



## Introduction to the Honors Program in Political Science

Unlike papers written for most classes, an honors thesis must be a substantial piece of research and writing. The thesis should demonstrate the student's mastery of a major debate or problematic area within the discipline of political science, conduct research to address a major question, and show evidence of the student's independent thought about and evaluation of a significant issue. A good honors thesis will identify an unresolved problem in a field of Political Science and set out to solve it.

The thesis should show that the student has a good grasp on the way that political scientists have approached the question but will also lay out the student's own approach, differentiating it from what has been done before. The student is expected to go beyond a mere recitation of evidence and theoretical perspectives, working instead to develop an analysis of a question that they have formulated carefully. Most theses in Political Science will combine an analysis of theoretical literature with some sort of empirical research, though some students may choose to focus solely on theory. All acceptable theses will be well organized and will have clear framings of the problem or issue they set out to address at the very beginning. They will also present a credible argument supporting their approaches and using evidence effectively to bolster their reasoning.

### Why Write an Honors Thesis?

Writing an honors thesis will take most students at least an entire academic year. It will often be a lonely and frustrating process, since once you begin writing, you will not have the companionship and support that comes from taking classes together with others who are going through the same experiences. Why should you nonetheless undertake the challenge of writing a thesis?

First, it is the only way to graduate with honors in the department. Graduating with honors tells future employers and educators that you have undertaken a major research project with minimal guidance from faculty and followed it through to the end. It shows that you can do more than follow instructions and do well on bluebook examinations; it attests to your critical and organizational abilities in a convincing way. Particularly if you are thinking of going on to professional or graduate school, being able to tell prospective institutions that you are writing or have written a thesis will strengthen your application by providing evidence of your preparation for the next educational level. It will also help you to compete against students from institutions at which most seniors applying to professional and graduate schools write theses. Finally, you will have a strong writing sample to send to prospective employers and educators.

The professional advantages to be gained from writing a thesis, however, only scratch the surface of the many reasons why you should accept the challenge. Once you have gone through the experience, you will find that your writing abilities have improved to a great degree. You will be better able to formulate interesting questions and to carry out large-scale research projects. Your analytical skills will be sharper. On a broader level, you will learn a lot about how to motivate yourself to accomplish things when there is no class deadline breathing down your neck. You will be able to work more independently and with less supervision as a result of the experience. You will also most likely get to know your advisor well and will find in this person a wealth of information and experience that will benefit you no matter what you go on to do. Last but not least, you will learn a great deal about a topic that you find provocative and interesting, leading to the personal satisfaction and self confidence that arise from having accomplished a major goal that you've set for yourself.

## Suggestions for Developing the Topic for the Honors Thesis

The question that will form the basis for the thesis should be developed carefully in consultation with a faculty member. Upper-division courses in political science are often good resources for getting ideas for theses and provide opportunities to get to know potential thesis advisors. It usually takes a year to formulate a workable question and answer, so students are strongly encouraged to begin thinking about potential thesis topics early. Many students will find that initial ideas arise in upper-division courses taken in the junior year; they will then connect with an advisor and do some reading and thinking over the summer between the junior and the senior year. Writing a good thesis is often a year-long project, so getting an early start on the process of formulating the research question is vital to ensure success.

### Timeline: Prospectus Writing (PS 411) and Thesis credits (PS 403)

Students writing honors theses are required\* to enroll in PS 411 Honors Thesis Prospectus. This course will serve several purposes. First and foremost, it will enable students writing theses to make connections with other students who are going through the process at the same time. It will help students to frame their topics more effectively within the discipline of political science. It will provide opportunities for brainstorming and troubleshooting. Finally, it will help each student develop a prospectus, or a workable plan, detailing the topic of the thesis and the research materials and methods that the student will use.

