

Political Science Senior Thesis Handbook

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Note: This handbook discusses thesis (470) requirements and expectations as well as College, HSS Division, and PS Department Requirements. Stefan J. Kapsch, longtime member of the faculty, wrote it, and the Department has revised it because it holds much useful information. Other helpful resources include the [IT thesis page](#), the [Thesis Hub](#), and [Library Resources for Seniors](#).

1 Policies

Most of the policies outlined in this guide refer to divisional or college requirements. In addition to those requirements, the Department has a short thesis policy.

Among the skills we hope you master in the course of thesis is the ability to edit and tighten your own work. When we submit our materials to journals and publishers, they commonly ask us to cut 1/3 or 1/4 of our “finished material.” We know how valuable this exercise is, and painful though it is, it has taught us how to edit.

We believe mastering this skill will assist you in writing graduate school essays, op-eds for newspapers, or journal articles and will generally increase the likelihood that strangers will read your work with interest. The greater the economy of thesis, the easier it will be for you to submit it to national student journals and conferences.

We will be working with you individually and as a group to help you learn how to edit. If there are things you think we could do better, please tell us.

2 The Thesis at Reed College in the Context of the Senior Year

2.1 The History of the Thesis and the Faculty Code¹

The Senior Thesis is often considered the seminal experience at Reed (along with several other equally “seminal” experiences). But in fact the Faculty Code considers the thesis as another course, different from yet no more important than other courses. What is different is that like Hum 110, it is required of almost all Reed seniors.² Unlike Hum 110, it is a one-on-one experience with a faculty member. Chp. IV.I.J states that

“This requirement is made not with the expectation of obtaining novel contributions to human knowledge, but with the aim of developing powers of independent thought, general grasp of the field and facility in preparing an extensive piece of constructive writing.”

This goes all the way back to 1913, which considerably predates the Hum program and virtually all other aspects of the current Reed curriculum. In this sense, it really is the quintessential Reed experience.

¹ The Faculty Code is the collected (codified) legislation of the Faculty acting as a committee of the whole, which sets the curriculum and the requirements. It is administered by (surprise, surprise) the “Administration Committee,” an appointed committee of five faculty members, plus the Registrar and the Dean of Student Services. (Faculty Code Reed Constitution, Bylaws, Article IV, “Committees,” Section 4.A).

² In fact, some Reed students do not write a thesis. For example, no thesis is required for students enrolled in the Engineering Program with Cal Tech, Columbia, Rensselaer, or Wash U. (Faculty Code, Ch. IV.M.3.a); The Computer Science Program with the University of Washington (Faculty Code Chp. IV.M.3.b); The Forestry Program with Duke Washington (Faculty Code Chp. IV.M.3.c); The Medical School/Veterinary School Program (Faculty Code Chp. IV.M.3.d); or the Oregon Graduate Institute Program (Faculty Code Chp. IV.M.3.f). All of these earn a Reed B.A., however. Not all Reed students take Hum 110, either. Some transfer students may and do opt out. (Faculty Code Chp. IV.2.E.a.)

2.2 The Senior Year and the Thesis in the Faculty Code

There has been controversy over the years in regard to the thesis, as problems arose, times changed, and kinks were worked out. For example, at one point, concern was expressed that students and faculty were exaggerating the importance of the thesis. The evidence was that some students would take years to complete the thesis or take a senior year made up of nothing but thesis, as the authors strove to write the great American novel, cure cancer, or reinterpret history demonstrating that everyone else heretofore was sadly misguided. The result is Faculty Code Chp. IV.I and J, which provide that all students must have a six unit (minimum) senior year (including 2 units of 470) and that all students must take a two-unit thesis (but never more than 2 units), one unit per semester.

The student grapevine is alive with both lore and “facts” about the thesis. But the fact is that outside the broad outline above, the process can differ greatly by disciplines, divisions, and faculty advisors so it is essential for all thesis students to check anything they hear with their advisor, and to be sure the advisor and the student are “on the same page.” Be aware of what Artemus Ward (a nineteenth century humorist and a favorite of Abraham Lincoln) said: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know that just ain’t so.” (Actually, Ward was wrong—it’s both, but it’s worth remembering anyway).

2.3 The Oral Exam

The oral exam is scheduled for 90 minutes, but will last less than that. With as much as a half hour left, or as little as a quarter hour, the Orals Committee Chair (the Advisor) will ask you to leave the room while the Committee deliberates. This is routine, it happens in every case. This is time when the Committee members give their judgments and comments to the Chair, which (s)he then considers in assigning a grade and providing feedback to you as the author.³ Then you come back for handshakes, kudos and hugs (only if you’re the hugging kind).

Orals committee members may have suggestions for revisions, but in the HSS Division this is rare (except for typos, etc.).⁴ This is partly because HSS has a strict “first draft” policy, which means that you will have the comments weeks before the final draft and the oral, and will have already responded to comments and criticisms. This also means that you will know well in advance if there are any unresolved problems.

Orals in HSS virtually always start the same way: The advisor will say something like “Cheddar, please take a few minutes and tell us how you got into this project and what you think is important about it.” There are many variations on the wording of this, but what you need to keep in mind is (a) The only point is to let you start the discussion and (maybe) set the agenda, and (b) It really is just “a few minutes.” Sometimes that works, sometimes someone will (in effect) say “That’s nice but what I want to discuss is....”

