

## How to Come Up With a Senior Project Idea

Ah, the senior project. For many, this will be the capstone achievement from your time at Bard. Much of this stems from the fact that this is **the first completely independent project** you will work on in your academic career! This begs the questions: “Where do I start? How will I ever finish? What could I possibly spend a year writing and thinking about anyway?”

This handout is all about answering these initial questions when your senior year approaches and providing some suggestions for getting the SPROJ ball rolling.

### First off, what is SPROJ?

Senior projects are independent research projects. At many colleges, you can complete an undergraduate senior project in order to receive academic Honors. At Bard, everyone completes an undergraduate senior project, so there is not an “Honors” distinction. Instead, think of it as a Bard distinction, **a uniquely Bard experience**.

Regardless of what major you are, you will be assigned a **Senior Project Advisor**. If you are a joint or double major, you will have two. This advisor may or may not be a professor you know, and they may or may not be outside of your department. The advisor you receive is carefully selected based on availability and your proposed senior project ideas.

Though you have a SPROJ advisor, **the SPROJ is largely an independent project, meaning that you have to do the work, the planning, and the structuring mostly by yourself**. BUT, you have **many resources at your disposal** to help you see this through! These include, but are not limited to, your professors, your advisors, your peers, Bard’s tutors, Bard’s librarians, and even the deans.

Your SPROJ can be in the form of a theatrical play, a sociological study, a scientific research report, a film, literary analysis, or whatever else you set your mind to. Most senior projects have a written component, whether it’s a 40-100 page paper or a short artist’s statement. This written component will eventually be uploaded to Bard’s Digital Commons and put in Bard’s physical archives in the library (and you can decide who can access it).

**Whatever form your SPROJ takes, you will likely have several components that you need to work on and plan out. Interviews, editing, researching, sketching, filming: these skills and tasks may interact and overlap.** You may have experience with some of these skills and none with others. You need to figure out exactly what you will be doing for the next year, what you will be working on to see your SPROJ through to completion.

**Lastly, your SPROJ should not and likely will not be the best academic project you ever work on!** For most of you interested in grad school, there will be bigger and better projects to come. For

now, this project should be something you are interested in, proud of, and something complete. It doesn't need to be particularly groundbreaking or the best thing you ever do! So, let's start exploring how you can settle down on an interesting topic to work on for a year.

## Tips for Generating Senior Project Ideas

- 1. Read! Listen! Observe!** Just start reading as soon as you can. Academic journal articles, books, pieces of creative writing, whatever it might be: reading is a surefire way to start rounding up some concepts that interest you.
  - a. Read things within your SPROJ discipline.** If you are a Computer Science major, reading articles about coding apps will certainly help you to get inspired or envision something plausible to work on. Similarly, if you're a Literature major, you'll want to try reading works of literary analysis to see what your SPROJ might end up looking like. Familiarize yourself with what a project in your discipline typically looks like, so from there, you can use them as a guide or as a way to break the norm.
  - b. Read things from other disciplines.** If you're tired of reading sociological study after sociological study and feel disillusioned, take a rest and try something fresh. Turn to music or biology or whatever else interests you in order to find concepts that are not generally explored in your discipline. Again, you just want to identify things you are interested in before settling on what is legitimately doable.
- 2. Look at the Digital Commons for past senior projects.** The Digital Commons is Bard's archive of past senior projects and independent research. Use this website to explore what Bard alumni have done for their senior projects. Though you absolutely should not use this as an opportunity to plagiarize someone else's work, the Digital Commons is useful for looking at how to structure the written portion of your project, whether or not folks have written about the areas you're interested in, and for brainstorming new ideas.
  - a. Link to Digital Commons:** <https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/>
- 3. Read old essays of yours.** Many of the papers and projects you worked on during your time at Bard are filled with ideas that can be transformed into year-long projects. Spend some time going through your Google Drive or through your Bard Brightspace posts to remind yourself of what you are passionate about or what you still have questions about. Do you find yourself still fascinated by the lifespan of luna moths? Are those burning questions about the legacy of graffiti in NYC still itching your brain? Is your love for Ocean Vuong's poetry the reason you're a Written Arts major? Maybe revisiting those passions, those long lasting interests, will really help get the SPROJ juices flowing.
- 4. Talk to professors.** Needless to say, your professors are here to help and guide you. Visit them during their office hours, send them an email, or schedule a meeting after class. Tell them that you're trying to decide what to write about for your SPROJ, and talk in-depth

about any ideas (or fragments of ideas) that you are considering. They will likely recommend articles or books for you to read – especially if you meet with them earlier in your SPROJ year when you have more time – and these will help point you in whatever the right direction might be.

5. **Talk to fellow seniors or previous seniors.** What are your friends working on for SPROJ? Ask them how they came to this decision. Do the same for previous seniors, if you have opportunities to chat with them. *Everybody* at Bard has gone through this period of settling on a SPROJ concept, so get chatting with them! They may have suggestions for where else to look for ideas or even have ideas to suggest.
  
6. **Free-write about your interests.** And, if all else fails, it's time to do an old-fashioned freewrite. Go somewhere relaxing and comfortable – library, dorm room, sensory-deprivation tank – whatever you like. Grab your preferred writing implement (digital or analog). Set a timer if you'd like, and start letting out all your worries and thoughts about SPROJ, about your academic career, about what interests you, about existential questions you have, whatever it may be. The idea is that you should make this mess of ideas and fragmentary ideas tangible in writing. Once you feel you have spent enough time and energy expelling your thoughts, go back through what you wrote. Underline what interests you, either concepts or even phrases that stick out to you. By the end of this activity, you should have a list of general SPROJ topics.
  - a. **Pros and Cons.** Once you have a SPROJ topic list, make a new list that identifies the pros and cons of each topic you have listed. Maybe one topic is too broad; maybe another topic isn't truly something you want to spend a whole year on. Maybe one topic is the reason you came to Bard; maybe another is something that relates to your personal identity. Make these pros and cons clear by writing them out, so that you can go through them again.
  - b. **Narrow down the list to two or three things.** Once you have a more manageable list of ideas, you can dive deeper and start developing them. If you're really interested in doing something about artificial intelligence, think about how you can do this as a philosophy major. What questions do you want to answer or concepts do you want to explore? If you're also interested in the phenomenology of queer identity, think about what questions and experiences you're particularly drawn towards. If you're able to develop one of the projects on your list more than the others, then maybe this is your SPROJ!
  - c. **Use these above steps: identifying interests, assessing their pros and cons, and developing more specific research questions/ideas.**

For more questions, tips, and resources, contact Liv Zinn at [lzinn@bard.edu](mailto:lzinn@bard.edu) or [blc@bard.edu](mailto:blc@bard.edu).