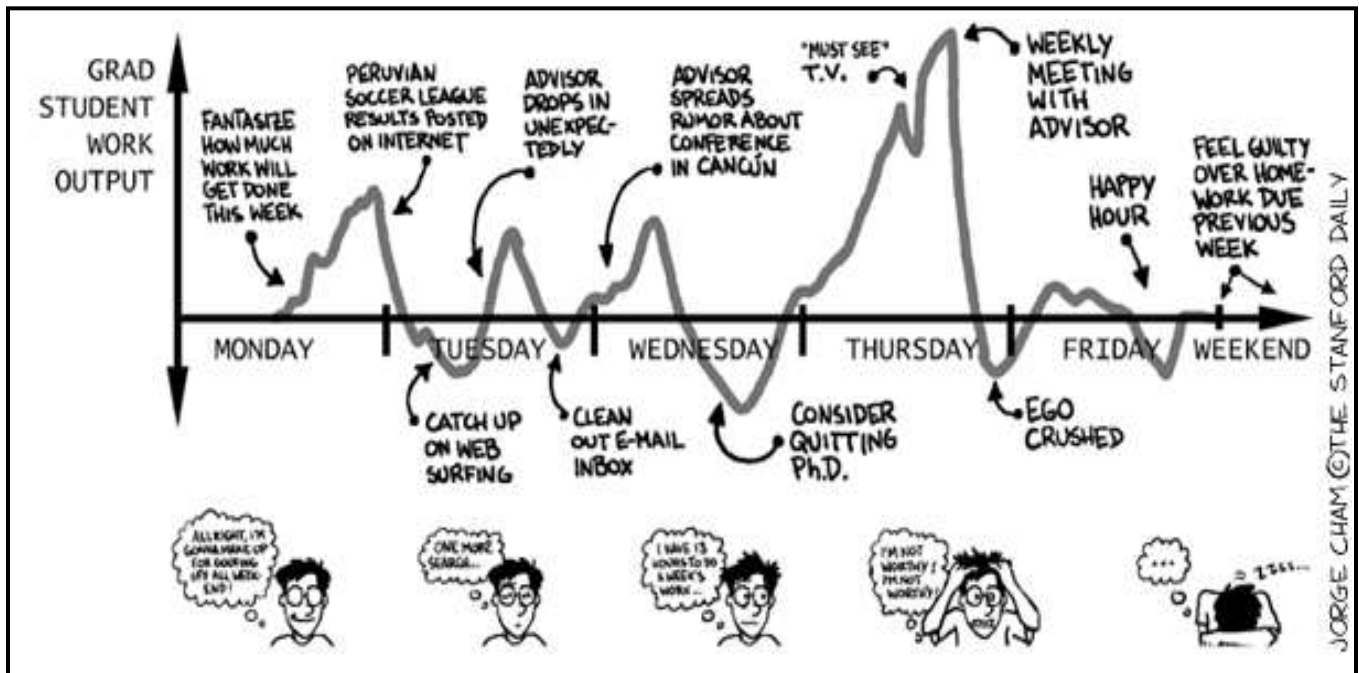


The Smart Guide to Getting Done:

Some Tips for Getting through Your
BC Sociology Graduate Degree



Department of Sociology
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MESSAGE FROM THE GRADUATE STUDIES COMMITTEE

Welcome to the Boston College Sociology Department! Like all graduate programs, our department has rules and regulations, outlined in the *Guide to Graduate Study*, (otherwise known as the “*Blue Book*,” see <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/sociology/graduate/resources-for-current-students.html>). But in addition to rules and regulations, we on the Grad Studies Committee saw that there was a need for informal and friendly advice on getting through the program. We pooled our collective wisdom, and produced this *Smart Guide* in response to this perceived need. Whether you are an MA or a Ph.D. student, we hope you find it useful.

Please note that this *Smart Guide* is intended to be a living document, to be updated periodically by both its designers and its users. If you identify something that you think should be added to, deleted from, or changed in this document, please send an e-mail to the Director of Graduate Studies.

THE FIRST YEAR

When you first arrive in September, you'll probably feel overwhelmed with the many details of getting established as a grad student (and if you're from out of town, getting established in Boston). The following are some tips for getting through the initial confusion.

Selecting Courses

Unlike BC undergraduates, who take 5 courses per semester, BC graduate students take 3 to be considered "full time." Unless they have been waived out of taking the full 54 credits courses for the Ph.D., funded Ph.D. students *must* take 3 courses per semester for their first three years, while they have their credits being paid for by GSAS. On the other hand, some MA students who do not have funding may want to consider taking only two courses per semester and completing their degree within a three-year time-frame so as to be able to maintain a paying job while taking courses.

The two main things to remember when selecting courses in your first year are: (1) get a running start on your required courses, but also; (2) take some elective courses that you like.

Required Courses

If you plan on being registered full-time (i.e., for three courses per semester), you will want to complete at least four of your required courses during your first year; you will likely be too busy during your second year to play catch-up.

Unless they come to our program with a prior sociology Master's, Ph.D. students take three years of coursework (3 courses per semester for 6 semesters). For Ph.D. students, required courses include 2 semesters of sociological theory (SOCY7715 and SOCY7716), and 2 semesters of statistics (e.g., SOCY7702, SOCY7703, SOCY7704, etc.).