³ This differs from the Lit and Lang Division where grading is done by the Division as a committee of the whole. In the HSS Division, the Advisor is considered the grader since this is a course and only s/he knows the overall context of the course. In other words, the course is more than the written product and the oral. It is also about process, about how you have mastered the art of research.

⁴ Never hand in anything that has not been spell-checked. You are directing your reader’s attention away from what you have written to how you have written it, and that is not in your interest.

This traditional opening⁵ presages what is intended to be as much a discussion, as an examination. Yes, it is part of the grading process, but keep in mind that having done the research, you are expert on the topic. It's OK to say "I don't know, but I can think it through," and it is also OK to ask a question and engage the questioner in the interest of promoting discussion. A Reed thesis oral is like a Reed conference when it really works well, but don't try to manage it; just let it develop.

Finally, food at orals: This is the subject of much lore at Reed, but the fact is that it is neither required or expected. If you want to do it, fine, but keep it simple, let the committee know in advance what you will be bringing so they can plan to eat (or not), and don't bring alcohol. In our experience, alcohol is rarely touched, so it is wasted.⁶ If your oral is at 1:00 and you want to bring food, let the Committee know well in advance or they will come from lunch and your graciousness will be for naught. Water, coffee and juice are most likely to be appreciated.⁷ Finally, place the food on a table to the side so it isn't the "centerpiece" of the conference table. This also allows people to get up to go to the food table, which helps to keep a relaxed but not distracting atmosphere for the oral.

2.4 The Orals Committee

Orals committees are usually four faculty: The Advisor as Chair, the "First Reader," a Divisional Reader usually from within the HSS Division (but not always) and a fourth member who should be from outside the HSS Division. From the Faculty Code, Chapter IV.L:

"Every candidate for graduation must take a final Comprehensive Oral Examination of approximately ninety minutes in length. The exam is under the direction of the major division (or if delegated, the major department) or interdisciplinary committee. In typical practice, an orals board consists of four Reed faculty members. Even in exceptional circumstances, the exam may not take place with fewer than two members. The board generally includes the thesis adviser, a second member of the major department, and two other members. To reflect the breadth of a liberal education, at least one examiner from outside the division should be present. An examiner from another department but in the same division may be required. The student may be expected to secure one or more examiners. With the approval of the thesis adviser, an examiner who is not a member of the Reed faculty may serve on the board."

After you turn in your thesis proposal to the division, the department will assign a professor to be your First Reader. The role of the First Reader can vary. At a minimum, the First Reader is obligated to read the first draft and provide you comments and suggestions (i.e., a "critique") in a reasonable amount of time. What is a "reasonable amount of time?" That depends on the nature of the thesis (complexity, length, logical cohesiveness, etc.), the workload of the First Reader and other factors. Obviously, the more theses the First Reader has to work through, the longer it will take.

⁵ An anonymous but insightful Reedie observed, "a Reed tradition is anything that has happened at least once." That's not bad, not bad at all, but in our experience, this kind of start has an extremely high probability of happening. The exceptions are those in the [hard] sciences and math where orals often start with a long presentation by the candidate.

⁶ Orals week is exhausting for faculty and alcohol just makes it worse.

⁷ The Paradox has "hot pots" of coffee and cups for purchase, if you wish, or you can make your own.

Normally, a First Reader is not involved until the draft is turned in, but sometimes the First Reader is involved much sooner, almost like a second advisor. This is subject to negotiation between you, the First Reader, and your thesis advisor. The last two committee members are virtually never involved until orals week. Once you get the comments from your First Reader, then you and your advisor will normally meet and discuss them, leading to agreement on revisions, etc.

The HSS Division Secretary appoints the Divisional Reader. This will be announced on the day that your first draft is due. The proposal informs the Division of your general topic—that's the reason for the proposal requirement; that and to make sure you are making some progress.

The last member of your committee must be from outside the HSS Division and you are personally responsible for finding that person. It is normally not possible to do so until the thesis oral exam schedule is announced since until then faculty don't know whether and when they will be available. After that, it's a scramble. The role of the last member is to help keep the oral from focusing narrowly on the thesis by having a non-expert on the committee.

Other people may be invited to the oral, but this is extremely unusual.⁸ If you want to do that, we need to discuss it well in advance and agree on it. No one can attend without your consent. Most often, an additional person will be someone with a professional interest in the research, often someone who has helped with the research. They may or may not participate, as agreed upon in advance. Again, an outside person is extremely unusual.

2.5 Thesis Grading

Grading is supposedly a taboo subject at Reed College, but 470 is an exception. As mentioned previously, in the Division of History and Social Science thesis grading is the prerogative of the instructor i.e., the thesis advisor. The thesis committee provides advice and opinion in the post-oral conference, but the advisor assigns the final grade. This is because the grade is not based exclusively on the final document and the quality of the oral discussion. Thesis is a process that takes a full year, which is reflected in the grade. The grade can be affected by the interaction between the advisor and the student over the course of the year on such matters as whether discussions were productive, whether advice was seriously and thoughtfully considered, whether deadlines were met, etc. It is entirely possible (although extremely unlikely) that the thesis grade for an excellent document is less than excellent because the process was seriously flawed. Just as one example, this is why it can be a huge mistake to write a thesis in the last few weeks. On the other hand, some hastily written theses receive excellent grades because the reason for the haste were beyond the control of the student (In these cases, often essential data were not available until late in the process). One could say this is really not a counter example since the process was still excellent because the student was actively working on getting the data. The point is that thesis grading is a matter of judgment and the advisor is the judge.

