Senior Thesis Guide

A Guide to Writing your Senior Thesis in International and Global Studies at Brandeis

International & Global Studies Program

Brandeis UNIVERSITY

Acknowledgements

This handbook was inspired by Nicole Newendorp's Guide to Writing a Senior Thesis in Social Studies, written for students at Harvard College, and we are indebted to Professor Newendorp for this valuable template. The organization of this handbook generally follows the earlier work, but content has been significantly adapted to reflect the IGS program at Brandeis and the organization of its Senior Thesis process.

The cover photos come from the thesis projects of Brandeis Alumni Xuantong He and Savannah Jackson. Many thanks for allowing Brandeis International & Global Studies use your work as examples.

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Chapter 1: Getting Started: Nuts and Bolts

Why should I write a thesis?

For many International and Global Studies (or IGS) graduates, the honors thesis is the highpoint of their experience at Brandeis. The thesis process is challenging, but it allows you to reflect deeply on a question of close personal and academic interest and the satisfaction of completing a significant piece of work. Further, the specialized knowledge you gain along the way sets you apart from others and often opens the door to new academic and professional opportunities.

There are also practical benefits of taking on a thesis. Writing over 50 pages of coherent text is a learning process in and of itself, giving you experience in conceptualizing, researching, and finishing a long-term project. Negotiating the various tasks involved teaches you skills that will prove themselves time and again as you enter the work environment.

What's a good topic for an IGS thesis?

Almost any topic that you might meet in your training in International and Global Studies is valid for an IGS thesis. To get a better idea of the subjects that students pursue, see this list of recent titles, which can be viewed from a Brandeis email. From that list, you can see the range of topics that students have addressed. Whatever your interest, your topic must be intellectually or personally compelling to *you* since you will be fully engaged with it for about a year.

How long is it? How should it be organized?

An IGS thesis should be 50–100 pages in length. While this may sound intimidating, you will find that putting together the different elements of a thesis quickly brings you within this page range.

The usual format for a thesis is the following:

- **Introduction** - sets out the question you are posing, along with its significance
- **Literature review** - distills the scholarly work on your question and indicates how your thesis will contribute to that knowledge
- **Methods section** - explains how you will analyze your question
- **One to three body chapters** - which relates your findings
- **Conclusion** - sums everything up.

All theses must incorporate a substantial amount of primary source data and should also make an original argument. That is, they should "contribute to knowledge." You can consider reading a sample thesis early in the process, to gain a better sense of your end goal. You can contact the Honors Thesis Coordinator, Dr. Lucy Goodhart, for a good example of an IGS thesis. You can also search for past IGS theses deposited at the Brandeis Library at Scholarworks (look under the theses and dissertations tab).

What am I committing to?

Writing a thesis is unlike any other undergraduate assignment that you've undertaken and, to do it well, you'll need to commit a substantial amount of time. While the time commitment will vary over the course of your senior year, you should expect to allocate at least part of the summer between junior and senior year toward your thesis, and around 10–30 hours/week during the school year, depending on what you were able to accomplish over the summer.

If you plan to collect original data during the fall semester of your senior year, you may want to balance your workload by taking fewer classes or making sure that at least one of your classes is directly related to your thesis. In all cases, you can assume that you'll be very busy with thesis writing and editing during the spring semester, particularly during the February and Passover vacations. Especially during the four weeks before the final thesis is due, many students spend upwards of twenty hours a week on thesis writing.

What kind of support will I have?

You aren't on your own as you work on your thesis. You'll get regular guidance and feedback from your thesis advisor. The selection of your advisor, and your working relationship with him or her is so important that we have dedicated a whole section of this guide to that topic. In addition, the Brandeis library is a good source of support for research as is the Writing Center. You can also reach out for advice to the IGS Honors Thesis Coordinator, Dr Lucy Goodhart.

In addition, and while completing a project of this length will require a substantial amount of individual work-time, there is plenty of opportunity for you to engage with peers, faculty, and the people you encounter as research subjects! In fact, the successful outcome of your thesis may rest on how well you complement your individual work-time with "social" work-time -- engaging with friends, roommates, and family throughout your research activities.

