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 a student’s 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 than quantity.

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 an 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 required. It also requires that the student direct and motivate him/herself. The student must determine what question to ask and how to answer it. The student advisor will advise based on what the student brings to the table.

What is a suitable topic for a thesis?

It is possible to write on any topic for which the student obtains his/her advisor’s approval. It should also be a topic that falls within the advisor’s area of expertise – so that they can advise the student appropriately. A good topic is one in which the student is deeply interested, relates to his/her program of study, and can reasonably be completed by the end of the 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 to do this. Alternatively, you can contact professors via e-mail. You should do some 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 the 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 the advisor’s approval, students will enroll in a six-credit course, 190.499, and continue to work on the thesis through the spring of senior year. Even 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. Due to deadlines made 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 will be 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. 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,” to be a violation of academic integrity.

*Can a graduate student advise me?*

No, although some graduate students might be willing to help 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. 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? These questions are often a good place to start. How can you form those interests into viable research questions? What has 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:


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.

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<th>When</th>
<th>What</th>
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<tr>
<td>April of Junior Year</td>
<td>Begin developing a topic; approach prospective faculty about advising the project.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May of Junior Year</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Begin research on your topic; communicate with your advisor over the summer about your progress.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall semester of Senior Year</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring semester of Senior Year</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April of Senior Year</td>
<td>Complete your thesis; your advisor may nominate it for a departmental prize.</td>
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