

**Union College**  
**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**

## **The Senior Thesis**

The research and writing of a senior thesis is a capstone experience for a major in sociology. Since the thesis demands a great deal of independent thought and expression, it is a fitting culmination to your undergraduate education. More than any other project you have undertaken, the senior thesis will be your work. Most importantly, it is your choice as to how seriously you take the responsibility for research and writing. Your advisor may inspire, guide, cajole and threaten, but you must ultimately make the commitment to excellence for yourself. You have chosen a major that requires that you will be able to someday say that the thesis was your best work.

The pages that follow provide guidance regarding the rules for writing your thesis.

### **I. Choosing a Topic**

The selection of a topic need not be a painful experience if you recognize several key facts:

1. Virtually no topic springs full-grown or perfectly formed from the head of the advisee in May of their Junior year. Usually, the basic idea comes first, followed by gradual refinements that may take hours, days, or weeks to develop. The objective should be to have a well-defined topic before you return to campus in September of your senior year.
2. Union students have written on an array of subjects over the years. Theses that have achieved Honors are on file at Schaffer Library. On the Library's website, look for the *D Space: Digital Archive*. Reviewing some of these is often helpful.
3. One of the best ways to start your search for a thesis topic is to think about your interests and social concerns. If your interests and concerns coincide with a topic relevant to sociology, then you have a natural starting point. Something in your own background may provide you with a topic you care enough about to want to investigate in depth.
4. Another thing to consider when choosing a topic is the kind of research methods you wish to use, such as questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, participant observation, content analysis, case study, etc.

### **II. Your Advisor**

Advisors are selected on the basis of thesis topic, department scheduling and individual faculty expertise. Students may wish to consult with individual department faculty regarding the selection of their advisor. Advisors and the advisees should meet weekly to discuss the work in progress.

### **III. Beginning Research**

How to begin depends upon several factors: (1) how much you already know, and (2) what your advisor expects of you. Obviously if you have already written a seminar paper on the general topic of your thesis, you will have fewer start-up problems. Once you have an idea for a topic, your advisor can suggest readings over the summer. If so, try to stick to your plans. Often students begin with good intentions but lose their focus once summer jobs and recreations become a reality. Remember, however, that you will have to do the preparatory work sooner or later.

No matter what kind of thesis you are writing, the preliminary work should help to clarify your objectives and/or refine the hypothesis you hope to test. The Sociology faculty urges you to recognize that your research must be grounded in the work of scholars who have gone before you. So take your bibliographic work and background reading seriously.

### **IV Writing**

The Department is unanimous in its insistence upon well-written theses. By this point, you have presumably learned enough about how to write that we should not have to reiterate the basics of grammar, punctuation, paragraph structure and spelling. And yet, each year we see drafts of chapters that are unworthy of a literate Union College graduate. We will require you to rewrite until such time as you have met the standards we expect. Quality of exposition reflects quality of mind and will be a factor in determining the grade assigned to the thesis. Each advisor weighs this factor as he/she sees fit. It is not, however, your advisor's job to proofread your work for the most elementary errors. You must accept that responsibility. In some cases, if the draft is excessively error-laden, your advisor may return it without reading it. In this age of sophisticated word processing software, there is no excuse for sloppy writing!

Regarding bibliography, know that the Department requires all bibliography to be cited in the style of the American Sociological Association. If you have not yet done so, you should purchase a copy of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the *ASA Style Guide* at the college bookstore. Schaffer Library also has copies on its reference shelf.

### **V Research Resources**

Many resources are available to you as you proceed with your project:

- Schaffer Library's reference collection, periodicals collection and government document holdings are quite substantial. Use both the main library catalog and the large selection of electronic databases to search for material relevant to your topic. Interlibrary loan is almost guaranteed to get you what you need in a matter of days. The library is also part of the *NYConnect* system which allows you quickly borrow from major academic libraries across New York State. Look for the blue icon on the pages of the library catalog. Start your search early, since Schaffer Library may not have on the shelves all the materials that you require.