Also required for PhD students is a 3-course sequence in research methods: the Social Inquiry Research Seminar (SOCY7710), taken during the first semester of the first year; the Empirical Research Seminar (SOCY7711), taken during the second semester of the first year; and the Second Year Graduate Writing Seminar (SOCY7761), a year-long 3-credit course taken every other week over the course of the second year. Ph.D. students are also required to take an additional methods class

Thus, for a Ph.D. student without a prior sociology Master's, a typical first year course load might look like the following:

Fall:

SOCY7710 (Social Inquiry Research Seminar)

Either SOCY7715 (Classical Theory) or SOCY7703 (Multivariate Statistics)

One elective

Spring:

SOCY7711 (Empirical Research Seminar)

Either SOCY7716 (Contemporary Theory) or SOCY7704 (Categorical Analysis)

One elective

If there are no sociology electives in either Fall or Spring semester that pique your interest, you may decide to take both theory and statistics courses at once in order to get those requirements out of the way. In most cases, that is preferred over taking electives in other disciplines during your first year, before you had a chance to explore your interests in Sociology.

MA students also have to take two semesters of statistics (e.g., SOCY7702 and SOCY7703, or SOCY7703 and SOCY7704), one semester of sociological theory (either SOCY7715 *or* SOCY7716), and two semesters of methods, including SOCY7710 and one more course. For those planning to write a

Master's Thesis/paper, that additional methods course should be SOCY7711; for those who do not plan to write a Master's thesis/paper, it can be any other methods course or even an internship course or an applied course aimed at building career skills. Thus, a typical first year courseload for an MA student would look similar to the one for a Ph.D. student listed above, but an MA student not planning to write an MA thesis would not register for SOCY7711 in the spring semester.

A note on statistics: the first graduate statistics course offered in the fall is SOCY7703 (Multivariate Statistics). To be prepared for SOCY7703, you need to have taken a previous introductory statistics course. If you have not taken such a course, you will need to wait until spring to take your first statistics class, SOCY7702 (Introductory Statistics).

Both MA and PhD students are eligible to receive a Certificate in Advanced Quantitative Methods (AQM). The AQM represents formal recognition of student's quantitative methods skills, and appears on their transcript upon graduation. It may be an asset in applying for both academic and non-academic jobs. More information is available here: https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/sociology/graduate/programs.html#tab-quantitative_methods_certificate.

Elective Courses

It is also very important to take some elective courses you like in your first year. Taking electives helps you to explore your interests, and will help you maintain your original enthusiasm about sociology as you work through the required courses. Make sure to discuss your choices of electives with your advisor. It may also be helpful to get some information from other students about the professor teaching each course, along with looking at the syllabus.

Which elective courses are appropriate for graduate students? Courses numbered 7000 and above are considered to be graduate-level courses. However, because the BC graduate program is relatively small, with a correspondingly small number of 7000-level courses, you will probably also be taking some 5000-level courses, which are considered to be mixed graduate and undergraduate. In reality, the composition of that mix (and the actual level of the course) varies considerably from course to course; you should ask the professor before registering whether the class is more targeted toward graduate or undergraduate students. If it is the latter, it may be possible to get the professor to agree to beef up the assignments you complete so that they are more grad student-appropriate. You will probably also want to explore the possibility of taking elective courses in other departments or schools within BC (e.g., the BC Law School or the School of Education), or at area universities that belong to the Graduate Consortium. (For more information on cross-registration within the Consortium, go directly to <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/sociology/graduate/consortium.html>). Remember that only three non-sociology courses can be applied to your MA degree, except with permission of the Director of Graduate Studies.

Readings & Research Courses.

Many students find readings and research (R&R) courses (otherwise known as independent studies) to be an excellent option for one or more courses, particularly in their 2nd and 3rd years. To put together an R&R, you must first determine a specified area of study and find faculty member to work with in that area. Generally, the student and faculty member meet the semester prior to the R&R to agree upon the expectations for the semester, including the final product to be graded. Once you are settled on the R&R, an email exchange between the faculty member, yourself and the Department Administrator must occur for you to be enrolled in the course.

Please note that the final product of an R&R could be a research paper, but could also be an MA paper, an area exam or a dissertation proposal. Some students have even used R&Rs to participate in an internship with a local organization (see below), in which case their final product may be a journal on their experiences or a document of use to the organization for which they worked.

Another option is to create a collaborative R&R with your peers in the graduate program. This is a really innovative way to explore your interests but continue to learn in a collective manner. It is also a way to take on a group research project. If you are interested in this option, you should speak to other graduate students in the program to see where interests overlap. Once you have a specified area of interest defined for an upcoming semester, you may want to collectively e-mail adminsoc.grad@bc.edu to see if other students might be interested in joining.

Internships

If you would like to get course credit for sociology-related work with organizations outside Boston College, you may consider arranging it to be part of a Readings and Research course (see above), or register for the Internship in Sociology (SOCY5540), which is offered periodically.

Getting through Statistics

Before beginning any graduate-level statistics classes, students usually have polar expectations about these courses. Some students believe that Statistics will be a breeze and are looking forward to stats courses. Other students expect to feel like they're stuck in a rainstorm with no umbrella. But whether your research interests are qualitative or quantitative, statistics are a tool that will put you in touch with a lot of what is going on in the discipline. You may never use statistics in your own research, but you'll almost certainly have to read and understand it so you will be glad you learned it.

The graduate statistics course offered in the fall is SOCY7703 (Multivariate Statistics). To be prepared for SOCY7703, you need to have taken a previous introductory statistics course. If you have not taken such a course, you will need to wait until spring to take your first statistics class, SOCY7702 (Introductory Statistics), and complete your statistics requirement during your second year.