Do I get credit and how do I register?

The class format within which you research and write your thesis is the Senior Honors Thesis class, IGS 99D. You register to take this class, a four-credit course, with your thesis advisor in both the fall and spring semester of your senior year. There are no fixed class times for IGS 99D and you determine, with your advisor, when you will meet throughout the two semesters.

To register for IGS 99D, first ensure that your advisor has IGS 99D listed under their name in Workday. If this is not the case, the IGS program will request the Registrar to create this class entry for a given faculty member. Because the class requires the permission of the instructor, you will also need to follow these instructions (accessible from any Brandeis email) to register for IGS 99D for both the fall and spring semester. At the close of each semester, your advisor will determine a grade that depends on the intensity and consistency of your work in the course.

How is the thesis approved and what happens at the defense?

The final decision on your thesis is determined not by your grade in IGS 99D but by your Honors "defense." The defense is an oral exam in front of a committee composed of your thesis advisor and two additional readers (see the section on *Working with your Thesis Advisor* for more on the two additional readers). This defense takes place in the two to three days following the last day of classes and will take approximately one hour.

At your defense, you first give a brief overview of your thesis, to set the scene for discussion. Then you engage in scholarly conversation, during which committee members ask you a variety of questions. The defense simulates the rigor and freedom of academic debate and mirrors a Ph.D. thesis defense. A rubric for your thesis defense slide presentation is included at the end of this guide under useful documents and guides.

At the close of the discussion, you step out of the room (or Zoom meeting), while your thesis committee discusses whether your thesis has met the level required for honors. Please note that it is highly unusual for a thesis not to receive honors at the defense. Indeed, if there is any question about this, your advisor will generally alert you in advance so you can decide on the steps to take next. You should also be aware that there are different levels of honors: regular, high and highest honors. Your committee cannot tell you, at the defense, what level of honors you will receive as this is partly determined in a discussion among the full IGS faculty. You will be informed of your level of honors about one week following the defense. You can then follow these instructions for depositing your thesis digitally with the Brandeis library.

What if I can't complete the process?

Some students find that they embark on a thesis but cannot see it through to completion. This happens for multiple reasons, including outside life events and/or the discovery that the thesis process is more challenging than expected. While this is not frequent, there is an established procedure if and when students decide that they do not wish to proceed to the defense. In short, students receive the credit that is due to them for the IGS 99D course, but do not receive honors. If the student decides not to continue with the thesis process past the winter break, then he or she receives credit for IGS 99D only for the fall semester while, if they are still working on the thesis in the spring, they will also receive credit for this semester.

What is the timeline?

Not every IGS thesis will follow the timeline below, which covers both junior and senior year, but it provides you an approximate guide to the dates by which you will complete different tasks. See the exact timetable for senior thesis writers for the current academic year at the IGS website for specific deadlines on applications and assignments.

IGS Senior Thesis Schedule	Approximate Dates
For Juniors	
Information Session for Juniors (via Zoom as necessary)	September
Information Session for Juniors (via Zoom as necessary)	Early March
Apply to write an Honors Thesis using the online form	March
Contact potential advisors	April
Visit Undergraduate Research and Creative Collaborations symposium (if resident on campus)	Early May
Check-in with your advisor on summer plans	May/June
For Seniors	
Register for IGS 99D for the fall semester	End August
Submit your Honors Thesis Prospectus using the online form	Tuesday after Labor Day
Fall Senior Thesis cohort meeting	September
Submit IRB request for human subjects research as necessary	By end September
First chapter draft	Mid-late October
Second chapter draft	Early December
Check-in with your advisor on winter break plans	Mid December
Third chapter draft	Second week January

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IGS Senior Thesis Schedule	Approximate Dates
For Seniors *(continued from page 4)*	
Register for IGS 99D for the spring semester	Mid-January
Spring Senior Thesis cohort meeting	January
Recruit additional committee members	February/March
Complete first draft submitted	Mid-March
Complete all edits suggested by committee and circulate thesis	Two weeks before defense
Present at Undergraduate Research and Creative Collaborations symposium	Early May
Defense scheduled before this date	Friday after last day of class
Thesis submitted digitally to library using online form	Following Friday

Chapter 2: Getting Started: From Topic to Question

How do I choose a topic?

