

Guide to Crafting a PLS Senior Thesis Proposal

This guide will take you through the key steps in formulating a senior thesis proposal for PLS. We'll begin with a brief overview of the process and then discuss each step.

Overview

The basic process is fairly straightforward:

1. Decide if you're going to write your thesis through PLS
2. Generate initial ideas for topics
3. Meet with faculty (inside and/or outside PLS) to discuss your ideas
4. Refine your topic(s) in conversation with potential faculty advisors
5. Submit your thesis proposal through the Google form that Becky will circulate in early April (if you plan to write your thesis through PLS).
6. Be matched with a thesis advisor after the faculty meet to discuss the proposals in late April.*

*Note: Faculty typically have space to work with 2-3 advisees at one time. You will be matched with a faculty advisor based on how helpful they feel they can be to the proposed project as determined by their own expertise and on how proactive the student is in pursuing a conversation about their proposal in its early stages. **Do not wait until the last minute to contact a faculty person about your topic!** Even if you have only a general sense of what you might want to work on, conversations with faculty can often help to draw out a more concrete idea. Also, be open to talking with different faculty about different possible projects. You may find that you click with a faculty member that is better equipped to help with your second or third choice topic. The outcome of the matching meeting will be far less stressful if you are not hoping to work with that one and only perfect faculty person.

1. Decide if you're going to write your thesis through PLS

Every PLS student must write a senior thesis. However, you don't need to write your thesis through PLS (i.e., taking the PLS senior thesis tutorials, working with a PLS advisor, meeting the PLS deadlines, etc.). Writing your thesis outside the department is acceptable provided that you meet a few minimum requirements:

- i. Your thesis must be a minimum of 9,000 words (including notes and bibliography)
- ii. Your thesis must involve primary sources or the equivalent (e.g., interviews, quantitative surveys, etc.)
- iii. Your thesis must engage secondary literature.

Almost every senior thesis option in the College of Arts & Letters would satisfy these requirements.

Typically, there are three cases where you might write your senior thesis outside PLS.

- a) *If you have a second major with a thesis option:* You can write your senior thesis through your second major provided that this is acceptable to the other department. (Some departments have specific rules about who is, and who is not, permitted to write a senior thesis.) In this

case, you would register for the thesis courses in the other department (not the PLS courses) and would follow their deadlines, requirements, etc. Departments have different rules as to whether or not their senior thesis courses can be counted towards their degree requirements; you should consult with the relevant advisor from your other department beforehand.

- b) *If you have a minor or supplementary major that requires a research seminar.* Some minors (e.g., Peace Studies, European Studies) require students to write a research paper or capstone essay. In some cases, it may be possible to combine these projects with the PLS senior thesis. (For example, you might take the Peace Studies research seminar in the fall instead of the PLS senior thesis tutorial. The essay that you write in the fall becomes the basis for the senior thesis that you submit to PLS in the spring.) These arrangements are made on an individual basis, and you should consult with me as soon as possible if you think this option might be relevant to you.
- c) *If you are in the Glynn Family Honors Program.* All students in the honors program must write a senior thesis. You can take the courses through the Honors Program or through PLS. If you are working with a PLS advisor, it is easier to take the PLS courses instead of the Honors Program version (Senior Honors Thesis, 48980); you would still take the Honors Thesis Research Colloquium (43950).

In all of these cases, you should contact me to discuss your plans before the deadline for submitting proposals.

2. Generate Initial Ideas for Topics

Before contacting potential advisors, you should begin to think of topics that you might want to pursue. In my experience, the best senior theses meet two criteria:

- 1) They build on a topic that the student already knows something about
- 2) They are reasonably close to an advisor's field of expertise

You should keep both of these criteria in mind when devising a thesis topic, but the first is especially important. This isn't the time to be wildly ambitious by diving into completely novel topics (e.g., deciding to write about the Zhou dynasty when you've never taken a course in Chinese history or literature).

Eventually you will need to narrow your topic down to a specific, quite narrow question (e.g., "What are Melville's views on religion in *Moby Dick*?") You may have already settled on that narrow question, but in most cases that process takes time. You might begin with something broad: "I want to write about *Moby Dick*," "I want to write about nineteenth-century American literature," or even "I want to write about a novel."

If you have a broad topic (or even if you have a narrow one), it's very helpful to reflect on why you're attracted to that topic before you meet with a faculty member. (What intrigues you about *Moby Dick*? Why are you curious about nineteenth-century American literature? Why do you want to write about a novel?) Knowing the answers to these questions will help potential advisors suggest ways in which you could narrow your topic or perhaps alter it so that it fits more easily with the advisor's areas of expertise.