Grades on thesis follow the same A,B,C,D,F, or S conventions as other courses. Grades of "S" (satisfactory) are often given at midterm and end-of-fall semester. "S" means your work so far is at least satisfactory. All thesis grades except the final grade are advisory and do not appear on your transcript (same as any year-long course). An "INC" (incomplete) is also possible, and follows the same rules as any other course.

⁸ In some Colleges and Universities, orals are public events with a sizeable non-participating audience.

Your thesis must be uploaded to the Registrar's Office by 3 PM on the due date along with a separate document from the advisor indicated acceptance. If you miss the deadline (and that is rare), you can still do that within three days by paying a fee of \$50.⁹ If for no other reason, doing so is likely to mess up Renn Fayre weekend, and is therefore something to be avoided.

In addition to the usual letter grades and INC, a 470 grade of U ("unfinished") may be also be assigned. The differences are, first, that an INC has to be for reasons that are beyond the control of the student (significant illness is the usual one), whereas the U is at the discretion of the instructor. Second, a U carries a fee of \$200 compared to no fee for an INC and third, a "U" automatically changes to an "F" if the conditions are not met on time. Finally, an INC on thesis requires the approval of both the Division and the Administration Committee, unlike a regular course where the INC is at the discretion of the instructor. This requires a petition and, make no mistake, securing the approval of both of these is an arduous process with success very doubtful. Your advisor and Administration Committee will expect medical certification (if illness is the reason). Other grounds ("extreme emergency") are possible but require a strong argument and evidence.

3 Thesis Roles and Responsibilities

3.1 The Advisor

Your thesis advisor and the general advisor are (or will be, once the registrar processes the changes) the same person.

The reason is that Reed has a very structured curriculum that is also very unforgiving, as you know. That is, you must meet all of the following sets of requirements with the clear prospect of not graduating if you fall short in any of them. They are:

1 College Requirements (Hum 110; six PE; the three "Group" requirements depending on your declaration of major; the Junior Qual; [at least] 30 units total, 15 in residence at Reed, passing six units in your senior year; 470).

2 HSS Division requirements (Two units from each of three disciplines in the HSS Division, one of which can be your major) or REL/ES/ICPS-POL equivalent.

3 Department Requirements (Two empirical intro PS courses; One Political Theory course; a choice of statistics courses; junior seminar; and four additional PS courses) or REL/ES/ICPS-POL equivalent.

The role of the Advisor is to advise on these requirements. But it is emphatically your responsibility to make certain that you have met all of these requirements.

Be advised (for starters) that the PE requirement is never waived, and no one we know of has ever graduated without meeting it. As an adult, you are responsible for managing your program in such a way that the requirements are met.

You will receive notices during the senior year about requirements. One comes twice a semester from the Registrar's Office titled "Degree Progress Evaluation." It applies only to College Requirements. Let's repeat that: It applies only to College Requirements. Be sure you read it carefully! In addition, the HSS Division will review your Division requirements and notify you; similarly, the PS Department or relevant interdisciplinary program will do it for Department/Program Requirements. These notification procedures do not affect one whit the fact

⁹ This fee goes into an obscure fund known as the "book fund" administered by the Office of Financial Aid to help needy students pay for incidentals such as books. One must be eligible for financial aid to draw from this fund. The \$200 "U" thesis fee also goes into this fund.

that you are personally responsible for meeting all requirements. So, even if the system goofs and fails to notify you, you are still responsible for meeting requirements.

If you are a transfer student, or are transferring courses to Reed to meet requirements, things get more complicated and require greater attention because courses elsewhere must be converted to Reed units, and there has to be time to do that. In other words, a three (or four or five or whatever) semester-hour course somewhere does not necessarily equal one unit at Reed. Ben Bradley in the Registrar's Office is the expert on transferring courses.

If you do transfer courses to meet a requirement, say (for example) one of the two HSS departments, 1.75 units of transfer credit will be accepted as filling a two-unit requirement. However, you still have the thirty-unit "quantity" requirement. In other words, 29.75 will not satisfy the quantity requirement.

If you wish to transfer courses, make sure you clear them with the department involved to be sure they are acceptable, and do that in advance of taking the course. The last minute is far too risky!

Finally, it is up to you to make sure the college you are transferring courses from actually does that (they must send the information to Reed), to make sure Reed has received it and (most importantly) allowing enough time for it all to happen. If you take a course elsewhere and do not arrange to have it transferred, it's the same as not taking it at all. If you take a course elsewhere and do not allow enough time to have it transferred, it's the same as not taking it at all. Bureaucracies, like anyone else, need time; you aren't their only concern.

Please see the department student resources web page for policies on transferring courses: http://academic.reed.edu/poli_sci/resources.html.

3.2 The Student Researcher

Obviously, your first obligation is to meet all the requirements for graduation and to do so on time. In other words, to take responsibility for managing your own program, as discussed above.

Your second responsibility is to work with your advisor to develop the project that is your thesis. That is, it's not just a document, but a process, a project and you need to work together on it. This should be an enormously rewarding experience, and it is your advisor's goal to facilitate this experience for you. But your advisor can't do this without your cooperation. Usually, this means regular weekly meetings, though arrangements can vary. Regardless, it is a very bad idea to "disappear" on your advisor and only show up as you feel capable. Go whether you feel like it or not. Some advisors hold group meetings with all their advisees as well to discuss projects informally. These can be helpful in forcing you to present to others unfamiliar with your project what you're doing. You will be called to do this during your thesis oral, so practice is always a good idea. You will also be asked dozens of times to present "what you're working on" by friends and relatives, and you will need to develop your 1 minute, 5 minute, 10 minute, and "how much time have you got?" versions of your thesis. Burdensome though this may be, practice it.

