

Senior Thesis and Thesis Seminar

POL 499
Friday 9-11

Seminar Coordinator:

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Office Hours: Friday 11:30-1:30 (and by appointment)
Sidney Smith Hall, Room 6024

Thesis Supervisor: per application and approval by the Department

Overview

This seminar is open only to students whose applications for the Senior Thesis Program have been approved by the Director of Undergraduate Studies. It is intended to serve as a forum in which students who are writing a senior thesis can present and discuss their work and consider various approaches to research in Politics. The readings for the seminar are required for all participants. They are meant to facilitate students' individual thesis work and to provide insights into the research and writing processes, as well as to expose students to different ways of presenting the results of their work. While each student has a primary responsibility to her own project and to her specific supervisor, all students enrolled in the Senior Thesis Program are expected to fully participate in the work of the seminar. Final assessment in the seminar will reflect both the thesis itself (as determined by each student's supervisor) and participation in the seminar (as determined by the seminar instructor).

A thesis is a 15,000 word (~40 page) research paper on any topic chosen by the student, in consultation with a thesis supervisor. The thesis should contain appropriate footnotes and a bibliography, and in general it should conform with the specifications of an established style guide (APSA is the convention, but with this – as all things – check with your supervisor). Once chosen, the thesis will be further developed over the course of the academic year in consultation with the supervisor. It is the responsibility of each student to schedule and hold regular meetings with her supervisor in addition to those of the seminar.

Our aim will be to help students write a thesis that of which they can truly be proud. Our meetings are meant to host conversations that will help us all through the highs and lows of researching and writing a major piece of work such as a senior thesis. The seminar begins with a consideration of the issues involved in choosing and honing a topic, and how to go about formulating the salient questions for the research process. We will then proceed to a consideration of methodological considerations, including the formulation of questions and hypotheses, conducting a literature review, and the methodological prerogatives of the major subfields of Political Science as a discipline. In the second semester, students will concentrate

primarily on the completion of their research and the actual writing of the thesis. A summary version of the thesis research will be presented at a ‘mini conference’ which will take place in the final week of classes.

Requirements and Assessment

Thesis (determined by supervisor)	75%
Participation and Presentations (determined by Seminar Instructor)	25%

Course Activities and Projects

Most weeks in the syllabus I have identified an activity designed to help us in our writing process. These include preparation for peer review, considerations for effective proposals, and some potentially odd ways of tackling writer’s block. Specific instructions will be circulated prior to each meeting either in class, or via quercus. There are three major assigned activities:

Refine your Proposal

You all wrote a proposal as part of your application for admission to the course. However, for most students that was months ago. More to the point, many proposals were less roadmaps for project completion than statements of intent. During the first three weeks of the course we will work to make your proposals a functional document for you and your advisor, with a clear research question, thesis statement, and plan for success.

End of Fall Term Mini-Conference

The final sessions of the Fall term will be occupied with group discussions of your work. We will follow a model developed in the Post/Extractivisms Working Group, referred to affectionately as the ‘cone of silence.’ In this approach, a student observes and takes notes (putting on a ‘cone of silence’) as their work is introduced, praised, and problematized by a colleague, then discussed by the group as a whole. After the short introduction and discussion (~15 minutes total), the researcher will be invited to remove the cone of silence to respond, ask questions, and clarify any issues that might have arisen during the previous discussion.

In order to get the most of the sessions, we will dedicate our November 8 meeting to preparation. All students are asked to provide a Brief of their work to date, and will be paired off with colleagues by the professor based on topics. The Brief will be the basis of your colleague’s presentation of your work – for their sake and yours, please treat it accordingly. While most students will still be in the middle stages of their research, by November you should have sufficiently developed your work to present preliminary findings, frustrations, and analyses with the seminar.