There are a few things that you can do to make sure your statistics experience is smooth and stress-free. Stay on top of the readings and keep up with the class assignments. As a graduate student it is quite easy to begin focusing more on other courses, personal research, or non-school obligations. By providing yourself with ample time to complete the assignments, you will make sure that you have enough time to ask your professor or teacher assistant (TA) about certain areas where you might need further clarification. It is important to keep the lines of communication open with your professor and TA because they can offer you some extra help outside of class. Don't hesitate to ask for help: your classmates or your TA can quickly remind you what you've forgotten and save you a lot of time. Finally, if statistics is not your area of strength, and you feel you need someone to commit more one-on-one time than a professor or TA can offer, you should not hesitate to inquire within the department about hiring a tutor.

Beyond the professor and the TA, remember that you can use your classmates also enrolled in the class for support as well. Many students who have successfully completed two courses of statistics talk about the advantages of forming partnerships or small groups to problem-solve with when questions arise and work alongside while completing assignments. Statistics can be social!

Deciding Whether to Do an MA Thesis/Paper

Although an MA thesis/paper is required for PhD students, it is optional for MA students. It may be most useful for MA students who would like to use their MA to prepare for entering a PhD program later on. It may be less useful for students interested in applied (rather than academic) careers. Please remember that ***all students who want to complete a thesis/paper must register for SOCY7711*** (Empirical Research Seminar) the spring of their second year.

Information on the difference between an MA thesis and an MA paper can be found below in the section on "The Second Year."

Job Opportunities for MA Students

Being a graduate student in Boston is expensive. The following are some pointers to help ensure that your financial situation does not keep you from making the most of your experience as an MA student. The MA program is designed to be a two-year program, but can be completed over three or more years. Although every student's schedule is unique, it is important that you recognize and take into consideration the time that you need to dedicate to your courses and personal research, before accepting just *any* job. Being an MA student is job in itself. Along with finding a job that is compatible with your duties as a student, it may also be helpful to find a job that you are truly interested in, whether it's working for a non-profit organization, a research institute, or as a university administrator.

Because it is extremely helpful to have an employer who understands your responsibilities as a graduate student, Boston College may be the best place to work. Most full-time BC employees are allowed to take two courses per semester for free, which can also help cut down on your bills. For information on full-time BC jobs, see Human Resources: <https://www.bc.edu/offices/hr/jobopps.html>.

There are some part-time campus jobs, called graduate assistantships, that come with partial or full tuition remission. The Boston College Student Affairs website posts graduate assistantships here: <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/offices/student-affairs/sites/graduate-student-life/campus-life/assistantships.html>. And the Office of Student Services has a student employment website: <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/offices/student-services/student-employment.html>.

Being a Teaching Assistant

As part of their funding package, Ph.D. students in the BC sociology department serve as Teaching Assistants (TAs) for their first three years, followed by two years of service as Teaching Fellows (TFs). Whereas TAs are assigned to a professor's course to help with grading and other tasks, TFs are responsible for preparing and teaching their own courses (two per academic year). The Graduate Director is responsible for making TA assignments; the Chair for assigning TFs.

In making TA assignments, the Graduate Director has to balance the preferences of faculty and graduate students, as well as the needs of the department. Because priority for TA slots goes to high-enrollment courses, you may often find yourself TAing for a course that is not in your major area of interest. This is not necessarily a bad thing—part of your training in sociology involves learning about more than one or two narrow areas within the discipline. However, you should also try to ensure that some of your TA assignments fit with your long-term research and teaching interests. The best way to do this is to find out what courses will be eligible for TA assignments, and to ask professors with whom you are interested in working if they are teaching a TA-eligible course. If a student and faculty member have reached a prior agreement about TAing, the Graduate Director takes that very seriously in making TA assignments.

The workload for TAs in the sociology department is supposed to average out to approximately 15 hours per week (if you are routinely asked to do a lot more than this, you should notify the Graduate Director). Typically, the professor will want you to keep up with class readings, attend class, and do some grading. In some cases, you may also be asked to teach one or two weekly discussion sections. TA assignments with discussion sections typically involve more work, but also provide students with more valuable teaching experience.

External Funding for M.A. and Ph.D. Students

Another way to fund your studies, whether you are an MA or a Ph.D. student, is to obtain a predoctoral fellowship. Such fellowships can provide you with funding for one year or for multiple years. It takes some effort to prepare an application, but it is well worth it if you actually get a fellowship. If you are an M.A. student, a predoctoral fellowship will allow you to focus on your graduate studies without having to spend time on an outside job. If you are a Ph.D. student, a fellowship will let focus on your research

without having to serve as a teaching assistant. Such fellowships look great on CVs and résumés and they can help you obtain funding in the future.

The Boston College Office for Sponsored Programs keeps a list of predoctoral opportunities: <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/research/sites/vice-provost-for-research/sponsored-programs/funding.html#appid=info-item-4>. The Graduate School at UCLA maintains a more comprehensive list of graduate funding opportunities, including predoctoral fellowships: <https://grad.ucla.edu/funding/#/>.

Getting Advice

Both MA and Ph.D. students should have an academic advisor at all times. When you enter the program, you will be assigned an academic advisor based on the interests that you declared in your application package. You should set up an appointment with your academic advisor early in your first semester to discuss your coursework and research plans, and then stay in touch on a regular basis – at least once every semester. For those working on a Thesis or MA paper, and for Ph.D. students working on their Doctoral Dissertation, their academic advisor is typically the Chair of their MA or Doctoral Dissertation committee.

Choosing an academic advisor is not irreversible—you can always switch advisors! Ph.D. students, in particular, may find themselves working with different advisors as their research and teaching interests evolve. When selecting or switching advisors, just make sure to notify your previous advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies so that the department has a record of who your current advisor is.