The most important consideration is to choose a topic that you find academically or personally compelling. Other considerations, such as intellectual significance and feasibility are important, but can often be resolved as you hone your topic into a question (see discussion below).

You may already have some idea of a broad topic that is intellectually interesting to you and is connected to your training in International and Global Studies. As a rule of thumb, however, your thesis topic will need to be narrower than the subject matter of your courses. To begin the "narrowing" process of selecting a topic, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- What topics in your IGS classes have you found the most interesting?
- What disciplinary approaches have captured your attention?
- Which approaches do you feel comfortable using?
- Are there scholarly debates you have found yourself drawn to again and again?
- Is there a particular problem you have read about that you want to learn more about?
- Do you have personal experience that you want to explore in an academic way?

The answers to these questions will help you to generate a shortlist of potential topics to discuss with advisors, faculty, and peers. These discussions will force you to think more deeply about the academic significance of your potential topic and whether it is associated with a research question that you could feasibly address over a year.

How is a research question different from a thesis topic?

Your thesis topic is the subject on which you will focus your inquiry. The research question isolates some aspects of that topic for detailed investigation over the course of nine months. As such, a research question is narrower than the broader topic of which it is part.

How do I get from topic to question?

Once you've decided on a topic, you will find that your real work begins. Not only do you have to come up with a question on which to focus your research, but you also need to come up with an interesting question—one that will engage others and make them feel invested in the outcome of your research. In other words, it's not just enough to have a question. You also have to explain why answering this question is *important*.

For some students, coming up with a question is not difficult. For others, it will be. Keep in mind that you can refine your question over time and that your question can change in response to data and your reading. To help you along the path, consider the following questions:

- Is there a puzzle or paradox about your topic (in actuality or in the scholarly literature) that you can explore to set up a research question?
- Can you identify a specific case study, or a paired comparison case study, that will shed new light on your topic?
- Can you offer a new interpretation of a theoretical idea, topic, or debate?

It is also important to think about formulating a question that you can address in the time and page length afforded by a Senior Honors Thesis. As you work towards this question, it may be worthwhile to think about a big question—a "governing" question—that cannot be fully answered but is significant and really interests you. Then, you can work on narrowing this big question into a more discrete research question that you can answer in your thesis.

These self-help exercises can expedite your progress from topic to question, but the thesis process is also structured around tasks that reinforce the process. For example, the regular discussions that you hold with your advisor (see below) are an important, and consistent, exercise in digging into your topic in pursuit of a workable question. In addition, the requirement to write a thesis prospectus, due the day after Labor Day, pushes you to read over the summer, reconsider your viewpoints, and start on articulating a research question. The prospectus is not a final outline for the thesis, but it is a first pass at structuring your research and justifying to your readers why a particular question is valid and interesting. For more on the prospectus, see the section on *Preparing: Summer, Data Collection and Prospectus Writing* below.

A special consideration for an IGS thesis is that the different disciplines represented in the program have their own standards for establishing suitable questions. For example, an anthropological question might be quite open-ended, asking about how or why individuals engage in certain practices. On the other hand, a thesis informed by political science might require you to craft a question as a testable hypothesis. Both questions are suitable for an IGS thesis, but they will orient you toward different types of data and different methodologies for data collection and analysis. For these reasons, it is important that you refine your question while working together with your thesis advisor, who will be able to give you guidance about "fit" between disciplinary concerns, appropriate methodologies, and the topic that interests you.

How do I apply for research funding?

