

## **Political Science Department Honors Thesis Guidelines**

Unlike papers written for most classes, an honors thesis must be a substantial piece of research, writing, and argumentation. The thesis should demonstrate the student's mastery of a major debate or problematic area within the discipline of political science, present research that addresses a major question, and show evidence of the student's independent thought about and evaluation of a significant issue.

Most theses in Political Science will combine an analysis of theoretical literature with some sort of empirical research, though some students may choose to focus solely on theory. All acceptable theses will be well organized and will have clear framings of the problem or issue they set out to address at the very beginning. They will also present a credible argument supporting their approaches and using evidence effectively to bolster their reasoning.

### **Why Write an Honors Thesis?**

Writing an honors thesis will take students at least an entire academic year, in addition to the preparatory seminar on research that you should take during your junior year (PLSC 2901: Political Inquiry). It may often be a frustrating process, since you will not have the companionship and support that come from taking classes together with others who are going through the same experiences. So why should you undertake the challenge of writing a thesis?

Graduating with honors tells future employers and educators that you have undertaken a major research project with minimal guidance from faculty and followed it through to the end. It shows that you can do more than follow instructions and do well on bluebook examinations; it attests to your critical and organizational abilities in a convincing way. It demonstrates initiative and commitment, something employers and graduate schools look for in recent graduates. Finally, you will have a strong writing sample to send to prospective employers and educators.

The professional advantages to be gained from writing a thesis, however, only scratch the surface of the many reasons why you should accept the challenge. Once you have gone through the experience, you will find that your writing abilities have improved to a great degree. You will be better able to formulate interesting questions and to carry out large-scale research projects. Your analytical skills will be sharper. On a broader level, you will learn how to motivate yourself to accomplish things when there is no immediate deadline and when no one is forcing you to do something. You will be able to work more independently and with less supervision as a result of the experience. You will also most likely get to know your advisor well and will find in this person a wealth of information and experience that will benefit you no matter what you go on to do. Last but not least, you will learn a great deal about a topic that you find provocative and interesting, leading to the personal satisfaction and self-confidence that arise from having accomplished a major goal that you've set for yourself.

### **Suggestions for Developing the Topic for the Honors Thesis**

The question that will form the basis for the thesis should be developed carefully in consultation with a faculty member. Upper-division courses in political science are often good resources for getting ideas for theses and provide opportunities to get to know potential thesis advisors. In addition, pay attention to what you find compelling in the world. You can almost certainly craft a project around it. We have had students write about community mobilization around an environmental problem in North Denver, about the effect on teachers of grading of schools, and on community mobilization concerning transportation. We have also had a student write on community service organizations for refugee resettlement. In other

words, many topics are possible. You will live with this project for a year; make sure you have found something that interests you. I would encourage students to find initial ideas in the junior year; then connect with an advisor and do some reading and thinking over the summer between the junior and the senior year. Writing a good thesis is a year-long project, so getting an early start on the process of formulating the research question is vital to ensure success.

### **PLSC 3990 Honors Thesis**

Students writing theses in the department of political science must enroll in PLSC 3990, which is worth eight credits spread throughout the year. The focus in the fall is on framing suitable topics, conducting preliminary research, and writing a prospectus, or an in-depth description of their topics and plans for researching and developing their arguments.

### **The Thesis Advisor, the Second Reader, and External Reader**

Each student writing an honors thesis will work with primarily an honors thesis advisor and also with a second faculty reader, both of whom are usually from the department of Political Science. As the primary advisor, the student should choose a departmental faculty member who has worked in the field in which the student is interested. The department may approve a primary advisor or second reader from another department if the topic of the thesis warrants going outside of Political Science. The thesis advisor is the principal faculty member with whom the student will work. For an oral defense in the spring, each student will need to choose an external reader, i.e. a faculty member who is not in the department but whose interests are related to the student's, in addition to the second reader from the department.

The instructor of PLSC 2901 and the primary thesis advisor help the student formulate a workable research question, often suggesting materials to read and places to go to find empirical information. This primary thesis advisor then oversees the process of research and writing, helping the student to develop a schedule for completing drafts of sections. The primary thesis advisor will also read the thesis as the student is writing it, providing feedback along the way to keep the student on track. In selecting a thesis advisor, the student should try to find someone who knows a lot about the thesis topic and who will have the time to give the student adequate feedback. Planning in advance is helpful in securing a good thesis advisor, as most faculty members are unable to supervise more than two theses in any given quarter. The second reader has a more limited role in the process. The student should keep the second reader informed about his or her progress on the thesis throughout the time that she or he is writing, and should consult with this professor about reviews of any drafts. It is possible that the second reader will seek only to read a revised draft that has been approved by the primary advisor.

In general, students should note that faculty tend to be quite busy, particularly at the beginnings and ends of terms. Do not expect an advisor or second reader to read a lengthy draft and provide comments unless you give that person at least a week. It is also much easier to get comments quickly if you work out a firm schedule with your advisor and stick to it: most faculty members can read drafts much more quickly if they know when to expect them and can set aside time from their schedules in advance. Faculty members are generally very willing to help you if you are organized and motivated. Know your advisor's office hours and make use of them!

