

## Senior Theses

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A senior thesis is a sustained and sophisticated attempt to answer a question that you pose. It should be broad enough that literature already exists on the subject, but not so broad that there is no possible answer. For example a question like “what is the relationship between democracy and development” is interesting, but too broad to be a successful senior essay. A perhaps better formulation is “how have democratization attempts and development policies shaped economic growth in Chile and Argentina”. Even better: “The move toward floating exchange rates in Chile and Argentina produced very different economic outcomes. Why? Is it related to political institutions in each country?” Importantly, though, thinking of the first question as your initial “topic” can guide early readings that turn into a more specific question as you become more informed about the literature.

1. Subject matter
  - a. It is important to pick a topic for a long project carefully. You will work on the project for a while, so you have to be interested in the answer to the question you pose.
  - b. Starting in your junior year, keep a list of potential topics somewhere on your hard drive.
  - c. If you don't have a topic when the year begins, The “Annual Review” journals, Oxford “handbooks”, textbook explanations, or generalist journals in any field, often provide keys to research frontiers.
  - d. An advantage of picking a topic early is that you have more time to discover what questions remain unanswered in that general area. Sometimes, the real question only reveals itself after a long time of learning about a given subject.
2. Substance
  - a. Something that distinguishes a thesis from a reading response (besides the length) is that the main goal is to make an *argument* to answer the question you have posed.
  - b. Make sure to position the question & argument in a broader context.
3. Quality of Writing:
  - a. You should attempt to find your own “voice”. Elegant writing helps get your point across.
  - b. Numbers less than 10 should be written out, i.e. (four students, 16 students).
  - c. Do not write with acronyms or jargon;
  - d. Avoid the passive voice (note that US versus European conventions differ);
  - e. Best to avoid “we” when there is only a single author (again, conventions differ);
  - f. Do not use conjunctions (i.e. Don't use “Don't”...Use Do Not ☺);
  - g. Do not use a thesaurus to find more sophisticated words – often these break up the flow of writing and read strangely.
4. Math:

- a. Make sure to double-check all mathematical equations (including sub-scripts in regression equations) with your basic econometrics textbooks.
  - b. When you use numbers, including percentages and income figures, always use referents in other major currencies or to other countries' figures.
  - c. In formal writing, write "percent" instead of %, and USD instead of \$.
  - d. Finally, always interpret regression coefficients relative to relevant baselines (like averages of the independent variable and standard deviation shifts). You can even compare the magnitude of the effects you find to those of other, similar studies.
5. Scholarly evidence:
- a. Use quotes sparingly (better to reformulate ideas in your own voice);
  - b. Literature reviews are boring when they are a list of findings. Try instead to categorize research around themes or hypotheses and give an overarching summary.
  - c. If you cite someone (i.e. "according to so-and-so (2011)) make sure to tell us why we care about so-and-so's taxonomy, system, etc.
6. Figures:
- a. All figures in the report should be described in the body of the text.
  - b. Make sure to use high quality images if you are replicating from another author's work.
  - c. Number all figures and tables and give a detailed explanation *within* the figure legend reporting source, year the data refer to, and the definition of the data. A figure should be understandable entirely on its own.
7. Non-native English writers:
- a. It may help to write a few papers in your native tongue first and then translate, so you will learn to write a well-structured argument before you try to think in English.
  - b. Have a native speaker/ writing center tutor edit **every single piece of assessed writing** before you turn it in. Sometimes poor syntax and bad grammar can move you from a distinction to merit or merit to pass.
8. Document formatting:
- a. Use Serif fonts (like Times, Garamond);
  - b. Submit in **unlocked** PDF because often people take notes inside while marking;
  - c. Always double space.
9. Recommended readings:
- a. Strunk and White *The elements of style*.
  - b. Karen Elizabeth Gordon *The well-tempered sentence*.

## Example Outline

- **Introduction**, which contains a statement of the research question, the argument, the key method and evidence used to make the argument, (3-5p).
- **Literature review**, which contains a concise, conceptual overview of the theoretical arguments that have been used to answer your question (or similar questions) in the past, what they would predict, and a succinct summary of the empirical literature on related subjects focusing particularly on the findings (5-7 p).
- **Method**, a description and defense of the method that you use – statistics, case studies, interviews, archives, experiments, formal models. There should be a description of the data (if any) and a table with the complete list of sources and summary statistics of all variables (mean, standard deviation, observations, years covered, etc.) (1-3 p).
- **Analysis**, the key part of the thesis, this is where you use your method to evaluate the evidence that could prove or disprove your argument. If it is a statistical analysis you want a statistical model (mathematically) and to think about endogeneity concerns, and also to do robustness checks to verify your findings hold up when other factors are included (10-15 p.)
- **Discussion**, which considers the limits of your findings (or their potential applications elsewhere), perhaps discusses policy implications, endogeneity concerns, etc. (1-4p.)
- **Conclusion**, summarizes the argument, the evidence, and makes the case that your evidence points to your hypothesis better than other hypotheses. Perhaps describes what can be done in the future to follow up or improve this line of research in the future (1-4p.)
- **References**, a bibliography with complete citations of works you cite in the paper (not just works you read).
- **Appendix**, with additional material related to data collection, additional analyses, list of archives visited, etc.

## Timeline

Junior year:

*Mid March*: Identify broad topic and read review essays, handbooks, and textbook accounts.

*End March*: get a reading list together

*End April*: outline of literature review, and sketch topic.

*End May*: Complete literature review and statement of research question, potential method, and evidence.

Senior year:

*Summer and Fall:* reading and data collection. Description of method by end of fall term.

*End of January:* preliminary analyses

*End of February:* Changes to the draft and more analyses.

*Mid March:* Outline of introduction and conclusion

*Mid April:* Full Rough Draft

*End of April*