

## **Writing a Senior Thesis in International Studies and Political Science**

### *What is a Senior thesis?*

A senior thesis is an extended original research project written under the supervision of a faculty advisor during your senior year.

### *How long is a senior thesis typically?*

Projects vary. Theses are generally between 50-99 pages. Some are longer, but quality is more important length. The better question to ask yourself is how much desire do I have to take on such a serious research and writing commitment?

### *Who should write a senior thesis?*

A senior thesis project is best suited for students who have an interest in exploring a specific question and/or field of knowledge beyond their previous course work. A thesis is an in depth analysis of a specific topic with the emphasis on original research. Writing a good thesis requires a significant amount of work well beyond what is required in most 300 level classes in terms of the amount of preparatory research and actual effort putting it together. It also requires that you direct and motivate yourself. *You* must figure out what question to ask and how to answer it. Your advisor does exactly what the name implies; he/she advises based on what you bring to the table. Do not expect your advisor to come up with a topic for you.

### *What is a suitable topic for a thesis?*

It is possible to write on any topic for which you get your advisor's approval. It should also be one that falls within your advisor's area of expertise – so that they can advise you appropriately. A good topic is one in which you are deeply interested, relates to your program of study, and can reasonably be completed by the end of your senior year.

### *How do I find an advisor?*

It is your responsibility to find a faculty member who is willing to advise you on the senior thesis project. Once you have a possible thesis topic in mind, identify members of the faculty whose interests fall within the ambit of your topic and contact them about your proposed project. Office hours are a good time for this, or you can contact professors via e-mail. You should do some work thinking about your topic before you approach a potential advisor. Your advisor should be a permanent member of the faculty (not an adjunct) with whom you have, or desire to have, a productive working relationship. The ideal advisor is one with whom you have worked or studied in the past, who has some expertise in the topic you wish to study, and with whom you have a good rapport (the political science and international studies coordinators can also suggest faculty to you).

*Can I have an outside advisor?*

For political science, an advisor in political science is necessary. For international studies the advisor can be from any of the main contributing departments: political science, economics, history, anthropology and sociology.

*I found an advisor, now what?*

Every student writing a senior thesis must enroll in an independent study with their advisor during the fall semester of their senior year. You may, with the approval of your advisor, enroll in the independent study during the spring registration period. In some cases, however, a faculty member will ask you to work on the topic over the summer before agreeing to supervise the project, in which case you should enroll in the independent study early in the fall semester. This is a three-credit graded independent study. You and your advisor will decide on a work plan for the semester such as completion of a literature review or first thesis chapter. Your grade will be assigned by your advisor based on your progress during the semester.

*What if I don't make enough progress during the fall semester?*

With the completion of the independent study your advisor will decide whether sufficient progress has been made to continue the project. With your advisor's approval, students will enroll in a six-credit course, 190.499, and continue to work on the thesis through the spring of the senior year. However, if your advisor decides that the project should not continue, you will still receive credit for the independent study in the fall semester. Similarly, if you choose not to continue the thesis project, you will still receive credit for the independent study.

*Will I receive honors for my thesis?*

If you complete the thesis and you have a GPA of 3.7 within the major, then you will graduate with departmental honors. If your thesis is of exceptional quality, your advisor may nominate it for either the Julius Turner Prize for Best Thesis in Political Science, or the Robert Tucker Prize for Best Thesis in International Studies. Because of deadlines by the Registrar, theses must be submitted in early April to be considered for either of these awards. You and your advisor can discuss whether this is a possibility.

*I am not eligible for honors because of my GPA. Can I still write a thesis?*

Yes. Whether you are eligible for honors or not, it is up to your prospective thesis advisor to decide whether you should pursue the project. However, given that the thesis is credit intensive as well as time intensive, you should consider the effect on your GPA of undertaking a thesis with a lower than honors GPA.

*Can the same thesis count in two separate departments?*

No. You cannot receive credit twice for the same piece of writing. In fact, the Johns Hopkins University Ethics Board considers, "submitting the same or substantially similar work to satisfy the requirements of more than one course without permission," as a violation of academic integrity.

*Can a graduate student advise me?*

No, although some graduate students might be willing to help you out if you are writing on a topic that relates to their research interests.

*Will I receive instruction on writing a thesis?*

There is no formal instruction on writing a thesis. There are a few suggested readings below that can help you think about how to approach a project of this kind. In addition, the department offers courses on the craft of political science research and writing such as 190.255 *Political Inquiry: How to Conduct Research in Political Science and International Relations*, offered by Professor Marlin-Bennett. Students are strongly encouraged to take such a class before embarking on a thesis project. Ultimately, however, the main burden of writing the thesis falls upon you.

*What can I do to get started on my thesis?*

- *Think and read broadly about your topic.* What interests you? ‘What annoys you?’ is often a good place to start. How can you form those interests into viable research questions? What’s been written on your subject already? What research methods will you need to use?
- *Set specific goals with your advisor.* The sooner you establish a plan of research with your advisor, the better. Once you have settled on your topic, do some preliminary research and begin discussing with your advisor how to proceed. Get their advice on your ideas, suggestions for further reading, etc.
- *Learn about the craft of research.* Good scholarship means solid research skills, good writing, and careful revising. Here are some books that can help:
  - Charles Lipson. *How to Write a BA Thesis: A Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper.* (Chicago, 2005).
  - Wayne C. Booth, Gregory C. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research.* (Chicago, 2003).
  - Diane E. Schmidt. *Writing in Political Science: A Practical Guide.* (Longman, 2004).
  - Gregory M. Scott and Stephen M. Garrison. *The Political Science Student Writer's Manual.* (Prentice-Hall, 2005). ISBN: 0131892592.

*What if I have more questions?*

Contact the undergraduate coordinators in political science and international studies or the directors of these programs.

*Revised April 2009*

### ***Recommended Timetable for Senior Thesis***

The senior thesis is the capstone intellectual project for students in political science and international studies. It is intended only for those students who wish to undertake a research project in conjunction with a faculty advisor. Given the level of commitment and workload this entails, you should approach the senior thesis as a twelve-month project running from April of your junior year to April of your senior year. The following is a recommended timetable for the project.

<b>When</b>	<b>What</b>
April of Junior Year	Begin developing a topic; approach prospective faculty about advising the project
May of Junior Year	Once a faculty member has agreed to advise you, establish a summer work plan such as a reading list or preliminary research that will help refine your thesis topic
Summer	Begin research on your topic; communicate with your advisor over the summer about your progress
Fall semester of Senior Year	Enroll in a three credit independent study with your thesis advisor; establish a work plan such as a literature review, thesis outline, or introductory chapter to be completed by the end of the semester
Spring semester of Senior Year	If your advisor determines that sufficient progress has been made, enroll for the six credit senior thesis (190.499); establish a timetable for completion of the project
April of Senior Year	Complete your thesis; your advisor may nominate it for a departmental prize