Third, you are responsible for fully exploiting the very considerable resources and services available to you at Reed. Every PS thesis student's "best friend" is the Social Science Librarian at Reed. They specialize in helping all of us in social science to do our research, and they are very, very good at it. If you go through your senior year without getting to know them well, you are simply squandering an opportunity and making things hard on yourself. You may have already been introduced to them; but even so, don't hesitate to get in touch again, discuss your idea and see where that leads. Things move so fast in electronic data retrieval, etc. that you really do need to work with them. Among other things, they are also an expert in government documents. Government, especially the federal government, is a major sponsor of research,

which it publishes itself. Many PS theses could benefit from government documents, but you need to know how to get access to them.

Many of you are already familiar with ILL (Inter library loan), Summit, and other systems that put virtually any information within your grasp. In addition, there is CUS (Computer User Services) and statistical help (data@reed will help with data acquisition and formatting, although your model selection will be up to you and your advisor).

Fourth, you are responsible for keeping all your appointments, including those with other professors (First Readers, for example). If you cancel your appointment, you should let the faculty member know at least one day in advance when you can't make it and whether it seems better to use the time some other way. The thesis process varies in intensity over the weeks, and so some weeks you may need to devote your attention elsewhere. Faculty are familiar with this, and we will understand that there are some weeks where meetings are difficult and other weeks where you might need to meet twice or even more intensively. In general, it is good to develop a habitual, predictable routine so the faculty member and you are both on the same page of the thesis process, so to speak.

It is also appropriate for you to take the initiative to come in to discuss other matters not directly related to your thesis including questions about the future, your other classes, or just how things are going. Your thesis supervisor is also your advisor, so these are entirely legitimate questions. Don't narrow your relationship to the point that the advisor is unaware of other academic issues that are in great need of attention.

Once we get to the point where you are giving your advisor drafts, some professors prefer electronic versions while others like hard copies to mark up. Inquire in advance. Some faculty members prefer to write their comments and others prefer to offer them orally. Hopefully the comments will be helpful rather than annoying. Remember that we've all been through this process ourselves, so we know what it's like to sit in your seat, and we can all attest to the improvements that we subsequently saw in our work.

4 Deadlines and the consequences of missing them

4.1 HSS Division Deadlines

HSS and College deadlines must be taken very, very seriously because they are rigorously enforced and the consequences of missing them are onerous. Moreover, exceptions are very hard to get and involve petitions and time; you will have very little of the latter. Finally, your advisor's ability to intervene on your behalf is decidedly limited. The decision on any petition will be made on the merits, not on the basis of whether your advisor supports it. The advisor's influence is likely to be pivotal only if he or she does not support your petition. So, do not let it come to this.

Read the HSS deadlines and requirements carefully. Note the deadline and requirements for the proposal. It is usually the Monday of the fourth week of classes. The checklist for the proposal is:

1. A title
2. A short description of your thesis project

Meeting the HSS proposal deadline is really not an onerous task, and everyone should be able to make it with no problem. If you fail to meet the deadline, the HSS Division will apply a penalty.

Keep in mind that the proposal is not a binding contract. It is expected that the thesis will evolve over time and that part of that evolution may be dictated by factors that cannot be anticipated in advance, such as the unavailability of essential data. If that happens, it might necessitate significant changes. The key is to make sufficient early progress that these things happen early, when it is possible to respond efficiently.

Also note the deadline and requirements for the first draft, which is typically due Friday of the week after the mid-semester break." Most importantly, look also at the HSS "First Draft Certification Form," a copy of which is available from the HSS administrator. Note that it does not use the term "rough draft" (as students often do.) It uses "first draft." Students often use the term "rough" to justify turning in almost anything, but we can assure you that this just won't fly. Several components are listed, and your advisor must certify that the draft meets each one of them. Here is what you must do: An acceptable "first draft" is a thesis that has all of the listed components in proper format such that if no revisions are suggested by the first reader or the advisor, the document could be handed over to a professional typist who could prepare it for final printing with no further communication with you, the author. The bibliography can be in any format as long as it is legible and contains all the necessary information.¹⁰ If you write "chapter 2 to be finished later" and put that in the first draft, you will have failed to meet the requirement and your advisor must certify this, so don't do that. Let your advisor decide if another chapter is necessary.

The official HSS checklist is as follows:

1. Thesis in template.
2. Abstract, Table of Contents, with chapter titles.
3. All chapters in complete form (i.e., no "outlines" or incomplete chapters).
4. All citations and references in proper format
5. Introduction and Conclusion.
6. Bibliography or references.

Note also that your advisor must certify only that overall the thesis is of passing quality, i.e., worthy of at least a "D." This is a very low standard, but it is not in your interest to aim for it. It is in your interest to aim for the best draft you can produce because that is how you will get the best feedback from the First Reader and your advisor, and that will allow you to make good use of the ensuing month for revision.

If you fail to make the first draft deadline, the HSS Division will apply a penalty.

