

Guidelines for Senior Thesis (History Department)

What Is a Senior Thesis?

The Senior Thesis is the capstone experience of the History Department Honors Program. It is a two-semester sequence during which history majors work, under the supervision of an advisor, on a substantial piece of original research and writing (usually on the scale of 60 to 100 pages). The thesis requires a major commitment of time and energy, and ordinarily attracts only a small percentage of graduating seniors.

Can I (and Should I) Write a Senior Thesis?

Any history major whose GPA is higher than 3.5 can petition the history department at the end of their junior year. However, there are important considerations you should weigh before deciding to undertake a thesis.

A successful thesis requires a great deal of self-motivated work. You should expect to put into the thesis at the very least the level of work you would put into two upper-level academic courses. In a typical course, the syllabus tells you what you must do week by week. The thesis, by contrast, requires and rewards a much greater level of student initiative. Beginning in the Spring semester of your junior year, you should work with your advisor to set signposts and deadlines that will keep you on track and allow you and your advisor to monitor your progress. Progress signposts might include annotated reading lists, research summaries, a formal prospectus, outlines, and draft chapters. Formulate a plan with your advisor by the beginning of Fall term, and stick to it.

Here are some of the reasons motivated students who enjoy independent work might wish to consider doing a senior thesis:

1. A senior thesis entails “doing” history; it helps you to discover how the historian conducts research and transforms that raw information into a coherent story and analysis.
2. Writing a thesis allows you to explore, in depth, a subject that is of great interest to you, but only tangentially (if at all) broached in the general curriculum.
3. It provides an essential experience for those planning to do graduate work, especially in history. If your research requires the use of non-English sources, you can improve your reading skills to the level expected in graduate work.
4. With the help of your adviser, you will learn how to structure and sustain a large piece of scholarly writing.

You should consider all of these factors—and discuss them with potential advisors—before you commit to writing a thesis.

What Does a Senior Thesis Look Like?

Successful history theses, like the best works of historical scholarship, come in many different forms. Some are strongly narrative in design; others are more overtly analytical; still others braid narrative and analysis into a coherent whole. Whatever form the thesis ultimately takes, the author poses a significant historical problem or question and sets out to address it at an appropriate scale. No topic, however cosmic or limited in scope, is self-evidently important. You need to explain early in the thesis why the subject you have chosen or the question you are asking matters—why it justifies your effort and the reader’s attention. A thesis about a baseball club in 1900, for example, may illuminate the relationship between sports and patriotism, or the changing culture of working-class leisure.

Conducting and Presenting Research

What kinds of topics are appropriate for a senior thesis? The list of recent theses at <https://www.brandeis.edu/history/undergraduate/thesis.html> suggests the broad range of possibilities. Your topic should, of course, be a subject in which you have a particular interest. You do not want to spend an entire year working on a project that you find boring or inconsequential.

But the choice of topic has practical concerns as well. Perhaps the most important issue you face when writing a senior thesis is determining your source base. Almost any topic can be explored using existing secondary sources, which are often so extensive that your advisor will usually only expect you to have consulted the most important among them. But a thesis must be rooted in primary sources—sources emanating from direct participants, or the closest participants that history can provide, in the event or moment you are investigating. These can include newspapers, diaries, chronicles, oral testimony, and many other kinds of primary evidence. A source can be primary in one context and secondary in another. For example, A.J.P. Taylor’s *The Origins of the Second World War* would be a secondary source in a thesis exploring some aspect of the origin of the war, but a primary source in a thesis about British historiography or about Taylor as a historian.

While you probably have some idea of the topic that interests you, the advisor can help you link that interest to a substantial and accessible set of primary sources (whether printed or archival) available on campus or at least in the Boston area. We are fortunate at Brandeis to have access to an array of printed volumes and online databases. You should make an appointment to see a research librarian early in the process. You can also access a great number of sources through Interlibrary Loan, but be aware that ILL can take time and, hard as they try, our library staff cannot always secure materials. As you formulate your topic, take advantage of the dedicated research staff in Goldfarb Library. Laura Hibbler, the librarian for history (lhibbler@brandeis.edu), will be a tremendous help as you turn your interests into a topic, your topic into a question, and your question into a research strategy.

