Senior Thesis Guidelines

Welcome! I’m very happy to be working with you. My goal is to set up a challenging but satisfying learning experience. The thesis may seem daunting, but I’m confident you can do it! You will develop as a scholar and a learner. You’ll become better at critical thinking, rigorous analysis, independent research, and writing with power and clarity. You’ll also learn how to seek help from various resources. A thesis is not written alone, though it does communicate your own ideas.

Below you will find a schedule and an outline for the thesis. I have broken down the thesis into manageable parts. The components I ask you to turn in build on each other and are meant to write the larger thesis for you, not to create extra work. Many students have trouble imagining how they will possibly write so much. Do not worry – this guide can lead you there, step by manageable step. First, a few rules of the road.

Most important: I will expect you to stick to the schedule unless you inform me of a serious obstacle to meeting a given deadline. The most important practical goal is to submit to me a full rough draft, without which I cannot provide adequate guidance on your thesis. This draft is due on the date set by the department. I will return a draft submitted by that deadline within two weeks, but late work may not be returned at all. Please understand that I have many responsibilities, and I can only help you if you work steadily rather than doing most of the work in the last couple of months. Sometimes students have asked me to respond to emails with questions or to read partial drafts of documents with less than a week’s notice; please remember that I am often unable to do so. January is late to begin gathering data. February is late to begin to analyze data. If you are doing so, I can only be of very limited and delayed help at that point. If the schedule I have attached here does not suit you for any reason, please feel completely free to discuss it with me and we will work out a modification, but please do so at the beginning of the year.

I have provided the means for you to keep to a structure and timetable, but I will not send reminders – the responsibility to stick to a schedule and seek my guidance lies with you.

I can guide you more effectively if you choose a topic in my field of expertise. I use experiments and surveys to study public opinion, political psychology, and political communication, in the US. I am especially interested in inequality. My publications are on my website and you can browse them to get a sense of my expertise.

A few additional things to keep in mind:

1. Write the thesis around a hypothesis you develop. The thesis should explain why the hypothesis is worth testing, why it’s plausible, how you test it, whether the test supports or disconfirms the hypothesis, and why this finding matters. You should develop and test an alternative hypothesis as well, one that contradicts ‘your’ hypothesis. Do not worry if you can’t
formulate a hypothesis right away. The first phase of the project consists of iterative attempts to do so, using preliminary reading of secondary sources. A hypothesis should be causal: A is the way it is because of B; B is an important cause of A; or some variation on this theme. Here are two examples. As the number of women increases in a legislature, women consequently carry more influence over policy enacted by that legislature. The growing racial tolerance of white Americans during the 1930s was caused primarily by the 1932 Olympic games.

2. You will need a dataset. Common data sources are interviews, census data, voter files (for variables such as voter turnout and registration), public opinion data (from academic surveys or commercial polls, or from an experiment you execute), public speeches or hearings reported in newspapers or government documents, credible news organizations’ broadcasts or internet news stories, legislative votes, election returns, and court decisions. Work with the politics librarian at Firestone, the Survey Research Center, and the Data and Statistical Services staff at Firestone. They can help with your research strategy and finding or collecting a dataset.

3. Don’t spin your wheels. Email me when things are not going well for whatever reason. Don’t waste time trying to solve a problem on your own when you get stuck.

4. Writing matters. Take your drafts with my comments to the Writing Center. I can provide comments on the substance and on the organization of your writing but often do not have time to correct specific words or sentence-level errors. When reading your draft I will indicate to you what kinds of writing errors you should look for and correct. The consultants at the Writing Center can be of most use to you when you bring them a chapter with specific goals for improvement. Be sure to turn in a polished final product. Spelling, poor word choice, or grammatical errors detract from the thesis.

