

# Soc538: Doing Qualitative Research

Tuesdays from 3:30 to 5:20

(Draft syllabus)



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## Course Description

This course takes a hands-on approach to learning qualitative sociological research. Students will fine-tune and implement a small project during the quarter; this will be supported by a series of assignments submitted and peer-reviewed weekly before class. A final paper on the research findings will be due during finals period.

The focus of this class is on how we move the big questions of design into the nitty-gritty details of implementation. Students should select a field site before the course begins. Students already in the field are welcome to join. Because researchers already in the field will have already completed many of these steps, they will also be expected to work collaboratively on creating a writing a guide to qualitative research for UW graduate students. This will be in addition to submitting assignments, participating in peer reviews, and submitting a revised version of their study for the final paper.

Peer review is a core part of the course. Students will complete weekly assignments to be read by myself and other students. Class members are also expected to provide high quality, productive, and timely feedback on each other's work. Meetings will be run as a seminar, with the bulk of time spent discussing weekly assignments. Because expectations for research, writing, and peer-reviews are heavy in this course, the total amount of required reading will be light.

While the seminar has been designed to support graduate students doing interviews and participant observation, modifications can be made for students using other methods (comparative-historical work, archival research, focus groups, etc.). In such cases, students should contact me immediately so that we can discuss options.

In order to pull off even a small, pilot projects in a short ten weeks we must hit the ground running. **For that reason, enrolled students must complete memo 1 and post it on Canvas 1 week *before* the first meeting of class.**

## Course Requirements

### WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS: 40%

- Assignments are due on Canvas by 8pm on the SUNDAY before class.

### PEER EVALUATIONS AND CLASS PARTICIPATION: 30%

- Comments from peers are due by midnight the evening before class.

### FINAL PAPER: 30%

- A 15-25 page research paper due during finals week.
- Students who have already gathered data in the field will, in addition to submitting a final paper, work together to develop a guide on the basics of doing qualitative research. This will serve as a resource for future grad students who want to begin qualitative research during quarters when a class like this is not offered. I will provide more information about this in class.

### COURSE MATERIALS AND WEBSITE

You can access the course Canvas page through your myuw portal. Journal articles are available through Jstor.org. You will need to acquire the following books:

- Luker, Kristen. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Weiss, Robert Stuart. 1994. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press.

I highly recommend buying the following books for your own library:

- Becker, Howard. "Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing it." *Chicago guides to writing, editing, and publishing*, 1998.
- Strunk, William, and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 50th Anniversary ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2009.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### Week 1: Introduction

Assignment 1: Your Project

### Week 2: Site Selection & Beginning Fieldwork

Assignment 2: Your Data

- Luker, *Salsa Dancing in the Social Sciences* “4. What Is This a Case of, Anyway?”
- Weiss, *Learning from Strangers*, Introduction
- Goffman, Erving. (1989). “On Fieldwork.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18(2), 123-132.

### Week 3: Talking with People

Assignment 3: Talking with People

- Weiss *Learning from Strangers* – “Chapter 2: Respondents: Choosing them and recruiting them”
- Luker, *Salsa Dancing in the Social Sciences* “6. On Sampling, Operationalization, and Generalization” and “7. Getting Down to the Nitty-Gritty”
- Also recommended: Luker, *Salsa Dancing in the Social Sciences* “8. Field (and Other) Methods”

### Week 4: In the Field

Assignment 4: Interview Schedule/Research Plan

- Weiss *Learning from Strangers* – “Chapter 3: Preparation for Interviewing” and “Chapter 4: Interviewing”

### Week 5: IRB & Ethics

Assignment 5: Human Subjects

- Weiss *Learning from Strangers* – “5. Issues in Interviewing”
- McClelland, Sara I. forthcoming. “Vulnerable Listening: Possibilities and Challenges of Doing Qualitative Research.” *Qualitative Psychology*.

### Week 6: The Data

Assignment 6: Findings

- Readings: Bring in (and post to Canvas) an **inspiration piece**. This should be an article or an appendix that contains a useful discussion of *a method that you are using*. Students will present these in class, explaining why they selected this example, and discussing the presentation of the data and methods: Who did the author cite to motivate and justify the design? How much detail was included? How were charts or graphics used? What about relevant appendices? Etc.

