

How to succeed in this course

1. Take initiative and ask questions—if not in class then by email or appointment. I cannot read your minds. You are a diverse class with very different experiences, backgrounds, and opinions. Things that some say are helpful, easy, difficult, etc. are not the same for others. I cannot help you if I don't know what you're having trouble with.

2. Read the syllabus carefully to understand the point of the course. Ask for clarifications if you need, otherwise I will assume you have understood it all.

3. Expect that this course will be challenging and not easy. I warned you about this on Day 1. That this is an “introductory” course does not mean no-brainer / low-effort. (If that’s what you continue to expect, then you still have a chance to get out now).

How is this an introductory course?

(a) This course is introductory in the sense of introducing you to new ways of thinking about and studying the world, understanding yourself, and working with people around you. It is about educating you, broadly speaking, rather than about cramming and regurgitating materials on exams. Advanced courses would be unable to do this, being restricted by the need to master specialized content.

(b) Your research project is introductory in the sense that it requires very basic research (10 hours is hardly sufficient for serious participant observation), and little engagement with theoretical debates.

(c) There are only a small number of theories and theorists covered in this course, and we’re not covering them in great depth either. Still, it takes a lot of work just to wrap your heads around these basic ideas. It’s introductory in that sense.

With all this work, believe me, you are just getting your feet wet. Sociology is a difficult subject and this course aims to give you a basic but solid grasp of a subset of key sociological ideas and methods that are especially relevant to the study of social problems.

4. If you find the course is not “fun,” I am not going to apologize. It’s not supposed to be. Why would anyone expect a course on “social problems” to be “fun”? It’s meant to chafe, it’s meant to challenge, it’s meant to be uncomfortable. If you’re not bothered and disturbed by what you are learning, then the course is failing. It is meant to confront you with difficult questions about the social world that have no easy answers. The sooner you accept that this is what the course is about, the better you will be able to tackle the challenges it poses.

5. Take it seriously and put in solid, consistent effort, and you will do well. Conversely, if you exhibit disregard for the approach and what the course is trying to achieve, you likely won't do well.

6. The high reading volume is intentional. You need to put in a good 2 hrs per class (before class) for readings. Class discussions won't make sense without the readings—as I’ve warned you on the syllabus. How to read for this course:

- Start first by skimming, then re-read. Aim to figure out main points, then evidence that illustrates them. Take notes, highlight, underline, etc. Flag difficulties and questions. Communicate your questions to me before and after class.

- Lectures and discussion in class will cover the main arguments. If the main points are still not clear to you after this, ask!

- This is not Shakespeare; you aren’t supposed to meditate on each word, but instead, grasp the central ideas and arguments. I'm not going to cover or test you on intricate details or trivia. Try to cover as much as you can in the allotted time but don’t expect to master it all in great detail. You’ll

need to learn to discern what parts of the text are more relevant or important to the central arguments the authors are making. The more regularly you do the work, and the more you pay attention in class, the better you will become at this.

- A lot in the readings is repetitive. Key concepts and ideas recur within and across readings. You won't be able to sense this unless you actually do the work.

7. Do not expect mastery on the first attempt (at anything in life!) This method and these kinds of readings are new to most of you, so will take time getting used to. Those who do the work regularly will undoubtedly get better at digesting complicated texts faster. Those who don't do this and instead try to binge before exams and assignments will struggle and likely not do well.

8. Group work: Is central to the aims of this course. If we don't learn to work better with each other in spaces where we can be intentional about the process and can learn from mistakes, it is going to be much tougher later.

- The point now is to try learn from it all. Regularly ask: What's going wrong and why? How can we work better together? How can I do something differently to help? What could be done differently in the future? How can we produce something better as a group than we would individually?

- Your group can totally fail and you still can get full points on your group project, if you demonstrate that you've understood what went wrong, and if you've made all efforts to use resources at hand (communicate with each other, talk to me, use group-work resources that I made available to you). If you don't take the work seriously and don't make the effort, you cannot do well.

9. Exams: should not be your #1 priority in this class. They are worth only 30% of your grade!

- I will tell you beforehand what readings to focus on for the exam.

- Nothing outside of what we covered in class lectures and discussion will appear on exams. If you were in class, attentive to lectures, participated in discussion, read the slides, clarified doubts → no surprises.

- But, if you didn't do the readings regularly, you will neither understand what I cover in class nor be able to do well on the exam.

10. Many of you will find that this course is intentionally designed to run up against a lot of your basic training. It is against an individualistic and consumerist approach to learning.

- It is meant to make you depend on other people *while* putting in your personal best. It's meant to get you to confront and admit your weaknesses *while* learning through this process. It's meant to get you to deal with the uncertainty and ambiguity of the outside world *while* doing your best at planning, initiative, and being responsible. It's meant to get you to focus on making contributions that can benefit others, rather than focusing simply on getting ahead.

- If you focus on the broader goals of the course, you can certainly earn a high grade, but you will also have learned something more valuable in the process.

- I understand that this is especially difficult because—here is where sociology comes in—you are located in an institutional context that tends to predominantly reward learning in individual competitive isolation, the consumption of knowledge for instrumental ends (i.e., as primarily a means to get a grade and a piece of paper and a job), the disconnection of theory from practice, and the perception of classrooms as primarily entertainment venues. So this course for some of you will mean a serious reorientation and de-programming of your normal script. It is intentional. It is an introduction to something new.

I invite you to again to take on the challenge.