

Paper in the Major/Senior Project Guidelines  
Department of Sociology  
Whittier College

The paper in the major/senior project should be a space for you to pursue your interests and to craft a “calling card” for graduate school or future employment. Senior Seminar is a space to workshop and complete the paper in the major/senior project, but you will need to have most of the research (literature review and data gathering) complete well before you being the Senior Seminar.

The most important thing for you to grasp about the paper in the major/senior project is that, unlike a course paper, the scope and complexity of this project requires a more intricate and a more extended research process. The key is really *process*. You need to find a topic and you need to develop research questions. Then you need to investigate the academic literature and see what type of work has been done on your topic, what types of questions have been asked, and what types of research methods have been used to investigate these questions. Then, you need to refine and narrow your research topic and refine your research questions. Getting the research questions developed is probably the most difficult part of the project. This means that you need to start thinking about the project *now*. You need to think about what you want to work on *before* you sign up for courses for Fall semester so that you have at least one course that contributes to your senior project.

Basic Parameters:

The paper in the major/senior project must meet the following general criteria:

1. It must involve research. This may be research that uses an existing data set (or sets) and/or that uses primary documents as the basis for an analysis. It may also include research that generates data through an ethnography, for example, or a survey, or interviews, among other methods. In certain few cases (to be determined by Becky and/or your advisor), it may be library research using secondary sources to write an extended literature review on a particular topic.
2. It must be connected in some way to the courses you take in your senior year, so that the work you do in a course or courses furthers your progress on the Senior Project.
3. It will locate itself in the literature to which it contributes through the inclusion of a literature review.
4. It should be relevant in some way to your post-college personal and professional goals. It will act, in other words, as your “calling card” for a graduate program, an internship, etc.
5. It will generally be 20-25 pages long and professionally formatted (double spaced, etc.)

**Resources:** If you do not already own *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers*, written by the Sociology Writing Group, purchase it. This guide offers helpful, practical information on framing research topics and research questions, on the writing process, and on the norms for different types of research projects (e.g. library research papers versus qualitative field research). We also recommend the Appendix to *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills. Mills, a brilliant researcher and writer, offers wonderful insights on what it means to *do* sociology (as well as good advice about *how* to do it). Charles Lemert’s *Social Things* is another good resource, less as a guide to research than as a musing on sociological thinking and therefore sociological

questions. Other good reference materials include: *The Sociology Student Writer's Manual*, by William A. Johnson, et al., *The Craft of Inquiry*, by Robert R. Alford, and *The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*, Kenneth R. Hoover.

### **Key components of your senior project/paper in the major:**

First, remember that your topic, your research question—your entire project—needs to be grounded in the *sociological imagination*. You need a sociological question to research and explore! We direct you to the first chapter of Mills and the first chapter of *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers*, along with Lemert, to clarify and hone your understanding of the sociological imagination. Remember that sociology as a discipline is quite critical of individualistic explanations of social phenomena. Sociologists think in terms of social organization, social structures, social interaction and, importantly, the relationship between these social processes and individuals.

Second, our discussion here is simply meant to clarify the elements and requirements of the senior project/paper in the major. That is to say, this document does not purport to be a substitute for the research methods or theory courses.

### **Project proposal and due dates: **\*\*sign up for the Soc 407 workshop in the fall\*\*****

- 1) All seniors are required to enroll in Soc 407 this fall, where you will work on completing a project proposal (see p. 4) and a literature review (in conjunction with your grad plan). Students must have approved proposals and literature reviews in order to complete Soc 407 successfully and enroll in the senior seminar. Soc 407 is the prerequisite for Soc 408.
- 2) Seniors should meet regularly with their advisor (note, this must be a member of the sociology department).
- 3) Additional deadlines and the final due date will be articulated in the syllabus for the Senior Seminar.
- 4) Note: the department strongly encourages study abroad, if you plan to study abroad during your junior or senior years, please discuss the timing/scheduling implications with your advisor. You may be required to complete some elements of this process ahead of schedule.

### **Essential elements of the project and the proposal:**

1) What is your *topic*? A topic is an area of study or an issue. For example, poverty, racial inequality, homelessness, corporate power and civil rights are all *topics*. A topic is too broad to research however, and thus you must narrow down your focus.

