

Sociology 398: Senior Research Seminar
 Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, Fall Term 2012
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 Office Hours: Tuesday, 2:15-4:30
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Writing a senior thesis can be one of the most meaningful experiences of your life, and also one of the most enjoyable. If you plan to go to graduate or professional school, the experience of conducting a sustained research project will give you a taste of what to expect. If you plan to go into the job market after graduation, you should know that employers look for students who are self-directed and creative, and who have problem-solving capacities and real-world experience. These are exactly the skills the senior thesis calls on, and allows you to demonstrate. Writing a senior thesis can also teach you how to evaluate the thousands of social science studies that you will read about in the course of your life. For many students, it is the intellectual capstone of their time at Northwestern.

There are no required books or articles for this class, but I will suggest or require books and articles for each of you individually as necessary for your project. In the fall quarter, you will identify a research question, put together a research proposal, write a literature review, and begin your data collection. If possible, try to finish data collection by the end of winter break. In winter quarter (with Professor Carolyn Chen) you will finish analysing your data, put the pieces together to create a first draft, give a presentation on your work, and turn in the final draft.

All assignments should be submitted *over email* by 12PM on the due date to m-prasad@northwestern.edu

Assignment	Date Due	Please see the separate assignment instructions for each numbered assignment—available on Blackboard and distributed on the first day of class.
Paragraph on topic and significance (ungraded)	Sept. 28	
1. Imaginary abstracts methods exercise (2-3 pp)	Oct. 1	
Class discussion of projects (ungraded)	Oct. 3-Oct.8	
2. Preliminary literature review (3-4 pp)	Oct. 5	
3. Memos on discussion with librarian (1 p) and 4. with expert (1 p)	Oct. 12	
5. Research proposal: what <i>specifically</i> are you asking that no one before has answered, and why is it important? And what are your specific methods going to be? (3-4 pp)	Oct. 19	
IRB submission for those projects that require it (ungraded)	Oct. 22	
(optional) apply for a URG research grant http://undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/provost-sponsored-opportunities	Oct. 30	
6. Comprehensive literature review (4-6 pp)	Nov. 2	
7. Progress report 1 (2-3 pp)	Nov. 16	
8. Progress report 2 (2-3 pp)	Nov. 30	
9. Progress report 3 incl. plan for break (2-3 pp)	Dec. 10	

Senior Thesis FAQ

What do you expect in a senior thesis?

The senior thesis is a 35-50 page report of an original research project. The choice of topic, the research method, and the data sources are up to the student. Topics should be sociological. Research methods can include interviews, ethnography, historical methods, surveys, analysis of existing databases, or anything else. Data sources can include documents (libraries, archives, private collections); data collected by the student (surveys, interviews, ethnography, experiments); or existing datasets (NES, PSID, GSS, etc.). Analysis can be qualitative or quantitative. I will work with you to identify a reasonable topic and the most appropriate methods and data for it.

The ideal process of writing a senior thesis is: identify a topic; identify a research question about that topic; identify what we already know about that question, and what we need to know; identify how we can figure out what we need to know; identify methods to get the data that would let us figure that out; collect and analyze the data; write up a report that explains the significance of the study, presents the data and analysis, and identifies limitations and future directions; present the results and incorporate feedback into the final paper.

The *actual* process is usually not so linear, but it's good to keep this procedure in mind as you conduct the research.

Plagiarism is taken very seriously. Any student found to have plagiarized material will be reported to the dean, and will fail the senior thesis. Please consult the Student Handbook if you are unsure what constitutes plagiarism.

How much data should we aim for in this project?

This will vary depending on what you are asking, and I will discuss your individual situations with you, but here are some general guidelines to give you a sense of the scope of the project: If you are doing interviews, you want to conduct and tape (and transcribe at least parts of) about 30 interviews. If you are doing a survey, send it to 300 people and follow up with them until you have at least 100 replies. (Please note that we do not allow the use of Survey Monkey or other computerized survey software.) If you are doing an experiment, the minimum is 20 controls and 20 experimental trials, but 30 each would be better. It is harder to give precise numbers for ethnographic and historical work. Our rule of thumb is 30 total hours of participant observation, but it depends on what you are observing. Similarly, if you are doing historical work, the same figure of 30 total hours applies, but again, the hours depend on what you are studying and what you find. A quantitative paper should represent the same number of hours, some of which will go toward learning more refined techniques. If you are combining methods—which we highly recommend--or using a method not mentioned here (focus groups, GIS), we'll discuss with you what is an appropriate amount of work.

