. Several minor assignments are also required at various points throughout the quarter. These are designed to help students make progress toward the main assignment. Lastly, students will give a presentation on their thesis project to their classmates, who are expected to provide constructive feedback.

Please note that Weinberg College expects student researchers whose work involves "human subjects" to develop a research protocol and have it approved by Northwestern's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This protocol is a basically statement of the concrete research activities that a researcher intends to undertake, along with an assessment of the risks that are potentially posed by the research and a plan for how the researcher plans to address those risks. Developing a protocol and getting it approved by Northwestern's IRB will be required on the part of all students whose work involves "human subjects." This will be a majority of students writing a sociology thesis. The few students whose research does not involve "human subjects" (for instance, students doing a project in historical sociology) are not expected to file such a protocol. This assignment is not graded.

READING

This course does not have any required readings. But the reading load can be heavy at times. As students develop their projects and finalize their prospectuses, both faculty advisors will suggest readings to each student that are specifically relevant to her or his research.

The following readings are not required, but they may be useful at various points of the research and writing process:

Babbie, Earl. *The Basics of Social Research*, 6th edition. New York: Cengage, 2013.

Becker, Howard. *Writing for Social Scientists*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

University of Chicago Press Staff. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Strunk, Jr., William and E.B White. *The Elements of Style*, 4th edition. New York: Pearson, 1999.

For the sake of practicality, only the most recent editions are listed, but older editions are perfectly serviceable as well.

GRADING

Student grades are based on the following components. There are four short memos, and each one counts for 5 percent of the overall grade. The rough draft counts for 10 percent. Peer review of the rough draft counts for 10 percent. Class participation, including the end-of-the-quarter presentation, counts for 10 percent. The final prospectus counts for 50 percent. Please note that faculty advisors will be asked to assess the quality of a student's contact with them in preparing the prospectus. Did their advisee make a consistent effort to meet? Was their advisee responsive to the feedback that the faculty advisor provided? Faculty advisors will also assess the quality of the final prospectus. In particular, they will be asked to determine whether it strikes them as a) strong enough that it is *likely* to yield a project of distinction, b) *borderline* in quality, c) weak enough that it is *unlikely* to yield a project of distinction. These assessments from the faculty advisor will factor into the grade given for the final prospectus.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All students are expected to adhere to the standards of academic integrity outlined in *Academic Integrity: A Basic Guide* (2016), published by Northwestern's Office of the Provost. An online copy may be readily found by using the search engine on Northwestern's home page. Please contact the instructor if you are having difficulty locating it. Suspected violations of academic integrity will be referred to the administration of Weinberg College for appropriate action.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1. September 26. Overview: readings, assignments, grading, and schedule; what is a thesis; what makes a good thesis; what is a prospectus; what is the IRB; will I have to file a protocol; how will I get a faculty advisor; what should I discuss with my advisor; what kinds of financial resources can I tap in writing my thesis; how is departmental honors determined.

First memo (1 page) due October 2 at 5pm via e-mail.

Week 2. October 3. Settling on a topic: what book or article do you wish you had written yourself, preferably in the area you intend to write a thesis in; why do you wish you had written it; what is your single best idea for a thesis; why are you interested in it; why should other people be interested in it; how would you cast your topic in a form of a question.

Second memo (1 page) due October 9 at 5pm via e-mail.

Week 3. October 10. Formulating a researchable question: what is the exact question posed by the article or book you wish you had written; how the same question can take different forms; what makes a question significant; how did the author go about researching it; what are some different ways of posing your question; what makes your question significant; what are some ways you could go about researching your question; what do you think is the answer to your question.

Third memo (1 page) due October 16 at 5pm via e-mail.

Week 4. October 17. Motivating your question: what does the “literature” say about your question; what are the three or four most relevant pieces of research; what is valuable about them in answering your question; where do they fall short; what are some ways of overcoming the deficiencies of previous work; what kinds of answers are in the cards given what you would be doing; what would your findings add to the literature one way or another.

Fourth memo (1 page) due October 23 at 5pm via e-mail.

Week 5. October 24. Designing your project: what is your question and hypothesis; what method do you think would enable you to best answer it given the constraints of time and resources; what data do you plan to use; will you have to collect your own data; how do you plan to collect your own data; what will you do to analyze your data; what “research instruments” will you need to work out.

Week 6. October 31. Submitting a protocol. Students needing IRB approval for their research project will finalize their protocols in class and submit them.

Week 7. November 7. No class.

Week 8. November 14. No class.

Rough draft of prospectus due November 14 at 9am.

Week 9. November 21. No class

Peer review of prospectus due November 21 at 9am.

Week 10. November 28. Presentations.

Final prospectus due December 5 at 5pm via e-mail.

OTHER DATES OF INTEREST

URG Application Deadline (optional): October 4, November 1, November 29

POLICY ON RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES

Every reasonable allowance will be made to enable students to carry out their religious observances without academic penalty; students are responsible notifying their professor or teaching assistant in advance of any conflicts that may arise.