

Completing an Honors Thesis in Political Science

What is Expected of an Honors Thesis?

An Honors thesis is a significant scholarly project at the undergraduate level. The thesis should make a contribution to existing scholarly literature in your chosen area, although that contribution will generally be less substantial than is required for a graduate thesis. This means that your thesis will probably be the most sustained and involved research effort of your undergraduate career.

There is no set length or content for your thesis: your thesis advisor will have the ultimate say about when your thesis is complete and ready to defend formally. As a rule of thumb, Political Science Honors theses tend to be at least twice as long as a departmental capstone paper. Capstone papers are typically 20-30 pages, so an Honors thesis in Political Science will typically be at least 50-60 pages long. If this sounds overwhelming, think of your thesis as composed of several smaller pieces—for example, an introduction, a literature review, two 15-page chapters, and a conclusion—each of which is more of manageable size.

How Do I Choose an Advisor?

Choosing your thesis advisor is one of the most important decisions you face in writing your thesis. The best strategy is to take upper-division Political Science courses as soon as possible so you can get to know possible advisors and their areas of interest. A good thesis often builds on things that you learned about in an upper-division class. Conversely, *it is nearly impossible to write a strong thesis in an area where you have had no coursework*. How can you expect to write an Honors thesis on some aspect of, for example, Japanese politics, if you have not already taken a course in this area? In fact, some professors may refuse to serve as your thesis advisor if they have not already taught you in an upper-division course on a similar topic. The Political Science department does not require that you have studied before with your advisor or taken courses in his or her area of interest, but we do strongly encourage it.*

Advisors for Political Science Honors theses must be full-time faculty in Political Science (including both permanent and visiting faculty). Part-time faculty or faculty from other departments may not serve as advisors but may serve as thesis referees: see below. Also, because you will be working on your thesis for about a year, you should make sure your advisor will be in residence at BYU during that entire time period.

The department Honors Coordinator can help you identify possible thesis advisors given your interests. It is a good idea to schedule a meeting with the coordinator early in your junior year (or even late in your sophomore year, if possible) to help you identify possible advisors. This will allow you to choose courses during your junior year that will prepare you for your

*For the same reason, we generally do not allow non-Political Science majors to write their Honors thesis in Political Science. The department Honors coordinator, in consultation with the proposed thesis advisor, may make rare exceptions for non-majors with demonstrated research skills (i.e., Poli Sci 200) and significant upper-division Political Science coursework in the area of the thesis. Coursework in related disciplines is *not* sufficient.

thesis. Remember also that any potential advisor has a wide variety of responsibilities that may keep him or her from working with you: it is wise to consider more than one possible advisor.

What is the Role of the Referee?

The thesis referee is the second reader for your project. Typically, he or she is chosen to provide complementary expertise to that of your advisor. The referee will have the most direct input at the thesis prospectus stage (when he or she must approve the design of your project) and at the thesis defense (when he or she will participate in questioning you about your project and deciding if it is sufficient). Many referees will be willing to provide feedback more frequently. You should think of the referee as a useful additional resource for your thesis work and involve him or her whenever possible.

Your referee will often be a full-time Political Scientist, but may also be a part-time faculty member or a member of another department with relevant expertise.

Can I Do Part of My Honors Thesis as Capstone Paper?

Because the Political Science department already requires all its majors to complete a significant scholarly research project in a capstone seminar, it is often possible to combine a capstone paper with your Honors project. Working with your capstone instructor and your thesis advisor, you may be able to design a capstone project that fits within the scope of your larger Honors project. Completing your capstone paper might even help you accomplish as much as half the work necessary for your thesis. The deadlines and intermediate projects of a capstone course are also a good way to make sure your Honors thesis gets done in a timely fashion. For these reasons, the Political Science department encourages Honors students to try to combine these two significant projects.

However, you should be aware that this will *not* work in every case. Capstone course topics are chosen by individual faculty members and there is no guarantee that a capstone course on the topic you want will be offered when you want it. Nor are capstone instructors under any obligation to stretch their paper requirements to fit your thesis topic. A thesis on the Japanese Diet may or may not fit within the confines of a course on Congress; the capstone instructor has full discretion.

Students who are unable to combine a capstone with their particular project may instead receive 3 hours of PLSC 499 credit for working on the thesis. You should sign up through the department Curriculum coordinator. But we do *not* allow students to “triple count” their work by receiving *both* capstone *and* PLSC 499 credit for an Honors thesis.**

** This does not affect Honors 499 credit. Check with the Honors Program to see if you can receive Honors 499 credit in addition to the capstone or Poli Sci 499.

What is Expected of a Thesis Prospectus?

A prospectus is a statement summarizing the research you intend to do in your thesis. You might think of it as a “beefed up” PLSC 200 research design. *Be aware that the Political Science department takes the thesis prospectus very seriously because we see it as the prerequisite to a strong thesis.* A weak or vague prospectus almost always leads to a weak or muddled thesis. Extra effort at the prospectus stage can prevent later mistakes and misunderstandings that waste your time, and try your advisor’s patience. It is to your advantage to start your journey with a strong prospectus.

