



## **Honors Thesis Guidelines and Application**

### **Department of Economics**

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This document provides advice for students interested in writing a senior honors thesis in Economics. At the end of this document you will find an application form required of students seeking to write a thesis and a timetable for planning and submitting the application.

#### Why Write a Thesis?

Writing a thesis involves starting with a puzzle that intrigues you, assembling the analytical tools and information that can help you solve the puzzle, and then presenting your findings in clear terms that someone else can understand. It is the kind of task you will likely face again and again in your future, as you work to change the world in whatever realm of life. The great benefit of writing a senior thesis is the guidance and encouragement you can get from a faculty mentor, as you learn the skills for doing all this. This is a rare opportunity, and you may never get another one like this.

While the thought of writing a forty-or-more-page paper may seem daunting, it is doable if done in stages. The senior thesis will likely be the longest, hardest, and yet most rewarding single academic project in your undergraduate career, the tangible and cumulative expression of what you have learned as an undergraduate scholar.

Of course, it is worth reminding oneself that the senior thesis is just that: it is not likely to be perfect or comprehensive, nor is it expected to be the final word on the subject. However, at the very least, it should demonstrate that you are conversant with ongoing academic debates, that you are an active participant, and that you have something worthwhile to say. The thesis should be more than a big book report that merely summarizes what you've read or simply an econometrics project. It should have original points to make. It should employ the accepted practices of academic research. At its best, it should be a piece of scholarship that reflects your present ability and future potential. It is what you will want to show to prospective graduate schools or at job interviews as a sample of your analytical and writing skills.

The senior thesis, then, is worth doing. Even if you are not thinking of attending graduate programs or professional schools, completing a senior thesis still represents an accomplishment of which you can be proud.

## Distractions and Determination

A thesis will consume as much time as classes, assignments, readings, term-papers, exams, and class preparation of an upper-level course—and probably more. You will have to put aside a lot of your social obligations. Clubs, friends, family, and significant others will have to understand you need to reorder your priorities temporarily to undertake and complete a senior thesis. You may have to quit your part-time job or volunteer commitments. Students must be motivated, organized, and self-disciplined. A thesis requires dedication.

And you should be warned now: there will be periods of self-doubt when you survey what has to be done and what you have done so far, or when you ask yourself if the project is worth doing. These moments are intrinsic to the process; rest assured, even experienced faculty are susceptible to these feelings of uncertainty. What is the best (and perhaps only) solution? Communicate with people: talk to your friends, talk to your fellow thesis writers, and, most important of all, talk to your faculty adviser. Air your concerns over the progress of your research and the difficult process of writing—you will find that talking about your mental roadblocks or your writer's block will also help you overcome these problems.

Lastly, it is worth acknowledging that writing a thesis is not for everyone. It may be that other commitments (part-time jobs, athletics, student clubs and organizations, etc.) are more important or pressing. You may be more interested in pursuing the internship option, which can be as equally rewarding and just as useful for your future aspirations. But it doesn't hurt to go through this information while keeping open the possibility of writing a senior thesis.

## Topic + Advisor + Hard Work = the Senior Thesis

The equation above is a loose description of writing a thesis. It should be noted that "hard work" is the most important element, but it is also the one on which we can give the least useful advice. What follows, therefore, are some comments on finding a topic and advisor. These are not hard and fast rules, but guidelines that faculty and students have found useful in their own experiences as advisers and as thesis writers.

### *Selecting a Thesis Topic*

In order to convince an advisor that your thesis is worth doing, you must propose a sufficiently honed research question along with a suitable method of answering it. Finding the right topic can be frustrating; while there may be dozens of issues that interest you, narrowing the scope of these interests into something manageable is critically important.

Faculty will respond best if you contact them with a precise research question and thesis proposal. Saying, for example, "I'm interested in foreign direct investment in developing countries" is a bit too broad. Asking a faculty member if he or she would consider supervising "a study of the effects of foreign direct investment on economic growth" is a bit better, but still open-ended. However, if you suggest examining the extent to which good economic policies enhance the effects of foreign direct investment on economic growth, or whether the associated patterns of uneven distribution of income will

retard economic development, you may be on to something. These latter ideas are still not research questions, but they can be transformed into them after further analysis. You can then ask yourself what theoretical models or causal mechanisms might explain why foreign direct investment would enhance economic growth and how economic policies and the distribution of income might influence this relationship. It is at this point that you have a research question and a possible method of answering it: these are the seeds of a senior thesis.