While many honors thesis writers analyze existing data, others compile and gather their own dataset, based on interviews, participant observation or other research methodologies. Where this data collection requires travel to a foreign country, there are limited funds available through Brandeis via fellowship opportunities for undergraduates pursuing independent research abroad. Past IGS thesis writers have been supported through the Jane's travel and research grant while other grants are structured around particular regions or subjects of interest.

Students seeking more information are encouraged to contact the office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Collaborations. You can also follow this guide to applying for a fellowship for research abroad.

Chapter 3: Working with your Thesis Advisor

Is it up to me to find a thesis advisor?

Yes, it is the responsibility of each honors thesis writer to recruit their thesis advisor. Your academic advisor, or the Honors Thesis Coordinator, Dr. Lucy Goodhart, may be able to help by suggesting potential advisors, but it is the student's responsibility to contact likely advisors and ask if they would be willing to serve. Indeed, recruiting a thesis advisor is something that most honors thesis writers focus on in the spring of their Junior year.

Does my thesis advisor have to be an IGS faculty member?

It is often preferable to have an IGS faculty member, or an IGS-affiliated faculty member, as your primary advisor, because that person will understand the interdisciplinary training offered in the IGS Program. However, in many cases your topic will require specialized knowledge that goes beyond the research interests of IGS faculty. In that case, you should approach the Brandeis faculty members who possess the specific knowledge and skills that are most relevant for your honors thesis. In cases such as this, where your primary advisor is neither an IGS faculty member, nor affiliated with IGS, we require that you include an IGS faculty member as one of the two additional readers on your thesis defense committee.

How can I find a good thesis advisor?

Faculty members are often busy, juggling multiple research projects and administrative responsibilities. What are the best ways to encourage them, amidst other demands on their time, to advise you?

- Personal connections help. Faculty members will feel more comfortable advising students whom they have taught in at least one class. These faculty members will understand your capabilities and have a good sense of how to advise you.
- Taking the time to understand faculty interests is important. Faculty members are more likely to agree to serve as your advisor if your proposed topic overlaps with their research interests and methodological skills. So do your research on faculty first!
- A high degree of organization sets a good tone. When you write a thesis, you will need to undertake many tasks on your own. A thesis advisor, particularly one who does not know you well, will be more comfortable advising a student who is predictable, timely, organized and courteous.

How can I find an advisor when I am not sure about my topic?

You need to have some general idea about your topic when you meet with potential advisors, but you do not need to have worked out all the details in advance. Students often wait too long to begin meeting with potential advisors—finding, when they do finally meet, that their "ideal"

advisor has already agreed to supervise other theses and is no longer available. Once you have a tentative topic worked out, you can use your meetings with potential advisors to help you as you hone that topic into a feasible research question. As you receive feedback from potential advisors, you'll also get a sense of who would be the best advisor for your thesis project.

How should I approach a potential advisor?

Most commonly, and always if you are away on study abroad, you will want to email a potential advisor in advance to set up a meeting, either by Zoom or in-person. In that email, you should let the potential advisor know that you are interested in talking to them about your thesis project. In addition, if you don't already know this faculty members, you should explain how you found out about them. Did you get their name from the IGS website of affiliated faculty? Did one of your professors recommend that you speak to her or him? Have you read their work on the subject? When you meet, you'll want to lay out your topic idea, explain why you think it's interesting, and then move to the following questions:

1. Does the faculty member have any feedback for you? Do they have recommendations for relevant literatures to read?
2. Does the potential advisor have any suggestions for how you might analyze your question and what research methods would be appropriate?
3. Does this person have any experience advising Honors Thesis, for the IGS program or other programs and departments?
4. Is this potential advisor willing to supervise you, and is he or she available next academic year?

How do I recruit an advisor while on study abroad?

A semester of study abroad is often a stepping stone to an exciting thesis and many IGS majors write a thesis related to the country in which they studied. Study abroad gives you a jumpstart on research and the chance to work with and make connections to local academics and researchers who have more specialized knowledge about topics related to their country than faculty at Brandeis. However, you'll also need to be focused on Brandeis deadlines relevant to your project from afar—particularly the thesis application and any fellowship deadlines – and be active in emailing potential advisors and meeting with them via Zoom.

