

SOCIOLOGY SENIOR THESIS

FAQs - *in progress*

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Q: Why write a senior thesis?

A: The experience of writing a senior thesis is intellectually valuable. Students who tackle a senior thesis have the opportunity to do in-depth research on a question of their choosing. For students who want bona fide exposure to all the different phases of the research process, there is no substitute for writing a senior thesis. You will need to come up with a good question, figure out how to answer it, collect the necessary data, analyze it in a rigorous manner, and then discuss your results in a compelling piece of long-form writing. Students who successfully complete a senior

thesis will go through a uniquely rewarding intellectual experience, and their skills and capacities typically grow tremendously over the course of the two quarters.

Q: What is a senior thesis?

A: A senior thesis is an optional project for sociology majors. Seniors take the Senior Thesis Seminar (398-1,2) in the Fall and Winter quarters of their senior year. The Senior Thesis Seminar is an opportunity to do your own independent research project!

Q: How does a senior thesis relate to Departmental Honors in Sociology?

A: To qualify for Departmental Honors in Sociology, you must write a senior thesis. The Sociology Department recognizes the work of its outstanding seniors with Departmental Honors, which are presented at the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences (WCAS) Convocation. Departmental Honors are given to those students who show outstanding scholarship in their major course of study.

Nominations are submitted to the College Committee on Superior Students and Honors, which has final authority to grant the honors degree. The Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences Committee on Superior Students and Honors reviews students' grade point average, senior research theses, and faculty recommendations to determine which students receive Departmental Honors.

Q: What is "distinction"?

A: During Spring Quarter, after senior research thesis projects are complete, the Sociology Department's Undergraduate Affairs Committee, composed of faculty (other than the professor of the seminar) and graduate students, evaluates senior theses for "Distinction," which means that a senior thesis is deemed to be exceptional. "Distinction" senior thesis awards are given to students at the Sociology Department's Graduation Reception during Graduation Weekend. Senior theses awarded "distinction" (and students who meet other requirements as noted above) will then be nominated to the College Committee on Superior Students and Honors.

More information here about Department Honors from WCAS!

Q: Do I need to apply to the Sociology Program to do a thesis?

A: Not for the Senior Thesis Seminar (398-1,2), but you must be a sociology major. It's most helpful if you do speak to the Director of Undergraduate studies, an advisor, or a potential faculty advisor prior to registering for 398-1,2.

Once registration opens in Spring Quarter during your junior year for Fall Quarter courses, contact sociol@northwestern.edu for a permission number to enroll.

(The exception to this is if you are planning on doing a thesis project for two majors – see more below!)

Q: What happens in each quarter of the Senior Thesis Seminar (398-1,2) and how is the process structured?

A: The Fall Quarter (398-1) is devoted to converting a research area into a research question, conducting a formal literature review, defining the empirical component of the project, obtaining approval (including IRB approval if needed) for your empirical project if necessary, obtaining funding for your research if necessary, and beginning the data collection process.

The Winter Quarter (398-2) is devoted to analyzing data and writing your thesis (typically 30 to 40 pages long). Although the schedule varies depending on the Senior Thesis Instructor, students will typically meet as a class for the first several weeks of each quarter and then meet with the professor individually thereafter.

Q: When do I have to have a topic or research question?

A: A primary goal of the Fall Quarter (398-1) is developing and refining your research question. Students should have a relatively well-defined area of research (like an interest in youth-led social movements or gender identity and education) in mind by the start of the Fall Quarter (398-1). Doing some background reading on your topic over the summer will be helpful. Meeting with professors in the Spring Quarter of your junior year may help refine your topic and define a reading list for the summer.

Q: What methods can I use?

A: Many different data collection and analysis methods are possible, including archival research, analysis of documents (e.g., legal, media), survey analysis (e.g., GSS, U.S. Census data), qualitative interviews, participant observation, and so on. The only requirement is that the thesis be an original piece of empirical research.

Q: Can I do human subjects-based research?

A: Yes! Senior thesis projects involving human subjects (such as interviews or experiments) must have formal IRB approval prior to data collection. Your thesis advisors (more below!) and the IRB office are all valuable resources for navigating the IRB process. ([Learn more about IRB!](#))

Q: Do I have to have research experience or collect my data before taking 398-1 during the Fall Quarter of my senior year?

A: No! There is no requirement to have research experience in sociology beyond standard coursework. It is most helpful (but not required) to have taken the required methods (Soc226, Soc303, and Soc329) and theory (Soc306) courses for your sociology major before your senior year so you have experience with a wide range of theoretical and methodological tools to help as you formulate a research question and collect data.

