

Notes on writing a successful honors-level thesis in Anthropology

Working Independently

A senior thesis is a remarkable opportunity to undertake a “capstone” project that culminates your work as an anthropology major. Please bear in mind, however, that a successful thesis requires a great deal of self-motivated work. You should expect to put into the year-long thesis writing project at least the level of work you would put into two upper-level academic courses.

Writing a senior thesis, you are expected to demonstrate a higher level of autonomy and initiative than in regular academic courses. The onus is on you to present your advisor, in a timely fashion, the various documents that will help them to help you. These might include annotated reading lists, summaries of field notes, outlines, draft chapters, and so forth. Please don't wait to be contacted by your advisor about meeting deadlines; you should be proactive and let your advisor know ahead of time if you are falling behind on your schedule.

Asking Meaningful Questions

The thesis should ask questions that are motivated; that feel like they *need* to be asked. Ideally, your introduction will set up your thesis statement (that is, your statement of your central argument) with context that shows how your thesis emerges from a tension, question, or puzzle in your field data or the anthropological literature or both. Rather than simply stating “I'm interested in X and Y,” it is often helpful to formulate a “why” question that your thesis will attempt to answer, or at least illuminate. For example, “Why do thousands of people abandon their comfortable lives for a week every year to participate in the Burning Man Festival?”, “Why, in the three different societies under consideration, are women much more likely than men to be accused of practicing witchcraft?”, “Why did empire X collapse under this particular set of conditions, while empire Y, seemingly under the same conditions, flourished?” “How” questions can also be fruitful. For instance: “How do Hawaiians sustain the notion that certain culinary and ritual practices are ‘traditional’ even when they are actively engaged in the process of altering them?”, or “How do the power dynamics between coaches and players manifest themselves even in seemingly casual and friendly conversations?” Having an interesting question or puzzle – a “motive” – built into your thesis helps you and your reader feel the urgency or importance of your argument.

Engaging with Anthropological Literature and Ideas

The thesis should engage in some meaningful way with the anthropological literature on the subject matter, and should show proficiency in that literature. Be careful, then, not to ground your thesis primarily in literature from other disciplines (e.g. sociology, psychology) and/or trade books (written for wide audiences, without a significant academic/theoretical slant). Drawing on the insights of other disciplines is fine, but the thesis must feel anthropological at its core.

Especially if your thesis is not based in fieldwork of some kind, it does need to clearly articulate with anthropological theory in order to succeed.

In consultation with faculty members and library staff, do your very best to review thoroughly the salient anthropological and scholarly literature on your topic. Be sure to search through the various databases, including JSTOR, Academic Search Premiere, Anthropological Abstracts, and so forth. It doesn't hurt to run relevant terms through Google Scholar.

The thesis should show signs that certain core lessons of anthropology have been internalized. A sociocultural anthropology thesis should, for instance, reflect your understanding that the normally taken-for-granted conceptual categories of modern western societies are themselves subject to critical examination, and that anthropologists tend to try to understand the internal logic of cultural practices. An archaeology thesis should also reflect such approaches, and should be about the people behind the potsherds, buildings, and other objects. It should question the how and why of patterns of material culture, striving to understand the cultural contexts and natural processes that produced the archaeological data.

Whether or not your thesis directly addresses a non-western case, it may be strengthened by the comparative, cross-cultural perspective associated with anthropology. For example, a thesis concerned with modern American conceptions of pets might benefit from thoughtful engagement with anthropological work on totemism and animal symbolism in a range of non-western societies. A thesis on archaic states might benefit from a comparative review of the role of kinship in segmentary and unitary forms of socio-political organization.

Writing about Methodology

A successful thesis should have a methodology section that not only explains the methods used, but also justifies them carefully. If, for example, your data comes from written surveys rather than ethnography, this choice requires some explanation. If your fieldwork was constrained by logistical or social considerations, these should be explained. If you chose to focus on a particular

subgroup, this choice requires some background. You should also indicate your awareness of the potential pitfalls and limitations of your chosen methods. Your methodology section often appears in your introductory chapter, but in some instances, methodological issues may be addressed in an appendix. If you used surveys or an interview guide, for instance, those usually are placed in an appendix.

You may wish to include a reflexive section, clarifying your own relationship to the topic in question. Are you studying a tradition or community that you count yourself a part of? Did you begin this project with a strong draw towards, or anxiety about, the social group in question? Why?

Titling the Thesis

Your title should be precise; rather than merely gesturing at a topic (“Gender among Boston Construction Workers,”) it should give the reader a more precise hint of your argument or your theoretical focus (e.g. “Rebuilding Gender: Practices of Self-Fashioning among Boston Construction Workers”). In the case of sociocultural theses, it is at times helpful for the first part of the title to incorporate an especially evocative quote by one of your informants – a quote that foreshadows the central concerns of the thesis.