How do I establish a good relationship with my advisor?

Keep in mind that developing a good relationship with an advisor is a two-way street. It's not just their responsibility; it's your responsibility, too. One of the first conversations you should have with your advisor (after they've agreed to work with you) is what they expect from you—in terms of communication, setting up meeting times, preparation for meetings, turning in written chapter drafts, etc. Together, you should work out a contract of sorts that includes a regular system for communication, and sets up a scheduled meeting time every one to two weeks, as well as

guidelines for what work you need to complete prior to meetings. Both you and your advisor should review the schedule of IGS thesis deadlines for the coming academic year as you do so.

Remember that you are not the only busy one. Your advisor is busy, too. Make sure that you give them ample notice if you will not be able to complete an assignment on time or if you need to reschedule a meeting. In return, give your advisor the same consideration if he or she needs to change a meeting time or is late offering feedback on your writing

What should I do if it's September and I do not have an advisor?

If you waited until late in the season to get started on your search, then many of the people you approached may not be available. Many IGS-affiliated faculty receive up to three requests to serve as thesis advisors from students they serve by April of the previous year. Alternatively, your chosen advisor may suddenly not be available. Whatever the reason, there are always a handful of students who don't have advisors by the start of their senior year.

While this is not an ideal situation, it's not a catastrophe. If you haven't done so already, set up a meeting with your academic advisor to talk about possible candidates to serve as a thesis advisor. At the same time, you should go back to people you spoke with earlier to ask if they have any additional recommendations for faculty working in your area of research.

If you are planning on conducting research over the summer, you should try your hardest to secure an advisor by April of the spring semester. You'll need your advisor's input as you plan your methodology and data collection. In addition, and if your research involves collecting data from or about people, you will almost always require approval from Brandeis' Institutional Review Board (IRB) for your thesis research (see below). You will not be able to apply to the IRB unless you already have a thesis advisor. This faculty member will then be listed as the Principal Investigator on your IRB research application and will be responsible for ensuring that your research conforms to legal standards for ethical research on human subjects.

What should I do if my relationship with my advisor is not going well?

There are a variety of reasons why students might encounter difficulties with their advisors during the thesis process. Sometimes these reasons have to do with the advisor, but sometimes they also begin with the student. In most cases, temporary difficulties can be remedied by good communication about specific expectations and goals.If you think you have made every effort to communicate well with your advisor and you are still experiencing problems, set up a meeting with the Honors Thesis coordinator, Dr Lucy Goodhart, or with your academic advisor. If you are having problems, please ask for help earlier rather than later. The closer you are to the thesis due date, the fewer options may be left to help resolve concerns or difficulties.

When and who should I recruit for additional thesis readers?

As you may recall from the section on the thesis defense from *Getting Started: Nuts and Bolts*, your thesis attains honors as the outcome of an oral defense before a committee of three faculty members, made up of your primary thesis advisors and two additional readers. As such, you are also responsible for recruiting two additional thesis readers.

Most thesis writers do this in February and early March of their Senior year. The first draft of your thesis, generally due in mid-March, should be circulated to all of your three thesis committee members. Not all Brandeis programs and departments circulate first drafts to the full committee, but IGS does, and additional readers often bring extremely valuable and fresh perspectives. Because you want to be in good time to circulate your first draft to the whole committee, it is a good idea to have the additional readers in place by early March.

The selection of additional readers follows the criteria set out above for recruiting a good primary thesis advisor. These readers should be a source of knowledge: on your particular question, or the research methods you employ, or a related literature. However, in selecting the additional readers, you can also consider the people who will complement the expertise of your primary thesis advisor. In addition, you may want to reach out to faculty members whom you know well from classes, and whose overall judgment you trust, so that you can be assured of the quality of comment you will receive at the defense.