### **Week 7: Analysis**

Assignment 7: Coding

- Weiss “6. Analysis of Data”
- Luker, “10. Data Reduction and Analysis”

### **Week 8: Writing it up**

Assignment 8: Research Memo

Readings:

- Lamont’s *Bird by Bird* “Shitty First Drafts”
- Cheryl Strayed. “Dear Sugar, The Rumpus Advice Column #48”
- Weiss “7. Writing the Report”
- Karen Kelsky “Dr. Karen’s Foolproof Grant Template.”  
<http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/>

### **Week 9: The Research Guide**

Sections of the research guide will be presented and discussed.

### **Week 10: Presentations**

We will wrap-up with student presentations.

## Assignment Prompts

All of your assignments should be written in simple, jargon-free language that a senior in high school could understand. If you must use a specialized term, define it. Assignments 1-3 are adapted from Claude S. Fischer's syllabus for his soc285 course. Assignments 4-7 are inspired by Raka Ray's course on interview methods.

### ASSIGNMENT 1: Your Project

- 1) **Research Question.** Write your research question using simple language that an average American high school student could understand. 25 words or less.
- 2) **So what?** In 50 words or less, explain why sociologists should care about this.
- 3) **Derivative Questions.** List up to three subsidiary questions that emerge from the general question. In order of importance, 25 words or less.
- 4) **Identify the gap in the literature that you will fill.** Explain what we do not yet know, and why your research is needed. Maximum: 100 words.
- 5) **What Argument Do You Anticipate Making Regarding the Question?** Explain two or three possible answers for your questions. If you have a working theory about what you will find, state it here. Maximum 100 words.

### ASSIGNMENT 2: Your Data

*STEP 1: Rewrite your answers to the questions above in view of feedback*

*STEP 2: Add the following questions*

- 6) **What data would allow you to answer those questions?** Be specific here about what kind of information you would need, and how that information precisely answers your question. (For example, if you want to know how gender roles change for wives of men who have immigrated from Nepal, you would need to know what women did inside their homes before their husbands left, and what sort of jobs and chores they did after their husbands left, so that you can gauge the nature and extent of changes at home.)
- 7) **How will you gather this data?** Here you should explain all of the data you plan to gather, taking care to show how your observations provide answers to your questions. Be as specific and detailed as possible about your plans. For example, if you are doing interviews, explain who you will sample, how you will contact them, what kinds of questions you will ask, etc. Maximum: 500 words.
- 8) **How will you analyze this data?** In addition to explaining your plans for data analysis, be specific about how these analyses will answer your research question. Continue to use simple language and avoid jargon. 500 words max.
- 9) **What are you worried about?** Chances are some part of this process is freaking you out to the point that it is slowing down your progress. Write down your concerns here so we can all help address and/or troubleshoot them. Maximum: 100 words.

### ASSIGNMENT 3: Talking With People

*STEP 1: Revise your answers to questions 1-8*

*STEP 2: Add the following questions*

- 10) **What are your criteria subject/site selection?** Be specific. If you are interviewing, how many people will you interview? How will you select and recruit them? If you are doing PO, how will you select among possible sites? Where will exactly you go? What days of the week? What times of day? How long will you stay? How will you interact with people when you are there?
- 11) **How will you recruit your subjects or enter your site?** If you will be using a flyer or recruitment letter, include it.
- 12) **What are the strengths and limitations of this approach?** What can this approach allow you to understand? What kinds of relationships or conclusions will you be unable to observe or analyze?

### ASSIGNMENT 4: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE/RESEARCH PLAN

If you are doing an interview project, bring in a draft of your interview schedule. If you are using another method, create a 1 or 2-page research plan that covers the pragmatic and procedural details of your research.

- For PO: when and how will you take field notes? What are you looking for in your field site? How will you introduce yourself, and to whom? If you are anonymizing your data, how will you execute that? Will you use paper and pencil or a computer? Etc.
- If you are using another method, adjust this accordingly. For example, if you are going to the archive: What finding aides are available? What files do you intend to pull? How will you track your data and record notes when you are there? When and how will you contact the archivist? Will you take pictures or scan? How will you store, name, and upload your documents? How will you back up the data? Etc.

### ASSIGNMENT 5: Human Subjects – Fill out the UW IRB form

### ASSIGNMENT 6: Early Findings

Submit a 5-page sample from field notes or a transcribed interview.

### ASSIGNMENT 7: Coding

Submit a coding book and a 3-page sample from a transcribed interview. If you are using field notes, turn in a 2 to 3-page reflection on something you have observed.

### ASSIGNMENT 8: Writing

This should be a short (5 pages or so) overview of major themes and findings from your research so far.

### ASSIGNMENT 9: The Guide

Students working on the booklet will submit their drafts for comment and review.