

Senior Research Seminar in Comparative Politics

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Fall 2007
POLSC BC 3761x sec. 3
Th 2:10-4:00 pm
809 Altschul Hall

Introduction

This seminar will help you design, research, and write your senior thesis over the course of two semesters. A senior thesis is an opportunity to immerse yourself in a specific comparative politics question that has always interested you. You will carry out in-depth research of the existing literature on your question of interest, and then craft a persuasive, clear argument demonstrating your own unique contribution. The thesis-writing experience sharpens your analytical capabilities and develops your expository writing skills.

In addition to being an intellectual project, the thesis is also a considerable logistical undertaking. It cannot be produced in a short, intense burst of inspiration. Instead, it requires basic skills such as smart time management and effective organization. Writing the thesis is best approached as a large project made up of small, well-defined tasks, such as constructing a preliminary bibliography, writing a proposal, revising the proposal, writing drafts, revising drafts, etc. Much of your research energy will be taken up by revision, re-organization, and re-conceptualization, hence the importance of a year-long sequence for writing the thesis. Through our group meetings, individual meetings with the instructor, and your peer reader, the seminar will help you plan and organize your time so that your thesis experience is a rewarding challenge rather than a dispiriting burden.

Requirements

Thesis. A final thesis of 50-100 pages that demonstrates original and extensive research on a well-defined question. The non-negotiable deadline set by the department is **April 23, 2008 at 4 pm, followed by a party for all departmental seniors.** Your thesis should be professionally bound and you should keep a copy for yourself. Use 12-pt. font, double-spacing (footnotes can be single-spaced), and number all pages. Include a title page, table of contents, bibliography, and ensure that there are no typographical or spelling errors. Choose one recognized system of citation (MLA, APA, Chicago) and use it consistently throughout the thesis (refer to Lipson's book for details).

Attendance and Peer Review. Researching and writing a thesis is an individual responsibility, but peers offer the best advice and support. Attending and fully participating in the seminar's weekly

group meetings is thus mandatory, as we will review basic research skills and discuss each of your research projects. Each of you will offer constructive criticism and concrete advice to your peers. Commenting on others' work improves the quality of their research while sharpening your own thinking and writing.

Preparatory Assignments. Writing a thesis is composed of many small steps and assignments with their own deadlines paced throughout the year. A basic requirement of this course is to carry out specific assignments, such as turning broad interest in a topic into a feasible research question, designing a research plan and working outline, identifying and gathering sources in an annotated bibliography, writing a draft, and the all-important tasks of revision and rewriting. Submitting each assignment on time is crucial for a successful thesis experience.

All students will be assigned a grade of “Y” for the first semester. Your final grade in the spring will reflect not only your final thesis product but also your performance on the preparatory assignments, attendance and class participation, and your feedback on your colleagues' work. At the end of the fall semester, I will meet with each of you individually to assess your progress and indicate areas for improvement in the spring.

Required Texts

The following book has been ordered at **Labyrinth Books** (536 W. 112th St., 212-865-1588) and also placed on reserve at Barnard Library.

- ❖ Charles Lipson, *How to Write a BA Thesis: A Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

For a more detailed handbook on the minutiae of writing, I highly recommend Wayne Booth et al, *The Craft of Research*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). For time management strategies, read Eviatar Zerubavel's brief and instructive *The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations, and Books* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Course Schedule

Week 1 September 6: Introduction

In our first meeting, we will introduce ourselves and discuss our respective research interests, and review the schedule of assignments for the semester.

Assignment for next week: Skim chapters 1-2 of Lipson and read carefully the handout from *The Craft of Research* to begin formulating your research question(s). You should narrow down your choices to no more than two questions that you can see yourself writing a thesis on. Select questions that you genuinely would like to learn the answer to, issues that you can see yourself exploring throughout this academic year. You will make a 5-minute presentation next week on your question(s) and collectively discuss it with your peers.

Week 2 September 13: Formulating a Research Question

In this session, you will help each other narrow down your research question. Each student will present her research question(s) in five minutes, and her peers will ask her clarifying questions. The purpose is to narrow down the scope of your thesis through collective discussion and reflection.

Assignment for next week: Find an article from a scholarly journal, newspaper, or magazine related to your question, read it carefully, and prepare a 5-minute presentation on it for next class, including how you might incorporate it into your thesis. Some questions to consider: what is the problem being addressed in the article? Are there multiple points of view that are made clear in the article? Who are the actors involved? (Organizations, leaders, officials, parties, movements, states, international entities?) How do they relate to each other, and what are the outcomes of their interaction? Does the article provide sufficient evidence for its claim(s)?

Week 3 September 20: Discussion of Articles

Student presentations and evaluations of articles. As with last week, you will ask your peers more clarifying questions to help prepare each other for the next step: the research design. At this session, you will also be assigned a peer reader. For the rest of the year, you will give each other constructive feedback on drafts and chapters.