Major issues to discuss in your first meetings with your thesis advisor:

- What is the exact research question?
- What do we know about this issue from other scholars?
- What will this project contribute to what we know?
- What evidence is necessary to develop the thesis?

- How can I collect this evidence?
- How will I analyze this evidence?
- How will I present this evidence?
- Who should be the second departmental faculty reader?
- Who should be the external reader?

### **Requirements for Argumentation, Formatting and Length**

An acceptable senior thesis will be properly formatted both in terms of the way that the argument is structured and in terms of the technical set-up and look of the document. While theses written in different fields may vary greatly in the way they are organized, they will have certain features in common as persuasive pieces of argumentative writing. Each student writing a thesis is responsible for ensuring that the final draft fulfills the requirements for argumentation, formatting and length. Bear in mind that it is much easier to fulfill these requirements if you are thinking about them and applying them throughout the process of writing your thesis.

#### **Argument**

An honors thesis in any field of Political Science has three basic parts. The first is a clear and concise explanation of the main argument of the thesis itself. The second, which comprises the bulk of the thesis, is a presentation of the argumentation and evidence that will convince the reader that the argument is valid. The final part is an explanation of the implications of the argument. The first section of the thesis will be the most difficult to write for most people because it requires that you have a complete understanding of what you will do in the thesis. Most people write a draft of the introduction to their thesis and return to it to sharpen their insights after they have written up the argumentative section. In the first section of the thesis, the author should identify the problem or issue with which she or he will be dealing and sketch out his or her answer or solution. This section should also demonstrate the student's mastery of the academic literature associated with the problem or issue. Here, the student explains both what other analysts have had to say about the issue or problem and differentiates her or his approach and analysis from others' approaches and analyses. The student should also explain here what methods he or she intends to use to support the analysis she or he will undertake. The second, or argumentative, section is the heart of the thesis. In this section, the student presents the argument and evidence promised in the first section. Careful organization is crucial to the success of this section; arguments and evidence should be presented to flow logically toward the conclusion the student wishes the reader to endorse. The student should also ensure that she or he is arguing rather than merely presenting evidence. Pieces of empirical data should be placed in their proper contexts and their relationship to each other should be clearly outlined. The inclusion of all evidence and arguments must be justified by direct relationship to the main point of the thesis. The student should avoid mere description or recitation of facts in favor of in-depth analysis. Finally, the student should deal effectively with counter arguments or contrasting cases that might tend to persuade the reader that his or her main point is invalid. The final section of the thesis should summarize what the student has accomplished. In addition, it should explain what implications the student's findings have for the field in which she or he is writing. How should scholars and readers think about the main question differently after having encountered the thesis?

#### **Formatting**

Typing or word-processing should be on one side of the page only. The thesis must be double-spaced with standard (1-inch) margins, except for quotations of more than 50 words. All footnotes must be single-spaced. Pages must be numbered. For citations, consult the Chicago Manual of Style and use that format unless you and your advisor mutually agree that another citation format would be more

appropriate. The thesis must include a complete bibliography of works consulted. Given the nature of a thesis as a major research project, it should include numerous in-text citations to theoretical works and empirical evidence. You must cite any information of which you do not have personal knowledge, whether or not you are quoting this information directly from the source.

No special formatting is required for the headings of sections within the thesis, but the headings should be formatted consistently throughout the text. Given the length of a typical thesis, students are strongly encouraged to use headings or chapters within the text. The author should also prepare and include a table of contents. The table of contents should appear immediately after the title page of the thesis.

### **Length**

An honors thesis in political science should range between 10,000 and 20,000 words (approximately 45 to 60 standard double-spaced pages of text). Your thesis should not fall substantially below 10,000 words or significantly exceed 20,000 words unless your advisor has approved an exceptionally short or long thesis. Theses that fall outside of these limits run the risk of not being accepted by the readers or the honors committee.

### **Departmental Process for Evaluation and Deadlines**

During the spring term, the university sponsors a day for the presentation of undergraduate research. Students may either present their material as a poster or they may present it in a panel discussion with other students. Students should practice their presentation, and take the time to make a poster of which they can be proud. We can have practice sessions in the spring. Students generally find this experience to be very rewarding; they can talk with interested people about what they have been doing for the academic year. By the ninth week of the spring term *at the very latest*, the student should have provided her/his *final* draft of the thesis to the three readers. The student should also schedule an oral defense of the thesis for the tenth week or finals week, at the latest. That defense should take about an hour. In it, the student will have the opportunity of presenting the thesis, explaining how s/he came to it and what s/he did. The members of the committee will then ask the student questions, generally questions concerning the conceptual framework and evidence supporting it. At the end of the defense, the three readers will decide whether to pass the thesis, fail it, or grant high honors. The department is then responsible for passing this information on to the university honors program.