In addition, the Director of Graduate Studies serves as an advisor to all students with regard to making sure that they meet all the requirements of the program. You should make sure to touch base with the Director of Graduate Studies before your first semester starts to ensure that your coursework plans conform to the expectations of the program. You should also feel free to make an appointment with the Graduate Director at any time if you have questions about registering for courses, choosing a substantive advisor, planning your upcoming year, or any other matters pertaining to your graduate education.

Beyond your formal graduate advisor, it is highly recommended that you seek advice from your peers, those further along in the graduate program, and other faculty members. You will likely find that fellow students have good “inside information”, TAing and grading, working with local organizations, and even journals to consider for publication. Different faculty and students may have different perspectives, so ask several people.

On Being Holistic

A final thought about your first year—try to set aside some time for activities and interests outside the department. This is particularly true if you are a Ph.D. student. Getting a Ph.D. in sociology is like running a marathon; it takes a long time, and you need to conserve your energy for the long haul. This means keeping yourself sane and balanced so you can keep up your strength. Particularly if you are from out of town, your first year is a good time to explore local activist groups and other activities.

THE SECOND YEAR

During their second year, students continue to take their required Core classes. It is also the year when students typically complete their MA paper or thesis, with two important exceptions: (1) MA students who do not plan to complete a paper or thesis; and (2) Ph.D. students who come into the program with prior MA degrees (and who have been waived out of the MA requirement).

The MA thesis/Paper

Under departmental rules, there is no substantive difference in the structure or content of an MA paper versus an MA thesis. In other words, a thesis isn't any longer, more difficult, or of higher quality than a paper. The difference between the two is that a thesis (but not a paper) is bound and placed in O'Neill Library, and is submitted electronically to GSAS, and will ultimately be accessible via ProQuest and eScholarship. A thesis must therefore meet special formatting guidelines and be submitted to GSAS well ahead of the student's graduation date (see <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/mcas/graduate/current-graduate-students/thesis-checklist.html>). The advantage of completing a thesis is that it has a more official status as a public document; M.A. students intending to apply to Ph.D. programs may elect to complete a thesis for this reason. A thesis is also eligible for competition for external awards for M.A. theses. Advantages of a paper are that it involves considerably fewer bureaucratic procedures, does not need to be completed as far ahead of the graduation date and does not need to be submitted to GSAS.

An MA thesis or paper is **not a term paper**. Term papers are produced at the end of a course, typically after several weeks of preparation. In contrast, the MA thesis/paper is something in which you invest many months of time—it is a much more substantial and serious piece of scholarship. On the other hand, it is **not a book or dissertation**, either. Dissertations are multi-chapter behemoths typically hundreds of pages in length. In contrast, a Second-Year MA thesis/paper should typically be 30-50 pages long, double-spaced.

Finally, an MA thesis/paper **is not a publishable article**—or at least it doesn't have to be. Many Ph.D. students will later want to use their MA thesis/paper as the basis for one of their area exams, which means they will submit it to a peer-reviewed journal (and defend it in an area). But a typical MA thesis/paper will need further revisions to become publishable. Under department rules, an MA thesis/paper is ready to be defended when it is ready to be submitted for presentation at a professional meeting—a less stringent standard than publishability.

Doing sociological research and writing it up is both a demanding and rewarding experience, and is a central part of your professional training at BC. A major goal of the first-year methods sequence (SOCY7710 and SOCY7711) is to launch you into a viable sociological research project so that you can hit the ground running when you get to your second year. The MA thesis/paper generally takes a lot of time, thought, and effort. That means that this is a year you will want to clear the decks. In other words, you will want to postpone taking on an extra job (especially if you are a funded PhD student), volunteer work, etc., and set aside time to work on your thesis/paper.

The Second Year Writing Seminar is required for all Ph.D. students, and MA students who are writing a paper or thesis. It is also suitable for other students working on research projects intended to be presented at professional conferences. The seminar meets approximately every two weeks over the course of two semesters. Students only register for one semester, typically in the Spring: it is a 3-credit course, not a 6-credit course. Especially if you are a funded Ph.D. student, it is recommended that you sign up for at least one additional Readings and Research course in the fall semester for the specific purpose of working on your MA paper. These strategies will help you finish up your MA while remaining registered full-time.

If you are doing interviews or fieldwork for your paper/thesis, it is extremely important for you to submit your proposal to the BC Institutional Review Board (IRB) well before the beginning of the fall semester of your second year. Consider managing your references in Zotero (<https://libguides.bc.edu/zotero?msclkiid=1a7ae414b8fb11ecafd6428a0b862303>). If you are planning to search for literature while being off campus, it can be helpful to set up BC VPN (Virtual Private Network) on your computer: <https://bcservices.bc.edu/service/vpn>. A VPN connection will allow you to easily open full-text articles even if you find them using non-library resources, e.g., a search engine or Google Scholar.

To remain in good standing, Ph.D. students are expected to finish and defend their MA paper/thesis by **September 30** of their third year (see the *Guide to Graduate Study* for further details).

Presenting Your Research

Once you have done your research and are writing your thesis/paper, consider presenting it at a professional conference. It is not an actual requirement, but it is an important step in your professional development. The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences provides partial reimbursement to grad students to travel to one conference per academic year (see <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/mcas/graduate/current-graduate-students/forms/graduate-student-reimbursement-guidelines.html>).

The biggest conference in the discipline is the annual meeting of American Sociological Association (ASA) held every August; submissions to this conference must be complete papers, and they are typically due in mid-January. If your paper is not ready yet, but you anticipate that it will be by August, consider submitting to the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), which usually holds its conferences at the same time and place with the ASA meetings – SSSP does not require complete papers and accepts extended abstracts. SSSP also has travel grants for grad students that will pay for a portion of your travel expenses.