PS 411 Honors Thesis Prospectus is offered on a pass/no pass basis, only. The course will meet five times during the quarter. The meetings will be devoted to getting students started on their prospectus and giving them the opportunity to present their prospectus to the class. At the end of the quarter each student will submit their completed prospectus to the thesis advisor and second reader for approval. After submitting a successful prospectus, a passing grade will be entered for PS 411.

If the student has passed PS 411, maintained a PS GPA of 3.7 as well as a 3.5 cumulative GPA, and submitted a completed Honors Agreement to the department, they will be cleared to register for PS 403 Thesis during Winter term. **All students writing honors theses are required to complete PS 403.** The thesis will be written in Winter term while enrolled in PS 403. Students will use their prospectus as a roadmap and work closely with their advisor and second reader. The first draft of the thesis is due the last day of classes; Week 10 of Winter term. It is important that honors students utilize office hours and stay in close contact with their advisor and second reader throughout the writing process.

In the first week of Spring term, honors students will receive comments back from their advisor and second reader. Then, they will have a few weeks to make revisions. The final version is due Monday of Week 5 during Spring Term.

Along with taking PS 411 & PS 403, students may also register for 1-2 credits of PS 401 Research or PS 405 Reading during Spring term, under the supervision of their thesis advisor, while they finish editing their thesis. The form to request to enroll in PS 401/405 credits can be found at [polisci.uoregon.edu/undergraduates/independent-credit](http://polisci.uoregon.edu/undergraduates/independent-credit).

**NOTE:** \*Honors College students are encouraged to complete PS 411, however it is optional. If you choose to opt-out, you will need to submit the PS Honors Program: Intent to Enroll form by finals week of Spring term and the Honors Program Agreement by week 6 of Fall term. Find the forms at [polisci.uoregon.edu/undergraduates/honors-program](http://polisci.uoregon.edu/undergraduates/honors-program).

## **The Thesis Advisor and the Second Reader**

Each student writing an honors thesis must have a primary thesis advisor and a second reader, both of whom are generally faculty members in the Political Science Department. Very occasionally the department may approve a second reader from another department if the topic of the thesis warrants going outside of Political Science. The thesis advisor is the principal faculty member with whom the student will work, while the second reader is available for occasional questions prior to reading and approving the final version of the thesis.

The advisor helps the student formulate a workable research question, often suggesting materials to read and places to go to find empirical information. This faculty member then oversees the process of writing, helping the student to develop a schedule for completing drafts of sections. The advisor will also read the thesis as the student is writing it, providing feedback along the way to keep the student on track. In selecting a thesis advisor, the student should try to find someone who knows a lot about the thesis topic and who will have the time to give the student adequate feedback. Planning in advance is helpful in securing a good thesis advisor, as most faculty members are unable to supervise more than two theses in any given quarter.

The second reader has a more limited role in the process. The student should keep the second reader informed about their progress on the thesis throughout the time they are writing, but the second reader does not need to see drafts as frequently as the advisor. At a minimum, however, the second reader should receive a full outline of the thesis early in the writing process, the second-to-last draft of the thesis, and the last draft of the thesis. This will enable the author to deal with any problems that the second reader raises before time becomes a serious problem.

## **Points about Argumentation and Length**

### Argumentation

An honors thesis in any field of Political Science has three basic parts. The first is a clear and concise explanation of the main argument of the thesis itself. The second, which comprises the bulk of the thesis, is a presentation of the argumentation and evidence that will convince the reader that the argument is valid. The final part is an explanation of the implications of the argument.

### Length

An honors thesis in political science should range between 16,000 and 30,000 words. Your thesis should not fall substantially below 16,000 words or significantly exceed 30,000 words. In standard manuscript pages, this translates into a document of between 45 and 100 pages. Theses that fall outside of these limits run the risk of not being accepted by the readers or the honors committee.

## **Questions and Concerns about the Honors Program**

Questions about the PS Honors Program can be directed to our Undergraduate Coordinator ([polisci@uoregon.edu](mailto:polisci@uoregon.edu); 541-346-4864).