Clearly, moving from interests to topics and from topics to questions can be a difficult part of the research process. The research question must be 1) something doable, 2) something worthwhile—that is, it should address the intellectual conversation in the field of research, and 3) something interesting—you have to stay interested in a large research project over the course of an academic year, as well as pique the interest of an adviser in the first place.

Finding that singular research question is thus the most crucial step. And finding it will take a lot of thinking and perhaps some preliminary research. The perfect thesis topic will not fall like an apple upon your head; you will have to shake the tree.

Equally important, a precise research question will narrow your research focus. Knowing what you want to answer will help you gauge the utility of all the material you will undoubtedly uncover. The research portion of the thesis can overwhelm anyone. But knowing what you need to know to answer the question you have set before you will also help you determine whether the resources you find are important or unimportant for your purposes.

A worthwhile investment is *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed., written by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. Relatively inexpensive (\$17, currently \$11.56 on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)), the book offers good advice on the initial steps of transforming your interests into focused research questions (read the first four chapters).

### *Selecting an Advisor*

The ideal thesis advisor is a faculty member who: 1) is an expert on your thesis topic; 2) is willing to help you; and 3) is someone with whom you have a comfortable rapport. If you are lucky, you will find this ideal combination in a single person, but you might not. Your favorite professor may not be an expert in your topic, or you may not have taken courses with the professor who is most knowledgeable about the topic. In either situation, it may be hard to convince the professor to advise you. And of course, your ideal advisor may be on a sabbatical, or have other commitments, or already have too many students to supervise.

What should you do if this ideal combination for an advisor is not present?

In such cases, some students suggest the third criterion is most important: select someone who knows you and with whom you have a comfortable rapport. In defense of this third criterion, it is worth noting that almost any faculty member will be able to help you in the research process, even if he or she is not familiar with all the nuances of the topic you are studying. Because there are basic principles of research in the social

sciences and humanities, it is very likely he or she will be able to provide some helpful advice.

At the same time, the faculty point of view might lean closer to the first criterion: select an expert on the topic. Being able to give basic advice on research and writing is one thing, but being able to help you navigate the necessary literature and relevant issues is another. You can avoid wasting time discovering what you need to know only if your advisor knows the topic well and can guide you to the relevant scholarly research.

Moreover, he or she will be a better judge of the worth of your project. And while it may help to have a positive rapport with your advisor at the outset, the mutual effort involved should create a useful and productive rapport through the process of research.

Even if you do not know your potential advisor very well at the outset (and *vice versa*), contact him/her and express your desire to work under his/her supervision. If you can, meet with the person during office hours. If not, e-mails will have to do. In either case, don't waste the person's time. Have some ideas fleshed out: at the least, present a set of narrow topics as possible research questions. The more you can indicate your interest, enthusiasm, and initial knowledge about the topic, the better your chances will be of getting him or her to agree to become your advisor. The willingness of faculty to help you (i.e., the second criterion) is a function of your being able to convince them that investing their valuable time and effort will be worthwhile.

What should students initially provide to potential advisors? They should "flesh out" their tentative ideas, perhaps in a one-page, three-paragraph format: 1) what is the puzzle? 2) why is it significant (to the student; to policy; to scholarly understanding)? and 3) where and how might one find the answer to the puzzle (archives; library research; interviews)?

The student-advisor relationship is open-ended. You are free, indeed encouraged, to ask other faculty members for advice. Your advisor is the faculty member who will read the completed thesis and issue a grade, but anyone can help you through the thorny issues and problems you will undoubtedly encounter. As mentioned earlier, talk to everyone. Let people know what your thesis topic is, and what you are researching. You will be surprised at what resources and ideas people can provide. Even if your advisor meets all three criteria, there is nothing wrong with contacting other faculty members who might be able to help you with your research.