Another great venue for graduate student presentations is Eastern Sociological Society (ESS) conference, held in February or March every year, and always in a northeastern city. These conferences are smaller and typically provide a friendly audience for your first presentation experience. They also accept extended paper abstracts rather than entire papers.

Finally, you should also look into student-organized conferences and field-specific conferences—such conferences can provide a wonderful experience and help you form closer ties with others in the discipline. And, compared to larger conferences, field-specific conferences can also provide you with more detailed feedback on your work.

Many conferences distinguish between regular paper sessions and either roundtables or poster sessions, so even if your paper didn't make it into a regular session, it will nevertheless be included in the program. Beware that while regular paper sessions will have AV equipment, roundtables typically will not. But with either presentation format, you will have to be brief – practice your presentation ahead of time to make sure it fits the allotted time (typically 15–20 minutes). Note that poster sessions require that you present your research in the form of a poster. In preparation for the conference, it might be a good idea to order business cards—for example, having them makes it easier to ask someone to send you their paper.

APPLYING TO PH.D. PROGRAMS

Many of our M.A. students are interested in moving into Ph.D. programs after they get their B.C. degrees. There are a number of strategies that will increase your likelihood of being accepted into a program with funding. Here are some of them.

Timing. Generally speaking, it is inadvisable to apply to a Ph.D. program in your first year as an M.A. student. You have not accumulated enough of a track record, will not have your thesis research to send, and will not have enough experience with faculty to get well-informed letters. In short, waiting until the second year to apply will give you a much stronger application.

Advising. Get a good advisor to help you navigate the process. Find someone you trust who has experience.

Writing sample. The choice of writing sample is an important decision. Go over with your advisor. You should submit a piece of writing of 15-30 pages—ideally one that contains empirical research. Don't submit an excessively long writing sample (e.g., 60 pages), as this will just annoy the admissions committees.

GREs. Are important—some places are phasing them out, but they continue to play an important part in grad admissions. If your old scores are outdated, or lower than you would like them to be, do whatever you can to get the highest scores possible. This means taking practice tests, studying math you may have forgotten, etc. GREs are a shorthand way that programs sift through competitive pools. Do not shortchange yourself in this area. It may be unpleasant, but do focus strongly on this aspect of your application, as it will yield high returns.

Letters of recommendation. Try to get 3 letters from faculty members who know you well. For example, faculty members who have had you in small classes are better letter-writers than those who have had you in large classes. Faculty members who have had you in class recently are better letter-writers than those who had you a long time ago. People outside the discipline are less useful for application to a sociology program and non-academic employers are even less so. Do not use undergraduate faculty unless their connection with you is recent.

Research record. If you can get involved in doing research for or with a faculty member before applying, that will help a lot. The decision to admit you to a Ph.D. program is in many ways a decision about your competence in doing research.

THE THIRD YEAR

During their third year, after completing their MA papers/theses, most Ph.D. students need to think about facing the next hurdle—the area exams. However, Ph.D. students who come into the program with prior MA degrees (and who have been waived out of the MA requirement) should be working their area exams during their second year (i.e., they should be “one year ahead”).

Working on your area exams helps you make a more informed choice with respect to a dissertation topic. This work also helps you prepare for teaching courses, and may lead to a published journal article that will help you on the academic job market.

Some important resources to look at to prepare for your area exam journey:

- The *Blue Book* policy on area exams (please read carefully).
- The department’s online library of area exam resources, which includes guidelines and reading lists submitted by former students: <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/sociology/graduate/resources-for-current-students.html>.

Finishing Your area exams While Simultaneously Finishing Your Coursework

Ideally, you should also finish both area exams during your third year, because in your fourth year you will be teaching your own courses as a TF—a rewarding but time-consuming job, particularly for first-time teachers. It is to your advantage to finish up your exams while your workload is relatively light, so that you have enough funded time left in the program to work on your doctoral dissertation.

If you have been able to take courses in your areas of interest during the second year, it is a good idea to sign up for a good number of R&R credits in the third year in order to put time into your schedule to make progress on your research. To do this, approach a member of your area exam committee (typically the Chair) and ask whether s/he would be willing to supervise an R&R. You should specifically ask that the area exam (whether it is the journal article or take-home exam) be submitted in lieu of a final paper.

Choosing between Journal Articles and Take-Home Exams

In fulfilling the area exam requirements you have some choices to make. One big choice is whether to do one exam in the form of a journal article and one take-home exam, two exams in the form of journal articles, or two take-home exams. How do you decide? If you check around with different faculty in our department you will find some faculty that will support each of these options. The following are some guidelines, but you should keep in mind that not all of the faculty in our department will agree or will give the same weight to the various arguments that can be made in favor of each of these options. In general, it is important to consider two criteria: (1) the time it takes to complete area exams and (2) your career aspirations.

Time

As a general rule, researching and writing up a publishable article takes more time than preparing and completing a take-home exam. Therefore, if you need to crank out an area exam quickly, you are better off doing a take-home.

That being said, by the beginning of your third year, you should *already* have a completed paper that may be revisable to submit to a journal: namely, your MA thesis or paper. Therefore, the most efficient strategy for many (although not all) students is to convert their MA thesis/paper into an area exam.

However, there will be instances in which it becomes clear that the paper is, for any of a variety of reasons, unlikely to be publishable. It could be that it would take too long to get the paper to a publishable level or that the strength of the findings is not at the level required to get accepted at a peer

reviewed journal. If you think that might be the case, consult with advisor and consider shifting to the take-home area exam option.