Your Brief should use the following guiding principles, and cover the following main points or aspects. A Brief should be:

- **short:** one to two pages. As short as possible without sacrificing content;
- **concise:** every word is used as efficiently as possible
- **clear:** keep it to the point; include only what matters (this is especially the case at the sort of ‘midstream’ moment you’ll be when composing your brief)
- **reliable:** the information should be based on sound and identifiable research. Any missing information, questions, or areas for future investigation should be acknowledged
- **readable:** use plain language, don’t get bogged down with jargon

Briefs will vary depending on the topic and the stage of research. Generally speaking, however, they should be organized around the following main areas:

- **Issue:** What is the problem, question, or issue? This should be very short and direct.
- **Background:** What are the most immediately relevant contextual aspects the research has identified? What histories feed into the present status of the problem or issue?
- **Current status:** Why is this research being conducted *now*? (This can also be the “who cares?” section)
- **Key considerations and/or analyses:** These are not conclusions, but rather for example risks, opportunities, stakeholders, and/or policy consequences of the research (this is of course not an exhaustive list).
- **Next Steps:** This may be a two part section, depending on the topic. One next step could have to do with likely developments in the empirical case and how that might impact analysis. Another could have to do with identifying pending work to be done (ie, interviews in the field, a global climate summit, a coming election or transfer of power).

Hot Seat (3 Rounds)

Also known as an elevator pitch, the hot seat exercise is meant to help researchers focus their attentions while considering how to make the work compelling to outside or unfamiliar audiences. During the Fall and Winter Semesters, students will have no more than 2 minutes to introduce their project (we will be timing). Your pitch needs to cover the key elements of your project in an engaging and informative fashion. Your ‘hot seat’ presentation should – *at a minimum* – cover the following (not necessarily in this order):

Hook: Provocative question

Who: Actors/institutions/stakeholders

What: Puzzle/problem/target of research

When: time period

Where: scale/location

Why: Who cares?

How: what are you doing that is a) new; b) important; c) contributing to the discipline

After your 2 minute pitch, your colleagues will have the chance to ask questions. Be prepared! We will hold 4 hot seat sessions throughout the year. Students should prepare a pitch for each scheduled session (it is completely normal if your pitch changes throughout the course of your research). We will draw names from a hat on the scheduled session to determine which students present on a given day, and in what order.

Abstract and Schedule

Students will submit a working abstract of the thesis to the seminar instructor and her supervisor no later than **January 24th**. The abstract should be roughly 200-300 words in length and will be circulated among the class for workshopping at the January 19 meeting. At this time, students should also revisit and, if necessary, revise their working schedule with concrete and attainable benchmarks with their advisor. Each student will revise their abstract in tandem with their thesis throughout the second semester. After revisions, final drafts of the abstract will be circulated in advance of end of term conference in 2024.

Email Policy

I do my best to respond in a timely fashion (usually within 48 hours) to all student emails. Please do not expect an immediate response, especially on evenings and weekends. Also, please be sure that any questions you have are not already answered in the syllabus. Substantive questions about your project are almost always best addressed to your thesis supervisors.

Course Policy on Classroom Courtesy

Students are strongly encouraged to ask questions and participate in vigorous debate. Some of the issues we discuss are sensitive in nature. It is important that we respect views different from our own, and are mindful that comments that are racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise disrespectful or offensive will not be tolerated.

In order to ensure that class is a productive and enjoyable experience for everyone, please observe the additional rules of classroom courtesy:

1. Except for laptop computers, all other personal electronic devices such as cell phones, tablets, etc. must be silenced and put away during class.
2. Please give your full attention to class. Laptop computers should be used **ONLY** for taking notes. Refrain from reading extraneous materials during class meetings.
3. Avoid disrupting class with unnecessary arrivals and departures from the classroom.
4. Make an effort to arrive promptly and wait until break or the end of class before leaving the classroom for non-essential phone calls and other similar purposes.

Texts

The primary text book for the seminar and all other materials are available online at the University of Toronto Website. The primary text will be:

David E McNabb (2016) *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods*. Routledge.