If you don't have any initial ideas, the best strategy is to build on something that you have already done. Did you take a course (inside or outside PLS) that excited or intrigued you? Was there a book or essay that you found fascinating, revelatory, or beautiful? Was there a paper that you especially enjoyed writing? Any of these could form the basis for a senior thesis.

At this stage, it's probably a good idea to generate a number of topics, even if some (or only one) are your favorites. Because the department needs to balance the workload of the faculty, we cannot guarantee that you will be matched with your first choice of advisor or topic. You might really want to work on Dante with Prof. Martin, but there might be five other students with the same plan, and Prof. Martin will likely be limited to only three advisees.

3. Meet with faculty (inside and/or outside PLS) to discuss your ideas

Once you've generated some initial ideas, it's time to begin thinking about potential advisors. **You should begin contacting faculty several weeks before proposals are due.** Begin by looking over the list of faculty profiles provided by the department. In some cases, the match(es) might be obvious; in other cases, you might not see a clear connection between your topic and a specific PLS faculty member.

There are a few things to keep in mind:

- Begin with the faculty members whom you think are the closest to your particular topics. During your conversation, ask them who else might be a good potential advisor for you.
- Don't be afraid to look outside the department. Finding an external advisor is easiest when it's someone who has had you in class or knows you in some other way. But even if you don't know your prospective, non-PLS advisor, he or she might be willing to work with you if (a) you are working on something in his/her area of expertise and (b) you can demonstrate that you have some knowledge of the topic or a requisite set of skills already. (And if you can't meet the second condition, you've chosen a bad topic – go back to step 2!)
- **Be flexible.** You are going to have a better thesis experience if you work on a topic where your advisor can provide a substantial amount of guidance. That might require shifting away from your initial ideas. But that's OK: if you've been able to articulate *why* you were interested in a certain topic, potential advisors can help you think about other ideas that might have the same attraction, might address the same kinds of issues, or raise the same sort of questions.
- **Listen to what your potential advisors say.** If you want to work on topic X but your advisor warns you that this is not likely to be viable (because you lack the requisite knowledge or skills, because the source material isn't readily available, because your question is ill-posed and unanswerable in a scholarly essay, etc.), listen to him or her! Most faculty members have advised a large number of theses and know what kinds of topics can work and where the pitfalls lie. Take their advice and spare yourself needless headaches later.

4. Refine your ideas

Keep in mind that your initial conversation with a potential advisor might only be that – an initial conversation. Potential advisors might ask you to do some additional reading, think over several options, and come talk to them again. Don't wait until the last minute to talk to prospective advisors.

Likewise, be prepared to devote some time to refining your ideas after you have talked with the faculty. It's a good idea to draft a short topic proposal and send it to potential advisors *after* you have met with them and then schedule another meeting to discuss how you might refine, revise, and expand the proposal.

Different faculty members will have different expectations for what they hope to see in a proposal. Some will want a couple of paragraphs outlining the relevance of and sources for your research question, and others may ask for a couple of pages showing familiarity with the scholarship and primary sources that inform your question along with an initial bibliography.

Don't be afraid to put in a little more work at the proposal stage. The clearer you and your potential advisor are at this stage, the better working relationship you will have going forward!

5. Submit your thesis proposal

In early April, Becky will circulate a Google form requesting senior thesis proposals. This will allow faculty to see all of the proposed projects in PLS so that they can be sure they are working on the thesis topics that are most closely aligned with their own interests and expertise. And it will enable you to find the advisor who is best equipped to help you with your thesis.

On the Google form you will be able to indicate your general areas of interest, the PLS faculty with whom you have discussed your project, and to upload your proposal. If you have different proposals that you have developed in conversation with different faculty, you can submit more than one proposal.

The format of the proposals will vary based on discipline and topic, but generally speaking, a compelling proposal should be 1-2 pages (~500-1500 words), give a brief overview of the body of literature or literatures that you plan to engage, and culminate in a clear research question or a closely related set of questions. You should also include an initial bibliography of sources. You do not need to have read all of the sources on your bibliography, but you should know enough about them to be able to say why they are relevant to your research plan.

Sample proposals will be made available before the submission deadline. But, again, you are encouraged to meet with faculty to help you develop your proposal, even if they do not end up advising your thesis.

6. Be matched!

Once the proposals have been submitted, the faculty will meet in late April to match proposals with advisors. Once you know who your advisor is, you are encouraged to contact them to begin planning the work to be done over the summer.

Have FUN!