Your Career Plans

In addition to getting through your exams in a timely manner, you should make sure that these exams become a useful experience for your future career. If your eventual goal is a job at a college that puts a very heavy focus on teaching (which in some cases will involve teaching four courses per semester), a strong case can be made for doing at least one take-home exam. Such schools will often be particularly interested in evidence that you have a lot of teaching experience, that you enjoy teaching, that you want to emphasize teaching, and that you are an excellent teacher. Relative to other schools with more of a research agenda, they will be less interested in evidence that you can publish in refereed journals. Refereed journal publication is also less important if you are interested in a non-academic career in a research institute or non-governmental organization.

In contrast, if your goal is to get a job at a research university like Boston College (i.e., an academic department that has a Ph.D. program), your publication record, and particularly publications in refereed journals, is going to be given quite a bit of attention. With this career goal, you should aim to have at least two peer-reviewed articles either published or accepted for publication by the time you hit the job market. If this is your goal, then the best choice may be to do both area exams as journal articles even though this option will take you longer. If you are doing two articles, you may also benefit from the support offered by the Dissertation Seminar (described below in the “Getting through the Dissertation” section).

If your goal is to teach in a selective liberal arts school (e.g., Middlebury, Vassar, or Amherst) you are going to find that they will want to see evidence that you excel with respect to teaching and demonstrate potential with respect to publication. If this is your goal, it might make the most sense to select one exam as a journal article and one as a take-home exam. However, some would argue that if this is your goal, selecting two journal articles also makes sense with your teaching potential demonstrated through a careful selection of the actual courses that you manage to teach while a graduate student.

Some Tips for Doing Take-Home Exams

In general, the reading list for the take-home option will be equivalent to two graduate courses on that topic. Students should aim for a reading list length of between 150–250 points, where each book is equivalent to 3 points and each article/book chapter is equivalent to 1 point. Ask your committee about their reading list expectations early on. Try to take a seminar in your chosen area. You can also take Reading & Research courses to prepare the reading list and do the readings (see above).

Other sources that might be helpful for preparing a reading list include:

- Our departmental library of past students’ reading lists:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1eUHSb_3batj5ZCSRkfeMZvoLiFsXTNdg
- A textbook that gives you a feel for the subfield.
- Graduate syllabi and area exam reading lists from other institutions, often available online.
- Key handbooks in the subfield.
- Review essays, such as those in the *Annual Review of Sociology*.
- Major journals of the subfield.

When your reading list is ready and you have read most of the items on it, you should discuss the issue of exam questions with your committee (see the *Guide to Graduate Study* for guidelines). Your participation in this process is important, because it gives you a chance to make the most of your exam experience. If your questions are carefully selected, then the writing you will do at this stage will help

you better formulate your dissertation topic and can even be useful for the literature review for your dissertation.

Some Tips for Choosing Specialty Areas

You can choose to take a specialty area exam in any of the many subfields defined by the American Sociological Association (ASA), or in any topic of similar breadth (as long as you clear it with the Director of Graduate Studies). If the Graduate Director approves it and if you can get two faculty members to agree to examine you on the topic, you can take an area exam in it. If you are committed to a particular area but are having trouble finding two committee members, you are allowed to look outside the department – the second committee member can be someone from another department or even from a different university. You can ask your committee chair to help you find the second member.

In general, it is easiest to take an area exam in an area where there is strong departmental support: a critical mass of faculty to serve on committees; seminars on the subfield to help you prepare; and past students' reading lists to use as a guide. Faculty clusters are groups of sociology faculty members with common areas of expertise who agree to serve on area examinations on a regular basis. Taking an area exam in a faculty cluster gives you a guaranteed committee, thus saving you the trouble of hunting down two willing committee members. Areas with large faculty clusters are also areas for which the department has a national reputation.

When selecting your areas, it is helpful to consider the size of the job market and the number of people competing for positions in a given area. If you expect to have geographical restrictions when you are on the market, it may make sense to select areas for which there will be a lot of positions. You can get a sense for what those areas might be by looking at ASA reports on academic job market trends, available here: <https://www.asanet.org/academic-professional-resources/data-about-discipline/asa-reports>. The various sections at ASA tend to send out job listings for relevant positions, so it may be a good idea to join sections that fit your interests and to monitor their mailing lists.

Some Tips for Preparing Publishable Articles

As mentioned above, it can be advantageous to turn your second-year Master's paper into a publishable article. When you have finished your Master's paper, make sure to discuss this issue with your Master's paper committee and ask them for specific feedback on how to make your paper publishable (and whether they think this a practical option).

You will note that *The Guide to Graduate Study* states that the "Publishable Paper Option" calls for a paper that your committee judges suitable for submission to a refereed journal. This does not mean that the paper will or must actually be accepted for publication. If your goal is a job at a more teaching-intensive college, a research institute, or an NGO, whether or not your paper is actually published is less important than if your aim is a job at a research university. If you are interested in a research university job, you will want to have several such articles accepted for publication. Some committees will keep you working on a paper longer in the hope that the final paper will end up being accepted for publication (typically after revisions made in response to comments from reviewers). If you select a committee that tends to be more flexible with respect to how strong it needs to be to meet this standard, you might be able to finish this requirement faster. But keep in mind that if you submit a paper that in reality has little chance of being accepted for publication, this may make it less likely that you will later be able to be able to pursue a research university or a liberal arts college career. Once again, you should weigh your decision based on your future career aspirations.

