

Researcher Guide

Class Projects, Human Subjects Review, and Sona

A single guide for student researchers conducting class projects with human participants.

Use this guide with your approved materials. Your approved Human Subjects application, consent form, debriefing form, and study materials control how your study must be conducted. If anything changes, obtain approval before using the change.

At a glance

- 1. Confirm eligibility:** Make sure the project is solely for a CSUS Psychology course and will remain within the CSUS community.
- 2. Build the application packet:** Prepare procedures, consent and debriefing forms, deception language if needed, and every material participants will see.
- 3. Submit and wait for approval:** Combine materials into one PDF, obtain faculty sponsor approval, submit online, and wait for the review decision.
- 4. Set up Sona:** After approval, enter the study exactly as approved, then add timeslots when you are ready to collect data.
- 5. Run the study professionally:** Use approved procedures, obtain consent, protect privacy, track attendance, and assign credit promptly.

1. Confirm that your class project qualifies

Class projects must meet all the following criteria:

- The sole purpose of the project is to fulfill a requirement for a Psychology Department course in which you are enrolled at CSUS (for example, PSYC 102, 194, 197, or 294).
- The project and its findings will not be disseminated beyond the CSUS campus. Dissemination may occur in CSUS classes, conferences, informal gatherings, websites, or publications.
- The project and its findings will not be made available in a public forum, online or otherwise, and will not contribute to the body of scientific knowledge outside the CSUS campus.

Important scope limit. If you intend to publish, present publicly, share data outside CSUS, or use the project for a purpose beyond the course requirement, contact your instructor and the Human Subjects Committee before proceeding.

2. Prepare the application packet

Submit a complete packet so the reviewer can understand exactly what participants will experience and how you will protect them.

Research procedures

- Describe the proposed procedures in enough detail so that the reviewer knows exactly what participants will be asked to do and how the procedures relate to the research purpose.
- Explain how you will protect participant confidentiality and anonymity.
- Identify any potential risks and explain how you will minimize them.

Participant-facing forms

- Create an informed consent form using the department-approved template.

- Create a debriefing form using the department-approved template.
- If you use deception or false information about an experimental manipulation, include this statement in the consent form: “Although the researcher may need to avoid a complete description of the procedures at this time, I am entitled to a full explanation after the research.”
- For deception, include a clear explanation of what was hidden or misrepresented in the debriefing form.

Research materials

- Include every survey, vignette, image, video, instruction, explanation, or other material participants will see or use. Label each item clearly.
- For photos, provide the source if the image is in the public domain. Otherwise, obtain signed waivers from individuals whose images are used for the class project.
- For videos, provide a viewable URL. If that is not possible, arrange delivery of a CD or DVD to the Human Subjects Committee Chair.

3. Assemble and submit your application

Create one PDF

Combine all research materials into a single PDF document. Use this file-naming convention:

File name: Lastname_Project Title for SONA website

Example: Festinger_Cognitive Dissonance Made Me Like It

Get faculty sponsor approval

- Obtain your faculty sponsor’s approval before submitting the application.
- On the online form, indicate that your sponsor has approved the project. The department will verify approval by email before reviewing the proposal.

Submit online

1. Complete all required questions on the online application.
2. Upload the single PDF containing your application materials.
3. Submit the application for review.

Wait for the decision

You will usually hear back approximately one week after your faculty sponsor confirms approval. The project may be approved or returned for additional information or revisions. Do not begin participant recruitment or data collection until the required approvals are in place.

4. Set up your study in Sona

If you are using the subject pool, set up your project after it has been approved. Enter the title, description, and other project information exactly as shown in the approved application.

Approval controls the study. Do not change the procedures, materials, eligibility criteria, compensation, or other study details after approval without first obtaining approval for the change.

Schedule sessions

- After the Human Subjects Committee approves the study, the Sona Administrator must approve it in Sona and set any applicable timeslot-usage limits.
- When ready, activate the study and use “Add Timeslots” to schedule data-collection sessions.

