

SOCIOLOGY 496: Sociology of Companion Animals Spring 2025

Instructor: Jason Nolen

Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursdays 1:00PM–2:15PM
Classroom: Science Hall 180

Office: Sewell Social Sciences 7109

Office Hours: Thursdays and Fridays *by appointment* at:
<https://doodle.com/bp/jasonnolen/jason-nolen-office-hours>
Email: janolen@wisc.edu

Overview

This course will apply a sociological lens to the role of companion (and other) animals in human society. During the semester we will analyze the historical, cultural, and social implications of human-animal relationships and how they shape behaviors, values, and social norms. The course will touch on themes such as the commodification of pets, animal welfare, the role of pets in the home and family, and the impact of companion animals on mental health. This class will be a fun, interesting opportunity to apply sociological theories and concepts to an important – though often overlooked – aspect of our social world... and, on occasion, there will be companion animals visiting the classroom!

Course Readings

You will not be required to purchase any books for this course. All course readings will be available for download on the course's Canvas page, which you can access through MyUW.

I reserve the right to adjust reading assignments—with proper notice, of course.

Grading

Your overall grade for this class will be calculated on a 100-point scale as follows:

Three exams (25% each)	75%
Four writing assignments (5% each)	20%
Attendance:	5%
Total:	100%
Participation bonus:	up to 3%

The grading scale for the course is as follows:

A:	93–100
AB:	89–92.99
B:	84–88.99
BC	78–83.99
C:	70–77.99
D:	60–69.99
F:	below 60

Lecture Attendance

Lecture attendance is mandatory and will count for 5% of your overall grade in the course. You will be allowed one free absence, no questions asked, without penalty. Every unexcused absence after that will result in your attendance score being reduced by 1 point (e.g., if you miss two lecture meetings, your overall attendance score will be 4%; if you miss 6 lectures, your attendance score will be 0%).

Of course, life happens, and sometimes unexpected issues will arise – just make sure you let me know as soon as possible. *If you are feeling sick, please do not come to class.* As long as you let me know before class and you have a legitimate excuse, you will not be penalized and your attendance score will not be effected.

PLEASE DO NOT ARRIVE LATE OR LEAVE EARLY.

Exams

Three closed-book exams will take place during class time on **Tuesday, February 18, Tuesday, March 18, and Thursday, May 1**. Each exam will be non-cumulative and consist of a combination of multiple-choice, true/false, and fill in the blank questions. About half the questions will be about lecture material and half will be about the readings/listening assignments.

Writing Assignments

You will be given five short writing assignment prompts, and you will be required to complete four of them. You have the option to complete all five assignments, in which case your lowest score will be dropped. More details about each writing assignment will be provided throughout the semester.

Participation

Most, but not all, class meetings will include structured group discussion. You are highly encouraged to contribute to these discussions, and as an incentive I will add up to 3% to the final overall course score for those students who consistently participate in meaningful, productive ways that move the conversation forward.

Office Hours

My office hours are Thursdays 2:30 to 4PM and Fridays 1 to 2:30PM, *by appointment*. Meeting times must be reserved at least 24 hours in advance. Use this link to reserve a time to meet with me:

<https://doodle.com/bp/jasonnolen/jason-nolen-office-hours>

If you'd like to meet with me and my designated office hours don't fit your schedule, please talk to me after class or send me an email and we can arrange another time to meet.

Email

My email address is janolen@wisc.edu (please do not attempt to communicate with me through Canvas). I will try to respond to messages promptly, but you should always allow 24 hours (up to 48 on weekends) for my replies. Therefore, do not wait till the last minute with a pressing question or an important concern! Emails should be limited to questions of clarification that can be answered in a sentence or two. For anything requiring a detailed response or a back-and-forth dialogue, please schedule a time to meet with me in person.

Electronics

I do not allow audio or video recording of lectures without my permission. Under no circumstances can students post audio or video recordings on the Internet.

Laptops and tablets will be permitted for taking notes during lecture. However, *I reserve the right to prohibit their use at any time during the semester if they become a distraction*. Do not use cell phones, laptops, or tablets for non-course-related activity – it's distracting to your classmates and to me.

Academic Misconduct

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. It will be detected and detested. It is truly not worth it. Ignorance of the rules is NOT an excuse.

