

Tips for Working on Senior Projects

What does it even mean to “work on SPROJ?” Countless Bardians have written this into their weekly to-do lists, but it can be difficult to turn this massive task into **manageable action**. In this handout, I’ll provide you with some tips for **building your own structure and toolbox** for completing your first major independent project in your academic career.

1. **Make a plan.** The first step in any project is to create a plan for you to follow. If you have no idea where to begin, most departments have Senior Project guides on their respective pages on Bard’s website. Be sure to find these or ask your advisors for assistance. These guides should provide you with a clearer idea of the deadlines that your department expects you to follow in order to work smoothly. From here, you can start the multi-step process of creating a game plan for the year of work ahead of you.
 - a. **First off, break your senior project into parts.** What do you actually have to *do* to finish this project? Start with major parts before you break them down into smaller tasks. For example, these parts might look like writing, interviewing, coding, analyzing data, reading articles, sketching, creating graphs, etc. Identify all of the major components of your project.
 - b. **Next, break down these major components into tasks.** Let’s say that you’ve figured out your SPROJ involves writing, researching, interviewing, and interpreting data. Identify the smaller components of these tasks by asking yourself, “What do I need to write? Who do I need to interview? What do I need to research?” By this point, you should have a list of tasks like create a research question, reach out to interviewees, outline your chapters, etc.
 - c. **Pull out your (digital) calendar and plan out your next year of work.** This will involve ordering these tasks based on what makes the most sense. You can’t analyze data until after you’ve started collecting it, for example. You can even **work backwards from the due date** to estimate what tasks you will be working on week by week.

2. **Meet with your advisor(s).** You are assigned a senior project advisor (or two, in the case of joint and double majors) because they are here to help and guide you. **Set up regular meetings with them, perhaps weekly or biweekly.** These meetings can serve as accountability check-ins, where you are guaranteed a person who will chat with you about your project.
 - a. **Ask them questions.** Bring questions about your SPROJ, both process and content-related questions. Take time before these meetings to generate

questions. Think about what you're struggling with. This might be a theory you're confused about or how to structure your literature review or what to make of a certain piece of data. Identify these things before you meet, write them down, and ask your advisor during your meeting.

- b. Bring samples of writing to talk through.** Send long passages in advance of the meeting, but you can also bring a paragraph or two that you're struggling with or want feedback on. Advisors can help you with editing your writing, developing your academic voice, and making sure that your structure reads well and makes sense.
 - c. Ask for research help or recommendations.** Your advisor is knowledgeable about their field, and likely knows a little about your research topic, too. Ask if they have article or book recommendations that might apply to your research. **Especially ask this in the early stages of your project, such as in the summer after your junior year.** Depending on your project, you likely want to read as much as possible before getting started on the bulk of your writing, and your advisor will definitely have suggestions.
- 3. Create community/study groups.** SPROJ is something that everybody has to do, but it ends up being a very lonely process unless you work to make sure it isn't. Book a room in the library or set up a study room in your dorm where you can meet with fellow seniors from the same discipline as you and beyond. In fact, chatting with seniors outside of your discipline is an excellent way to discover new concepts or angles you hadn't yet considered for your own SPROJ. Study groups are helpful for getting work done, thinking through ideas, and having some friends to chat with.
- 4. Keep track of your sources.** I cannot stress this point enough. As you are doing research for your SPROJ, keep a running digital document of the things you're reading. Regardless of whether you'll use the text in your SPROJ or not, it's much easier to just keep those things in order so you don't have to go searching for it again later.
 - a. Do the citations in advance.** As you are keeping track of titles and page numbers, you might as well complete the citation. Figure out what citation system you will be using – MLA, Chicago, etc. – and use Purdue Owl or another online resource to help you format your citations. For more citation help, visit the Stevenson Library and speak with a librarian.

- b. Identify key terms or page numbers with useful quotes.** To make your digital document easier to navigate, you can separate sources by key terms, concepts, or whether or not they have useful quotes. Maybe you'll have a section dedicated to historical sources or a section of sources for your methods section (how to do interviews, what an ethnography is, stuff like that). Or, you can write things like "systems theory" or "definition of nationalism" next to a citation, so that you can Ctrl-F and search for it later.

- 5. Meet with a senior project tutor.** The Learning Commons trains Bard students in collaborative, peer-to-peer, non-prescriptive tutoring. Our Learning Strategies program has tutors that are additionally trained in helping students work on their senior projects. These are one-on-one meetings where seniors can plan out their SPROJ goals into manageable tasks, revise their writing, and talk generally about concept development. Meeting with a SPROJ tutor can help you build confidence in your project, schedule your SPROJ tasks week by week, and provides you with an accountability buddy.
 - a. To set up SPROJ tutoring, email me at LZINN@bard.edu. You can set up SPROJ tutoring at any point during the academic year, though we encourage students to start as early as possible!**