While your argument will come from your analysis of primary sources, you should read and engage the most relevant secondary sources as well. In most cases, making an original contribution to the field requires the author to demonstrate an understanding of existing

scholarship. Reading important works in your area of research will provide background for your study and allow you to determine how you as an historian can contribute something new to historical knowledge.

Research is critical, but writing style is important as well. Your thesis should be carefully organized to make its argument and its sequence of themes easy to follow. It must be written in correct, grammatical English. Write clearly and concisely, and revise your work with care. We expect you to submit a document free of grammatical or typographical errors and faithful to the style and format guidelines given below. Even a thesis based on substantial research and sound in its argument will suffer unless the writing is strong and the presentation careful. Poor writing can weigh heavily on the final evaluation.

At the end of the fall semester, you and your advisor will decide whether to continue with the thesis. If you do not, your advisor will normally give you a grade for your work during the fall, which would in effect be converted into a readings course or an independent study, and for which you would receive a single course credit. If you continue with the thesis, you will receive a grade of “CR” for the fall. After the thesis is completed, you will receive a letter grade for the spring, and the fall grade of CR will also convert to that letter grade. In any event, neither a single nor a double course credit for 99D, however, will count towards the nine courses you need to complete a History major.

You should begin the spring semester ready to write, with the structure of your thesis clear and your research substantially complete. At the end of the spring semester, you will submit your thesis to a committee consisting of your advisor, another faculty member from the History Department, and a third faculty member—an “outside examiner”—from another department. If the thesis is under consideration for joint honors, the committee will also include examiners from the other department, but must always include at least two faculty members from the History Department.

The Defense

The defense is rarely an adversarial proceeding; it is usually a discussion, in which the examiners ask you to develop certain points or explain the absence of certain others. While it may not be adversarial, however, it certainly matters. The way you explain your choices and your arguments can sometimes mean the difference between one level of honors and another.

In deciding whether to recommend the granting of Honors to the thesis, and whether to distinguish it further by conferring “High” or “Highest” honors upon it, the examiners will consider several questions.

- 1) Choice of topic: Have you clearly defined the historical significance of the topic of the thesis?
- 2) Choice of sources: What sources have you used, and how are you using them?
- 3) Argument: Have you developed a clear and relevant argument?
- 4) Presentation: Have you made your argument in a lucid and scholarly manner?

5) Defense: Have you defended your thesis convincingly?

Following the defense, your committee recommends honors to the department. The History faculty votes on the recommendation at the last faculty meeting. Your advisor will assign a final grade at the end of the term.

STYLE GUIDE FOR HONORS THESES

I. PREPARING THE MANUSCRIPT

- Two copies of the thesis must be submitted to the Department. The first will become a permanent part of the Library's Special Collections; the second copy will be filed in the Department's archives.
- All theses should be printed in 12 point font.
- The first copy must be cleanly laser-printed on only one side of the sheet. The paper should be standard (8 1/2 by 11 inches) size, unpunched, white, and of good grade. The second copy may be photocopied or laser-printed.
- Any corrections which the examining committee may require should be made to the electronic copy of the thesis and the relevant pages reprinted. If this is not possible, corrections may also be either typed or written in ink on both the first and second copies after the examination.
- Margins should be at least two inches on the left side of the page and one inch at the top, bottom, and right side.
- The author should be sure to number all pages consecutively, including plates, tables, maps and illustrations.
- The main text of the thesis should be double spaced. But single spacing should be used for long quotations, foot-notes, tables, charts and bibliographies.
- The thesis should be carefully proofread before submission and all typographical errors legibly corrected.
- The title page should contain the following inscription:

Title
Author
Date

A senior thesis, submitted to the History Department of Brandeis University, in partial fulfillment of the Bachelor of Arts degree

- Illustrations should be scanned and laser-printed or photocopied. They may also be attached to a blank 8 1/2 X 11" page with library paste, dry mounting tissue, or transparent tape. Do not use scotch tape, photo corners, rubber cement or plastic glue.
- Words should be broken at the end of each line according to the standard rule of hyphenation.
- Generally speaking, common prefixes should not be hyphenated except in unusual or special instances. Foreign words commonly used in English should not appear in italics. The author

should italicize only foreign words that are apt to be strange to the reader. For example: *tour de force*, but *à tour de bras*.