One final consideration is that the thesis defense is meant to have at least one outside reader, meaning a faculty member who is not a member of, nor affiliated with, the IGS program. Thus, and bearing in mind the earlier section on your primary thesis advisor, you should ideally have at least one, and not more than two, IGS faculty or affiliated faculty on your committee.

Chapter 4: Preparing*:* Summer, Data Collection, and Prospectus Writing

What should I work on over the summer?

The summer vacation between your Junior and Senior year is the longest single block of time available to you as you commence on the thesis process. The productive use of this time is instrumental in helping you to engage productively with your thesis on your return to campus. Not everyone uses the summer in the same way – and most students also have work or an internship – but there are several common themes in how students use the summer break.

First, almost all thesis writers use the summer to read widely in the literature, or literatures, related to your topic and potential questions. This helps you to understand what questions have already been completely answered, and which, by contrast, generate a lively debate and inspire cutting edge research. Undertaking this reading will help you to draft the thesis prospectus, due the day after Labor Day and will speed up your transition from topic to research question.

Second, some students, particularly those whose thesis is motivated by a question they encountered on study abroad, undertake their own research during the summer, sometimes as an extension to the formal classes they have taken while abroad. In addition, students whose thesis is inspired by personal experience may also want to undertake research related to that experience, whether in the US or abroad.

Whatever your ultimate summer activities, you should follow the steps below to ensure that you get the most out of this important breathing space before classes resume.

1. Make sure that you've met with your thesis advisor (in-person or through Zoom) to talk about your research plans and timetable over the summer.
2. If you have not already done so, read a sample IGS thesis. You can contact the Honors Thesis Coordinator, Dr. Lucy Goodhart, for a good example of an IGS thesis.
3. If you will be undertaking research over the summer, you can initiate contact with any organizations or individuals who will be helping you— an NGO that will provide introductions to your interviewees, or libraries where you will consult archives. You can also reach out to any family, friends or Brandeis connections near your research site. These individuals know local logistics and may also offer you housing!
4. Finally, and if you are conducting research abroad, it can be worth contacting the Brandeis Office of Study Abroad. This office is a valuable source of information on all matters related to health, wellness and safety in different countries of the world.

Do I need to apply for human subjects approval for my data collection?

Whether you collect data during the summer, or over the fall, a key question is whether that data collection constitutes "human subjects research." If it does, you will almost always need to

submit an application to the Brandeis Institutional Review Board for approval of your research protocol before you can commence data collection. If you conduct interviews, administer surveys, or perform ethnographic research you will most likely require IRB approval. By contrast, analyzing *existing data* does not count as human subjects research.

Most thesis writers have not encountered the regulations around human subjects research before. Indeed, most undergraduate research does not need to be reviewed by the IRB because most undergraduate projects are not meant for publication. However, an honors thesis is required to be publicly available, so that your research joins the corpus of open-source academic work. As such, it must conform to the regulatory and legal requirements for ethical research. Your application to the Brandeis IRB is the process by which this commitment to ethical research is upheld.

How can you tell whether your plans for data collection will require an IRB application for human subjects research and what degree of risk is involved for your human subjects? Undergraduate thesis writers can start at the Student Researchers page, which covers a host of questions. For a more tailored search, on whether your research constitutes human subjects research, see the IRB's Defining Human Subjects Research page and the determination tree. If you need to apply for IRB approval for research, go to the initial application page.

Submitting the application is not difficult, but it can be time consuming. Before you fill out the form, you need to have planned your research and must explain the data you will collect, how you collect it, and how you will protect your human subjects as you do so. You will also have to complete ethics training, through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, or CITI.

If IRB approval is required, you should ideally set aside a full month to six weeks for the application process – and understand that you cannot undertake *any* data collection until you have received that approval. Given the time required, we urge you to submit any applications to the IRB for human subjects research by the end of September of your senior year at the latest. This will enable you to collect data in the fall semester, analyze it during the fall and over the winter break, and write up your results in "body chapters" in the spring semester.

