

Thesis FAQ

International Relations @ CMC

When should I begin thinking about thesis?

By the spring of your junior year, you should have some sense of your thesis topic, at least in general terms.

You should arrange for a reader (ask a professor if s/he would be willing to serve as your thesis advisor and grader) by the middle of the spring semester of your junior year.

Should I write a year-long or a semester-long thesis?

We strongly encourage you to write a year-long thesis (80-100 pages).

If you choose a one-semester thesis (40-80 pages), consider writing it in the spring of your senior year so that you can begin research in the fall.

If you choose a one-semester thesis and wish to do it in the fall, consider beginning your research in the summer – and, again, it will be better if a professor has agreed to be your reader before fall semester begins.

Remember that you will be taking classes and also, in all likelihood, looking for a job in the fall semester of your senior year; you may have sports commitments; take all of this into account when making a decision about when you'll write your senior thesis.

Choosing a thesis topic

Although it is tempting to use this opportunity to jump into a topic that is entirely new to you, we encourage you to leverage work and interests you have already developed.

Your thesis topic should fall within your functional or regional focus area.

Choosing a thesis reader/adviser

Ideally, your reader should be a professor with whom you have already taken at least one class and with whom you have some rapport.

Your thesis reader need not be from the IR Program or even the Government Department.

Setting a schedule

You and your thesis reader will decide whether you need to set a schedule.

The Registrar recommends a certain schedule of deadlines for chapter submissions for both one-semester and year-long theses.

If you are doing an Honors thesis, the professor in charge of the program will recommend a certain schedule.

What's the difference between writing a thesis and writing a normal term paper?

A thesis is more than just a longer term paper or a bunch of term papers strung together.

It requires original research and analysis (some term papers might do this, but it's necessary for a thesis); it should be placed in the broader context of debate and discussion on the issue you select (usually through the literature review); it requires a defense of methodology (why case studies, for example, or why a quantitative analysis using these factors?); and it should be a fresh contribution on the topic.

Structuring the paper

You will work with your reader to structure the paper.

Your thesis will likely have some combination of an introductory chapter in which you offer some background and present your argument, a defense of your methodology, and a literature review (these three bits can be combined into one or more chapters); then two or more chapters in which you present your research and analysis; and a concluding chapter.

The structure of the paper should allow you to offer your argument, place it in context against existing research and analysis related to your topic, clearly demonstrate the logic as you test it against the evidence, and present logical

conclusions that resonate with your reader and are consistent with your argument and evidence.

What is a literature review?

A literature review is an overview of the relevant academic work on your subject; it is basically a description of the primary academic debates on or related to your issue, in which you cite authors and their work as you describe the various arguments on or related to your topic and where your thesis sits among them.

Writing a literature review allows you to place your thesis into the larger context of discussion and debate on the topic.

Writing a literature review also helps ensure that your work is not redundant and that it takes into account existing research and analysis.

What is methodology?

Your methodology is your analytical approach. It can be quantitative (running regressions, for example) or qualitative (a single case study, comparative case studies, etc.).

You want to identify and justify your methodology early on so that you know what kinds of materials you need to collect during your research; you will need materials that allow you to test your argument against the evidence in a systematic and logical way.

Conducting research

You will work with your reader to determine what kinds of research you might need.

Initial research will place your thesis in context and can be used for the literature review; this will likely involve reading contemporary books and articles to see what has already been done on your topic or in relation to your topic.

Subsequent research will involve testing your argument against the data to see how it holds up; this may involve collecting primary and secondary sources materials, conducting interviews, etc.*

**there are strict guidelines for conducting interviews; consult with your professor to ensure that you respect these*

Tips for efficient research and writing

It can help to begin with an outline and to feed research (and citations), as you collect it, into the outline for future reference.

When you're conducting research, you don't want to lose anything that might be useful; referring to your sources in your outline is one way to organize materials; you can also organize your research into categories for reference as you write.

This is a research paper, not a term paper, so you will not write it, most likely, from start to finish, but in pieces.

Be prepared to go back and rewrite your introductory chapter when you've completed the paper; in fact, be prepared to go back and rewrite once you assemble the pieces so that you can ensure continuity from beginning to end.

Create a standard chapter structure or outline, at least for your research and analysis chapters, that allows you to ensure consistency in the presentation of your argument from chapter to chapter.

Be sure to always use quotation marks and footnotes when you cut and paste information into your documents; you want to avoid any possibility of inadvertent plagiarism.

What's different between doing a regular thesis and an honors thesis?

The honors thesis is automatically a year-long thesis.

You are required to attend a series of seminars in the fall semester.

In the spring, you are required to defend your thesis in front of other honors thesis students and Government and IR professors.

If you get a B or higher on your thesis, your transcripts will indicate Honors in IR.

How do I indicate my interest in doing an Honors thesis?

A certain number of IR students will be invited automatically, by dint of their GPAs, to do an Honors thesis.

If your GPA is not competitive, you nonetheless may ask a professor to nominate you to do an Honors thesis. There is no guarantee that you will be selected, but there's also nothing to lose!