

Excerpts from A GUIDE TO WRITING YOUR HONORS THESIS IN SOCIOLOGY¹

Honors students in sociology spend a significant part of their senior year conducting independent research guided by a faculty mentor. The research culminates in a thesis that will be evaluated by Department of Sociology faculty members as the basis for awarding an undergraduate sociology degree with honors. The thesis and the research behind it serve both as a summary demonstration of competencies you've developed as an undergraduate and as an illustration of your ability not just to consume, but to produce knowledge. In most cases, it is an undergraduate's first real scholarly product.

Developing a Research Project

To write a thesis, you need to decide what you will going to study. SOC 397 is largely devoted to “having ideas” and assessing them for their research potential. This is the first step in transforming yourself from a consumer to a producer of knowledge. The most difficult part may be realizing how often ideas that sound good when they're vaguely formulated wind up being less impressive, impossible to research, or otherwise bad bets for a thesis after you've clearly formulated them. So you have to anticipate several trials and a couple of errors before you settle on a likely candidate for thesis research. And even then you needn't be wedded to it at the end of the course: you can change your mind over the summer and decide to work on something else if you want.

Where will my research idea come from?

Many students choose a topic of personal interest to them, read the relevant literature, and then decide on how to convert their topic into a researchable problem. Selecting a subject of concern to you helps ensure that your research energies remain high even when the work itself (transcribing interviews, entering data, etc.) is not inherently interesting. On the other hand, a topic of interest to you may not be best geared to impress the admissions committee of your favorite graduate department. Consequently, how you settle on a topic will depend in part on the role you want your thesis to play. The more you see it as a potential stepping stone to graduate or professional school, the more “professional” you'll want to be in your choice (though being personally interesting and professionally suitable are by no means mutually exclusive).

Whatever your ambitions for your thesis, your first task is to get from a “topic” to a “problem.” Topics simply indicate the general subject matter you'd like to study, while problems link topics to the research traditions behind them, specify the precise components that will be studied, and indicate likely methods for approaching it. Often you'll find problems mentioned at the conclusion of articles when the author gets around to discussing “topics for further research.” But if no one's dealt with the topic that interests you, you'll have to break your own path into the problem. Some of you will have encountered ready-

¹This document borrows in places from one prepared by the Sociology Department at Colorado College. It has benefited from comments by Howard Kimeldorf, Tom Gerschick, Jenny Jesena, Kathryn Bryk, Wendy Mrazek, and Debi Darmofal.

made problems in your course work, or will share interests with a professor who can suggest possible problems for study. You are encouraged to confer with faculty during their office hours and with the honors coordinator, but in the end you make the preliminary decision about what to study. Perhaps the most crucial point in selecting among possible problems is to evaluate the independent contribution each problem allows you to make to the creation of knowledge, since in the end, your contribution to new knowledge is what you will be evaluated on.

What form will my research and the resulting thesis take?

Depending upon your interests, your research will probably take one of the following forms:

1. an attempt to test a specific hypothesis, perhaps embedded within a broader theory, either by gathering original data or by analyzing secondary data (i.e. existing data gathered by others, quite possibly for different purposes);
2. an attempt to explore and describe some social phenomenon or sociologically interesting historical event, either on the basis of direct observation or through data gathered by others; or
3. a creative analytical work dealing with some important conceptual problem in sociology, where your contribution lies in the refinement, formalization, reorganization, etc., of existing models or theories, or in the creation of entirely new models or theories.

None of these options is in itself preferable to another, and no source of data (ignoring, of course, questions of validity and reliability) has any greater intrinsic merit than another. Different types of studies and different types of data simply involve different problems. Nor should this classification be thought hard and fast. Often a thesis will combine elements of the types listed above; for example, it is common for a certain amount of refinement, reorganization or formalization of hypothesized relationships to precede their testing by original research. In any case, the point is that good sociology can be written in all these modes. What is of prime concern is the quality of the evidence you bring to bear upon your problem and the analytic rigor with which you pursue it.

A consideration that cannot be overemphasized is that your project be of manageable scope. A fascinating topic that can't be completed in the time available just won't do. Though the least possible compromise between inherent interest and manageability is desirable, the latter must always be the determining consideration. The trick is to select a topic that allows maximum scope for your talents and ambitions without jeopardizing your timely graduation. The best projects allow impressive work to be done in limited time. In the end, however, you are better off sacrificing impressiveness to tractability.

One way to get a sense of what can be done is to look at what has been done in the past. Theses by previous honor students are available for short-term loan in the undergraduate program coordinator's office (3109 LSA). You should plan to complete a document equivalent in conceptual content, if not in depth of research, to a journal article. As to anticipated length of the

thesis: as short as possible, as long as necessary. Have a good reason to go beyond 50 pages of text: simple heft carries no independent weight.

In SOC 397, you will prepare a prospectus for your research project. A prospectus states your problem (not a topic), reviews the literature on it, outlines the methods you will use, and summarizes what you expect to find. (A crucial aspect of the prospectus is that your proposed methods must suit your research question. If the latter requires, say, a national random sample, it won't do to substitute twenty students from a sociology class.) If you have an idea of whom you would like to work with, you should consult your prospective mentor in formulating your prospectus; if you don't, you can use your work on it to entice faculty members into becoming your mentor. A viable prospectus is required if you are to move on to SOC 398, though it does not commit you to your project. You may change your mind at any time—provided the change you want to make allows for reasonable expectations of completion. It's the odd thesis that goes from conception to completion without some alteration.