Some students feel frustrated by the requirement to gain IRB approval, but there is an upside. Having put together an IRB application, you will be very well-prepared for writing the section of your thesis that relates to data and methods and can, in fact, use the same material that you prepared for the IRB process in your Honors thesis. As such, submitting an IRB application for human subjects research in the summer, or very early fall, puts you in a good position to write your thesis prospectus and at least one of the fall semester chapters.

How will I know if I've done enough research/data collection?

There is a healthy dose of uncertainty that goes along with all research projects. Things "in the field" may not work out as neatly as you envisioned before you left campus. You may be unable

to reach the people you had planned to interview; or documents believed to be in an archive might be missing, or your own life events may impede your productivity.

Any time that you encounter a serious setback, you should contact your advisor to ask for advice. In addition, here are a few other tips to keep in mind.

1. Be Flexible! There is no one set way to examine a particular question. If and when you hit roadblocks, decide what, if anything, you should change about your topic, question, or methodology. Often, challenges in the field provoke a better, more relevant, and more original question. Bear in mind that, if you end up changing your research methods you'll likely need to submit a "modification request" with the new information to the IRB. In general, these modification requests are reviewed relatively rapidly.

2. Allot sufficient time for your data collection. In most cases, data collection takes significantly longer than you anticipate. The longer you devote to the process, the better chance you have of returning to campus with enough material to complete your thesis.

3. Consult experts before you leave and once you are in your research location. These experts might be Brandeis faculty, local academics and researchers, or individuals (such as librarians and NGO employees) who are knowledgeable about the place and people.

4. Develop a "Plan B" before you leave. If you and your advisor have real doubts that you'll be able to carry out the research that you've planned, then you should talk about contingency plans even before you leave. These plans should include different questions to explore on the basis of what you find at your research destination.

5. Collect additional kinds of data that can supplement the material that you have been able to collect. For example, can you collect government surveys or accounts from national media that provide a different perspective on your question? Can you do some short-term participant observation? Sometimes, this additional data can become the bulk of your primary material if your original plans go awry.

What is a thesis prospectus and how/why do I write it?

A prospectus is a three- to four-page proposal that answers four key questions:

1. What is your research question?
2. Why is it significant?
3. Do you have a theory, hypothesis or argument related to this question?
4. What research methods will you use to explore this question and assess your argument?

A good prospectus is grounded in your preliminary research of the publicly available information and scholarly literature. Writing the prospectus is not only a requirement for approval to write a senior thesis, it is also a useful exercise that will allow you to:

- Take stock of where you are in your research process
- Identify key questions related to your research question
- Highlight voids in the literature that you can potentially fill

Your prospectus is due on the Tuesday after Labor Day and should be submitted at this online link. Bear in mind that your prospectus is not the final word on your thesis. Indeed, your project will continue to evolve over the course of the year. Rather, the prospectus is the first in a series of tasks that helps you to formulate an interesting and feasible research question and to structure your research and writing around that question.

Chapter 5: Writing the Thesis: From Draft to Final Product

How do I start writing?

Everyone approaches thesis writing in a different way. The key is remembering that it is a process, and, like all processes, takes time. The best place to begin is by outlining the various steps you will have to complete in order to gradually produce a full thesis.

Some of the steps every thesis writer will likely go through as they write include: completing your reading of the related scholarly literatures, establishing your research question, developing an argument or theory that helps to answer your question, explaining the research methods (including possible data collection) that you will use to test your argument, analyzing your data, making connections between your primary and secondary source data, organizing the presentation of your theory and evidence in a way that is clear and makes sense, writing chapter drafts, writing an introduction and conclusion, and revising your full draft.

These steps don't necessarily take place in a completely linear progression. Instead, you may work on some of them simultaneously. For example, it's likely that you'll need to revisit the literatures you read after you've begun analyzing your data, since your findings may challenge you to rethink your theory! However, some steps have to come before others: most importantly, the research question comes before the research methods.

