

Honors Thesis Guide

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The expectations and requirements for successful Honors Theses vary both across the College and within the Dep. of Government & Law.

This guide was written to assist students interested in working with me as the chair (or primary advisor) for their Honors Thesis committee.

Topics covered in this guide:

1. Why write a thesis?
2. Prerequisites to enroll in the thesis program
3. Requirements for a successful thesis
4. Meetings and workflow
5. Before your senior year (Summer)
6. Senior year (Fall)
7. Senior year (Spring)
8. What should you expect in the Honors Thesis Defense?
9. Helpful resources
10. List of academic journals to get you going
11. Final advice

[1] Why do you want to write an Honors Thesis?

Before committing to a thesis, we should discuss why you – specifically you, not some generic student – really feel compelled to complete a thesis.

- You'll likely spend a full year dedicated to working on this.
- There are so many *good* reasons to write a thesis, but:
 - You do not have to write a thesis.
 - You can be extraordinarily successful without completing a Thesis.

The Thesis naturally crowds out many other valuable uses of your time. For example:

- [a] take other electives at the College
- [b] take fewer courses (depending on your remaining requirements)
- [c] spend time searching for jobs
- [d] prepare for graduate school
- [e] enjoy more time with Laf. friends on campus in your final year
- [f] engage in new meaningful community service activities
- [g] pursue new hobbies/extracurricular activities, etc.

List the reason(s) why you want to pursue an Honors thesis.

- Be extremely honest. This is not a test or an interview.
- Knowing your motives can allow me to help you craft a thesis that works for you.
 - E.g., develop technical skills or network with certain organizations

Have you considered an Independent Study instead?

- Keep in mind:
 - Independent Studies are one-semester commitments.
 - You don't have to work over Summer/Winter break with an Independent Study.
 - The final project in an Independent Study doesn't have to be a long essay.
 - You do not receive a 400-level seminar credit with an Independent Study.
 - You do not need a full committee for an Independent Study.
- Honors Theses are much harder; Independent Studies can be incredibly rewarding.
- They are very different experiences, but both allow you to study something you care deeply about over several months.

[2] What are the prerequisites for attempting an Honors Thesis?

One faculty member needs to agree to be your primary thesis advisor.

- That faculty member will be from your Major department.
- Faculty *typically* work with no more than 1-2 Thesis students per year.
- You should not assume that any faculty member will agree to work with you.

In GOVT, you must speak with primary advisors by Jan. 31st of your Junior year.

- There is some flexibility (up to course registration limits) under college guidelines.
- Faculty availability is the main constraint; don't assume someone can work with you.
- Like other professors, I often decline to work with highly qualified thesis students.
- It's better to have a first conversation as early as possible.

You can line up the remaining members of your committee *much* later.

- Each committee will include:
 - [1] a primary advisor (i.e., a chair)
 - This is the most important person on your committee.
 - [2] an additional member of the Major department
 - This is usually someone in the same subfield (e.g., American politics)
 - [3] an outside reader (a faculty member from a different department).
 - This can be anyone, but it's usually someone with related interests.
- Most students exclusively work with the primary advisor for several months.
- All committee members must agree that your final project meets Laf. standards.

The Department has some additional requirements:

- GPA: 3.0
- Major GPA: 3.2
- A required methods course (listed on the relevant department website).
- Faculty members can waive requirements.

Individual faculty members can waive or add to these requirements.

- Assume it is rare to waive requirements and common to add to them.
- Always ask your potential advisor about their prerequisites and expectations.

Students working with me, specifically, must have completed GOVT275 (Political Analysis)

- It is rare that I waive this requirement.
- Occasionally I will allow students to enroll in the course during the Fall, Senior year.
- All assignments in GOVT275 allow you to simultaneously progress on your Thesis.

[3] What are the requirements for successfully defending a Thesis?

The College standards are pretty vague.

- Read what the College says here: <https://advising.lafayette.edu/honors-thesis/>
- In short: “outstanding performance” and “contribution to scholarship” are key.

The Department’s standards are very specific and very important.

- Read this detailed website: <https://govlaw.lafayette.edu/program/honors-thesis/>
- Most GOVT theses are between 80 and 100 double-spaced pages
- *If your Thesis fails to meet Department standards, you will not receive honors.*

Students working with me as their primary advisor must meet these additional requirements.