- The number of sessions you may schedule will be set in accordance with your requested sample size and study duration.
- For shared research rooms AMD 302 and AMD 306, avoid blocking excessive time. During busy periods, limit use to no more than 2–3 hours per day. AMD 303 and AMD 304 may be added if available.

5. Recruit participants appropriately

What you may do

- With prior instructor approval, briefly visit one or more daytime sessions beginning before 5:00 p.m. of PSYC 2, 4, or 8 to describe your project.
- Announce the study on the Sona Psychology Research Website and tell students when your sessions will be held.
- Direct interested students to sign up through Sona.

What you may not do

- Do not pass around a sign-up sheet in class. Sign-ups must be managed through the Sona Research Website.
- Do not distribute surveys or conduct a study during class time when participation is tied to subject-pool credit or extra credit. Participation-for-credit research must be managed through Sona.
- If a survey is administered during class time voluntarily and without research credit, make that clear on the consent form. Students must be able to leave or submit a blank questionnaire without making their refusal public.
- Do not hang signs around the building advertising your study.
- Do not recruit participants who are looking for another researcher's study or wait outside another study to pressure students into participating. These practices are unprofessional and may be unethical. Concerns may be reported to the instructor, faculty advisor, or Human Subjects Committee. Violations may result in failure or deactivation of the project.

6. Conduct the study professionally

Follow the approved plan

- Conduct yourself with professionalism and respect for participants and fellow researchers.
- Conduct procedures exactly as stated in the approved application.
- If you want to change procedures or materials, send the Human Subjects Committee Chair a description of the changes and copies of new materials, then wait for approval before using them.

Practice common courtesy

- Arrive on time, use only your allotted room and time, and do not stay past the scheduled end.
- Attend every session with participants signed up in advance.
- After 6:00 p.m. the evening before a session, participants can no longer sign up or cancel. You do not need to attend a session with no participants signed up.

Obtain informed consent

- Before participation, have each student read the consent form approved with your Human Subjects application.

7. Keep accurate records and assign credit

Attendance and privacy

- For Psychology students, have participants provide their 5-digit Sona ID code.
- Keep a sign-in sheet throughout the semester to help resolve later credit questions.
- Use Sona ID codes rather than names when assigning credit; this helps protect participant privacy.

Assign credit promptly

- Assign credit within one or two days whenever possible, and no later than the department's required timeframe.
- Assign no-shows diligently so Sona records remain accurate.
- If you have sign-ups but miss the session, assign credit to participants who email you the same day or next day stating that they attended and you were absent. Contact the Sona Administrator if questions arise.

Understand no-show categories

- Excused no-show: the participant was too late to cancel, had a legitimate emergency, and made an honest effort to contact you quickly to reschedule.
- Unexcused no-show: the participant did not attend and did not contact you or contacted you later without a legitimate emergency.
- Two unexcused absences will result in loss of subject-pool access.

8. Close your study when finished

When you are finished using Sona for the semester, deactivate your study:

1. Log in to the Research Website.
2. Click "My Studies."
3. Select the study you want to deactivate.
4. Click "Change Study Information."
5. Scroll to "Active Study?" and select "No."
6. Click "Save Changes."

Final pre-launch checklist

- ☐ Project is solely for a CSUS Psychology course and stays within the approved CSUS-only scope.
- ☐ Faculty sponsor has approved the application.
- ☐ Procedures, consent form, debriefing form, deception language if needed, and all participant-facing materials are complete.
- ☐ All materials are combined into one clearly named PDF.
- ☐ Human Subjects approval and Sona Administrator approval are complete.
- ☐ Sona study information matches the approved application exactly.
- ☐ Timeslots, rooms, attendance procedures, and credit assignment plan is ready.
- ☐ You know how participants will contact you about emergencies, cancellations, or missed sessions.