- Be sure to actually visit the library itself! If you have found one relevant book, go to the section in the stacks where it was located and browse for other good material.
- *RefWorks*: Early in the fall term, the library holds workshops for our thesis students on how to use the *RefWorks* bibliographic management system. *RefWorks* allows you to efficiently manage your growing list of sources and to efficiently print your complete list of references in ASA format. It is an ideal way to keep track of the many sources you will use for the thesis.
- Union's computing facilities are excellent, and most computers in the public labs have statistical packages such as SPSS and SAS available for student use, as well as a full complement of office software. Through consortia such as ICPSR, we have free access to numerous large social science data sets that you may choose to use for your project. Your advisor or the reference librarians can direct you to these.
- Extended Loan of library materials: A form is available from the library Circulation Desk that will allow you to check out books for the duration of your thesis project. The form must be cosigned by your thesis advisor.
- VPN Accounts: Establish a VPN [Virtual Private Network] account through ITS. This will allow you to access Schaffer Library's resources over the summer from home and any time you are off-campus, outside the College's own computer network. See this link for the application form, which you need to submit to the ITS Office in Steinmetz Hall: <http://www.union.edu/Resources/Technology/ITS/PDFs/forms/AFCA-Offcampus.pdf>
- Do not hesitate to ask the Reference Librarians for help! Many of them have particular interests in topics related to our discipline. They are knowledgeable and will be eager to assist you.

## VI. **Deadlines and Grading**

1. At the end of the first term of thesis work, a student who has made satisfactory progress on the thesis will be given the grade of P (Pass) for that term. When the thesis is complete and has been successfully defended, the thesis will be given an overall letter grade. That grade will be applied retroactively to the first term grade as well as to the second term grade.
2. The faculty advisor should not allow any advisee to receive the grade of P at the end of the first term of the thesis work unless a significant amount of work has actually been completed. Chapter one must be completed during the first time in to get a 'P' grade.
3. The deadline for submission of the final grading copy of the thesis is set by the department, and approval for an exception must be granted by the department chair. Failure to meet this deadline--which is likely to be the last day of classes in the

second term of work--results in a grading penalty. Oral defenses are typically scheduled at the end of the term and during finals week.

In general, the final grade reflects three components: (1) the written document, (2) the oral defense and (3) the effort and overall work experience.

Grades are largely based upon the quality of the final product, but advisors factor in the behavior of the advisee in terms of responsiveness to suggestion, demonstration of initiative and independence, and ability to meet deadlines. An oral defense of the thesis, after completion of written work, will also be factored into the final grade.

The following is a guideline to criteria used in grading the written work.

**A Grade.** Clear thesis (argument or analysis), organization, and continuity. Detailed understanding of the problem; sound organization; few or no mechanical mistakes; clear, unambiguous sentences, perhaps with a touch of elegance – in the best A papers, a lively and intelligent voice seems to speak; it has something interesting to say, says it clearly and gracefully to an appropriate audience, and supports the thesis fully.

**B Grade.** Probably some minor mechanical errors but no major ones; slightly awkward style at times; ideas that are reasonable and are anchored in the text – thought has obviously gone into the paper; it is solid but not striking; the writer has a definite point to make and makes it in an organized and competent way, and to a definite audience; the paper is good but not great.

**C Grade.** A weak, fuzzy thesis (argument) and/or perhaps even illogical arguments; a certain amount of confusion about what the text at hand actually says; many minor mechanical errors and perhaps some major ones (such as incomplete sentences); examples given for their own sake or just to demonstrate that the writer has read the texts (i.e., a book report), not to develop a point; organization rambles or disappears, words are misused, diction is inconsistent; proofreading is weak; the intended audience is unclear – there are some ideas there, but the writer needs help and work to make them clear to another reader. Poor effort is also a factor.

**D Grade.** Thesis (argument and analysis) missing; major mechanical problems; poor organization; serious misreading of texts and articles; stretches in which the writer simply gives a narrative account of a text for no apparent purpose; the paper is much shorter than the assigned length – the writer doesn't really have a point to make and has serious problems in writing and reading at an appropriate level. Especially poor effort also results in a D grade.

**F Grade.** The paper shows general weaknesses even graver than those of a D paper.

## **VII Funding**

A major source of support for thesis research in recent years has been the Internal Education Fund (IEF), which provides small grants (on the average of a few hundred dollars) to students undertaking projects that cannot be completed without funding. In recent years, IEF money has

been used to fund travel to archives or areas where research is to be done, data acquisition, postage, copying costs, and various other activities. The competition for funding (and it is competitive) occurs during the Fall term. Watch for notices in *Concordiensis* or consult your advisor. The Sociology Department does not have its own funding for senior thesis research.

### **VIII Interdepartmental Work**

If you are an interdepartmental (ID) major, you write an ID thesis; you will have two advisors—one for each department. Encourage dialogue between your advisors, and make sure early on that your topic satisfies them both.