- The following should be italicized: *sic*, *ibid.*, *ibidem*, *et al.*, *cf.*, *passim*, *supra*, *infra*.
- Capitalize official names of institutions, (e.g., Congress) but not the adjectives derived from them (e.g., congressional). Capitalize titles when they precede a proper name but not elsewhere: King Charles, the king of England.

II. QUOTATIONS

- Quotations should accurately reproduce the original source in all respects.
- Every quoted passage from a foreign language should appear in an English translation. If the point at issue requires the original language, then the original should also appear in the notes.
- Short quotations of five lines or less should be double spaced and enclosed in the text. Long quotations of more than five lines should be set as "block quotations", that is, single spaced and indented. Quotation marks should not be used for block quotations, but double quotation marks should be used for short ones. Quotations within quotations should be set off by single quotation marks.
- Interpolated comments, corrections or explanations should be framed in square brackets, not parentheses.
- Omissions within a quotation should be marked by ellipses, that is, by three spaced periods (...) followed by the appropriate punctuation.
- Quoted passages should not be modernized unless an alteration is necessary to make the meaning clear. If so, then the alteration should be explained in the notes.
- Names and words in a language that requires transliteration into Roman letters should be Romanized according to the standard Romanization system for that language (for example, the Pinyin system for Chinese, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* system for Hebrew). Usual but differing transliterations should, however, be employed for words commonly used in English (for example, Munich not München, Jerusalem not Yerushalayim).
- For particular problems consult the University of Chicago Press's *Manual of Style*.

III. NOTES

- Notes should be used to identify the origins of all quotations, all statistical data, all facts not commonly known, any language and all major interpretative points that are not the author's.
- Notes should appear at the bottom of each page.
- Notes should be numbered consecutively. A single numerical series may be used for the entire work or the author may begin a new series with each chapter.
- Published books should be cited in the following forms: Author's name, first name first, followed by a comma; title in full, in italics, exactly as it appears on the title page, followed by a comma, unless the next item is in parentheses; the edition (if relevant), the place of publication and the date of publication in parentheses, followed by a comma; the volume (if relevant) and the page followed by a period. It is not necessary to give the name of the publisher. For example: Charlton Laird, *Language in America* (New York and Cleveland, 1970), 125. For special problems consult the University of Chicago Press's *Manual of Style*.

- Subsequent citations of the same work should be in the form of short references. For example: Laird, *Language*, 126
- No use should be made of *op. cit.* or *loc. cit.* You may use *ibid.* where two consecutive citations refer to the same work. Do not use *ibid.* where more than one work is cited in the previous note. Do not capitalize *ibid.* unless grammar requires it.
- References to manuscript material should include the name of the writer and recipient (if any), the title (if any), the date, the manuscript collection, the document number, the page or folio number (including recto and verso for the latter), and the library or archive in which it is located. Subsequent citations may shorten the name of the collection, the author and the recipient.
- Newspaper citations should include the name of the paper (in italics), place of publication (if not obvious), and the date. References to large modern newspapers also should include section, page, and column numbers.
- Articles in journals and magazines should be cited in the following way: Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., "Colonel Ezekiel Polk: Pioneer and Patriarch," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 10 (1953), 80-98.
- For citations of government documents, oral communications, physical objects, and other forms of evidence, consult the University of Chicago Press's *Manual of Style*.

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The bibliography should include only the primary and secondary materials that were actually used by the author.
- The bibliography should be organized by types of materials. Manuscript, primary and secondary sources should be separated.
- The bibliography should follow the University of Chicago Press's *Manual of Style*.

V. MAPS

- Maps which cannot be clearly scanned or reproduced should be redrawn in ink specifically for the thesis. A scale should always be included.
- The source of the map should be identified.
- When in doubt, the author should consult A.G. Hodgkiss, *Maps for Books and Theses* (Newton Abbot, 1970); and F.J. Monkhouse and H.R. Wilkinson, *Maps and Diagrams: Their Compilation and Construction* (London, 1971).

VI. CHARTS AND TABLES

- Each chart and table should appear with its own number and title, to which appropriate reference can be made in text and notes.
- Standard statistical procedures should be explicitly named. Unusual or novel procedures should be described in detail.
- Scales and measures should be clearly labeled.
- The sources for statistical material should be identified.

- For special problems consult Charles M. Pollard and Richard J. Tenson, *Historian's Guide to Statistics* (New York, 1971).
- Doubtful cases should be resolved according to the University of Chicago Press's *Manual of Style*.