

BARNARD COLLEGE - WOMEN'S STUDIES

WRITING A SENIOR THESIS IN WOMEN'S STUDIES: GUIDELINES AND TIMETABLE

2004 / 2005

The senior thesis in Women's Studies provides majors an opportunity to engage in original interdisciplinary research, bringing the theoretical orientation of feminist scholarship to bear on a particular area of investigation. All majors in Women's Studies are required to write a thesis in their senior year and to do this under the rubric of two semesters of the Senior Seminar in Women's Studies (WMST V 3521). Seniors in the combined major may meet this requirement either through Women's Studies or through the combining department or program, but should design a thesis that integrates the two fields of inquiry.

The senior thesis typically takes the form of a 40-60 page research paper, based on original research and characterized by an interdisciplinary approach to the study of women and/or gender. Thesis writers work with an individual advisor who has substantial expertise in the field in which the thesis is to be written, and also meet as a group with the course directors of the Senior Seminar through the fall and spring semesters. The details of what these group meetings involve are set out in the fall and spring syllabi for the Senior Seminar. What follows are general guidelines for designing and writing senior theses in Women's Studies.

TIMETABLE (2004-2005)

September 8-22: decide on the topic of your thesis and choose an individual advisor

September 29: one page project proposal and one page bibliography

October 20: five page project proposal and two page annotated bibliography

November 10: detailed outline and at least five pages of a chapter drafted

November 29: first draft of one chapter

December 8: submit full draft of one chapter

February 24: complete full first draft of your thesis

March 24: revised second draft of your thesis

April 21: submit the final copy of your thesis

early May: thesis presentations

INDIVIDUAL THESIS ADVISORS

Choosing a thesis advisor

It is crucial that you choose an individual thesis supervisor within ***the first three weeks of the fall semester***. Choose your thesis topic with a potential advisor in mind and refine the plans for your project in consultation with your thesis advisor.

- You may not write a thesis on a topic in which no faculty has the expertise to assist you. See the attached lists of Barnard Women's Studies faculty, affiliates, and other faculty at Barnard who have feminist and gender research interests.
- Do not choose a graduate student or an adjunct faculty member as your advisor. While these colleagues are a tremendous resource, most are under considerable pressure to meet the requirements of their graduate program or other teaching commitments, and they are not compensated for the time they spend with you; with the best will in the world often they cannot follow through on their commitments to senior thesis writers, or do so at great expense to themselves and others.

Working with an Advisor

Your advisor can give you the following kinds of advice and support.

- *Project design*: advice on what questions require attention in your chosen area of interest and how these questions can be framed so they are a feasible topic for a senior thesis.
- *Resources*: bibliographic suggestions and guidance in searching out relevant sources, as well as a sense of the intellectual history and current dynamic of debate in your field of interest.
- *Research strategy*: suggestions about research methods appropriate to your topic, and guidance in working with the research materials relevant for your project.
- *Ethics review protocols*: guidance in securing the appropriate level of ethics review approval if your project involves research with human subjects. See the guidelines provided in the “Human Subjects Review for Senior Research Projects in Women’s Studies,” posted on the department website: <http://www.barnard.edu/wmstud/>. For background and training modules, see the Columbia IRB site “Rascal” (under “testing center” under “compliance”): <https://www.rascal.columbia.edu/>.
- *Execution*: advice on how those working in your field typically write up (or otherwise present) the results of their research.

Tutorial and Group Meetings

You should agree on a regular schedule of tutorial meetings with your individual advisor at the beginning of the fall semester. These tutorials should take place preferably no less than twice a month for no less than one half hour each time. Both of you should stick to the schedule and not miss meetings even if you feel you have nothing new to report or discuss. Use your tutorials as an opportunity to talk with someone who cares deeply about the field in which you’re working, a rare opportunity!