*Available via U of T library website

Reading and Meeting Topic Schedule

One: Big Questions

1. September 6 – Introductions and Orientation

2. September 13 – Why Research (in Political Science)?

David E McNabb (2016) Research Fundamentals. In *Research Methods for Political Science*

Activity:

Refining your proposal (see also Chapter 5, ‘Preparing a Research Proposal’ in McNabb)

3. September 20 – Choosing a Topic, Choosing an Approach, Finding a Place

Laura Zanotti, Courtney Carothers, Charlene Apok, Sarah Huang, Jesse Coleman, Charlotte Ambrozek (2020) Political Ecology and Decolonial Research: Co-Production with the Iñupiat in Utqiagvik. *Journal of Political Ecology* 27: 43-66

David E McNabb (2016) Research Approaches and Methods. In *Research Methods for Political Science*.

Activity:

Peer Review of Proposals

4. September 27 – Formulating Questions and Hypotheses (Final Proposals Due to Professor and Advisors)

****Please note, these proposals should also include a working schedule with benchmarks and clear goals. These are to be approved by your advisor and in consultation with the professor.**

David E McNabb (2016) Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. In *Research Methods for Political Science*.

Activity:

Keywords and Topic Sentences (in preparation for the library tutorial)

5. October 4 – Library Tutorial At Robarts Library with Social Science Research Librarians (further details TBA)

6.

October 11 – Case Selection

David E. McNabb (2016) Explanatory Research: Case and Historical Methods. In *Research Methods for Political Science*.

Thea Riofrancos (2021) From Cases to Sites: Studying Global Processes in Comparative Politics. In *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry*, Erica Simmons and Nicholas Rush, eds. Cambridge University Press, 107-125.

Suggested:

Hossein Khosrowjahi (2011) A Brief History of Area Studies and International Studies. *Arab Studies Quarterly* 33(3/4): 131-142.

Activity and Discussion:

Choosing and narrowing case(s) and/or site(s)

Hot Seat Round One

Two: Research Practices, Methods, and Concerns

7.

October 18 –

Ethics in Research with Human Subjects and Interview Basics

Lee Ann Fuji (2017) Chapter 4: Strategies for Conducting Interviews, In *Interviewing in Social Science Research*. New York: Routledge, 53-72.

Activity:

Working with U of T's Human Ethics Protocol System

Hot Seat Round Two

8. October 25 – From Notes to Annotations to Literature Reviews

Activity:

Writing a Lit Review by Committee

*****November 1 – Reading week, No Class*****

9. November 8 – Mini Conference Preparation Day

Students will be paired off and will exchange their Briefs. After reading the brief, you will have the opportunity to ask questions and clarifications.

10. November 15 – Mini Conference Day One

1/3 of the class will present, determined randomly at the start of class.

11. November 22 – Mini Conference Day Two

1/3 of the class will present, determined randomly at the start of class.

13. November 29 – Mini Conference Day Three

1/3 of the class will present, determined randomly at the start of class.

Three: Writing

12.

January 10 – No Class. Work on Your Abstract

13.

January 17 – Abstract Workshop

Activity:

Cut and paste 3 abstracts from the articles you have read during the first phases of your research. Circulate them to the seminar for peer review and discussion.

14.

January 24 – Organizing and presenting results

Activity:

Hot Seat Round Three

15.

January 31 – Writing Strategies – To Outline or to draft?

16.

February 7 – Optional Peer Review Workshop

17.

February 14 – Academic Writing: Free of ‘Needless Words’?

Check out one of the many debates about Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*:

<https://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/24/happy-birthday-strunk-and-white>

Ben Yagoda (2015) In Search of Needless Words. *Lingua Franca*. 8 September, 2015

<https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/in-search-of-needless-words>

(If you try to read directly from the Chronicle’s website you’ll need to set up a free account)

Activity:

Hot Seat Round Four (if needed)

*****February 21 – Reading Week, No Class*****

18.
February 28 – Optional Peer Review Workshop

19.
March 7 – Workshop: Writing your introduction

Activity:
Peer Review Introductions
Please come prepared with a draft (or outline) of your introduction

20.
March 14 – Optional Writing Workshop and Writers’ Block Party

21.
March 21 – Preparing Your Presentation

22.

Final Presentation Date, Time, and Location TBA