Do we have to get IRB clearance?

It depends on what exactly you're doing and whether you hope to publish your thesis. Please see the next page.

Senior Thesis Policy on Human Subjects Research

These rules are adapted from, and quotations are taken from, the Northwestern University Human Subject Protection Program Policy Manual, pp 77-78.

- (1) You must be present for the discussion of ethics in research the first day of class, no matter what you are researching.
- (2) You must record and present information in such a way that it is not possible to link specific individuals with their data, unless the questions you are asking “could not reasonably harm a person’s reputation, employability, financial standing, or place a person at risk of criminal or civil liability.”
- (3) You must not receive any compensation from anyone for conducting this project.
- (4) You must not conduct the project “on VA premises [or] use VA resources.”
- (5) You may need IRB clearance. Please determine where you fall in the table below:

If you are collecting original data from live human beings AND your project does not involve a special population ¹ AND you do not ask sensitive personal questions ²you need IRB approval ONLY if you want to publish your thesis. Without IRB approval you cannot publish your thesis, or disseminate it beyond Northwestern, ever. ³
If you are collecting original data from a special population ¹ OR you want to ask sensitive personal questions ²you DO need IRB approval, whether or not you hope to publish your thesis. ⁴
If you are NOT collecting original data from live human beings (for example, if you are only using historical documents, or a dataset collected by someone else)...	...you DO NOT need IRB approval, whether or not you hope to publish your thesis.

¹“special population” = “pregnant women, prisoners, children, or cognitively impaired individuals”; “children” includes anyone under 18

²“sensitive personal questions” = “questions about alcohol/drug use, sexual behavior/attitudes, criminal activity, medical history, grades/test scores...or other personal information that could ‘label’ or ‘stigmatize’ an individual”

³If you are in this box and decide not to go through IRB, you still need to do the following things when you work with a human subject: identify yourself as an NU student conducting this research for your senior thesis course; give the subject my name to contact if they have any questions; explain exactly who will have access to the individual data and summarized results; and inform the subject that his/her participation in the study is completely voluntary.

⁴In some cases you will need to go through a full board review, which takes longer. If you fall in this box please discuss with me immediately.

I've determined that I need IRB approval—now what?

- (1) Determine whether you need to apply for exempt, expedited, or full review (we will discuss this the second day of class).
- (2) Complete the human subjects training course at citiprogram.org. The results will automatically be registered and sent to IRB, but keep a copy of the certificate just in case. Note down the date on which you completed the training, as you may need this later.
- (3) Complete your research proposal.
- (4) Create a consent form (see templates at <http://irb.northwestern.edu/templates-forms#sbs>)
- (5) If you are recruiting subjects from an organization, get a letter from that organization (on letterhead, and signed) giving you permission to conduct your research there.
- (6) Go to <http://irb.northwestern.edu/eirb>, log in to eirb, create a new study, answer all the questions on the form; see examples on Blackboard (under “Documents”) if some questions seem tricky. Please note that I am legally required to be the PI for your project; you should list yourself as co-PI or study coordinator. Upload your proposal and consent form (and organizational permission letter and other documents, if applicable). When you are ready, notify me so I can submit the application to IRB.
- (7) Respond *promptly* to any requests for revision that IRB sends you—try to submit them the same day (you should be able to submit revisions on your own, but email me if you have trouble).
- (8) Do not start your project until it's been cleared by IRB—this can take several weeks, during which time you will work on your lit review and other aspects of the project that do not involve human subjects.

*We will hold a workshop on how to fill out an IRB application on **October 22**, at normally scheduled class time and in the usual classroom. We will try to get as many of the projects actually submitted as possible. Bring a laptop and try to prepare as much as you can beforehand (go through this list and have all the documents ready, complete the CITI course, etc.).*

How to Make an Appointment with Me

You have two options to schedule an appointment with me: you can make an appointment of 25 minutes during normally scheduled class time on any day that we are not meeting as a class; and/or you can make an appointment of one or more 15-minute sessions during my office hours (Tuesday 2:15-4:30). The appointments during class time are reserved for this class only, so it may be easier to find an open time slot then. The appointments during office hours are also open to students from other classes.

- 1) To make an appointment during class time, please sign up on the sign-up sheet; this will be available in class on the days we meet, and will be kept on my office door thereafter.
- 2) To make an appointment during office hours, please go to the following URL (for a clickable version of this link, please download the syllabus from Blackboard). You will need a Google account to make an appointment.