In the fall semester, seminar group meetings complement tutorial meetings with your individual advisor. These are designed to help you develop a plan for your thesis and they emphasize group discussion of general issues and concerns you are likely to share as you begin your project (see the fall syllabus for details). In the spring, when you are fully engaged with the specifics of your thesis project, tutorial meetings with your individual advisor and course director will generally assume greater importance. Throughout the year, however, seminar group meetings offer a supportive environment in which to compare notes and share resources and advice with others who are immersed in thesis research.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF DIRECTORS AND ADVISORS

Course Directors' Responsibilities

- Organize the schedule of seminar group meetings and special events.
- Preside at seminar group meetings and act as discussion facilitator if necessary.
- Provide individual tutorial and advising sessions.
- Provide general advice about the ethics review requirements for projects involving human subjects.
- Function as a liaison with individual advisors: help clarify their duties, assist with problems, join the advisor in assessing interim and final grades, and handle final grade submission.
- Read all drafts, proposals and reports as well as final papers: the course director concentrates on broader issues of theory and on presentation and writing rather than on topic-specific content.
- Help to ensure that thesis writers meet deadlines.
- Co-ordinate final presentations and arrange the reception that follows at the end of the semester.

Advisor's Responsibilities

- Establish regular tutorial meetings with the thesis advisee.
- Provide field-specific guidance in identifying a thesis topic of appropriate scope and clarity, and in determining a feasible strategy for addressing this topic.
- Provide on-going advice about research materials and methods, and input on issues of theory and content as the thesis research unfolds.
- Provide guidance securing appropriate IRB approval for projects involving human subjects.
- Read and provide the advisee substantive input on proposals, drafts, reports and the final thesis.
- Contact the course director if problems arise, and participate in assigning grades.
- Participate in final presentations as member of audience.

THESIS WRITING SUGGESTIONS AND ADVICE

Components of a Thesis

Your final thesis should be 40-60 pages typed and it should include the following components.

- *An introduction:* this should include a statement of the topic of your thesis that explains its significance and your goals in taking it up; a sharply specified question or problem within this topic area that you intend to address (see below); and a description of the methods and research materials you use to address this focal question.
- *The body of the thesis:* this should provide an account of the theoretical framework that informs your project, the historiography of the field and an assessment of the current state of research in your particular area of interest, and the political implications of your work on the topic. Here you should develop your central argument, or elaborate your focal thesis, making use of primary as well as secondary research material; this is where you present the substantive results of your research, in whatever form is appropriate to your chosen field of inquiry.
- *Conclusions:* your conclusions should explain what you've discovered or learned, why it is important, and where it leads. They should be clearly stated and realistic. You may feel there is much unfinished work, or that you have raised more questions than you have answered; this is an accomplishment in itself. Consider including some forward-looking discussion of unanswered questions (or new questions generated by your project) that might fruitfully inform future research in the area.
- *Notes and references:* you may use footnotes or end notes, and you may use any standard citation style so long as you use it consistently throughout your thesis (see below, "Form and Style").
- *Bibliography:* whatever citation style you use, you should include a full bibliography at the end of your thesis. Consider investing in bibliographic software so that you are building a database of the references you review in the course of your thesis research (see below, "Form and Style").
- *Tables and illustrations:* include these as appropriate to your topic. They may be interleaved or presented in an appendix at the end of your thesis, but in either case they must be numbered and accompanied by brief captions, and you must include a separate list of plates, tables, or other illustrations that identifies the sources of material you use.

Topic Choice

You can choose any substantive topic in the broad interdisciplinary fields that comprise women's studies and gender studies. Here are some more specific recommendations.

- *Topics that work especially well:* these include projects based on primary sources: research involving human subjects ranging from oral history and interviews to survey-based research; analyses of media ranging from newspapers, film, video, and on-line sources, to works of art and literature; archival research of all kinds; and critical/synthetic studies of laboratory and field research in a range of sciences.
- *Interdisciplinarity:* the most interesting questions will almost inevitably require the use of data, research tools, and perspectives drawn from a number of different fields. Not surprisingly, the best theses are interdisciplinary; the best are also those in which thesis writers theorize their own practices rather than copying other people's theories.
- *Constraints:* as open-ended as these possibilities are, there are some limitations on topic choice: you cannot write fiction or autobiography, or use yourself as the primary subject of your project; and you cannot write on a topic unless you have an advisor with the relevant expertise who agrees to work with you.

