

## THE SENIOR THESIS

### What is the Senior Thesis?

The Senior Thesis is a written capstone project that is a requirement for graduation for all seniors in the Program of Liberal Studies. Formerly known as the Senior Essay, it has been part of the culture and curriculum of the Program since the department's inception in 1952 (when PLS was known as the General Program). PLS remains the only major in the College of Arts and Letters that makes the Senior Thesis a graduation requirement for all seniors. Where other departments require a thesis only of their honors students, we think that all PLS students should rise to that level. Our belief is that in the process of conceptualizing, researching, and writing the Thesis, PLS students have the opportunity to bring to bear, either directly or indirectly, the knowledge and the skills that they have developed in the course of their education in the Program as a whole.

The Senior Thesis typically involves a significant research component, but the emphasis is still on original thought. Regardless of the nature of the project, the Senior Thesis might best be viewed as an extended essay. In formulating, researching, and writing the Thesis, all PLS students work one-on-one with a Thesis director. Usually, the director is a member of the Program faculty, but in certain cases the student may petition to have a faculty member outside of the Program direct his or her thesis. (Students who wish to pursue this option must request permission in writing from the Program chair, and of course they must also receive permission from the outside faculty member.) In situations in which a PLS student's Thesis is being directed by someone outside the department, that student will also be assigned a co-director from within the department who will be responsible for ensuring that the student is on track with all of the requirements leading to the final submission of the thesis.

Since the 2009/2010 academic year, the Senior Thesis has encompassed both semesters of the senior year. (Formerly, when it was known as the Senior Essay, the project was begun and written entirely in the second semester of senior year.) Program seniors enroll in the Essay Tutorial in both the fall and the spring semesters. In the fall semester, the Essay Tutorial counts for two credits, and in the spring semester for three. The purpose of the work done in the fall semester is to produce a *draft* of the final Thesis. Exactly what this draft entails will depend on the specific project and on an agreement that you will make with your director. The spring semester will be devoted to refining and perhaps expanding the thesis. Senior theses are generally between 9,000 and 15,000 words (the equivalent of 35-60 double-spaced pages of twelve-point font) with 40-45 pages of double-spaced text being the norm. The Otto A. Bird Award (named after one of the founders of the Program) is given each year to the student whose Senior Thesis is judged to be the finest among all those written during that year. Each Senior Thesis is read and evaluated both by the thesis director and by another member of the PLS faculty. In order to qualify for the Bird Award, the Thesis must receive a grade of at least A- from both readers.

## Kinds of Senior Thesis

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the department, the PLS Senior Thesis allows students to pursue research and develop projects in many different areas and encourages a range of approaches to a wide variety of topics. Frequently, students focus on an author, a text, or perhaps a topic or idea that they have encountered in one of the tutorials or seminars, and in such cases the thesis may turn out to be an expansion of a paper that was written for a PLS seminar or tutorial. Sometimes, however, students bring their PLS education to bear on a topic related to interests they have developed on their own or in studies undertaken in other departments. Here are a few of the titles from 2011 (they are always listed at the back of *Programma*, the department newsletter that goes to alumni): “The Figure of Dido in Virgil, Augustine, and Dante”; “Lessons in Liberalism: The Tale of Freedom and Education in America”; “The Landscape of Vatican II: Louis-Marie Chauvet’s Neo-Patristic Interpretation of the Twenty-First Ecumenical Council”; “Learning and Education in Bacon’s *New Atlantis*: Bensalem’s Scientific Elite and the Formation of the Mind”; “Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*: Bridging the Baroque and Romantic Eras through the Transformation of the Don Juan Myth”; “Founding the Health Care Debate: Statistics and their Stories.”

## The Process

In the fall of junior year, an information session will be held, usually with the undergraduate advisor, to explain what the Senior Thesis entails and to acquaint students with what will be expected of them. This is a good time to begin thinking seriously about the kind of thesis you will want to pursue. In November of the fall semester, you will receive the research profiles of those faculty members who will be directing senior theses the following year. Once you have received and studied the profiles, you should begin formulating ideas for the thesis and discussing them with faculty members who can direct topics in the areas you are interested in pursuing. PLS faculty look forward to discussing thesis proposals with you, and you should feel free to contact and meet with as many members of the department as makes sense to you. By the middle of April of junior year, students will be asked to submit to the department office proposals for three separate thesis topics. For each of the proposals, you should explain the nature of the topic and indicate one or more faculty members who could serve as thesis director. It makes sense to speak to all of the faculty members you list as potential advisors. A week or two after the due date for proposals, an announcement of the assignments of directors and students will be made. You should then make contact with the thesis director to whom you have been assigned, and, in consultation with him or her, you should prepare a description of the project of approximately a page in length with suggestions for readings for the summer.

Many PLS students go abroad during either the fall or the spring semester of junior year, but this does not pose serious problems. If you are abroad in the fall and will miss the information session, you should speak to the undergraduate advisor beforehand or contact him or her by e-mail. If you are abroad in the spring, you can make contact with potential directors by e-mail.

In senior year, as noted above, PLS students enroll in the Essay Tutorial in both the fall and the spring semesters. As soon as classes begin in senior year, you and your director should develop a regular meeting schedule and a plan of action for the Thesis. At the beginning of the academic year, the department issues a series of deadlines pertaining to the Thesis for each of the two semesters. Here is a rough breakdown of the deadlines. In the middle of September of senior year, you will be asked to submit a detailed outline of the project, along with a bibliography. Early in October, five pages are due. Early in November (after fall break), fifteen pages are due; and by the middle of November, twenty-five pages, fleshing out the main argument and the structure of the essay, are due. Early in December, a complete draft of the thesis, from introduction to notes, is due. Depending on the nature of the project, the draft can take different forms. Early on in the fall semester, you and your director should arrive at an agreement about what your draft should entail. During the spring semester, the focus is on improving, expanding, and polishing the essay. Obviously, the better the draft you prepare in the fall semester, the farther along you will be with arriving at the final version of your Thesis. The due date for the final essay comes early in March.

It should be noted that the actual process of conducting research, developing an argument or interpretation, and writing the essay is specific to the kind of research project and to individual styles and preferences. Your director will be able to answer questions and guide you along the way. By the beginning of senior year, if not sooner, you should purchase a copy of the manual of style that the department has used for many years: Kate L. Turabian's *Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition. This volume will give you an overview of the research process and will help with the issues of finding and using sources, developing and revising a draft, citing sources, and preparing a bibliography.