4.2 College Deadlines

The College deadlines are pretty simple because there are but three: One is the last day in the first semester of your thesis for handing in work in any course (thesis is a course). Your advisor must certify that you are performing satisfactory work at this point, and so may require you to turn in one or two chapters at this point in order to do so (see below). The next deadline is when you must turn in your final draft to the Registrar's Office (which you then distribute to your thesis committee). Finally, after you have passed orals, you must resubmit your thesis (without typos) to the Library. If you don't, you won't be allowed to participate in Commencement exercises.

¹⁰ However, keep in mind that the draft should be as easy to read as possible because that will allow the First Reader to focus on the content, rather than expending energy on deciphering a crude document.

4.3 Department Deadlines

There are no deadlines from the department, other than the college and HSS deadlines.

4.4 Your Advisor's Deadlines and You

You and your advisor will negotiate these individually as you go along, but normally, advisors expect a first chapter or the equivalent in writing by the end of the first semester. For many advisors the first chapter includes your literature review. And yet in other cases, it may make sense to start your thesis at another point. For example, if you know the thesis is going to be on religion and state in Turkey, it may make sense to write the chapter on the history of religion in Turkey (since you'll have to do this any way) and meanwhile figure out what your hypotheses are going to be in your first chapter. Or if your thesis is going to be on six or seven critical philosophers, you may need to write summary accounts of their arguments (so six or seven units of about 7-8 pages in length) and then use these to consider your own position. These are what constitute "equivalents."

Be sure you and your advisor have the same understanding of what the writing expectations are. Anything less than "the first chapter or equivalent" standard is insufficient progress because when the spring semester starts you will be amazed at how fast the time will go. Also, don't depend on working over break. It's not a bad idea—just don't depend on it because it's rare for anyone to get as much done as they hope and some don't get anything done at all. After all, it is "break" and relaxation is important.

5 The Thesis Process

5.1 The Logic of a Thesis

A thesis is simply a systematic development of an idea—a "hypothesis," question, hunch, problem, assertion—whatever one wants to call it. The assumption is that it will be non-trivial, i.e., important enough to merit the time and effort and that it will be approached in a disciplined manner, i.e. using the research and analysis tools of a discipline such as political science.

Theses look a lot like the lame joke about the preacher who was asked the secret of his famously successful sermons. He relied "First, I tells 'em what I'm gonna tell 'em. Then I tells 'em. Then I tells 'em what I done told 'em." These are the introduction, the main body of the thesis and the conclusion, respectively.

Thesis titles at Reed are often whimsical, personal and even nonsensical. We will expect only that they are not libelous or unduly vulgar (not vulgar at all would be best). Think carefully about your title because this is the first thing readers will see, and thus it is your first opportunity to capture the attention of the readers. If you want to squander that, your advisor probably won't stop you. But then again, he or she might. In the end, it's your thesis, not the advisor's.¹¹

You might look up the title of Stephanie Cason's thesis in the Reed Library Catalog (use her name). It tells the reader a great deal about the thesis: (I) It's about the USA PATRIOT ACT and

¹¹ This is one of the key differences for the advisor between a Reed thesis and a doctoral dissertation. Part of the professional reputation of a graduate dissertation advisor is his/her PhD students' dissertations. Hence, advisors have a key stake in the titles, content and everything else in the dissertation. Your advisor's stake in your Reed thesis is that as a professional, he or she wants you to do the very best thesis you can. Their job is to do what they can to make that happen; to help you realize your potential. But their professional standing as a professional in the external academic world is not affected by what you did in the same ways as it would be if this were a dissertation. Thus, your advisor will give you much greater latitude.

the War on Terrorism, and will capture the attention of anyone interested in public affairs (her intended audience); (2) It's about civil liberties and constitutional law; (3) It has a conclusion that includes both an hypothesis (unconstitutionality) and a value judgment ("governmental snooping)." It will also respond to "key word" searches, including the word "snooping" which is increasingly becoming accepted as indicating government intrusiveness and invasions of privacy. A thesis title that is humorous and full of hidden meaning may be fun, but it isn't helpful. And while your thesis may not be (indeed is unlikely to be) the last word on a particular topic, it is possible that it is the first word on an important topic for someone. Presumably you would want that person to find it, and they won't find it if only you and your friends get the title.

The abstract elaborates on the title. Students often write it at the last minute without much thought. Actually, it is another chance to grab the attention of the reader. It should not be squandered. Abstracts are elaborations on the title and condensed versions of the introduction and should not exceed about 400 words. Again, if you look at Stephanie's abstract, you'll see it develops the idea of "snooping," which is not obvious. It also suggests some of the dynamics of this issue—9/11, the rush to "do something," etc.

The introduction to the thesis is where you state the researchable question, hunch, etc., tell the reader why it is important by placing it in the context of the public debate or concern (if any), and place it in the context of the discipline. You should then outline the rest of the thesis—what evidence you will need, how you will analyze that evidence, and what you expect your conclusions to be. The introduction is a critical part of the thesis because it is your best opportunity to engage the interest of the readers—to entice readers to go on. If the introduction is boring, confusing or uninteresting, they are likely to stop there or (at best) to skip to the conclusion.

So, the reader's attention will progress systematically from (1) the title to (2) the abstract and (3) the introduction. You can lose them at any one of these steps. What you should be aiming for is to not only get them through all three of these, but to make them go on and read the rest of the thesis. Keep in mind that the thesis isn't about you alone; it's about informing and educating an audience, your readers.

