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Senior Thesis Research and Writing Guidelines

Welcome to your senior year at Princeton! I'm looking forward to working with you on your research project. The process of researching and writing a senior thesis can be a daunting but rewarding experience. Many students find that the thesis is the peak of their academic experience at Princeton. I am here to help you throughout this process. This guide sets out some expectations and advice for your thesis work.

Expectations

The senior thesis is an independent research project that is conducted with input and advice of a member of the faculty. This means that while I am happy to meet with you and offer guidance and feedback, it is up to you to take charge of your own work. It is your responsibility to be proactive, to set up meetings as needed, and to stay on top of the work. Although I find advising to be one of the best aspects of being a professor, I am simply not able to send reminders or come looking for you if you disappear for weeks at a time. To help provide structure, I have included below a suggested timeline with milestones (deliverables). For my part, I will provide written or oral feedback on all of the milestones mentioned in the timeline. I am always happy to meet to chat about your project, bounce ideas off each other, or answer any questions you have, large or small.

Please be advised that I am able to be significantly more helpful to which on topics on which I have research and teaching interests. These topics include sovereignty and authority, international and domestic statebuilding, state capacity and state weakness, conflict and security, international intervention, foreign aid, and development and public goods. I have regional interests in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Thesis Structure and Milestones

The prospect of completing a senior thesis can be overwhelming. Because of the nature of independent work, many students often find it helpful to have structure in terms of suggested deadlines. Additionally, intermediate milestone deliverables are especially important for breaking up the research process into manageable chunks. Below is a suggested timeline with deliverables. *With the exception of the final two items (the full draft and the final draft), these deliverables are optional but highly recommended.*

September/October

Goal: Work out your specific thesis topic and research question.

Potential deliverables:

- Write three paragraphs on your research question. What is the question and why does it matter (what is its broader relevance)? How do you intend to answer your research question?
- Create a working list of the 5-10 *most important* secondary sources that are *directly* related to your topic. See the hints below for some strategies. Read as much as you can to familiarize yourself with your topic.
- Write a one page memo on the outcome you'd like to explain (dependent variable). How do you define your dependent variable? What are the “values” or categories on your DV? Can you give some examples to illustrate different values on the DV? If you are doing a quantitative analysis, are there datasets that you might be able to use to measure your DV?

November

Goal: Thesis proposal.

Potential deliverables:

- Complete an annotated bibliography. What are the arguments of the readings you have selected to review, and how do these readings inform your own argument? Do they offer alternative arguments? Suggest a puzzle or gap that you will address? Provide evidence that can help elaborate your own argument?
- Draw up a list of existing factors (independent variables) that others have proposed as explanations for your outcome. Propose a categorization scheme to organize these explanations. Write a short memo explaining why you find these existing explanations inadequate or incomplete. This is mainly an exercise in paving the way for you to introduce your own explanation.
- Write a one page memo on your independent variable. How do you define your independent variable? What are the “values” or categories on your IV? Can you give some examples to illustrate different values on the IV? If you are doing a

quantitative analysis, are there datasets that you might be able to use to measure your IV?

- Complete a full thesis proposal (about 5 pages). The proposal typically addresses: 1) the puzzle or problem and the research question, 2) the broader relevance of the topic, 3) the scholarly relevance of the topic (how will you build or improve on previous scholarship?), 4) the proposed thesis or argument you will propose as an answer to your question, 5) how you will use evidence to assess your argument.

December

Goal: A draft of one chapter.

Potential deliverables:

- Complete a full draft of one chapter of your choice. This can be an introductory chapter, including the literature review; a brief historical background chapter; or a research design chapter.
- A sketch of your literature review. What are the broad existing explanations for your DV? Ask me for examples.
- Provide an annotated table of contents (like an outline) for your thesis: think of it as a listing of chapters with a brief description of the purpose of that chapter in view of the entire thesis.
- Make a plan for how to use your holiday break effectively. I recommend using your time for evidence gathering and writing. Check in with me to discuss concrete tasks specific to your project.

January

Goal: A draft of one chapter.

Potential deliverables:

- Complete a full draft of a chapter.
- (If not already completed): Provide an annotated table of contents (like an outline) for your thesis: think of it as a listing of chapters with a brief description of the purpose of that chapter in view of the entire thesis.