   Pay particular attention to the paragraph as the unit of argument. Every paragraph in every chapter should have a clear point of argument. The points should add up to your argument. Topic sentences are key – the first sentence of a paragraph should signal the point of that paragraph. Make one point per paragraph and use one paragraph per point. A common mistake is to use topic sentences that describe what someone else said. “Big Professor X studied Y and concluded Z.” Instead, use them to say what you want to say. “A good reason to expect conclusion Z is that study Y used appropriate methods and found support for it (Big Professor X cited).” If you take each topic sentence and string them together in sequence, you should get a good sense of your argument, point by point. Try that as a check on your writing.

   Write concisely. Filler content detracts from the quality. A thesis with more than 100 pages of text tends to lose steam and clarity.

5. Save your work daily and in multiple locations outside your computer, and do not store all your backups in one physical space. Several of my advisees have lost months of work because they did not do this. Do not let this happen to you. It is worth saving all your relevant files on a cloud backup every day that you modify those files. Plan on losing everything in your computer on any given day, and backup accordingly.

6. Cite or footnote when you use someone’s writing. When in doubt, cite. Consult the Chicago
Manual of Style or the Library home page for citation formats. Whichever system you use, do so consistently. I prefer the in-line citation method (you cite the author’s last name and year in parenthesis within the text, and give the full reference in a references section in the back).

7. Don’t let your short-term coursework crowd out time for your thesis. Schedule time every week, as if this was a course that met at a specific place and time. Aim to write something substantial every week throughout fall and winter.

8. Look up other theses on your topic. This will give you a good sense of how to organize the contents of your thesis, what tables and figures can look like, formatting, and the kinds of data you might use, and what a literature review looks like. (Just be careful not to borrow without citation.) I also suggest you read Zach Savage’s or Ryan Ebanks’ prize-winning theses (’08 and ‘10) for examples of an excellent thesis. Consult those to see what information you should provide and how to provide it.

9. When presenting numerical results from your study try to do so visually, with figures and charts. A figure should be self-contained and self-explanatory as much as possible. The axis should be labeled clearly with the unit (for example, ‘% of words about race’, or ‘mean approval of the candidate’). It’s best to use a scale that varies from 0 to 1 instead of a scale with arbitrary numbers such as 1 to 5 or 1 to 7. You can convert a five-point scale to the 0 to 1 interval. The text should refer to the specific figure, describe its contents and explain what it shows and what the reader should conclude from it.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter I: Introduction
The introductory chapter should state your hypothesis and explain why it is worth testing it. It should develop the research question that gave rise to your thesis statement. Explain why your research question is a useful and important one for our understanding of politics. Also, explain the alternative hypotheses. Do not provide descriptive ‘context’ or ‘background’ for its own sake, though it’s a good idea to give one or two good examples of the phenomenon you are explaining. Give only as much background as you need to make a particular point in developing the argument. At the end of the chapter, give a detailed chapter-by-chapter summary of the thesis, emphasizing the major points of argument and evidence from each chapter and how they add up to your overall argument.

Chapter II: Theory and literature review
This chapter should develop the hypotheses you will test using secondary sources (that is, other scholarly research and previous academic studies). In detail, explain your hypotheses, and justify their validity with as many good reasons as you can, drawn from scholarly works. For some theses, this chapter also requires a historical component that sets the argument in the context of a sequence of events in the real world of politics. Your core chapters (see below) may also be historical, but by contrast they will contain lots of detailed evidence. This chapter is the
place to define your key concepts (variables) using general language rather than specific operationalizations or measures, and explain how they are related to each other in hypothesis form (variable X causes variable Y; variable Z does not cause variable Y). Show how your hypotheses relate to and draw on the writings of other people. In part, this means showing how your hypotheses follow closely from existing scholarship. But in part, this can also mean showing how your study adds something that is not already in the literature – how it fills a gap, or even negates some existing studies. In the next chapter/s you will explain and justify the measurement of these variables at a more specific level (for example, you will provide the verbatim words in survey questions that measure variables). In this chapter you’ll do that at a more abstract level. It’s good practice to explicitly state all the hypotheses you will test, at the end of the chapter.