In an ideal thesis, everything is connected to everything else. Every sentence leads logically to the next sentence. Every paragraph leads logically to the next paragraph. Every chapter leads logically to the next chapter and all of this leads logically to the conclusion. No one should read a sentence and then scratch their heads wondering what it has to do with what came before. That is an excellent way to lose the reader.

Again, consider Stephanie's Table of Contents. There are two points to make here. Each chapter has a full title, not just "Chapter 1, Chapter 2," etc. If you just have chapter numbers, your Table of Contents will be almost entirely free of information. The page numbers would be the only useful information, and it's not clear why one would need that, either.¹² Instead, she has provided a kind of "road map" to her thesis. Like a map, it is a representation, not the real thing, but it does allow one to "navigate" the thesis and it exposes its logic. In a sense, the table of contents is a "model," an abstraction of the thesis itself.

Second, note that there are subheadings. She uses numerical designations: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc. which emphasize the progressive nature of the thesis, but these are not necessary. If you look at her [complete] thesis, you will see that these subheadings also appear in the text itself, thus

¹² A bad reason would be that it would encourage the reader to just skip to the conclusion because that might be the most efficient way to figure out what the thesis is about.

serving as guides for the reader as (s)he moves along. The map analogy is relevant here. Think of a road map, where the “legend” of the map explains the symbols used, which in turn are usually hierarchical and logical in nature. Large cities are in bold capital letters, smaller cities in bold but lower case and smaller ones are in simple lower case.

The table of contents is such a “road map” to the thesis. Not only does it guide the readers as they set out reading the thesis (i.e., gives them an “overall view” just like scanning a map), but it also serves as a handy way for the readers to identify parts later, parts they may wish to return to. The issue here is to make the thesis as accessible as possible and as easy to “navigate” as possible. Anything you do in this regard is in your interest as the author because it helps to assure that your thesis will actually be read and also that the reader can focus on content. It’s part of “telling ‘em.”

Not everyone agrees with this approach and it is best to consult with your advisor.

One thing we strongly recommend is learning how to use the Styles Function in Word to set up your table of contents electronically. This will save you an enormous amount of time because you can then automatically correct all the page numbers of your chapters with the touch of a button. This will save you a great deal of time and it will avoid painful problems (such as having to reprint your thesis because the page numbers changed have way or differ from the table of contents). Speak with CUS folks on how to do this.

5.2 Developing an Idea

If you don’t have one now—and most students have only the most general idea at this stage, you and your advisor’s first task is to refine and narrow your topic.

The first step is to simply review what interests you. Public policy? For example, whether the “War on Poverty” was a success or failure? What “works and what doesn’t?” Whether the concept of “democracy” differs between Plato, Aristotle or anyone else? Is the USA PATRIOT Act constitutional?

Chances are that you are working with someone roughly in your area, so she or he may have an understanding of what some topics might be. This is nice if it happens, but it is by no means necessary. We have advised all sorts of theses in many different fields. The topic should be dictated by your interests, not your advisor’s, and we go along for the adventure giving you advice. You might also think about courses you have had and especially which ones excited you, or left you with unaddressed questions.

Another metaphor may be useful here: The “heart, the gut and the head.” The “heart” is what tells us what we think is important—what our values are. For example, that we think poverty is a bad thing and that doing something about it is important. The “gut” is an intuitive reaction to the heart; it tells us something we suspect about poverty. Perhaps, for example, that it is “caused” by lack of education, which is then a crude hypothesis (it is “crude” because we haven’t specified what is meant either by “poverty” or by “education”). The “head” is the rational and analytical because it “tests” (or assesses, or whatever term one wishes) whether the intuitive notion of the cause of poverty is testable and more than instinctively plausible.

Most of the time, the “heart” is the driving force in developing a thesis idea. Mature scholars, those who have been practicing for many years, will develop research topics based not on the heart, but on their very sophisticated knowledge of their fields and their disciplines. In other words, research hypotheses are theory-driven. This is especially true in the natural sciences where knowledge is highly integrated and each research project that “solves” one puzzle, raises many more related questions. Even at Reed, it is not unusual for natural science thesis students to work on the same problem in successive years. In year #1, student #1 tests one hypothesis that

plausibly explains a problem and either finds it doesn't or proves the "null hypothesis," (no definitive evidence either way); which then leads to year #2 in which student #2 tests the next most likely hypothesis (or, as a practical matter, the next most likely hypothesis which is also feasible for a one-year undergraduate thesis and the resource constraints that implies), etc. ad infinitum or until the problem is solved.

If you already have a well-developed thesis idea, it is still useful to get a sense of the public debate, but the real first step is reading the academic literature surrounding an issue. In either case—only a vague idea or a well-developed idea—this is an essential step. A literature review is an essential part of any scholarly endeavor. One way or another, every thesis must review the scholarly literature. The reading list in this handbook has some books that may help you to do this. There are utilitarian reasons for a thorough literature review: You need to know what other scholars have done in order to inform your own work, make it more sophisticated and (ideally) add to the scholarly debate and discussion.

The reason Reed theses are more likely to start from the heart is because this usually is the first really serious academic research project you will undertake. Also, unless you already have a very good start on the scholarly literature (such as a prior course), reviewing it is likely to be a major undertaking which will take you well past the deadline for a thesis proposal.

