Senior Project in Sociology Guidelines

The Senior Project in Sociology is a yearlong class that is the capstone to your education in sociology, where you deploy and refine the knowledge and skills you have learned. The program strongly encourages Senior Projects to investigate a sociological question by conducting original empirical or historical research, *i.e.* a study where you gather evidence and analyze it yourself. You get one grade at the end of the academic year, worth 8 credits total. In the fall semester, you must also enroll in a 0-credit sociology Senior Project Colloquium that will help provide structure, community, and extra guidance. This course has no additional work beyond what you will do for the senior project anyway. It is graded pass/D/fail.

Your Advisor: Your advisor will be assigned via a coordinated process for all Social Studies Division programs in the Spring of your junior year. This person may or may not be a sociologist. You will fill out a form where you explain a potential topic and suggest advisors. The Division then selects advisors based on the following criteria: who has the right areas of expertise, your advisor preferences, and what will achieve an equal division of faculty labor.

Your Board: Your board is a panel of 3 faculty members who evaluate your project and give advice. It includes your advisor and 2 other faculty members. In general, 2 members should be sociology faculty. Your board members must also meet the requirements of any other majors/concentrations you have. In the fall, you will fill out a form to offer suggestions for your 2 board members. There are 2 formal board meetings, the midway in December and the final board in May. You usually have the same board members over the whole year.

Written Structure: The Senior Project in Sociology takes the form of an academic journal article, with a minimum of 40 pages. In the past, projects were often 60-80 pages and divided in chapters. The Program has decided to change its norm because the journal article has the following advantages: you have read things in this form before, it can be used as a writing sample more easily, and its shorter length gives you the opportunity to revise more fully.

- Use existing journal articles in sociology as a guide to the structure. They usually include: an *introduction* to the topic and the puzzle the study examines, a *review of the existing scholarship* that you are relying on and what more we need to understand, a section describing your *research methods* and the justification for them, several sections reporting and interpreting the *findings* of the research (this is the heart of the paper), a *conclusion*, and a bibliography.

- If you want to write a project using the older format (60-80 pages, with chapters) or another structure, discuss this with your advisor.

- For the Midway board, you must submit a draft of the first sections: an introduction to the topic, your research question, a review of the literature, and a description of your research methods. For the midway, you won't know your argument because you haven't finished your research. But you should have set up the study and read a lot.

- You must use a real citation system, for example the University of Chicago system or the American Sociological Association system. Consult your advisor or a librarian for help.

- See the library's website for detailed formatting instructions.

Work Process: To do a good Senior Project you must work consistently throughout the year (often over Winter Break). Unlike your other classes, sproj has little structure. It depends on your independent initiative. Work on it a few days every week. We suggest you form a work group with fellow seniors, where you meet weekly to get work done. In addition, revising is the heart of writing and refining your analysis. It is likely to be where you do your most important thinking. Build in a lot of time for revising --- not merely copyediting, real substantive revising.

IRB: If your research involves live human participants (e.g. ethnography, interviews, surveys) then you must get approval from Bard's IRB *before* you begin your research. It is usually one of the first things you must do. These applications take time and an attention to detail. We have application models that we can share; you can also find them on the sociology senior project Google Classroom. Note: you need approval from any organizations you will use to do your research <u>before</u> you submit to the IRB. The IRB accepts applications once a month. **Aim for the September or October deadlines.** The Colloquium will provide lots of guidance on IRB applications. Your advisor must also review and approve it.

Summary of Dates: You have approximately 8 months or 34 weeks	
mid-Sept	First IRB deadline
mid-Oct	Second IRB deadline
mid-Nov	LAST POSSIBLE IRB deadline
Nov 30	**First section due!**
2nd week Dec	Midway Boards
April 12	Complete draft due
May 1	**PROJECT DUE!**
2nd week May	Senior Project Boards

Big Picture Timeline

1. **Mid-September or mid-October**: IRB application submitted. This requires you to plan the specifics of your research in detail.
2. By **late October:** give your advisor an approx. 6 page research proposal, which includes a research question, partial review of the literature/theory on your topic, and an explanation of your research methods.
3. By around **November 30:** turn in *at least* 1 section (10-15 pages) to your Midway Board, which will take place during the 2nd week of December. This usually consists of the introduction, lit review, and methods sections. Attach interview questions, plans for future research, future outline, etc. as an appendix.
4. **Mid-April, 2 weeks before deadline:** you should have a complete draft of *all your sections*. This gives you 2-3 weeks to revise, write a conclusion, copy edit, etc.
5. <u>1st Wednesday in May at 5pm</u>**: Final Project DUE**. **There are no extensions on Senior Project.** Your project will be discussed and evaluated during your Senior Project Board in May.