Your Faculty Mentor

Having the advice of a faculty member about your problem and the strategies for researching it is vital to producing a good thesis. Department members, as individuals and as a group, are committed to their role in this regard. At the same time, they are not knowledgeable about everything, nor necessarily interested in what interests you. So you may experience some difficulty matching yourself up with a faculty member both capable of helping and anxious to do so. A logical prospect would be someone with whom you've taken a course or two or whose research you've read and admired. Barring that, however, you'll have to go prospecting among the more likely candidates, using the statement of your problem to interest them. Should no one prove eager to help, you'll have to consider modifying your topic or perhaps changing it.

The best way to interest prospective mentors is to present them—concisely, confidently, and energetically—with an intriguing research problem. In contrast, you are not advised to simply declare your interest in a topic and then expect a jump start into a problem. In the same vein, once you've got a mentor and the project is underway, the initiative is in all respects in your court. So don't be bashful. Further, though your mentor's opinions and suggestions always have to be taken into account, in the end it's your thesis—take responsibility from the word “go.” (It is in the nature of things that mentors will vary somewhat in warmth, supportiveness, or available time. Granted faculty members are all busy; you can help ease the burden on their time by being conscientious and well-organized yourself.)

The Research Experience

Seeing as this will vary greatly across various types of thesis, there's little in general to say about it. Most empirical research takes considerable preparation: you need to write your questionnaire, get approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), pretest it, choose your sample, line up your interviews, decide how to code them, and so on. Consequently, you need to make good use of your lead time. Furthermore, experience shows that research usually takes from 2.5 to 3 times longer than originally anticipated, so some leeway has to be planned in. All in all, the degree of preparation required is similar to what

you'd put into a serious technical climb in mountaineering: checking and rechecking your equipment as well as plotting your route is mandatory.

When the data comes in, you'll characteristically experience some confusion about how to analyze it, even though you've been thinking about this all along. Paralysis can set in. Respond by doing things in small and manageable steps. **Don't procrastinate.** Always have something else to write or rewrite when you hit a snag in your analysis. As SOC 398 and 399 continue to meet, you'll find your colleagues are having the same problems—and that some of their solutions and those of the honors coordinator can be of help to you, and vice versa.

Your thesis may be your first experience scheduling your own time. There will be a natural tendency to put things off until after.....the LSAT, your engagement, Spring Break, or whatever. But unless you think you'll enjoy high stress and all-nighters as a conclusion to your senior year, this should be avoided. The more you get done during SOC 398, the happier you will be around commencement. Once more, then: **don't procrastinate.**

Two additional matters to take into consideration: if your thesis involves human subjects, you'll need to have your proposal approved by the University's IRB. The review may take as long as six weeks, so time for it has to be factored into your schedule.

The Evaluation of Your Thesis

You will receive letter grades from the honors coordinator for SOC 397, 398, and 399. In addition, the department will recommend to the College Honors Program that you be awarded "no honors," "honors," "high honors," or "highest honors" with your degree. The recommendation is based entirely upon the evaluation of your thesis by your mentor and second reader (more about second readers in SOC 397).

Mentors and second readers will be using the following guidelines:

Honors: a sound thesis, based on substantial research, giving strong evidence of academic accomplishment; or an unusually good thesis marred by some significant flaw within the student's control (or by a combination of significant and minor problems). The work gives clear indication of the student's mastery of a subject matter, of independent initiative, of analytical rigor, and of a capacity to organize and present complex material. It stands as evidence of significant, but not unusual or exceptional scholarly promise.

High Honors: a thesis that might merit publication when revised but that is without substantial originality, or that might merit publication in the absence of some substantial flaw beyond control of the student (e.g. financial or temporal constraints). Or a work of unusual merit that is flawed in several minor respects for reasons within the student's control. Even considering these problems, the thesis gives evidence of unusual scholarly promise.

Highest Honors: a thesis with substantial elements of originality in conceptualization, in the evidence and reasoning brought to bear on its topic, or in analytical technique. Its findings merit attention by specialists in the subject and its procedures pass standards for publication. It tackles a well-defined and sociologically significant question, places itself within (or originates from) a tradition of analysis, is grounded in systematic research appropriate to its scope and objective, and presents its argument clearly and vividly. In brief, it is evidence of exceptional scholarly promise.

No Honors: on rare occasions, a thesis may, in spite of good faith efforts on the part of the mentor and honors coordinator, simply not rise above the mark we set for average students. Perhaps the final product has obvious problems to which the student has been alerted without avail, is unclear or poorly organized, does not evidence substantial research or independent initiative, or reveals serious gaps in the student's acquaintance with the subject. One wouldn't recommend it be sent along with an application to graduate school, and in such a case it seems reasonable to withhold honors.

To put these standards in perspective: in the past, "honors" has been the department's customary recommendation and "high honors" an occasional one. "Highest honors" is very rarely granted. Withholding honors, on the other hand, is an heretofore unusual, but conceivable, response to work that's not up to snuff. It exposes students to no material penalty, since they can be given a grade for SOC 399 on the basis of the thesis work, but graduate without honors appearing on the diploma. Seeing as so few students graduate with high or highest honors, withholding honors from substandard work is the only way the department can preserve the value of the award for the substantial majority of students who receive it.

Maintaining the GPA required for application to the Honors Program in Sociology, a 3.4 overall and a 3.5 in SOC courses, is required to receive *any* level of honors with your degree.

Robert Cooley Angell Award

In 1990, the Department of Sociology established the Robert Cooley Angell Award to recognize outstanding accomplishment in a sociology honors thesis. The pool of candidates results from self-nomination, mentor recommendation, and assessment by the honors coordinator. These are then reviewed by the undergraduate program committee, which decides on the winner.