The instructions in the *Guide to Graduate Study* also state that "The paper to be submitted is to be single-authored," but that "Under exceptional circumstances...upon the approval of the student's two-member exam committee, a co-authored paper may be submitted for review..." If this your first attempt at preparing an article for a refereed journal, you may need a lot of help, to the point that some faculty

would assume that it is only honest to include them as co-authors. However, if you want to submit a co-authored article as your publishable paper, you need to get permission from both members of your committee to do so and you must be very clearly the lead author on the article. You must be the person who has the primary responsibility for carrying out the research and the primary responsibility for the writing. The faculty co-author contribution will generally be limited to giving you a lot of advice, reading and commenting on several versions of the article, helping with what it means to follow the instructions for authors for the specified journal, selecting an appropriate journal given the topic and the relative importance of the contribution of the article, and helping with the final editing of the article before it is submitted. The faculty member's goal is to teach you how to write an article and to get you to do as much as possible so you will learn as much as possible from the experience.

In selecting the target journal, it might be helpful to aim high at first. Ask yourself what it would take to make your paper publishable in one of the top sociology journals (*ASR*, *AJS*, *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*), and then try to bring it to that level. When deciding on a journal, it is often helpful to try to find a "model article" – an article in that journal that addresses related issues which can be used as a blueprint for structuring your paper. It is also important to follow the journal's guidelines in terms of paper length and formatting. It is difficult but not impossible to get your paper into one of the top journals while in grad school. But even a rejection from one of those journals can be useful, because you typically get excellent feedback from anonymous peer reviewers. Take that feedback seriously; even if you will resubmit your paper to another journal, it is a good idea to address these critiques, because the same reviewer might get your paper again.

In addition to submitting your paper to a journal, consider nominating your paper for some of the numerous graduate student paper awards. Many ASA sections and divisions of SSSP give out such awards annually; ESS also has a few awards it gives out, and some of the more specialized professional societies might also have awards. The deadlines for such awards are typically in January–March, and the competition is not nearly as steep as you might imagine – oftentimes, award committees are selecting from 5–10 nominated papers, or even fewer, so the chances are pretty high. Typically, you do not have to be the member of that association to nominate your paper, and the paper does not have to be submitted for presentation at the corresponding conference.

"When you select the publishable paper option you are required to participate in a one-hour oral examination on the article itself and the specialty area in which the article is situated." This wording from the *Guide to Graduate Study* leaves open the question as to how much time will be spent during the exam dealing with the paper itself and how much dealing with the literature on the specialty area in which the article is situated. Some committees will ask you to prepare a list of about 10 very important readings in the specialty area, some may suggest 50 primary readings and another 50 readings to skim and be aware of. Most will be somewhere in between. Committees will also vary in the breadth of the area in which they expect you to defend your paper.

Given that most publishable journal articles in refereed journals are quite focused and given that the preparation of an article that really is publishable takes a lot more time than it takes to prepare for a take-home exam, you may find that some committees will want to focus primarily on the reading that is cited in the actual article and not on reading from an external reading list. You should definitely talk to your exam committee in advance to make sure there is agreement as to how this part of the exam will be handled and how much time you will be expected to invest in broad reading on the specialty area in which this article is situated.

GETTING THROUGH THE DISSERTATION

For most doctoral students, researching and writing the dissertation is the biggest challenge of their graduate careers. Below are some strategies for helping you to get through to the finish line.

Looking Ahead

There are some long-range strategies to help you get a good start on your dissertation long before you start working on it. One is to plan one or both of your area exams in anticipation of your dissertation proposal. If you already have a solid knowledge of the literature in an area, it will make it a lot easier for you to formulate your research questions and research design, and to write up the literature review for your proposal. And if you selected the publishable paper option for one or both of your exams, you can incorporate the research you did for those publishable papers into your dissertation.

Another good long-range strategy is to apply for external fellowships to work on your dissertation research. (Although GSAS has a competitive dissertation fellowship, the sociology department typically nominates students who have completed, or are near completing, their research, and are starting the writing phase.) Why bother applying for an external fellowship if you are already guaranteed a stipend as a TF? There are several good reasons. One is that most external fellowships will provide you with a larger stipend. A second is that if you are planning on doing research away from campus (e.g., in another country), a fellowship will give you the flexibility to be off campus (which is not true if you have to come in to teach). Third, and most importantly, serious sociological research takes a lot of time, and can be extremely difficult to pull off while you are busy teaching and grading! Having a fellowship can give you the flexibility and freedom to do higher-quality research and finish up sooner.

To get an external fellowship you need to think pretty far ahead. Typically, fellowship applications are due in the Fall, a full year before you actually begin receiving the fellowship. That means that you need to have the foresight to put together an application long before you start working on your dissertation (probably while you are still completing your area exams).

The BC Office for Sponsored Programs maintains some information on dissertation support for graduate students: <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/research/sites/vice-provost-for-research/sponsored-programs/funding.html#appid=info-item-5>. The Graduate School at the University of California at Los Angeles maintains a comprehensive list of graduate funding opportunities: <https://grad.ucla.edu/funding/#/>. Finally, the Social Science Research Council has a very thorough and helpful guide to writing fellowship proposals: <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/the-art-of-writing-proposals/>.

Getting Started

To write a dissertation, you need a dissertation committee. The Chair of your committee should be a faculty member in the department with whom you work well (after all, you're going to be working together for a while), and who is responsive (i.e., who gets back to you). You are required to have at least two other faculty members on your committee (see the *Guide to Graduate Study* for further details about committee composition).