Late February/Early March

Goal: A full draft of the thesis. Draft dates are set externally - check with your program!

Deliverables:

- Turn in a full draft of your thesis. It is important to leave adequate time for me to read and provide feedback on your thesis, and for you to have time to incorporate

that feedback.

March/April

Goal: Finish it! Due dates are set externally - check with your program!

Deliverables:

- Revise thesis based on feedback, and turn in the full draft! Congratulate yourself for a job well done and for reaching this important capstone moment in your college career!

Helpful Hints

1. Don't be a stranger.

Although the senior thesis is an independent research project, I am here to offer guidance. There is no point in wandering around in the dark. If you are struggling, come talk to me.

2. Take advantage of a wealth of resources for your literature review.

You can find scholarly work in many places. Google Scholar is NOT usually the most useful starting point. You will be better served by consulting existing syllabi (perhaps from a class that motivated your interest in a particular question) to identify the most important works on your topic. From there, utilize their citations, or check Google Scholar to see who has cited that piece of literature. Of course, you may consult with me as well. Additionally, Jeremy Darrington, the Politics Librarian at Firestone Library, is an amazing resource for you. I encourage you to reach out to him at jdarring@princeton.edu to set up an appointment to talk about your project.

3. When in doubt, always cite.

Whenever you use someone else's own words or their ideas, cite that person. It is always better to err on the side of over-citation. It matters less what system you use and more that you cite correctly and consistently. To that end, it does not matter to me which system you use, though I have a preference for author-date, in-text citation systems such as APSA (American Political Science Association) or Chicago. Lots of online and library resources are available for the most common citation systems.

4. Less is (often) more.

How long should a thesis be? As long as it needs to be (provided, of course, you do not exceed the page limit)! There is a reason for that frustratingly imprecise answer: your thesis should be long enough to make its points effectively, while avoiding the pitfalls of fluff and filler. Consequently, the length of a thesis will vary. Effective theses typically fall somewhere between 75-100 pages, sometimes less, rarely more.

5. Organization matters.

The single most common problem I've seen in student written work is organization. You may have uncovered a groundbreaking discovery in your research, but no one will ever know if your writing is poorly organized. Outlines often help, if only to sketch out a road map of your thesis. The hallmarks of good organization include logical flow and copious "sign-posting," which is the practice of using textual cues to help your reader figure out what you're doing and where you're trying to go. Sign-posting language can include enumeration (first, second, third, last) or sentences that indicate the purpose of some section or subsection ("In this section I address three potential alternative hypotheses."). Use topic sentences and make sure each paragraph sticks to

that topic (one idea per paragraph!). Your reader should be able to follow the logic of your writing by reading only the topic sentences.

6. Style, spelling, and grammar also matter.

Pay attention to style, grammar, and spelling, and refrain from abusing the thesaurus. You are welcome to use the third person or first person in your writing. Direct, active voice is almost always better than indirect, passive voice. Write this: “The rebels defeated the government.” Avoid this: “The government was defeated by the rebels.” The former is direct, active; the latter is indirect, passive.

For more on writing, I suggest the following resources:

Henry Farrell on writing:

http://www.henryfarrell.net/pol_science_essays.pdf

Christopher Blattman on writing:

<http://chrisblattman.com/2010/02/17/how-to-write-an-essay/>

7. Back up your work regularly.

Save your work daily and in multiple locations. Computer crashes happen to everyone, but they need not result in the loss of weeks or even months of work. To be on the safe side, create multiple backups in the cloud and on external media. Trust me: a little preparation will go a long way should you find yourself on the wrong side of a broken hard drive.

8. Dedicate regular time for your thesis.

The long-term nature of a thesis means that it is easy to prioritize the short-term demands of your courses over the thesis. This is a trap: the thesis cannot be completed in a few weeks or even a month before the final deadline. To avoid falling into this scenario, dedicate regular time to working on your thesis. For some students, blocking out time on their calendars is a useful strategy. For others, setting weekly writing goals, particularly in the late fall and in the spring terms, is extremely helpful. For yet others, finding a writing partner adds a valuable source of external accountability.