2) Narrowing your focus produces a *research question*. The research question is the most important element of your proposal and your project. The research question designates the terrain you will actually investigate; it sets the parameters for your project. Research questions are much narrower than topics. For example, if you are interested in poverty, you might formulate a research question that explores the effects of “welfare reform” on poverty. Research questions should not be answerable by a *yes* or *no* response; they need to be questions that actually require exploration.

3) What is your *thesis*? You will not fully know what your thesis is until the very last stages of the writing process, thus you should understand that you will have a *working thesis* that will change over the course of the research process.

4) You need to provide a *rationale* for your research. Why do this research? Why is it important? Sociological? You need to include a short discussion that addresses these concerns.

5) In order to offer a strong rationale for your research, you need to consult the sociological literature and conduct a *literature review*. There are at least four basic reasons that researchers conduct literature reviews:

- a) Most significantly, to find out what is currently known about the topic. This is the fundamental first step for research—you cannot really formulate a research question until you have a grasp of the contours of existing research. What are the different perspectives on this topic? What kinds of questions have different authors asked about this topic? What kinds of conclusions have been reached about this topic? Reading the literature helps you to identify and formulate your own questions about this topic.
- b) To summarize what is known.
- c) To locate the research within a literature or amongst literatures.
- d) To allow the reader to evaluate the researcher's familiarity with the literature. A well written literature review demonstrates that your own research into this topic complements what has come before by adding to or revising or better illuminating some aspect of the topic.

You will need to begin a literature review in order to formulate a research question. You will need to have a solid grasp of the literature by October of your senior year as the final research proposal must include a literature review.

5) *Theory and methods.*

- a) What concepts (theory) organize your research question? Your engagement with the academic literature will show you how other researchers ground their analyses, that is, what theoretical traditions they draw on and what specific concepts seem to offer analytic power.
- b) Why type of research will you conduct? Will it be empirical, will it draw on secondary sources, etc.?
- c) What type of research method will you use: textual analysis, survey, observation, historical analysis, etc.?
- d) What constitutes the evidence to support your thesis? Why?
- e) Will you be generating your own data? How will you do this?
- f) How will you analyze the data that you collect? How will you answer your research questions? Why is this appropriate data?
- g) How will the research method you propose answer your research question? Why is it an appropriate way to investigate this question? (Note: this fit between theory and method is **crucial**.)
- h) How will you know when you've answered your question?

7) Carefully consider the scale of your research. You have two semesters in which to conduct your research and write a 20-25 page paper. Be practical in your aspirations. Consider the following as you plan your project:

- 1) Obviously, what interests you? What topic will sustain your interest?
- 2) What course work can you build upon? What do you already know about? What courses will you take in the fall? How can you use these courses to assist your work on the senior project?
- 3) What other commitments do you have beyond your coursework? Do you have time, for example, to conduct interviews? Be realistic.
- 4) What do you plan to do after graduation? Can you build a project that, as Les says, “works as a calling card”?
- 5) Use faculty to help you narrow and focus the scope of your research.

8) Consult with faculty! You must work with at least one faculty member from the sociology department and may want to include additional faculty from sociology and/or other departments. Your project advisor does not have to be your academic advisor. You should select your project advisor based on the fit between your topic and the faculty member’s areas of interest and expertise.

### **Preliminary Proposal Guidelines**

In 4-5 typed pages address the following questions:

- 1) What is your research topic?
- 2) What do you currently know about this topic?
- 3) What is sociologically significant or interesting about this topic?
- 4) What are your preliminary research questions?
- 5) How will you investigate these questions? That is, what types of research methods will you use? What type of data is needed to answer the questions? Where/what is your research site? Who are your research subjects?
- 6) What courses are you taking in January and Spring that will help you with this project?

### **Time-line for the project:**

- 1) Summer: Work on literature review to refine and narrow the research topic and research questions.
- 2) Summer-early fall semester of senior year: 1<sup>st</sup> drafts of literature review and final project proposal.
- 3) Mid-late fall semester of senior year: begin gathering data.
- 4) By end of fall semester: complete project proposal and literature review.
- 5) January of senior year: complete data gathering and begin data analysis.
- 6) Spring of senior year: write the paper in a series of peer-reviewed workshops over the semester.