Focal Questions and Prospective Answers

Defining a sharply specified and tractable focus for your research is probably the single most important factor determining the success of a thesis project. Choose a topic that intrigues you, something you think is important to work on, but do not assume that you will do everything you might want to do, much less everything that needs doing on this topic, in the scope of your thesis.

- Be clear about the broader issues that motivate your interest and frame your topic, but then limit the scope of your thesis to a single manageable question: a question that is answerable within the scope of a 40-60 page thesis, and in the course of roughly six months research and writing.
- Be sure to formulate, not only a core question, but also a working thesis: specify, early in the research process, what you think the answer (or alternative possible answers) to your focal question might be. This will provide you crucial guidance in designing well motivated strategies for addressing your question: reviewing appropriate background material; gathering relevant evidence; choosing appropriate tools of analysis, conceptual and empirical.
- Note that this articulation of a focal question and prospective answer (or answers) need not compromise the integrity of your research project or prejudice the reader. If anything, you guard against developing a project that simply confirms foregone conclusions when you make your interests and expectations explicit; they become an object of critical scrutiny rather than unacknowledged background assumptions.
- If you clearly state your question and prospective answer(s) at the outset, you can write up your thesis as a narrative that engages the reader an active participant in the process of inquiry, not unlike the reader of a mystery or detective story. Your working thesis (and the rationale you give for considering it) tells the reader how you will approach your focal question; if you offer only the question, you provide no road map for navigating the terrain of the research field(s) in which this question arises. This, in turn, allows you to tailor the background you present (your analysis of past research in the area and the rationale you give for the specifics of your research strategy) to the specifics of your question. Whatever topic you choose, you are likely to find that you are entering an on-going conversation; you need to engage this dynamic of inquiry and debate, but you do not need to provide a comprehensive history of all the research in a given field, or canvass all possible methods for exploring questions in this field.

Thesis Writing: Form and Style

Some reminders about style and form, to be amplified in the second semester of the Senior Seminar.

- The organization of your thesis is the source of its comprehensibility. Begin by telling the reader exactly what your thesis is about (see above; focal questions and prospective answers), and why the topic you have chosen merits attention. Provide the reader a conceptual map of what will follow; describe how you will proceed. And then provide signposts that make it clear where the reader is in the overall structure of your argument as you proceed. Use headings to distinguish subsections or divide your thesis into chapters; identify the focus, content, or argument to be presented at the beginning of each section and sum up your findings at the end.
- Style is not superfluous to content. Make sure that every word and clause serves a purpose and says precisely what you mean. When you lapse into run-on sentences or rely on vague phrasing and elaborate circumlocutions, very likely the problem is not just stylistic. Awkward writing may indicate that you are unclear about the point you are making, or that it does not fit well into the flow of your argument; you may need to do some more thinking on the matter. Close editing should be an integral part of the writing process; not an afterthought. Be sure get a copy of *The Elements of Style* (Strunk and White) and/or *Rules for Writers* (van Goor and Hacker); read these carefully early in the year, even if you have already used them as style guides. The sooner you have these stylistic matters clearly in focus, the smoother the editorial process will be. It goes without saying that sexist language has no place here.
- Quote sparingly, but be sure to credit any author on whose work you rely. Quotations are not a substitute for your own discussion; use them only when you intend to discuss them as the focus of an argument, to illustrate an important point, or, rarely, when an author makes a key point with such clarity and elegance no phrasing could be better. Similarly, do not treat visual illustrations as mere decoration. They should appear in your thesis only when you discuss them directly and they contribute substantively to your argument or analysis.
- Citation practice, bibliographic form, and conventions for using endnotes and footnotes vary from discipline to discipline. You should choose whatever usage is conventional in the primary field in which

your project is situated. You must, however, follow the conventions you choose correctly and consistently. The *Chicago Manual of Style* is an invaluable resource if you find you are confused about the requirements of any particular citation, note, or reference style.