Chapters III, IV (and V): Research design and findings

Here you explain in detail how you test the hypotheses and methodically lay out the evidence for or against each hypothesis. Be sure to explain where the evidence came from and why it is valid. If you executed a study of your own (interviews, experiment, survey) then you need a chapter that justifies the research design and provides methodological detail. If you rely on data collected by someone else, give a description of how it was collected, so that readers can judge its validity. Be sure you know the potential sources of error or bias in the data, so that you can explain why it is valid despite these. Always report the sample size and the process of sample selection, and detail the characteristics of the sample. If you are using a case (e.g., a city, or an organization, or a state), then justify the reason for selecting that case and not others. Give full details – imagine someone wants to replicate exactly what you did without being able to ask you, and give the information necessary to do so. If you are reporting lots of technical content, put it in an appendix. Always report the verbatim wording of questions and response options from a survey, and the verbatim stimuli and exact procedure you use in experiments (those can go in an appendix; in the thesis, refer to the appendix page number).

It is often useful to include tables and figures. Figures are especially useful. If you do so, explain in the text what the reader is to learn from each table or figure. Each table and figure should also be self-explanatory and able to convey its point without written text, but the text should highlight what is relevant about it.

Chapter V (or VI): Conclusion

Remind readers of your research question and hypotheses, why readers might care about them, and briefly summarize the results you presented and how they support or disconfirm each hypothesis. Readers should be able to understand the main findings by reading only this section. Then, draw implications for the general topic from what you have found and argued. Knowing what we now know about your topic, what can we conclude about politics?
Thesis Schedule

(Note: if any of these dates falls on a holiday or weekend, simply use the next business day as this year’s deadline.)

Spring and early summer: Decide on a topic that interests you personally. What problem puzzles you? What aspect of politics would you like to understand in depth? Find a political phenomenon that you are curious about or feel an urgent need to understand. Or choose a formative intellectual experience -- a book you read or a class you took -- that challenged or engaged you. A paper you wrote can be a good basis for a thesis (including your JP). Begin reading on your topic. Check with me on important bibliographic (secondary) sources. But don’t spend a lot of time on this phase.

Summer and September: Write a tentative, working hypothesis that spells out a causal argument. A good way to do this is to consider a study you found interesting. How can you conduct a small replication and extension of it? What is that study’s hypothesis, and can you modify it slightly? Then, generate a list of important secondary sources to read. Make an appointment with the Politics librarian at Firestone to seek guidance on finding sources. Consult the bibliographies of the most useful handful of secondary sources. Start with the half-dozen or so studies that used the best quality data and are most relevant to your hypothesis. Although a subject search can yield useful sources that you might otherwise miss, you should not attempt a random or exhaustive survey of the literature. A general subject search is best restricted to the last 5-10 years; older classic works will turn up repeatedly in recent bibliographies. You probably took a relevant class; some of the scholarly sources you studied there are probably handy. It’s OK to draw on a junior paper or course paper you wrote.

PROCRASTINATOR’S ALERT: September should be an intensive thesis month. Course requirements are lighter so you have more time. Set aside frequent, regular blocks of time to read and take notes on important secondary sources. Set up a regular schedule and input it into your calendar. Require yourself to work on the thesis at set times and places, like you would in attending class. Make this guideline into a checklist with due dates and put those into your calendar like you would dues dates for course requirements.

October 1: Finish reading the important secondary sources. Consult with librarians about datasets that could serve as the primary source of evidence. If you are planning to interview or survey people, consult with Ed Freeland, the director of the Survey Research Center, on designing the study and finding a sample. If you are conducting interviews, an experiment, or survey you will need to apply for permission from the University’s IRB for Human Subjects (see the website of the University office called “ORPA” and read their guidelines and download their application). Apply now for IRB approval. Before you turn it in, I will need to read your application and sign it. This application will form the basis of your thesis proposal (see below). Take the online training course for human subjects research (link at ORPA). If your interviews or experiment fall under the IRB’s jurisdiction, you cannot conduct any of them without formal IRB approval, and the IRB process often takes several weeks.