Assignment for next week: Read chapters 3-4 of Lipson and construct a preliminary research design or proposal of 4-5 pages. You should address the following in your proposal: What is your main question? Why does the question matter? What are some of the possible existing hypotheses that address your question? What is your main argument (it can be distinct from or a variation on existing arguments), and what kind of evidence will you use to support it? Evidence might be derived from newspaper accounts, survey data, biographies and accounts written by participants, government and other agency documents, and the work of other scholars. Evidence can also consist of interview material, although this is rare for an undergraduate senior thesis.

Week 4 September 27: Searching for Sources

Class meeting in 328 Milbank at 2:35 pm

Submit research proposals (one hard copy to the instructor and one copy to your peer reader). We will devote this session to identifying and searching useful electronic databases and other online library resources.

Assignment for next week: Read carefully your peer's proposal and come up with 2-4 constructive suggestions to make it clearer and stronger. Typing up your comments to give to your colleague is strongly encouraged; bullet-point your suggestions and fit them on one page.

Assignment for October 11: Begin to construct a preliminary bibliography of 20-25 sources. Each item on your bibliography should be **annotated**, that is, contain a brief description (several sentences) explaining *how* you will use the source in your thesis. Your bibliography should contain primary sources: raw data unmediated by the interpretation of another scholar. Primary sources include polling data, government records and documents, memoirs and letters, speeches, photographs, documents of local, national, and international organizations, and newspaper articles. Your preliminary bibliography is due in class **Thursday, October 11**.

Week 5 October 4: Individual Meetings to Discuss Research Proposals

I will meet with each pair of peer readers for 30 minutes in my office to discuss the proposals and suggestions for improvement.

Assignment for next week: continue working on your preliminary bibliography. Read carefully chapters 5-7 of Lipson. Don't forget to take notes!

Week 6 October 11: Revising the Research Design

Turn in your annotated bibliography. In this session, we will meet as a class so you can share your experiences in writing the proposal, discuss common problems you've confronted and how to overcome them, and plan how to revise and strengthen the research design.

Assignment for next week: Revise your research design. Remember that the purpose of the research design is to explain how you will structure your research. What theory are you testing, refuting, or proposing? What are the major concepts you will be using and debates you will be addressing? What kind of evidence will you use? The key to the research design is to be explicit about your methods, concepts, and sources. You may also scan articles in *Comparative Politics*, *World Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Politics and Society*, and *American Journal of Sociology* for ideas on clear research designs.

Week 7 October 18: Submit Revised Research Design

We will not meet as a class today. Come by my office to submit your new and improved research design and pick up your annotated bibliography. Make sure to give your peer reader a copy of your revised research design.

Assignment for next week: Read Lipson's chs. 8-9 and begin outlining Chapter 1 of your thesis. Your outline should be 1-2 pages and clearly demonstrate the contents and organization of your first chapter. Consult the handout from Zerubavel's book for tips.

Week 8 October 25: Planning Chapter One

Submit Chapter 1 outline and receive your revised research design (with comments from peer reader and I). In this session, we will discuss what material goes into Chapter One, different ways of organizing the Chapter, allotting pages to Chapter sections, and other details.

Assignment for November 8: Read chs. 10-12 of Lipson and begin working on a draft of Chapter 1. Make sure to also read Lipson's Appendix 2 and select a citation system, then use it consistently throughout your thesis.

Week 9 November 1: Optional Individual Meetings

Continue working on your Chapter 1 draft, and if you wish you can schedule a 15-minute meeting with me in my office during class time.

Week 10 November 8: Submit Chapter 1 Draft

Please submit one hard copy on my office door and deliver one copy to your peer reader. No class meeting.

Week 11 November 15: Individual Meetings to Discuss Chapter 1 Draft

You and your peer reader will meet with me in my office for 30 minutes to discuss your Chapter 1 draft. Please type up your comments on your peer's draft.

Assignment for December 3: begin revising your draft based on your peer critic's and my comments.

November 22 Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 12 November 29: Optional Individual Meetings

Continue revising Chapter 1. If you wish, you can schedule a 15-minute meeting with me in my office during class time.

Chapter 1 Revision due Monday December 3 at 5 pm!

Please place one copy in my mailbox and deliver one copy to your peer critic.

Week 13 December 6: Final Individual Meetings

I will meet with each of you for 15 minutes to hand you comments on your revised Chapter 1, discuss your semester's progress, and preview the schedule for the spring.

Assignment over winter break: Read comments on Chapter 1 and spend about one week incorporating them, as you will return to Chapter 1 later. Outline Chapter 2, begin building its bibliography, and start prewriting with an eye to completing a draft in the first two weeks of the spring semester.

Have a wonderful winter break!