



Thinking Thesis?

AN INFORMAL WORKSHOP FOR
PROSPECTIVE THESIS WRITERS

What is a thesis in Government?

A ~80-150 page academic research manuscript

All GOVT theses are honors theses -- receive Credit, Honors (most), or High Honors

Enroll in a 1-credit thesis tutorial in the fall, and another 1-credit thesis tutorial in the spring

Meet ~weekly/monthly with a thesis advisor, typically in the GOVT department

Most students
shouldn't write a
thesis.

Better uses of your senior year

Taking interesting classes

Spending time with friends

Spending time with significant other

Job search

Athletics

Leadership roles on campus

Why do you want to write a thesis?

Wrong answers

“I want honors on my transcript”

“It looks good to grad schools”

“My parents said I should”

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Wrong answers

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"It looks good to grad schools"

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Right answer

"I am **desperate** to understand how foreign investment from China is changing how people think about politics, and **Google doesn't know**, so I need to find out myself, and I'm super stoked to practice data analysis"

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Right answer

"I did study abroad in Cuba and was **fascinated** by how the tourism industry talked about Cuba's history and I think politics play a role but **I don't know** and I want to find out and I want to go back to Cuba to figure this out"

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Right answer

"I loved my economic growth class and all the papers we read investigating the long-run effects of historical institutions, and I remember learning about haciendas in high school and was **curious** why **no one has looked at them**, and I think it would be **fun** to try a similar kind of project"

Your thesis topic should make you want to wake up at 7am on a Saturday and go to Olin.

Benefits of writing a thesis

1. The intrinsic joy of answering the question that plagued you
2. Practicing methods you have learned in your coursework
3. Learning about yourself - do you do well without structure? do you like research? do you want to go to grad school?

Alternatives to a thesis

Any GOVT seminar that requires a final research project

GOVT 401/402 Individual Tutorial (~40 page research paper, 1 credit, 1 semester)

CSPL 480 Engaged Projects (not GOVT-affiliated, more real-world oriented)

What should I write on?

Expand on a paper you've written for a class

Explore a topic you haven't been able to take a class on

Identify what you want to be doing (e.g. interviews, text analysis, etc.)

Think about your unique networks, skills, area/language expertise...

... and then talk to your professors about how to go from topic → research question!

Sidebar -- PT

Types of theory theses

1. Choose a single thinker and trace how the contours of their idea evolve
2. Choose a set of thinkers and provide a new interpretation of how they think about something, and then argue what is gained by reinterpreting them
3. Choose a single thinker, explain how they see a concept, then apply it to a policy or set of institutional questions

Junior Year Timeline

Winter Break	Brainstorm possible topics
Late January	Meet with possible advisors to define a research question
February	Draft proposal (includes thorough literature review)
March XX (TBD)	Deadline! Thesis proposals due
March 26	Deadline! Davenport Grant applications due
April	Acceptances go out

Meeting with possible advisors

Any permanent, visiting, or affiliated GOVT faculty can advise your thesis

Most of us take on only 1-3 theses per year - in your interest to act first! 🐦🔴

Advisors will probably be more engaged with projects they helped shape initially

Conversation starters:

I'm interested in X / I have this skill set in X / I've previously done X ... how could I make this into a research question? what theories or literatures should I read?

The application process

Have a strong proposal

Have a faculty member who is willing to advise you

OK if you don't have this ironed out, but getting professor support is helpful

Have completed/enrolled in 5 GOVT courses with GOVT GPA of 91.7 + Stage 1

Senior Year Timeline (Example)

Summer	Collect data, trial-and-error, more reading...
September	Revise proposal, write literature review
Pre-Thanksgiving	Analyze data and produce figures/tables
Pre-Winter Break	Write introduction and theory chapters
Winter Break	Write research design and results chapters
Pre-Spring Break	Explore an extension (puzzling finding?)
Spring Break	Revise previous chapters, write conclusion