All work that you submit must be your own and must have been done for this class. This means no recycling of old papers or projects (yours or anyone else's) and absolutely no plagiarism. This means no buying papers online, no cutting and pasting chunks of text from other sources and presenting it as your own writing, and no paraphrasing and presenting it as your own ideas. All work will be submitted in electronic form and checked against plagiarism detection software.

All incidences of plagiarism and academic dishonesty will be reported to the Chair of the Sociology Department as well as the Office of the Dean of Students, and you will receive a failing grade for the course. I expect you to acquaint yourself with the University's policy on academic misconduct, found here:

<https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>

If you have questions as to what constitutes plagiarism, the Writing Center has numerous resources and tutorials online on their website

<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/quoting-sources/>

All writing assignments will be run through Turnitin.com to check for originality.

Accommodations

Students who require accommodations for in-class exams (or any other assignments or course-related activities) due to disabilities, religious observances, or sports-team events need to let me know about them as early as possible, preferably before the end of the second full week of the semester.

Student Resources

University Health Services (UHS) Mental Health Services: To obtain assistance for personal, social, career, and/or study skills problems, please contact the counseling center at University Health Services: 333 East Campus Mall, 7th Floor. (608) 265-5600 (option 2). For 24/7 crisis support, call (608) 265-5600 and select option 9.

Website: <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health>

UHS Medical Services: For health issues ranging from the flu to sexual health testing, UHS offers health services for many student needs. They are located on the 5th and 6th floors of 333 East Campus Mall. You can contact them by calling (608) 265-5600 (select option 1).

Website: www.uhs.wisc.edu/medical

UHS Violence Prevention: Violence can affect university students before they reach campus and throughout their time at college. UHS Violence Prevention services exist to prevent violence as well as to support survivors of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking. Please contact them to learn more about their services or to make an appointment.

Location: 8th Floor of 333 East Campus Mall

Website: www.uhs.wisc.edu/prevention/violence-prevention/about-us/

The Writing Center: It is always useful to develop your academic writing skills as early as possible. The UW Writing Center provides you with a diverse range of resources to help you write as a scholar and with style.

Location: 6171 Helen C. White Hall

Website: writing.wisc.edu

Departmental learning objectives

Beyond the specific substantive content this course covers, I have designed it to achieve the following instructional objectives designated as priorities by the Department of Sociology:

- *Critically think about society and social processes.* Students taking sociology courses can look beyond the surface of issues to discover the “why” and “how” of social order and structure and consider the underlying social mechanisms that may be creating a situation, identify evidence that may adjudicate between alternate explanations for phenomena, and develop proposed policies or action plans in light of theory and data.
- *Conduct research and analyze data (quantitative or qualitative).* Although professional-quality research requires graduate-level training, we expect that all undergraduate students taking sociology courses will be able to conduct small-scale research in which they formulate a research question, collect data, analyze results, and draw conclusions.
- *Critically evaluate published research.* Students in sociology classes will be able to read and evaluate published research.
- *Communicate skillfully.* In sociology classes students write papers and make oral presentations that build arguments and assess evidence in a clear and effective manner.
- *See things from a global and historical perspective.* Sociologists learn about different cultures, groups, and societies across both time and place. They are aware of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences across space and time. They understand the ways events and processes in one place and time are linked to those happening in other places and times.

Schedule of Topics and Assigned Readings

WEEK 1

January 21: Introduction to the course

- No assigned reading

January 23: A brief introduction to sociology

- Mills (1959), “The Promise of Sociology”

WEEK 2

January 28: Animals in Sociology and Philosophy – an historical overview

- Alger and Alger (2003), “Drawing the Line between Humans and Animals: An Examination of Introductory Sociology Textbooks”

January 30: Animal Behavior viewed through a sociological lens

- Arizona State University (2024), “Evolutionary Anthropologist Presents Hypothesis about Why Humans are Dominating the World Over Other Animals”
- Keim (2024), “Landscapes of the Heart”

WEEK 3

February 4: Human-animal studies (HAS) and anthrozoology

- Herzog (2021), “Antrozology: The New Science of Human-Animal Interactions”
- Wilkie (2015), “Multispecies Scholarship and Encounters: Changing Assumptions at the Human-Animal Nexus”

