

GUIDELINES AND POLICIES FOR WRITING A SENIOR THESIS

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The purpose of this document is to lay out my expectations and process for advising a senior honors thesis.

What is a senior thesis?

A senior thesis is a capstone research project at the end of a student's undergraduate career. To complete a senior thesis, you conceive, conduct, analyze, and then present an original research project. A senior thesis differs from an undergraduate course paper in that it is a far more substantial undertaking: a yearlong focus on a single project. It is also evaluated against a conceptually different benchmark. Course papers often focus on particular competencies—demonstrating an understanding of different theories about the causes of war, or ability to implement a particular analytical approach, for instance. As such, a flawed course paper can succeed, as long as it is strong in a particular area. In contrast, a thesis is about generating new knowledge. It is not *training* to do some aspect of this, or a *simulation* of it—it is the thing itself. It is a more mature undertaking, and therefore evaluated more holistically.

To invoke a sports metaphor, course papers are like playing catch or going to batting cages to practice your swing (particular skills). A thesis is playing the ballgame.

What senior theses do you advise?

I study political behavior, political psychology, and public opinion. If I'm going to be the primary advisor, your intended thesis project should focus pretty clearly on one of those areas. (If I'm an outside reader, the topic can be a bit more removed.) Methodologically, I am best suited to advise theses that will have a substantial quantitative component—likely (but not definitely) from surveys or an experiment.

I strongly prefer that you have taken a course with me before you ask me to advise your thesis—this will give you a sense of my perspective and help us start with a good rapport—but I consider case-by-case exceptions for students who can demonstrate significant socialization in political behavior (via other coursework, or endorsements from other faculty). I require that students have grounding in quantitative social science methods before starting a thesis—completion of Poli 281 or an equivalent course with a grade of A-minus or better. (It is simply too much to be learning core quantitative methods while also doing the substantive work that goes into a thesis.)

What is the timeline for a senior thesis?

At UNC, students begin to develop their senior projects via a course (Poli691H) in the spring of their junior year. You do not need to have a specific thesis advisor at this point, but it's not a bad idea: you can probably get advice on how to focus your coursework to better support the project you want to undertake. I recommend you start having conversations with me (or other potential

advisors) as soon as you have an idea, or even a general topic, for your project. The Poli691H instructor can help guide you.

Poli691H culminates with a thesis proposal which, if approved, gives you license to continue your thesis project under the auspices of a specific advisor. If I am going to be your advisor, you should start having conversations with me about your project by mid-May at the latest. This is because I always require thesis students to undertake work on the thesis over the summer. The projects I advise involve a lot of time-consuming hurdles, such as acquiring funding and approval from the Institutional Review Board, and the academic year simply proves to be too compressed a timeline to finish a high-level empirical project. If I'm your advisor, expect to do work over the summer, including a handful of meetings. (If you're out of town, these can be phone calls.)

Once the academic year begins, we will meet more regularly—typically every other week. At each meeting, we'll go over what you've done and come up with a game plan for what to do before the next meeting. (This almost always involves a written assignment of a few pages.) And thus, the project will progress.

Each thesis is a little bit different, but because I tend to advise projects that involve human subjects research—often experiments—it is worth giving a sense of when certain landmarks probably need to be reached, in order to stay on pace:

- Summer: Revise Poli691H proposal; conduct a more comprehensive literature review to establish how your project will contribute to a literature; complete the CITI training required for human subjects research
- August and September: Write a draft introduction chapter arguing for the significance of your intended project; apply for any necessary funding from departmental, university, or other sources.
- September and October: Complete a full-fledged research design and submit it for IRB approval.
- November and December: Write full-fledged theoretical and research design chapters, making a more comprehensive case about how your project will generate knowledge.
- January and February: Execute your intended study. Conduct analysis, producing draft tables, figures, and so forth.
- March: Write write write. (Revisions to existing chapters, as well as full-fledged versions of a results chapter and a concluding chapter.) Find two additional faculty members who will serve as additional readers of the final project, and identify a date for an oral defense.
- Early April: Complete the oral defense. The university has a strict deadline for this, which varies by year, but it's usually around April 10. I require that you circulate a complete draft of your thesis to the full committee no later than one week before the oral defense. This, too, is a strict deadline. Note also that if I am a non-chair member of a thesis committee, I require receiving a complete draft of the thesis one week before the oral defense.

Any other tips?

I'll circle back to where I started. Much of your undergraduate career has been *training* in how to synthesize and produce knowledge. The best thesis projects go beyond training, and actually make meaningful contributions that people take note of. I know of thesis projects that have landed in undergraduate research journals, received coverage in the popular press, and even been published in highly respected peer-reviewed outlets (a big achievement for those interested in an academic career). I urge you to begin your project with these possibilities in mind, and to undertake your work with commensurate dedication. If you work hard, the sky is the limit.