Still, the process is not as neatly divisible as may be implied here. You almost certainly will choose a topic because it is something that matters to you as a human being, a citizen, etc., but that will quickly "blend" into the world of scholarship on that topic. As soon as something occurs to you as personally important, you should be starting a search of the literature. Following the heart and following the literature are simultaneous processes.

What really matters in all this is that you help the "heart" and the "head" distinct. A thesis is about "evidence," and "proof," and systematic, logical argument, not about "feelings." Your mind has to be kept open, receptive to the counter-intuitive and facts which are counter to your values. In fact, you have an obligation to examine all sides of the problem, hold them to the same rigorous analytical standards, and rest your conclusions on that, not on what you "like." Theses are scholarly research, not polemics or editorials.

Does this mean that your opinion and feelings have no role at all in a thesis? No, it doesn't. It just means you have to keep them parked in the right stalls, make as sure as you can that your values do not affect your analysis and that you are willing to accept that your analysis may affect your values. After doing the thesis, you may find that what you thought was important and mattered a great deal isn't so important or maybe even plain wrong.

The conclusion is where your values can legitimately come out. After summarizing what you have done ("Telling 'em what you done told 'em") and summarizing the scholarly significance, you are then free to also assess what this all means for your values or societal values—you can say whether this is "good" or "bad" precisely because you have done a good job of scholarship. Scholarship informs value judgments. It makes them more or less persuasive.

What we might call the "normative" has an important role in a thesis because it addresses the question of "so what?" To be sure, the answer to this question may be purely analytical. For example, that the attitudes of the public on the purposes of criminal sanctions are not strictly punitive and in fact are much more rehabilitative.¹³ In other words, this was the result of the analysis of survey data. But in addition to this, the author also made other normative statements. One kind of normative statement is prescriptive; i.e., based on these data, what would be

¹³ This was essentially the conclusion of one Reed PS student, Kathy Sher (1985)

workable public policy? In this case, that the public expects the correctional system to actually correct, and that programs designed to do that are consistent with public expectations. This kind of normative statement could be part of the main thesis, and routinely is in some disciplines such as economics. It is a contingent statement: “If one wishes to accomplish X (in this case, policy consistent with public expectations), then one should do Y.” Nothing is necessarily said about whether X or Y are good, bad, indifferent, smell good, taste good, or any other kind of value statement.

A second kind of normative statement is that either X or Y or both are good or bad and ought to be valued. Most of the time, this kind of statement is appropriate in the conclusion because it is a moral or ethical statement based upon assumptions that are value-based. It answers the “So what?” question from a moral or ethical perspective, and that’s fine. For example, that a criminal justice system ought to be based upon rehabilitation because people are redeemable and that a moral society will do all it can to achieve that end. It is also possible that such a statement would be the main thrust of the thesis, but then you would have to be sure you and your advisor understand this from the outset because that is a different kind of thesis. You should assume that value judgments like this are to be kept in the conclusion unless your advisor and you agree otherwise.¹⁴

5.3 The HSS Proposal

The HSS proposal should be no longer than one or two pages. It has two primary purposes: To make sure that you are progressing and to assist the Division officers in making a choice for your Divisional Reader. They are obliged to distribute the workload equitably among the division faculty; the proposal will help them identify faculty who may have expertise or interest in your thesis topic.

The HSS proposal is essentially a shorter version of the introduction, discussed above. A formal research design has not been feasible in most cases. The proposal is a somewhat formal statement of intentions or aspirations that is expected to change over time. That is, it is not a contract. So, the proposal should state the general area of the thesis, why it is important as a matter of public debate, some sense of the scholarly literature (it’s too soon for a full lit review), as precise a statement of the hunch, hypothesis, problem as possible, and how you intend to go about addressing the problem (methods and data).

5.4 Human Subjects

It may or may not be likely that you will need this, but it is very important. If your thesis involves humans as subjects, then you need to have the approval of the Institutional Review Board. This is both a federal requirement (Reed stands to lose all federal funding if we violate this) and an ethical imperative that Reed takes seriously. Approval is a painful process. It is also possible that you may need the approval of more than one human subjects committee. For example, a few years ago one student wanted to interview prison inmates, and that required approval of both the Reed IRB and the Oregon Department of Corrections Committee. Also, if the subjects are a vulnerable population, such as children or inmates, then the scrutiny by the committees is likely to be ratcheted up a good deal. Informed consent is always required.

¹⁴ An example of this is Toni Cheatham’s thesis from 2002-2003 on reparations for slavery. This was something that was very important to her, but her thesis was to explore the issue from all sides before coming to a conclusion. She does that in her conclusion when she does argue that reparations are not only feasible, but are the right thing to do morally.

A clear-cut case of necessary approval is an experimental research design, such as those that are routine in psychology. They are still unusual in PS theses, but nonetheless not unknown. The IRB has its webpage (<http://www.reed.edu/irb/>), and there is no reason to go into details here. The guideline is this: If the research involves contact with people as subjects, then the need for approval is sufficiently likely that you at least need to have a discussion with the IRB. This may include one-on-one interviews and may include survey research. Keep in mind that the IRB has deadlines and that it expects applicants to observe them.

6 Nuts and Bolts

Many questions will come up as this process unfolds. Some of them are addressed here in this document, but this is by no means intended to be comprehensive. Feel free to ask your advisor any questions at all, and if your advisor doesn't know the answer, she or he will find out who does.