February 6: The history of companion animals in human society

- Grier (2006), “A Natural History of Pets”

WEEK 4

February 11: The social construction of companion animals

- Jerolmack (2013), “Experiencing the City through the Quintessential Urban Bird”
- Irvine (2004), “From Pets to Companion Animals”

February 13: The animal-human bond

- Blouin (2012), “Understanding Relations between People and their Pets”

WEEK 5

February 18: **Exam 1 (during lecture)**

- No assigned reading

February 20: Companion animals in the home/family

- Mueller et al. (2024), “Understanding and Optimizing Human-Animal Interactions in the Family Setting”

WEEK 6

February 25: *Inside the Mind of a Dog* viewing

- No assigned reading

February 27: Guest speakers Jen Mallon and Kim Flom from Ruff Trails Hikes (with special guests Lola, Cashew, and Saturn!)

- Lowrey (2020), “The Dog Park is Bad, Actually”
- Bekoff (2020), “Let Your Dog Tell You If They Want to Go to a Dog Park: Why an Essay Called ‘The Dog Park Is Bad, Actually’ Misleads Readers”

WEEK 7

March 4: Animal Shelters

- Zawistowski (2008), “Animal Shelters and Rescues”

March 6: Guest speaker Amy Good from Dane County Humane Society (with special guest Jinx!)

- No assigned reading

WEEK 8

March 11: Zoos

- Grazian (2015), “Animal Farm: Making Meaning at the Zoo”
- Lin (2024), “Are Zoos Ethical? Arguments for and Against Keeping Animals in Zoos”

March 13: Guest speaker MacKenzie Pellin from UW-Madison Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital (with special guest Archer!)

- Chan (2019), “Veterinarians Face Unique Issues That Make Suicide One of the Professions Big Worries”
- Spidel (2023), “Why Suicide Rates are High Among Veterinary Professionals”

WEEK 9

March 18: Exam 2 (during lecture)

- No assigned reading

March 20: *Kedi* viewing

- No assigned reading

*****Spring Break*****

WEEK 10

April 1: Companion animals and social capital

- Mueller (2022), “How the Presence of Pets Builds Trust Among People”
- Vincent (2021), “Dog Parks as an Institutional Resource for Social Capital in the Urban Neighborhood”

April 3: Companion animals’ impact on human health and happiness

- Carr et al. (2021), “Dog Walking and the Social Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Loneliness in Older Adults”
- Mueller et al. (2024) “Longitudinal Associations between Pet Relationship Quality and Socio-emotional Functioning in Early Adolescence”

WEEK 11

April 8: Guest speaker Todd Trampe from Dogs on Call (with special guest Millie!)

- No assigned reading

April 10: Veganism and animal welfare

- Cherry (2015), “I Was a Teenage Vegan: Motivation and Maintenance of Lifestyle Movements”
- Grandin (2009), “What do Animals Need to Have Good Welfare?”

WEEK 12

April 15: Veganism and animal welfare panel, featuring Mollie Stolbov and Sara Andrews from Vegan Fest and Quincy Markowitz from Farm Bird Sanctuary

- Cherry (2006), “Veganism as a Cultural Movement: A Relational Approach”

April 17: Gender and non-human animals

- Herzog (2021), “‘Prom Queen Kills First Deer on Sixteenth Birthday’: Gender and the Human-Animal Relationship”
- Adams (1990), “The Sexual Politics of Meat”

WEEK 13

April 22: Animals and the law

- Boyd (2017), “Can a Chimpanzee be a Legal Person?”
- Cepeda Gallo and Taylor (2022), “Carceral Canines: Racial Terror and Animal Abuse from Slave Hounds to Police Dogs”

April 24: Animals in art and popular culture (Chazen Museum visit)

- Merskin (2018), “Re-Presenting Animals in Popular Culture”
- Fine Art Restoration Company (2022), “Cryptic Creatures: The Symbolism of Animals in Art”

WEEK 14

April 29: Animals and social media

- Fry (2024), “The Animals that Made It All Worth It”

May 1: **Exam 3 (during lecture)**

- No assigned reading

I reserve the right to make any changes to the syllabus as deemed necessary over the course of the semester.