When you and your advisor decide you are ready to start working on your dissertation proposal, you should consider signing up for the Dissertation Seminar. The Seminar is run as an ongoing research workshop, and covers all stages of the research process, from conceptualization and theory development through data analysis and writing. It meets every two weeks, with individual meetings with the professor as necessary. All students who are writing dissertations are strongly recommended to enroll in this workshop, at least for one semester. You can either register formally for the seminar each semester in lieu of registering for a single doctoral continuation credit, or (with the permission of the professor) audit the seminar without registering.

There are two formats for the dissertation:

- A scholarly monograph—essentially, the draft of a book. This is the “traditional” style of dissertation, and often makes sense for students doing qualitative research who want to publish their dissertation later as a book.
- Three journal-style articles, “sandwiched” between an introduction at the beginning and a conclusion at the end. This style of dissertation often makes sense for students doing quantitative research, which is typically published in article format.

When you are about to begin your work on your proposal, you should look carefully at the sections on Doctoral Dissertation Proposal and Doctoral Dissertation in the *Guide to Graduate Study*. To get a better idea of what your proposal should look like, ask a few other students to have a look at their proposals and analyze them carefully. Although there is no single formula, it will give you a sense of the range of options. You should also ask your committee chair about his or her expectations. It might be especially useful to discuss what your chair expects in terms of the literature review—should it be a brief overview of the literature, a full-blown literature review chapter of your future dissertation, or something in the middle? There is no single way of doing it, so make sure to find out what your committee expects to see. If you are planning to apply for dissertation fellowships, you might want to prepare your proposal according to the guidelines of these fellowships—but make sure that your chair agrees with that strategy.

Remember that a proposal is supposed to be a help, not a hurdle. It helps you clarify your research plan in your own mind, and it also provides you with a formal agreement from your committee—that way you can be sure that if you do what you proposed, your committee will stand behind you. Of course, things might change as you proceed with your research, and dissertations do not always exactly match proposals, so you should be able to adjust things later on if necessary.

The Dissertation

For most of us, the dissertation presents a formidable challenge to our time- and anxiety-management skills. While some people are very good at structuring their own time, other people need a lot of external structure, and will need to urge their Committee Chair to set goals and deadlines for them. For everybody, it is important to recognize that Rome wasn't built in a day: you need to approach the dissertation in incremental steps, or risk driving yourself crazy! There are many good Internet sources of advice on researching and writing your dissertation—see <http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com/>. Other good sources of information and advice on dissertating are other graduate students and (of course) your committee chair and committee members.

As you work on your dissertation research, you should consider looking into fellowships for writing up your dissertation. Each year, the sociology department is typically granted *one* dissertation fellowship by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS). If you apply for external fellowships as well, you maximize your chances of getting a fellowship for writing up your dissertation, and of getting a more generous stipend than GSAS provides. (See the links to fellowship information in the Looking Ahead section above.) As with dissertation research fellowships, dissertation writing fellowships tend to have early deadlines, and hence require some planning ahead.

In preparation for completing the dissertation, it might be a good idea to attend a couple of other students' defenses. You should also start preparing for life after dissertation—without stressing too much about it. For some students, the fear of post-dissertation uncertainty can prevent them from finishing! Focus on practical steps such as maintaining your CV, pursuing publications, and developing your teaching portfolio. Attend the professional development workshop that BC holds each year. Seek career advice from your committee members. And remember that academic job searches are usually conducted in the Fall, and the deadlines for submitting your materials can be as early as August.

Job Placement

Most of our Ph.D. graduates pursue academic careers—and unlike other kinds of hiring, academic hiring is done on a very long, slow timetable. You might start applying to jobs in August, get an interview in October, and find out in January that you will be starting a job the following September. Navigating the process takes quite a bit of insider knowledge and a lot of preparation. To prepare, you should be in close contact with your advisor. There is a collection of model job market materials and other tools available here,

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1vf5r7TYjs3RdbL6OU27DMZI3P0fKCzyU>.

The department also has a faculty member who serves as Placement Officer. Their job is to provide doctoral students with the knowledge, expertise, and materials that they will need in preparation for the academic job market. Specifically, the officer (1) assists students in preparing CVs, cover letters, research statements, or teaching statements through group and individual meetings, (2) helps students prepare for mock phone or Skype interviews, (3) arranges practice job talks or practice teaching demonstrations in which department faculty members and graduate students participate, (4) prepares candidates for on-campus visits, (5) assists in negotiating the terms of a job offer, and (6) answers questions about the job market from students at earlier stages of the program.

The Placement Officer will organize a spring workshop for students going on the market, or who think they might be going on the market the following fall. You should attend this workshop if you think there is *even a slight possibility that you will apply for a job in the fall*.

If you are interested in getting a job in an academic department with a Ph.D. program, you should also consider the availability of post-doc positions in your areas as you may need to spend 1 or 2 years after getting your Ph.D. in a post-doc program. A post-doc typically offers you a wage substantially above what you can earn as a graduate student, but substantially below what you will earn as a tenure track assistant professor. It also offers you a lot of time to publish, to get your post-dissertation research started, and to learn how to get your research funded. It offers you an alternative if you do not get the job you want in a place you want when you go on the job market the year you finish up your Ph.D. How do you find out about post-docs? Again, check the ASA Job Bank, section mailing lists, and “rumor mills.” Also, check with faculty at BC – faculty members with connections to researchers in departments with post-doc programs may be able to make some introductions for you.

Finishing Up

As you near completion of your final draft and your defense, you should prepare to deal with some final department and GSAS requirements (e.g., booking a room, filling out the correct paperwork at the correct time, etc.). Make sure to read the *Guide to Graduate Study* section on the Doctoral Dissertation carefully so that you get through all the hoops and graduate when you plan to graduate. At this point, you should also treat yourself to a nice dinner to congratulate yourself for having made it to the finish line!



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