Guidelines of what to do when

<u>April the spring before you start</u>:
- ○ Fill out advisor request form: https://socialstudies.bard.edu/students/

<u>Sept</u>:
- o Decide your topic: Read lots of relevant scholarly literature related to facets of your topic. Identify the main findings, theoretical frameworks, and debates. Identify your own questions and puzzles that build on this prior work.
- o Develop a sociological, feasible, and narrow research question.
- o Select a research method. Develop research instruments/procedures, identify research sites or population. Start gaining access if needed.
- o Write up each part of this process for the proposal.
- o Early IRB deadline

<u>Oct</u>:
- o Finalize research methods and procedures.
- o Main IRB deadline!
- o Extensively read the sociological research and theory about your topic.
- o Write your research proposal
- o Fill out board scheduling form: https://socialstudies.bard.edu/students/

<u>Nov</u>:
- o Keep reading, keep writing. Collect data if you can.
- o Write introductory section. Read others' senior projects and sociology article introductions for models.
- o Last feasible IRB deadline. Revise and resubmit if needed.

<u>Dec-Jan</u>: Do most of your research, analyze data, write as you analyze.

<u>Feb</u>: Finish analyzing data, finish second section. You have about 3 weeks per section.

<u>March</u>:
- ○ Fill out board scheduling form: https://socialstudies.bard.edu/students/
- ○ Finish third section and begin fourth.

<u>1st Half of April</u>: Finish last section and complete a full draft by mid-April!

<u>LAST 3 weeks</u>: Revise entire thing, write conclusion, copyedit, compile bibliography, crisis management, etc.

Resources & Tips

- Pick your topic and a focused research question EARLY. You may start with a topic, but make sure you move to a *question.*

- The key is to write regularly, throughout the process, and to revise. You will write lots of stuff you will not use – this is normal and desirable. Try to remind yourself that there are lots of chances to revise in this process, so nothing has to be perfect on the first go.

- Learn to manage your time and plan your work. The months will go *fast.*
  - o Break up what you must do into a list of clear tasks and sub-tasks.
  - o Set **specific, doable goals** for each week and each day. This is specific and doable: "write section on what interviewees said about X choice." These are not specific, doable goals: "work on sproj," "write the lit review," or "figure out my argument."
  - o Treat these goals like <u>required</u> assignments with hard due dates.
  - o Think of Sproj like a class with fixed time several days a week when you work on it. You will likely need to plan a <u>minimum</u> of 3-4 days a week where you complete some Sproj work.

- Conduct some form of original research, i.e. collect your own data through qualitative studies like interviews or ethnography; or use existing datasets for quantitative (and sometimes qualitative) analysis; sample texts for discourse/content analysis; or interpret historical/archival evidence. We do not recommend a project that is simply a literature review.

- Be curious; think through what you don't know or understand about a social dynamic that interests you. Look for gaps in what people have studied before or ongoing debates that you find intriguing. Research is for learning new things.

- You cannot study everything about a topic. Pick a NARROWLY focused question, then narrow it some more. <u>We cannot stress this enough.</u>

- Do NOT *assume* what you will find. Assume there is a lot you don't know. You will probably have a hypothesis/hunch, but do not set out to prove something. Set out with questions. Enable yourself to be surprised by your findings, to learn something new.

- Learn the existing scholarly work related to your topic. This includes the existing empirical findings, the theoretical perspectives used, and the debates people are having. Do this by extensively searching both scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles. Use the database **Soc Index** to find scholarly sociology articles. If you can't get something through the library try inter-library loan, Google Scholar, or https://socopen.org/ . Search online or ask professors for syllabi on your topic and read what is assigned (e.g. courses on the sociology of social movements or crime or education). Consult the library about how to find other sources. Often you have to search a broader set of key words than you initially think.

- Always consider how your question is *sociologically* relevant and how to make it so. Have your study be in dialogue with the existing literature. Connect sociological theories to empirical patterns. Show that you learned to do sociology.

- Select a question where the research is feasible, e.g. one that fits your language skills and location, with accessible participants.

- Make sure your method fits your research question – i.e. that it will get you the data you need to actually help to answer your question.

- Gain access (permission) to your research site(s) or sources early on.

- Submit to the IRB *as soon as possible*. But only submit when you can specify your actual research procedures.

- Analyzing your data will be hard and take a while. The meaning of your findings will not be immediately clear. Prepare to spend a lot of time over winter break on this.

- Use the Learning Commons for writing help.

- Form a writing group where you all work at the same time to keep you accountable.

- Use citation management software (e.g. Zotero) from the beginning of this process to keep track of what you read and to automatically generate correctly formatted citations. Add your sources to the program as you read them! The librarians can help you get started.

- Be careful when taking notes on what you read to ensure that you do not commit unintentional plagiarism. Make it clear which are your words and which are from other sources. Take good notes when you read so that you know where you got terms, ideas, and facts.

- Do not rely on AI for any part of the process. It is not reliable at summarizing literature, and it makes up citations and evidence. These tools are not trained on the full body of academic literature and cannot distinguish between crappy and quality research and writing. The amount of time you would have to spend checking its outputs means it cannot save you time AND enable you to produce even mediocre work. Using it for writing, generating points in an argument, or structuring your thesis is plagiarism. Using AI also clearly undermines the learning goals of the Senior Project.

- See our Google Classroom Site (Class Code: grtfzz4). There are more resources there.

- Have fun and don't let it consume you. Remember that your senior project does not measure your moral worth as a person. Nor does it have to be some perfect expression of who you are or your values. It is not the only intellectual engagement you will ever have in your life. It is a chance to learn a lot about one focused topic, to practice doing your own social research, and to improve your ability to communicate about complex phenomena.