

# **Wheaton College**

## **Honors Thesis Guidelines**

### **For Political Science and International Relations Majors**

#### **Introduction**

Writing an honors thesis can be a very rewarding experience and a special intellectual capstone to your college career. Honors thesis students conduct original research under the close supervision of a faculty mentor. This involves taking on the challenge of asking interesting questions, discerning how best to answer those questions, engaging with a community of scholarship, presenting one's findings in a substantial written document and defending those findings before a faculty panel. For those contemplating graduate school, this process offers a real sense of what it is like to be a professional political scientist. Even if you do not seek an academic career, writing an honors thesis can help you develop and hone skills that will benefit any work that you pursue beyond Wheaton.

Students interested in pursuing an honors thesis in any of the subfields of the Political Science Department should begin thinking about a research topic by **at least the beginning of their junior year**. The thesis may build upon work that you have done in another political science course or it could revolve around a completely new question you would like to explore. In all cases, it will be useful to consult with department faculty as you think about your thesis topic and begin the process, and as you think about whom you might ask to serve as your primary thesis advisor.

**Having completed POLS 200 Introduction to Research Methods is not required to propose an honors thesis. However, it is strongly recommended that thesis students complete POLS 200 before their senior year as it will prove immensely helpful to developing a thesis proposal.**

# Process, Requirements and Deadlines

## Eligibility

To apply to write an honors thesis, a student must have a GPA of 3.50 or better in the Political Science or International Relations major and a cumulative GPA of 3.33 or better through the Fall semester of junior year. Students must maintain these minimum GPAs through graduation to be eligible for departmental honors.

## Proposal

Interested students must submit a research proposal to the Political Science Department **no later than April 5 of junior year**. The research proposal should be approximately 8-10 typed pages and should include the following sections:

1. Introduction (including identification of research questions)
2. Literature Review
3. Hypotheses / Potential Answers and Arguments
4. Methods
5. Action Plan
6. References

Please note that the honors thesis is intended to be a year-long project. In general, the Department will not consider proposals for one-semester theses.

## Proposal Review

Department faculty will convene as a committee to discuss all thesis proposals and decide which candidates will be invited to proceed with writing the honors thesis. These decisions will be announced before the end of the academic year.

## Project Planning

Successful proposal candidates should meet with their thesis advisors before the end of junior year to review their proposed action plans and establish a work schedule with deadlines for completing chapter drafts and other research and writing tasks. Students are strongly encouraged to utilize the summer break before senior year to immerse themselves in the literature(s) germane to their project and to conduct field research or other foundational work.

## POLS 500 Registration

During senior year, all honors thesis students must register for POLS 500 Individual Research in both the Fall and Spring semesters. These registered thesis hours are in addition to the ten courses already required for the major. It is also expected that during

senior year, all thesis students will take POLS 500 as part of a normal four-course load (i.e. not as a course overload) for at least one semester.

### **Thesis Committee**

In consultation with their thesis advisor, honors thesis students should select a faculty committee consisting of the thesis advisor, one or two other members of the Political Science Department, and at least one member from another department by the end of the Fall semester. The student is responsible for keeping all committee members informed of progress on the thesis.

### **Mid-Year Review**

At the end of the fall semester, the thesis advisor will review progress according to the established deadlines. If progress on the thesis is such that the advisor believes it unlikely that the student will complete it in a manner sufficient to earn departmental honors, the thesis advisor may decide that the student should not continue with the second semester of thesis work. If thesis work is discontinued, students may have the option to convert the POLS 500 course to a POLS 398 Independent Research course.

### **Oral Examination**

The faculty thesis committee will conduct the oral examination of the thesis no later than the final exam week of the Spring semester. Hence, the oral examination should be scheduled in close consultation with all members of the thesis committee well in advance of the proposed defense date. **At a minimum, the student must provide each committee member committee with a copy of the thesis NO LATER THAN TWO WEEKS before the oral examination.** The committee may request the student to implement edits to the thesis before final submission.

### **Assessment**

The faculty thesis committee will determine the final grades for both semesters of POLS 500 and for the thesis. The grade will be based on the written thesis, the oral examination, the student's general knowledge in the major, and the student's initiative and independence in carrying out the project.

### **Formatting and Final Submission**

Students should follow the Registrar's guidelines regarding due dates and formatting for completion and submission of the final copies of the thesis.

# Evaluation Criteria for Research Proposals

Each honors thesis proposal will be evaluated using the following criteria. Only those proposals demonstrating exceptional promise along these dimensions will be approved.

## Research Question

1. Does the question address an interesting and important topic?
2. Is there a puzzle that warrants investigation?
3. Does the proposed thesis make a contribution of evidence, theory, cases, arguments or interpretations?

## Literature Review

1. Does the literature review identify and describe the bodies of thought and fields of research relevant to the research question?
2. Does the literature review indicate how the thesis will build on / contribute to scholarly conversations?

## Hypotheses / Potential Answers / Argument

1. Does the proposal consider possible answers to or arguments addressing the question?
2. Are the possible answers to the question or arguments informed by social science theory?

## Methodology

1. Does the proposed method seem appropriate for answering the question?
2. Does the proposal explain the reasons for using the method selected?
3. Is the proposed data appropriate for the proposed method?
4. Are the proposed data sources reasonably accessible given the constraints of the thesis?
5. Can the proposed thesis reasonably be completed within the required time constraints?

## Action Plan

1. Does the proposal include a clear strategy for completing the work over the next academic year?
2. Are there clearly defined benchmarks/deadlines/milestones with dates?

**Sources**

1. Are the sources in the bibliography drawn primarily from peer-reviewed or primary sources?
2. Is the bibliography substantial enough to show familiarity with how the proposed research question relates to existing scholarship?

**Organization / Presentation**

1. Is the proposal free of mechanical errors?
2. Does the proposal adhere to citation standards?
3. Does the Department have the expertise to advise the proposed thesis?

# Junior Year To-Do List

## August or December

- Enroll in POLS 200 Introduction to Research Methods, if needed

## February – March

- Meet with faculty members to discuss your topic.
- Start a research journal to track your thoughts about your topic and your thesis going forward.
- Set up a citation management solution (e.g. Zotero, Refworks, EndNote, Mendeley)
- Read scholarly journal articles and books to help formulate your research question.
- Think about possible sources of evidence (e.g. empirical cases, archival sources, datasets)
- Draft your thesis proposal

## April

- Submit your thesis proposal by April 5.

## May – August

- Meet with your thesis advisor to develop a schedule of deadlines.
- Think about potential thesis committee members.
- Continue reviewing scholarly literature.
- Start collecting data where possible.
- Keep notes on your research.
- Start outlining your thesis.