6.1 Submitting Drafts

Never send drafts, no matter how simple, which you have not spell checked. You are directing your reader's attention away from what you have written to how you have written it, and that is not in your interest. If possible, you should also use a grammar check. It can be really helpful once one gets used to it, even if you or your advisor don't always agree with it. After all, the goal is to make your argument and accessible as possible to the reader and this is one way to do it.

6.2 Responding to Drafts

Your advisor will try to respond as quickly as possible. It is always wise to speak with your advisor in advance to get an understanding of when you can expect a response. This will allow you to plan your schedule in the interim.

When you send successive drafts, advisors normally expect that you've addressed the issues from the previous draft, unless you indicate otherwise. This is important because no one is thrilled about rereading something that they didn't have to read because you haven't made any changes.

This isn't serious at first, when you're dealing with a few paragraphs, but once you're into the thesis in depth, the "bulk" begins to build. Also, sometimes it is not a good idea to stop and make changes because your "creative juices" are flowing and it is best to continue on and make changes later. Just keep your advisor informed. The point here is that good communication between you and your advisor is essential as the writing process unfolds.

6.3 Editing

Your advisor will do only limited editing since it is not a good use of this specialized resource. Your advisor's primary role is to help you be a good scholar and political scientist, not to rewrite your thesis. In practice, what this means is that they will edit main points once to illustrate the principle. After that, they expect you to apply it.

You should consider forming a "thesis group" with a couple of your colleagues and have them read the thesis as well as your advisor. Call this a thesis community if you like, and they are just as important for theses as advisors. This is not an attempt to reduce faculty workloads in thesis, but to draw your attention to the fact that people see different things, and that therefore multiple readers helps. It also can make a difference to have someone read it who is not an expert in the field.

6.4 Format and Style

The Political Science Department has no requirements in terms of style and format and unlike many disciplines, there is no standard procedure for Political Science. The College does have requirements and while minimal, you need to be sure you know them. That's your responsibility. Make sure you consult the references to Reed College guides. Always use a 12 point font. Even though a smaller font may suit you well, your eyes are as good as they will ever be, but your audience may be much older and in need of a reasonably large font. (Keep that in mind when you write a resume, where a small font can mean your resume will be filed immediately in the circular file). Never, ever use italics as the main font. Italics are used appropriately for foreign words and phrases. Times and Palatino are common thesis fonts.

Possibly the most important skill you can learn in thesis is succinctness and the worst vice that appears is redundancy. Do not be surprised if your advisor says something like, "these last ten pages are very good. Now rewrite them in no more than five pages." Striking a balance between that and wordiness is an art and a skill, but one that will serve you well once you have mastered them.

6.5 Endnotes and Footnotes

Some disciplines have imposed a particular style, such as the author-date notation style where cites are in parentheses right in the text or in a footnote such as (Kapsch, 1996a, p. 65). You are absolutely free to use any style of citation that you like as long as it is acceptable to your thesis advisor, who will likely point you to standard references such as the Chicago Manual of Style, Turabian, or the MLA Style Sheet. Remember that footnotes are not just for citations; very often, explanatory footnotes are very useful— e.g., ones that elaborate on something in the text for those who may not have the background to understand it completely. Another occasion for an explanatory footnote is to indicate the author's awareness that the statement is incomplete, or does not include everything, etc. This forestalls criticisms that one is unaware of something when in fact one has deliberately chosen not to include it. These kinds of footnotes will often indicate that the subject is covered elsewhere, for example in a different chapter, or in another person's work.

In the computerized age, switching from footnotes to endnotes is easy, and you may have reason to favor one or another and different points in the thesis process. While you are drafting it probably makes sense to have all your notes be footnotes, so that your reader can have all the information you're using at a glance. But for the finished product, you may want to switch to endnotes.

Keep in mind that there are very different standards. Academic lawyers, for example, are very strict in these matters, but that is because they are in a discipline that is adversarial in nature and therefore must document each point thoroughly.

6.6 Citations

Learning how to do proper citations and learning also how to judge when they are necessary are important skills in thesis. Truisms ("The grass is green") need no citation. Similarly, consider a statement such as "The US Constitution features a separation of powers." That is common knowledge, but it also is an instance where one could consider an explanatory footnote citing the articles that do this (Articles I, II and III). This is a judgment call—it depends on whether one expects it would be at all controversial, or perhaps on whether the audience might find it useful (for example, if your audience had a weak background on the principles of American government). Even then, you would do so in order to help them find the relevant parts; not to prove the point.

Many students think that the only time one must cite a source is when one is quoting. While quotes must always be cited, there are a number of circumstances where citation is crucial. One must also cite ideas, concepts, conclusions, statistics, and other facts that were established by someone else and can be considered their intellectual property. If you do not cite, you are plagiarizing someone else's work. The principle is to refrain from taking credit for the work of others and to allow others to replicate your research. In the case of facts, one should cite in order to indicate clearly that one is not making this up; that there is scholarship that established the point as a "fact." This is not always easy or clear and there is plenty of room for honest error. Don't fret over this; just be aware of the principle. The guideline is if in doubt, cite. You can cut back later if you have to, but it's a lot better than trying to find a citation that you forgot to mention and have long forgotten where it came from.

7 Questions?

Stefan Kapsch, who wrote this document originally, used to have a sign on his door that said "The only dumb questions are the ones you don't ask." This is always true, but it is especially true on thesis, including anything you read above. If you don't agree or don't understand, then talk to your advisor about it. Thesis is a process, and it is a collaborative process where we are working together.