

Watson Institute Undergraduate Concentrations: Introduction to Writing a Senior Honors Thesis

Writing a thesis is a great way to delve deeply into a subject you care about, and a great way to develop a scholarly project that is fully your own. A thesis, of course, is not the *only* way to culminate an education in the social sciences, but it's certainly an excellent and appropriate way. On that score, you should understand the thesis is first and foremost as an exercise in social-science analysis. It's a demonstration of the skills of empirical (evidence-based) analysis and critical thinking that you've developed and honed through your college education.

Good social science, including good policy analysis, helps us understand and explain the world around us by empirically investigating important social processes and outcomes. There is no one right way to conduct good social science, but good research projects are typically constructed around five basic questions:

- What is the real world outcome or process I am trying to understand and explain?
- Why is it important?
- What have others said about it?
- What makes my explanation or understanding different from those of others?
- How can I use empirical evidence to make my case?

But while these basic questions are relatively simple to state, the actual process of pulling them together into a well-organized, well-argued, and well-written thesis is not easy. There are many reasons for this. But the most important is probably that what you think is important to understand and explain will almost inevitably shift as you learn more about the subject that interests you and what others have said about it. The shifting nature of the questions you are asking will in turn affect how you conduct your research, and the kinds of evidence that can be reasonably marshaled over the life of the project to make the arguments you want to make.

The shape shifting nature of social science research in general, and senior thesis projects in particular, make it extremely important that you try to nail down the particular questions that you will focus on as early as possible. Thus while each of the concentrations has somewhat different guidelines for applying to write a Senior Thesis, and each has its own application form, we all require that you:

- Submit to your concentration advisor an initial thesis prospectus or proposal that provides your first cut at answering the five basic questions listed above by April 16th;
- Secure the written support of the faculty member who has reviewed your initial thesis prospectus and has agreed to serve as the 1st reader on your project.
- Be prepared to rework your thesis prospectus after it has been reviewed by your concentration advisor.

Once your proposal has been accepted you should:

- Submit to your concentration advisor and your 1st reader a concrete research plan for the summer.
- Apply for summer research funds if appropriate.
- Over the Summer:
 - Read [Undergraduate Work Involving Human Subjects](#) on the Research at Brown website.
 - Complete [Brown's education course](#) for the protection of human research participants (CITI). Submit your completed training certificate to the thesis seminar instructor in the fall.
 - Read at least one of the thesis writing resources below.
 - [Charles Lipson, How to Write a Thesis](#),
 - [A Guide to Writing a Senior Thesis in Government or A Guide to Writing a Senior Thesis in Social Studies](#)
- Return to Brown senior year having read some of the key literature on your topic, and after having refined your research question, and reviewed the quantitative and qualitative evidence available to you, be prepared to write your thesis prospectus.