- Formulate and investigate clear causal questions.
 - Your topic must be on U.S. political institutions, behavior, or public policy.
 - The thesis must include a comprehensive discussion of causal inference.
 - You must address the following concepts quite explicitly:
 - Internal validity, counterfactuals, and confounding variables.
 - External validity, samples, and populations of interest.
 - You should also clearly identify the following early in your thesis:
 - treatment variable
 - outcome variable
 - directional prediction
 - Causal questions should be informed by subject matter expertise/prior work.
- Effectively visualize quantitative data.
 - You must include several well-edited and effective data visualizations.
 - You must use R (ggplot, tidyverse, etc.) unless I approve in writing.
 - Start with an excellent version of a very simple analysis and build out.
 - *You may satisfy this requirement with descriptive or causal work.*
 - Qualitative evidence is also encouraged but not strictly required.
- Edit until you have effectively communicated your point.
 - Cut unnecessary language, and construct direct sentences. Organize your sentences and paragraphs intentionally and logically, and edit your work before you send it my way.
- *If your thesis fails to meet these standards, you will not receive honors.*

Here are two prototypical approaches:

1. The Descriptive Data Viz Thesis
 - Ask a causal question based on prior research.
 - Collect new and relevant observational data.
 - Visualize key patterns in the data effectively (using R).
 - Consider what these patterns might mean for future causal work.
 - Critique your own work.
2. The Experimental Thesis
 - Ask a causal question based upon prior research.
 - Run an experiment (survey or other) to generate new relevant data.
 - Visualize key patterns in the data effectively (using R).
 - Evaluate the relationship between your treatment and outcome.
 - Critique your own work.

[4] What will our meetings and collaborative workflow look like?

Join the Gov Lab Discord, which we will use as our primary form of communication.

- Download the Discord app on your phone and computer.
- Create an account *using your Lafayette email address*.
- Join the server: <https://discord.gg/BWy8kwPSNJ>
- Make sure your name is your real first and last name (not a user name).
- Drop me a message.

Schedule meetings using Google Calendar.

- I expect that we will meet once per week throughout your thesis project.
- Use my Google Calendar availability to propose a few standing meeting times.
- Once we agree upon a time, I will send you a Google Calendar event.

You will upload all relevant documents to a shared Google Drive folder.

- I will create the folder for you at the start of the summer before your Senior year.
- All draft chapters are single-spaced and editable as a Google Doc.

You should typically send something written 24 hours before each meeting.

- Meetings are most productive with something concrete on the agenda.
- Sometimes, this will be a chapter draft of a thesis.
- Other times, it might be some written notes, a research design, or a list of authors.
- Writing something out and sending it to me in advance has several virtues:
 - It forces you to think through problems and tasks in a new way.
 - It ensures we do not meet unless we have something on the agenda.
 - It can keep our meetings more focused and efficient.
- If I do not receive something in writing, I will generally cancel our meeting until you have something for us to discuss.
- If you cannot get something done before our weekly meeting, check in with me on Discord so that we can jointly decide if a meeting is still necessary.

We may have meetings with other thesis students present.

- You may be required to give written feedback to other thesis students.
- These can be good opportunities to workshop chapters and get outside feedback.
- It's a good idea for you to form a thesis working group independent of our meetings.

[5] What work must be completed in the Summer?

Preliminary thesis prospectus (due *before* Summer break begins)

- your broad research question
- an exhaustive academic reading list you intend to tackle over the summer
- a plan to collect/clean observational data or recruit an experimental sample
- a weekly schedule for your summer thesis work

Mid-Summer Report (due at a date agreed to by both Prof. Clarke and thesis student)

- an updated reading list
- an annotated bibliography of all materials read to date (APSA citation style)
- a detailed outline of your literature review chapter
- a preliminary chapter-by-chapter thesis outline
- an updated research question and hypothesis

End-of-Summer Report (due by the last week of Summer break)

- A finalized thesis prospectus to be sent to the Department, including:
 - Research question
 - Method of evaluation
 - Draft outline of each Thesis chapter
 - Updated bibliography.
- A complete first draft of your literature review chapter.
- A draft of your causal diagram.
- Proposed data collection steps.
- A weekly schedule for Fall semester work, including chapter draft deadlines.

[6] What work must be completed in the Fall of your senior year?

The details of your fall semester workload will be specific to the nature of your thesis.

- Typically, my students are expected to complete the following by December:
 - Two well-edited chapter drafts.
 - The main empirical analysis for the study.

You should confirm your remaining committee members by October if possible.

- Ask to have a brief meeting to discuss the project.
- Ask the faculty member to join your committee if you have a helpful conversation.
- *If they decline:* tell them you understand entirely and do not take it personally. We're pretty over-committed.
- *If they agree:* thank them and ask them what level of involvement they prefer.

The other committee members typically aren't very involved until March/April – but you should give them the option to have more influence on your thesis at an early stage.

