SENIOR PROJECT GUIDELINES

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

I. Complex Issues

A. What is a senior project? It should be a serious work of scholarship, presenting a carefully reasoned analysis of a problem of sociological or anthropological significance.

B. How do I choose a senior paper topic? Carefully. Remember that you are going to have to live with your topic for the better part of your senior year, and therefore you should choose one which will hold your interest. Do not be afraid of important topics. At the same time, you must be realistic.

Examine, in consultation with your adviser, your field of interest; at the same time it would be well if, before calling on him or her, you had ideas more definite than, say, wanting to do "something on childrearing in America." Find out what the library holdings are both here and (if you have the time) at the University of Vermont. (You can access the UVM holdings on the Middlebury College computer system.) We may not have a graduate research library; nevertheless, there is far more material here than most realize. There have been efforts to build up research materials in certain areas, and with a little effort and imagination one can locate much.

One of the points of the exercise is to see what you can come up with in one or multi semesters; if at the end, your conclusions are still tentative, do not be afraid to say so. If your work raises more questions than it answers, do not be afraid to ask them. A few penetrating questions may be far more valuable than a hastily patched up conclusion which does not really hold together.

II. Less Complex Issues

A. Format: After the title page and a separate 250-word abstract (required), a senior project will generally include the following sections:

1. Table of Contents: A senior project should have a table of contents in which you list the titles of your chapters. Good examples can be found in a style manual in book form or on-line (e.g., APA, MLA, or Chicago/Turabian – discussed further below).

2. Acknowledgements: (Optional) Sometimes there is someone you want to acknowledge for help in the research on your senior project. For advice, check a style manual.

3. Introduction: A discussion of the topic of the senior project, its significance for the field (and, perhaps, for you personally), methodology, hypotheses, and overview of the chapters can all be included. As a rule of thumb, tables do not appear in introductory chapters. Many of us suggest that you write your Introduction early so that you organize your thoughts about the project in general. However, you should

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1 These guidelines were influenced by a History Department handout. Modifications of the original handout were made over the years by members of the sociology/anthropology department.
not consider any early draft a final draft. Your Introduction will probably be the most frequently rewritten part of your entire paper.

In your Introduction, you'll want to capture the interest of the reader and to stimulate curiosity about the topic. You might find it effective to start off your introductory chapter (and perhaps some or all subsequent chapters) with one or more pertinent quotations. This works especially well when you can juxtapose two conflicting opinions on the topic. Think about it.

4. Substantive chapters: The great middle divided into coherent units in which you tell what there is to be told.

5. Conclusion: Herein you summarize your findings, draw the necessary conclusions, and discuss questions raised by the research.

B. Other Issues of Format:

1. Tables: Always label clearly and number consecutively. Useful examples of how to do them can be found in any research report or methods book.

2. Appendices: For material which does not really contribute to the flow of the thesis/essay, but is important anyway. Check a style manual for placement and further advice.

3. Footnotes and Bibliography: See the Department Handout.

C. Confidentiality: It is a good idea to make up pseudonyms for specific people and places mentioned in the research paper. Of course a Middlebury student writing about a small New England Town midway between Rutland and Burlington is going to be giving away the show even if she calls it Centerburg. BUT: speak to your advisers about this and if you promise confidentiality to anyone you interview, don't go back on the promise.

III. Even Less Complex (But Crucial) Issues

A. Length: We don't like to suggest a length but we do—by example from the past if nothing else. We suspect that competent handling of a fairly complex problem will require a substantial number of pages. Some problems can be discussed more briefly; others may require more room.

Keep in mind that a one-semester project should run about 30 to 45 pages. Since a multi-semester project deals with a research problem of greater scope, we should think that would take you about 70 to 80 pages.

Do not get "hung up" on matters of length. Presumably you have chosen a topic which fits either the one or multi semester project mode. Just say what you have to say about that topic. Remember: quality and clarity are more important than quantity.

B. Number of Copies: The department requires one copy of your senior project to be handed in by the due date. If it is a multi-semester project, the department will make any additional copies needed. If you receive departmental honors, the original copy is placed in Special Collections at the library, or within the department if you do not.
C. **Due Dates:** Getting your senior project in on time is a way of achieving equity towards your fellow students, and is a work of mercy towards your mentors. Precise due dates will be announced each year.

   To maintain equity, late research papers will be penalized. The details will be announced each year.

D. **Readers:** One-Semester projects are read (and graded) by the faculty adviser alone. If they decide it is worthy of honors, a second reader will be chosen. Multi-Semester projects are initially read by two members of the College faculty. The first reader is the faculty adviser, the second is usually someone in the department but may be from a different department. If you have suggestions for the second reader (e.g., you are writing about an historical period and know someone in the History Department who is knowledgeable on the subject), please let us know. We can't promise that we will follow your suggestions but we will try to accommodate if possible. Within the department papers are assigned to second readers on the basis of areas of interest and work loads. If the initial readers determine that the thesis is potentially an honors thesis, a third reader will be selected from outside the department and an oral thesis defense will be scheduled.

E. **Defense:** If there is a defense, you will be asked to answer any questions about your thesis. These questions may cover methodology, substantive issues, theoretical approach, implications for further work, etc. Don't lose sleep over it. Reread the thesis before the defense but be prepared to talk with the faculty rather than be talked to by them. In terms of a grade, your defense can help you, but cannot hurt you.

F. **Grades:** Senior projects are graded as any other piece of work. One-semester projects are graded by the adviser alone and then, if honors are a possibility read by a second reader. One-semester projects receive honors if they have a grade of A- or better.

   Multi-semester projects are graded jointly by the faculty readers. Multi-semester projects that are not deemed honors eligible by the initial readers are assigned a grade of "B" or less. Theses judged by the initial readers to be potentially worthy of honors are graded jointly by all three readers after the project defense. In these cases, the three readers decide first whether it is, in fact, an honors thesis, and second, if so, what degree of honors the thesis will receive: Honors= B+; High Honors= A-; Highest Honors= A/A+.

   (Departmental honors is dependent on thesis grade and a cumulative average of a B in your major courses. An honors thesis does not ensure departmental honors.)

G. **Examples:** Past honor theses are in Special Collections in the Library. Check with your faculty adviser for suggestions about which theses to read as examples of good and/or bad work. (A general list will be provided.)

H. **Word Processing:** Remember to make a backup copy as you go along.

I. **Style:** This refers to punctuation, formatting, and citation procedures. APA (American Psychological Association) style is standard and recommended, although there are also MLA (Modern Language Association), Chicago/Turabian, and other style options. Buy or locate a copy of the style manual you will be using, and follow it consistently. Online resources can help. For APA style, for example, see the following websites:

http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocAPA.html; and

The department has a form for the title page. Bind in a black spring binder. Make sure the left-hand margin is wide enough to permit the binding (usually 1 1/2"). You needn't use the red-lined thesis paper.

J. **Errors:** There shouldn't be any. If you wonder about the spelling of a word, look it up—you've probably guessed wrong. Proofreading is boring but essential; among other things the difference between Honors and non-Honors can hinge upon the absence or presence of typographical errors, misspellings, and other easily corrected atrocities. These are distracting to the reader and hinder the communication of your ideas.

K. There is some money available to help students with expenses incurred in doing their research. The small grants are only for expenses that you cannot afford yourself.