This leads to another point: different faculty undertake their supervisory roles differently. Some are more hands-on, supervising your progress carefully, while others take a more removed approach. It is important to establish an informal or formal "contract" of sorts, where you can agree to the frequency of meetings, the expected progress made between meetings, and set down deadlines to produce parts of the thesis. You do not want to expect one form of supervision, only to discover that the faculty member has a different one in mind—and to discover this too late to change advisors.

## The Details

The following pages summarize the Economics Department policies for the honors thesis program. Please read them carefully. The last sheet of paper is to be submitted as the cover page with your topic proposal and letter of support from your thesis advisor.

### **Administrative Information for the Senior Honors Thesis**

The prerequisites (to be satisfied by the end of the spring semester of the junior year) for applying to the Economics honors thesis program are

- Completion of both theory courses (with a theory GPA of 3.5 if you did not take the honors sections)
- Completion of Calculus I and II or the advanced placement equivalent
- Completion of ECON2228 (Econometrics) or an equivalent course in a study-abroad program
- GPA of at least 3.5 in economic courses

In the fall of your senior year, you will be enrolled in Senior Thesis Research (ECON4497, 3 credits), and work under your adviser's direction to develop a full thesis proposal. Each student will present his or her work to the class at the end of the semester. Students are expected to attend all presentations and offer comments and suggestions on their classmates' work.

A grade of B+ in ECON4497 indicates "satisfactory progress" on the thesis, and higher grades indicate the extent to which your work "exceeds expectations." Lower grades signify that the faculty have reservations about whether you would be able to complete an acceptable thesis in the spring semester, and students who earn less than a B- will not be allowed to continue.

In the spring you will be registered in Senior Honors Thesis (ECON4498, 3 credits). Students who perform well in the first semester, at the discretion of their adviser and the Director of the Honors Program, may have their thesis converted to a Scholar of the College project. In this case, the student will be registered for Advanced Independent Research (ECON6601, 6 credits) for the spring semester. In both cases, you will continue to work under your advisor's direction and will present your final work to the class in April. As for ECON4497, you are expected to attend and comment on all presentations.

In general, Honors in Economics is conferred only on those students who have earned at least a B+ in ECON4498 and maintained a 3.5 GPA in their non-thesis economics courses.

Students in the A&S Honors Program may fulfill their A&S Honors Program thesis requirement by writing an Economics honors thesis.

Students with questions about these guidelines should contact Professor Murphy, ([murphyro@bc.edu](mailto:murphyro@bc.edu); 2-3688; Maloney Hall 394)

### **Timetable**

February/March, Junior Year

- Start thinking about possible research topics
- Contact potential advisers, ideally in person, by e-mail if necessary
- Purchase, if you wish, *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed. (\$17, currently \$11.56 on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)) and read the first four chapters
- Contact Professor Murphy indicating your interest in ECON4497, Senior Thesis Research

April, Junior Year

- Narrow research topic into a research question
- Confirm with potential adviser that he or she will accept your project and advise you
- Submit topic proposal paperwork to Gretchen Rowley, Maloney 319

Students who meet the prerequisites for ECON4497 and whose application paperwork is complete will be registered for ECON4497 by Gretchen Rowley. Notice that registration into ECON4497 is not expected to occur until near the end of the academic year or the summer, not during the April registration period. Prospective thesis writing students must leave the ECON4497 time slot open.

Summer

- The initial literature review should be done at this time. Become acquainted with important scholarly texts, models, arguments, and theories related to the topic. It is not necessary to master everything, but it is useful to understand what the conventional wisdom is on your topic, where areas of dispute exist, or what aspects are still not understood. Quite often, these may represent promising points of entry for a research project. Ideally, your adviser will have identified the relevant literature you need to know. If not, take the initiative and ask what you should know as background material. You might want to consult
  - [Johnson, Joslyn, and Reynolds, "Conducting a Literature Review"](#)
- It is worthwhile staying in contact with your adviser, even by e-mail (if you are not staying in Boston over the summer). For students studying or traveling abroad or doing thesis-related research projects (on ASGs or the like), cultivate contacts there while staying in contact with your adviser here, with e-mails updating him or her on your progress.