- Model 1: other faculty receive occasional updates but otherwise become more involved close to the thesis defense date at the end of the Spring (**more common**).
- Model 2: other faculty ask to receive draft chapters/analyses as they are completed so that they can provide detailed written feedback at an earlier stage (**less common**).

You will give a Thesis Proposal Presentation to the Department on Reading Day (typically).

- There are three main objectives to keep front of mind:
 - Clearly introduce your research question.
 - Demonstrate meaningful progress.
 - Collect highly critical feedback.
- The presentation is typically very, very short
 - Plan for about 5-7 minutes
 - Start by planning a Google Slides presentation with 1 minute per slide (7 slides)
 - You should practice this with me before the department-wide meeting.
- When a faculty member asks you a question, keep the following in mind:
 - They are not attacking you or challenging your intelligence.
 - You do not need to have an answer to every question.
 - It's OK to say, "That's a great question. I don't know the answer. What do you recommend?" as a way of *benefiting from* tough questions.
 - Take clear notes as a signal that you are listening to the questioner.

By the end of the Fall semester, you must demonstrate "sufficient progress has been made to warrant continued pursuit of honors in the spring semester."

- Your primary thesis advisor (me) will give you a letter grade.
- This will be an A if you will continue with the Thesis.
- Otherwise, you will receive an appropriate grade for GOVT390 (Independent Study).

We will meet before you go home for Winter break to discuss your proposed outline of work over the month of January.

- You should have a week-by-week outline of your personal goals.
- It's fine to take time off (obviously) but build it into a clear schedule.

[7] What work must be completed in the Spring of your senior year?

The details of your Spring semester workload will depend upon your progress to date.

Work backward when constructing your weekly schedule for the semester.

- When do you hope to defend the thesis?
- Your final writing/editing deadline is two weeks before that date.
- Build in at least 2-3 weeks for extremely thorough revisions.
 - Citations and final touches take a lot longer than you might think
- Be realistic in your assessment of the remaining work.
 - It might be necessary to cut some planned analysis if you time is running out.

As a baseline rule, plan to complete an *edited* draft of *all* chapters by **March 1st.**

- You have some flexibility here that will depend on the way your thesis has developed.
 - E.g., The hard work is completed, but you haven't written up the intro/conclusion chapters – which tend to take less time.
- You should send me chapters as soon as you finish a round of self-edits.
 - Work on other chapters while you are waiting on feedback from me.
- Use digital tools to sharpen your writing and make your life easier.
 - More on this later, but we should talk about ChatGPT, plagiarism, etc.

Keep your committee members in the loop.

- Occasional emails notifying them that chapters are completed may be sufficient.
- Give them the opportunity – but not the obligation – to give you feedback.
- If someone has an issue with your thesis, you want to learn about it early (not at the Thesis Defense)

[8] What should you expect in the Honors Thesis Defense?

You will defend your Honors Thesis towards the end of the semester

- This is just a final evaluation of your thesis work by the committee.
- Plan for a thesis defense sometime between mid-April and the end of finals week.
- The specific date will depend upon the availability of your thesis committee members and the rate of progress you make on your thesis.
- The earlier you set a date, the more control you have over that date.

It is your responsibility to schedule a specific thesis defense date.

- Speak to me first so that I may assess your progress privately.

Plan to send your completed thesis to all committee members 2+ weeks *before* the defense.

- You will likely make some post-defense adjustments, but this should be a complete and thoroughly edited document from front to back.

A typical GOVT thesis defense runs 1.5 - 2 hours long.

- Plan to offer some very brief opening remarks + a few slides (certainly <10 minutes).
- You can safely assume that your committee has read the full thesis.
- Your goal is not to summarize the thesis; it is to guide our conversation.

The vast majority of our time will be spent with faculty Q&A.

- The outside reader (i.e., non-GOVT faculty) will ask questions first.
- The second reader (i.e., other GOVT faculty) will ask questions second.
- The primary advisor (me) will ask questions last.
- Finally, we pivot to a more free-flowing open discussion.

After our questions have been exhausted, we will ask you to leave the room.

- The committee will privately determine if you will receive honors.
- We will also discuss potential revisions and other conditions at this time.
 - Knock out all requested revisions as soon as possible after the defense.

If you have scheduled an Honors Thesis defense, you will most likely pass the defense.

- I *have* ended theses that are unlikely to receive honors before the defense date..
- However, all of my thesis students that have held a defense have passed.
- It is still possible to fail at the defense – take it seriously – but also know that I’m not interested in setting you up for a dramatic failure.