PROCRASTINATOR’S ALERT: Make an appointment with Ed Freeland if you plan to
collect personal data from live people. Don’t put off drafting your IRB application.

October 8: Write for yourself a thesis proposal to help you keep track of what you want to study, and an annotated bibliography of secondary sources. Annotated means you write at least one long paragraph that details the key points, and if the source is important to your argument, you’ll need several pages on that source. The proposal lays out the problem, justifies the topic as a significant one for understanding politics, clearly states the hypotheses you will test, tells the reader how your argument builds on (and perhaps refutes) other scholarship, lays out the specific research plan for gathering or analyzing a dataset, and concludes with the implications of the argument. Explain how the readings will inform your own study. Will a given book help you justify the plausibility of a hypothesis — specifically, how does it do this? Will it help you to by suggesting a research method or even a specific dataset the author used that you can use? The proposal will serve as a detailed outline of your introductory chapter. You can also use this to help you write your IRB proposal.

**Third day of fall break:** Turn in a detailed thesis outline and a draft of the research plan. Make use of your thesis proposal and the notes on your readings. Take into account my feedback so far. Conduct a preliminary analysis of the evidence you have gathered thus far to see if there are any problems with your research design. You may need to change your research design or find another dataset. If you turn this material in by the deadline I’ll return it to you sooner rather than later (professors use fall break to catch up too).

**PROCRASTINATOR’S ALERT:** Do not wait for the beginning of fall break to start.

December 18: Turn in a draft of the theory chapter (unless you already did).

**PROCRASTINATOR’S ALERT:** Do not wait for the end of classes.

December 4 - January 26: You should be well into gathering your dataset. Revise the initial chapters and the research plan as needed. Write a rough draft of one evidence chapter.

**PROCRASTINATOR’S ALERT:** It may be tempting to put this off until February, but remember that I may not be able to provide you guidance at that point.

January 26: Turn in a draft of an evidence chapter. Also provide a concise but detailed summary of the thesis, chapter by chapter (one page). This outline will serve you well in writing the final draft of the intro chapter.

January 29 - February 17: Write a rough draft of the remaining evidence chapters.

February 18: Turn in a draft of a second evidence chapter. Also provide a concise outline of each chapter including key elements (about one page total).

February 19 - March 3: Wrap up your analysis. Revise earlier chapters in light of new developments. Take into consideration my comments and incorporate the last of your research. You are likely to have to rearrange the order of your paragraphs, and probably will end up rearranging chapter sections. You may have to rearrange the order of your chapters. You may
even have to write a new chapter, or scrap most of a chapter you already wrote. Do not grow attached to what you have already produced; delete text that just doesn't work. Remember that what you had before was only a working draft. Pay attention to the overall flow of the argument from one chapter to another. Beware of claims that are not well supported or are exaggerated and cite every assertion of fact.

Departmental due date: **Turn in a full draft.** **Drafts and any other material you send past this deadline are likely to take me two weeks or longer to return, and I may not be able to respond to it at all.**

Use my comments in making final revisions. Attend to the logical flow of paragraphs and sentences, with particular attention to topic sentences that summarize the paragraph and advance the argument. Aim for a clear writing style. I have seen an A thesis get an A- from a second reader because of typos and errors – do not let this happen to you. **Visit the writing center. Check spelling and grammar. Proofread and polish. Allow several days for this.**

**Build in time for delays and unexpected sick days.**

Finish line: enjoy the satisfaction of producing something serious and engaging. This process will have helped you deal with new challenges. You’ll emerge with honed skills and valuable knowledge, and maybe broadened horizons – and be stronger and wiser than you were at the start.