Some students start their senior thesis projects as part of a [Summer Undergraduate Research Grant](#) (or similar experiences) to begin collecting data before their senior year. This can be a great way to help the senior research thesis experience, but most students do not start their research until the Fall of their senior year while taking 398-1!

If you have or plan on doing research before the Fall Quarter of your senior year, you should reach out to a [sociology advisor](#), the Director of Undergraduate Studies, and/or the Senior Thesis Instructor (398-1,2) to discuss further.

Q: How does advising for the senior thesis work?

A: As you go through the thesis-writing process, you will benefit from working closely with two faculty members: the Senior Thesis Instructor and your Faculty Thesis Advisor. Your interactions with faculty members regarding your thesis will be among the most intellectually rewarding in your time at Northwestern.

A sociology professor serves as the Senior Thesis Instructor for 398-1,2. Their job is to advise, give feedback, and guide all the senior thesis students through the process.

Students are also paired with another faculty member in the Sociology Department as their Faculty Thesis Advisor with expertise in a student's methodological or topical area. You will meet your Faculty Thesis Advisor periodically throughout Fall and Winter quarters and they will also provide feedback and guidance.

Q: How do I find a Faculty Thesis Advisor?

A: The process for finding a Faculty Thesis Advisor differs by Senior Thesis Instructor. That said, if there is a faculty member (most typically in the Sociology Department) you want to work with, reaching out to the faculty member to discuss your ideas can be a great plan and a potential way to find a Faculty Thesis Advisor.

Part of your goals during Fall Quarter (398-1) will be to connect with and finalize your Faculty Thesis Advisor.

Q: What is the time commitment required to write a senior thesis? Will I be able to take a regular class load at the same time?

A: Good question! Writing a senior thesis is a significant time commitment but also a rewarding one! 398-1 and 398-2 are regular classes and can count as two of your six 300-level courses required for your sociology major. Students typically take regular course loads during the Fall and Winter of senior years, with 398-1 and 398-2 being part of their regular course loads.

Q: Does doing a senior thesis cost money?

A: There is no fee to do a senior thesis (it's just a regular class!). However, research can indeed have associated costs, such as fees for transcriptions or honorariums for respondents. Students have subsidized such costs through programs like [Undergraduate Research Grants](#) (both academic year and summer grants).

The Sociology Department does not want cost to be a barrier for students wanting to pursue a senior thesis. Please contact the Director of Undergraduate Studies if costs are a concern and to discuss possible funding sources!

Q: What if I want to do multiple senior projects or want to do one project for two majors?

A: There are options if you have two majors where a senior thesis is required and/or optional. [Learn more from WCAS!](#)

If you are considering pursuing one of the options linked above, some paperwork and approvals may be needed during your junior year.

Q: What if I have a scheduling conflict with 398-1 and/or 398-2?

A: Ideally, students take both 398-1 and 398-2. However, we realize that students have other commitments and opportunities, such as study abroad or required courses for different programs. The best course of action is to meet with a sociology advisor or the Director of Undergraduate Studies during your junior year to discuss possible options and the best course of action.

Q: Okay, independent research sounds lonely. Is it?

A: Writing your thesis will be far from a solitary experience. Majors who decide to take on a thesis join a cohort of talented, motivated students who share many of their interests and are going through the same experience. If the opportunity to meet and bond with other sociology majors is somewhat limited in the first few years of taking courses, students who decide to write a senior thesis often find that they have the opportunity to forge strong connections with several of their fellow thesis-writers.

Q: Why should I pursue a senior thesis?

A: In addition to wanting to pursue Departmental Honors in Sociology, as discussed above, taking all of your sociological experience, coursework, and insights and doing independent research as a senior capstone project is an incredibly rewarding experience.

In addition to intellectual reasons, there are practical ones as well! There is (for lack of a better phrase) a ‘professional development value’ to writing a senior thesis. Students who complete a thesis will have worked closely with two faculty members for two quarters, and this experience will have given these faculty members the opportunity to watch their advisees develop and grow. If you plan to attend graduate school at some point after Northwestern, you will need letters of recommendation from faculty who know you well, and the faculty who helped you complete a senior thesis will be among the faculty who know you the best.

Students wanting to pursue master’s or doctoral degrees (in sociology or related fields) will gain valuable experience for their graduate school applications (and amazing writing samples!). Other former thesis students have reported their senior thesis projects as valuable topics they discussed during job interviews across fields, including finance, consulting, and law.

If you are considering pursuing a senior thesis project, it is never too early to talk with faculty in the Sociology Department to discuss not only your topic and methods interests but also how doing a senior thesis may fit into your future educational and career plans.