Once you, your advisor, and your referee have all agreed to the form of your thesis prospectus, you should fill out the Thesis Proposal form (available from the Honors Program), obtain the signature of your advisor, and submit the form and the prospectus to the department Honors coordinator for review. Detailed instructions and samples are available from the Honors Program (or on their website), but a strong prospectus always includes:

- a. *Purpose*: this has two parts:
 - *General Problem Area*: a brief statement of the general topic you will study and why it is worth studying.
 - *Research Question*: a specific question (or closely related set of questions) you intend to investigate.
- b. *Literature Review (or Background and Significance)*: a survey of the existing scholarly literature around your question and an explanation of how your topic fits into, and contributes to, that literature.
- c. *Research Methods*: a specific description of the procedures you expect to follow to answer your question; this typically includes discussion of hypotheses, case selection, data sources, methods of inference, etc. For theses in political philosophy, this section of the prospectus would typically focus on texts you plan to examine, methods of examination, and how conclusions will be reached.
- d. *Tentative Outline*: a detailed outline helps ensure that you and your advisor have the same vision of what your project will entail. (Can your outline change before you submit your final thesis? Of course. If you’ve learned anything along the way, it almost always will.)
- e. *Preliminary Bibliography*: list the sources you have already consulted and those you have found that will be helpful in your research.

Pay special attention to the Research Methods section. Before submitting your prospectus for review, carefully plan your research procedure with the aid of your advisor. And be sure to explicitly describe your research plans in the prospectus.

Do not be discouraged if your first prospectus is returned to you for revisions: high-quality scholarly projects (whether by students or by faculty) rarely emerge at the first draft. Your advisor and the Honors coordinator are simply trying to prepare you to do your best work.

What are the Deadlines?

Strong Honors theses begin with good planning in your sophomore and junior years. As mentioned above, you should already be thinking about your thesis topic and potential advisors by the beginning of your junior year, so that you can begin more specific coursework and planning *before* your senior year. The Honors Program requires that your prospectus be completed roughly 11 months before your planned graduation: May 15th for April graduation, September 15th for August graduation, January 15th for December graduation. These deadlines are not set in stone and both the Political Science department and the Honors Program are often willing to extend those deadlines for well-designed projects. However, the Political Science Honors coordinator will not sign off on a project after those deadlines if he or she believes the project cannot be completed, with honor, during the remaining time until graduation. If circumstances have kept you from completing a prospectus with enough time until graduation, you may have to extend your graduation date to allow more time to complete a strong thesis.

The deadline for completing your thesis is roughly 2½ months before your graduation: February 1st for April graduation, June 1st for August graduation, October 1st for December graduation. This deadline is firmly applied by the Honors Program, and they have a thesis submission form your advisor must sign, indicating that your thesis is complete and ready to defend. In practice, this means *you should have a completed draft of the entire thesis to your advisor at least one month before the Honors deadline (by January 1st, May 1st, or September 1st, respectively)*, so that he or she can make comments and suggest necessary revisions. Do not expect that you can turn in a first draft right before the Honors deadline and have your advisor “rubber stamp” your incomplete thesis: he or she will more likely suggest that you delay your graduation to give you time to reach the standards of an Honors thesis.

How Do I Write a Strong Thesis?

If you have completed a strong prospectus by the beginning of your senior year, you are already well on your way to writing an excellent thesis. The most important additional step you can take is to start giving your advisor written drafts of thesis materials as soon as possible. Some students make the mistake of spending months and months in the library without ever going to their advisor for feedback. The thesis is then hurriedly written in a single draft and submitted to the advisor without enough time for substantial revisions.

A successful Honors thesis cannot be written in the last weeks before the deadline. Like any scholarly project, it requires a repeated cycle of reading, thinking, writing, receiving feedback, and then more reading, thinking, and writing. Break your thesis up into smaller components and submit each piece to your advisor as it is completed. While you wait for your advisor’s comments, move on to the next piece. This allows your advisor to give you crucial feedback at an early stage that will save you from many wasted hours later on. It is also psychologically easier to tackle such a large project in smaller stages. By the time you approach the deadline, you will have made substantial revisions to your early drafts, and you and your advisor will already have agreed on the bulk of your thesis. All that you will have left to do is to bring all the components of the thesis together into a single, seamless package. You will

probably be surprised at how much stronger your thesis will be if you break the work up in this way and obtain frequent feedback from your advisor.

What Happens at the Thesis Defense?

Once you and your advisor have notified the Honors Program that your thesis is ready to defend, you will help coordinate a time when you can meet with your advisor, your referee, and a representative of the Honors Program. The department Honors coordinator is often invited as well but it is not necessary that he or she attend.

If you have worked with your advisor to write and then revise your thesis in a timely fashion, your actual thesis defense will be straightforward. The form of the defense varies from case to case, but you will probably start with an oral synopsis of your project and you should be prepared to answer a wide range of questions about your research design choices, your findings, and their relevance to the wider literature. Feel free to ask your advisor beforehand what kind of questions he or she sees as most likely in your case. Finally, you will also be asked about your broader Honors experience at the university—coursework, portfolio, etc. Once questioning is completed, you will be asked to leave the room while the panel members discuss your project and preparation. Immediately after they have finished their discussion, they will inform you of their decision.

What is the Role of the Department Honors Coordinator?

The Political Science Honors coordinator's role is to help you successfully navigate the route to an excellent Honors thesis. The coordinator helps you identify possible advisors and referees, and may even be able to help you brainstorm about thesis topics. The coordinator guides you in writing a strong prospectus to get your thesis off to a good start. While the Honors Program office is the best source of advice about official Honors requirements and procedures, the Political Science Honors coordinator is available at any point on your journey to answer questions and give advice about your thesis. Good luck!

revised: October 2004