Thesis Writing: The Process

Drafts and Revisions

- *First chapter:* you are required to draft one chapter, or one substantial segment, of your thesis by the end of the first semester. It should be no less than 20 pages and should be accompanied by a bibliography of no less than 2 pages. You will almost certainly want to rewrite this chapter when you have completed a full draft of your thesis, but it is crucially important to begin writing early in the research process, in the first semester. This will be invaluable in giving you a realistic sense of what your thesis project involves, and in providing the course directors and your individual advisor a solid basis for assessing your overall project and for giving you useful advice in later stages of the project.
- *First full draft:* the first draft of your thesis must be completed mid-way through the second semester (by late February). This draft not need include a full bibliography or complete footnotes, and some sections may be incomplete, indicating where work still needs to be finished. But it must incorporate all components of the final thesis and provide a clear sense of the overall structure and line of argument of your thesis. This is essential if your individual advisor and the course director are to assist you in identifying substantive gaps or problems that still need work, and in deciding how best to revise the manuscript to achieve the tone and style appropriate to your project.
- *Second draft:* this draft must be completed by late March. All aspects of your argument should be fully developed and all the relevant evidence should be incorporated in this draft. It should also include footnotes or endnotes and a complete bibliography. At this stage your individual advisor and the course director will help ensure that you have documented your sources appropriately and provide you guidance for a final round of close editing; the aim now is to tighten and polish your manuscript so that it reads smoothly and presents the fruits of your research in the most effective way possible.
- *Final draft:* the final draft of your thesis should incorporate all corrections of substantive error identified in review of previous drafts, as well as all recommendations for refinements of form and style.

Submission Copy

- The final version of your thesis should be submitted in two copies. One copy will be returned to you with the written comments of your advisor. The course director will give you a separate set of comments and submit the second copy to the Barnard Center for Research on Women where it will become a permanent part of the collection of Women's Studies theses.

Final Presentation

- A program of final thesis presentations will be scheduled at the end of the semester. The senior seminar group as a whole will decide how you should to present your material and the course directors will implement your plan. Various formats have been used in the past. If the seminar group is not too large, each of you may be able to give a 5-10 minute presentation on your work. Alternatively, you might each identify yourself and your topic briefly, and then divide into smaller groups to discuss your projects in more depth with a subset of the audience; the audience can then shift to a new group after thirty minutes to discuss another set of theses. If there are interesting convergences among your projects you might consider some form of collective presentation or, alternatively, a poster session format that allows open circulation discussion with the audience.
- Whatever format you decide on, the purpose of these presentations is to show what you have done through the year. They give fellow students, friends, family, faculty, and prospective Women's Studies majors an opportunity to discuss your thesis work, and they give all of us a chance to celebrate your year-long effort and your graduation.
- The Women's Studies Department organizes a reception following your presentations and provides drinks and hors d'oeuvres (following your suggestions and preferences).

Final Grades in the Senior Seminar

Your final grade will be assessed conjointly by the course directors and your individual advisor. Although your Fall transcript will show a 'Y', in December you will be given a letter grade for the work you have done in the first semester; that grade will count for one third of the final grade assigned for the seminar at the end of the year.

- *First semester:* the grade assigned in December will depend on satisfactory progress in your own thesis research as well as on active and effective participation in seminar group discussions about the work of other students in the class. Progress on your thesis project will be assessed on the basis of the written assignments you submit through the semester (project proposals; first draft of a chapter or segment of your thesis), as well as on-going discussion in tutorial sessions with your individual advisor and the course director. You will receive a failing grade for the fall semester if you do not complete the specified assignments.
- *Second semester:* two-thirds of your final grade will be based on an assessment of your final thesis and oral presentation, and will include a consideration of process as well as product (i.e., your participation in tutorials and the seminar group through the second semester). You must complete your thesis and hand it in on the due date in order to graduate.