[9] Helpful resources/tools

[The American Political Science Association Style Manual](#) should be bookmarked or saved somewhere readily available. Use this as a reference to understand how to properly use in-text citations, format reference pages, and properly edit your chapters.

[Google Scholar](#) is your first stop for finding research articles and books (but not your last, usually). There are lots of [guides online to help you craft better advanced searches](#). Learn to use the tool early in the process.

Pick up a citation management software before you begin your summer work. This can save you a lot of time by auto-constructing reference lists and in-text citations! Lafayette supports [Zotero](#) (read more [here](#)), so I recommend starting there.

You should obviously use spell and grammar checking software in Google Docs/Word Doc etc, but I also strongly recommend using some other tools. I personally like [Grammarly](#), which can be particularly helpful with sentence structure, passive voice, etc.

If you are conducting an experiment, we need to have a whole set of conversations about the [Lafayette IRB](#). You can find details on our process at Lafayette online, but keep in mind that you need to plan very early to receive approval.

You will also need to conduct a pre-analysis plan before you run an experiment. There are many ways to do this.

- The simplest approach is to use [AsPredicted](#); check out this [quick accompanying guide here](#).

[10] List of political science journals to get you going.

Always start with a careful Google Scholar search.

Once you find a good article:

- Look at the articles in their references (i.e., who do they cite?)
- Use Google Scholar to find new articles that reference that article you found.

Here are some of the many excellent political science journals for you to consider.

- *American Journal of Political Science*
- *American Political Science Review*
- *American Politics Research*
- *Annual Review of Political Science*
- *British Journal of Political Science*
- *Congress & The Presidency*
- *International Affairs*
- *International Organization*
- *International Security*
- *International Studies Quarterly*
- *Journal of Conflict Resolution*
- *Journal of Experimental Political Science*
- *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*
- *Journal of Peace Research*
- *Journal of Policy History*
- *Journal of Political Marketing*
- *Journal of Public Policy*
- *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*
- *Legislative Studies Quarterly*
- *Political Analysis*
- *Political Behavior*
- *Political Communication*
- *Political Psychology*
- *Political Research Quarterly*
- *Political Science Research and Methods*
- *Presidential Studies Quarterly*
- *Public Choice*
- *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*
- *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*
- *Security Studies*
- *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*
- *The Forum*
- *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*
- *The Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*
- *The Journal of Politics*
- *World Politics*

You might also consider books published by:

- *Cambridge University Press*
- *University of Chicago Press*
- *Princeton University Press*
- *Oxford University Press*
- *Brookings Institution Press*
- *University of Michigan Press*
- *Yale University Press*
- *Harvard University Press*
- *Cornell University Press*
- *University Press of Kansas*

When reading:

- **Identify the article's relevant research question & hypotheses**
 - Is the prediction based upon prior work, a rich theory, something else?
- **Take a note on their methodology.**
 - Do they use an experiment, regression analysis, qualitative case studies, etc.?
- **Identify the treatment and outcome variables**
 - Do these measurements fit with the underlying concept?
- **Consider their sample.**
 - Does their sample match the relevant population of interest?
- **Critically evaluate their conclusions.**
 - Where is the evidence in the paper/book to support their concluding claims?

[11] What final advice do you have for anyone pursuing an Honors Thesis?

I care more about you (as a person) than I care about your thesis.

- Talk to me – and others – if you're feeling stressed and/or anxious about the process.
- Obvious stuff really makes a difference:
 - Get plenty of sleep.
 - Regularly find time for exercise.
 - Get some food.
 - Drink lots of water.
 - Enjoy time with friends and loved ones.
- *Taking care of yourself will improve your academic performance – and building self-care habits now will set you up for future success.*

Find some friends who are also working on an Honors Thesis.

- Solidarity in thesis work has, historically, meant a lot to our students.
- I'm happy to put you in touch with other Thesis students if you like

I tend to sound very critical to students adjusting to honors-level work.

- That's because I treat you more like PhD students than undergrads in many respects.
- I would not agree to work with you if I didn't have an extraordinarily high view of your academic work and potential.
- If you're unsure of how you are doing – or worried that I'm dissatisfied with your progress – let's chat about it directly. Chances are that I am crunched for time and want to drop critical edits without adding the many, many positive things that could be said about your work.

I want you to have fun in the process and develop as a human being.

- You should always feel comfortable checking in with me on career ambitions, what's going on in your personal life, and how you're feeling about life at Laf. generally.
- Let me know if I can help you as you transition to post-Lafayette life!

Please sign/type your name here to confirm that you have read this document in its entirety. This step is required before I formally enroll you in the Honors course:

Your name here: _____