### **IX The Oral Defense**

An oral defense of the thesis is held after you have submitted the final typed copy. These exams are customarily held at the end of winter term for those who write a Fall-Winter thesis. Your thesis advisor and a second examiner, who is usually another member of the Sociology department, are present at the defense. Oral defenses are usually 30 minutes in duration and are based primarily upon your thesis, but may address related matters in Sociology. Students prepare a brief summary of their thesis, after which questions are asked by the two-person faculty panel.

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**Senior Thesis Checklist**  
**FOR THE FIRST TERM**

1. In the first two weeks of term, complete the following:
  - a. Thesis proposal finalized.
  - b. Starter bibliography.
  - c. For those wishing IEF funding for their research, complete an IEF proposal by (approximately) the 4<sup>th</sup> week (watch the *Concordiensis* for a notice of the application due date).
  - d. For interdepartmental majors, arrange a meeting between your two thesis advisors.
2. Purchase the *ASA Style Guide, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*, at the bookstore.
3. Let the Writing Center help you improve the quality of your writing. Your thesis will also be graded on writing quality. If you do not yet own one, purchase a good writing manual and start using it. Your advisor can recommend one.
4. Start the good habit [if you have not done so already] of ALWAYS making backup copies of your writing and other electronic materials. More than once, a student has been seriously set back by a crashed hard drive or lost USB key.
5. Attend the *RefWorks* workshop and start using it.
6. Plan (over both terms) to hand in to your advisor new written work on your thesis each week.
7. Set up an appointment schedule with your advisor to discuss weekly submissions. You must meet regularly.
8. Secure Human Subjects Committee approval, if needed. All research involving human subjects must be approved prior to beginning your actual data collection. See the guidelines and forms, available online at:  
<http://www.union.edu/Resources/Academic/hsrc/index.php>
9. By the end of the first term (for a passing grade), you must complete:
  - a. One chapter, typed and with references cited properly.
  - b. For students doing research (outside the library): a questionnaire, interview schedule, observation schedule, etc., should also be completed.

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**Senior Thesis Checklist**  
**FOR THE SECOND TERM**

1. Maintain a regular meeting schedule with thesis advisor(s).
2. Submit new written work weekly.
3. Locate (in library, or in the department) an example of a completed thesis, to guide the writing of your final draft.
4. The thesis should include:
  - a. Abstract
  - b. Title Page
  - c. Table of Contents
  - d. The body of the thesis divided into chapters
  - e. References/Bibliography
  - f. Appendices (optional)
5. You are responsible for finding out if your second advisor wants a copy of your thesis or sample chapter.
6. On the day that you submit your thesis, you should set up a date for the thesis defense. It is the student's responsibility to make sure that the advisor sets up his/her defense. The defense is normally held during the 10<sup>th</sup> week of the term, or during finals week.
7. Your thesis defense will include the following:
  - a. A 4-5 minute summary of the thesis.
  - b. Questions from each advisor about (1) the thesis, (2) relevant sociological theory and (3) future research.

The defense usually lasts 30 minutes.

## The Thesis Grade

Your thesis is graded according to the following criteria:

- quality of research
- writing quality
- analytical strengths
- strength of the defense
- effort

**PLEASE NOTE:** This Senior Thesis Checklist is a general guide to what you need to do in order to fulfill the Sociology Department's senior thesis requirement. Your primary departmental advisor has the prerogative to make any modifications.

This checklist does not apply to your other department (if you are an ID major); ID majors should consult with their other department regarding its Senior Thesis requirements.

### Sociology Department Meetings for Thesis Writers

The Sociology Department sponsors a series of events for majors designed to assist you both in successfully completing your thesis and in making your plans for life after Union.

#### **Fall Term**

*RefWorks* Workshop

An introduction to using bibliographic management software to keep track of your thesis sources – a great tool that will even format and print your final reference list!

Thesis Small Group Meetings I

Informal seminar meetings at which you can share your project with other department thesis writers – a good opportunity to get support and encouragement from your peers

Becker Career Center

A session with Becker staff geared specifically toward sociology majors as they plan for life after Union

#### **Winter**

Thesis Small Group Meetings II

Another opportunity to get support and share with your colleagues as you work toward finishing your project

#### **Spring**

Thesis Meeting for Juniors

Meeting for juniors, with faculty & graduating seniors, to discuss the thesis project

End-of-Year Party

Thesis is done! A party for the whole department...AKD induction ceremony