To provide greater clarity on the order and timing of these steps, what follows is a rough and ready plan, based on the timetable in *Getting Started: Nuts and Bolts*. While individual experiences may differ, the plan outlines a realistic series of assignments that will cumulate to a complete thesis. This timeline also assumes that you have registered for IGS 99D for the fall semester and have submitted your thesis prospectus by the Tuesday after Labor Day.

> **September:** Meet with your advisor at the beginning of the semester to get feedback on your prospectus and talk about what you have done over the summer. The core focus of these discussions is how you think about your research question and what decisions – for data sources, data collection and analysis – flow from that. Your advisor may also recommend additional secondary sources from the scholarly literature for you to read as you continue to refine your question. If you will conduct human subjects research, you should start on your IRB application and, if you completed interviews over the summer, you'll need to work out a timeline for transcribing them. Finally, you may want to map out your own "thesis calendar," entering deadlines for thesis tasks, keeping in mind any other major commitments you've made for the fall and winter.
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> **October:** Focus on reading the secondary literature to help develop the literature review portion of your thesis and to connect your research question and theory with the scholarly work that has gone before you. If you have not already done so, you should read a sample IGS thesis to get an idea of how a thesis is constructed. The first draft chapter (see below), is due by mid- to late-October, with the exact date determined by

your and your advisor. Thus, you will be writing this first component, which is most often a review of the literature that then supports and motivates your own research question.

November: This is another busy month of determining the shape of your thesis. You will receive feedback on your first draft chapter, which will be instrumental in finalizing your research question and research methods. You will also start on writing the second draft chapter (see below) for early December, often on the historical or institutional background to your question. Finally, if you have applied to the IRB for approval for human subjects research you should have heard from them and submitted any required amendments so that you can start on data collection. Indeed, some students collect data throughout the fall semester, in the background to the tasks described in this plan.

December: The second draft chapter is due in early December (with the exact data determined by you and your advisor). This second draft chapter (see below), often describes some important background of the data or cases that you are considering. As an alternative, some students use this second draft chapter to describe their research methodology and why that approach was selected. Following that submission, and before you leave campus, it is essential for you to meet with your advisor to map out the work objectives for winter break. At this stage, some students draft a thesis outline to help them think through the organization of the different materials that you'll be including. You can think of this as a draft Table of Contents for your thesis. You should not feel chained to the outline but it gives you a concrete feeling of the structure of the whole.

Winter Break and January: January is when you start writing up your thesis "body chapters." What is a "body chapter"? Your literature review helps to explain and rationalize your thesis question. A chapter on background or research methods sets the scene for what you are doing and why. A body chapter is where you do the primary scholarly work. You present the results of your research in an accessible way and explain their relevance for your theory and a possible answer to your research question. One of these body chapters is due on January 12th, before the semester begins, and you should set very clear goals for writing remaining body chapters through January and February. By the time spring semester begins you should also have received feedback from your advisor on your first two chapters so that you may also be revising this earlier material. You may have to do additional reading in the scholarly literature, if your findings challenge you to revise your theory and, if you have any last data to collect, then this is your last chance to collect it, free of class commitments. Finally, don't forget to register for IGS 99D for the spring semester!

February: This is the month when you make the big push to finish analyzing your data and write the significant body chapters of your thesis. You will come to be grateful for the February break. In addition, given that the shape and content of your thesis is now much clearer to you, you can think clearly about the faculty members whom you would like to recruit as the two additional members of your defense committee. It's a good idea to start reaching out to them now.

March: By mid-March (the exact date varies by year) you should submit a complete first draft to your advisor and the other two members of your defense committee. That draft should ideally include an introduction chapter, the conclusion, revised versions of the two draft chapters you submitted in the fall semester and the body chapters. Your committee is likely to respond with feedback by the end of the month.

April: This month is for revising your thesis. You should no longer be analyzing data. Just refining your argument. The final thesis version is due to your defense committee by about the third week in April, with the exact date varying by year and set so that your defense has a minimum of two weeks in which to read the thesis before your defense. You should also arrange a day and time for your defense, in the three days following the last day of classes, reaching out to your committee with different suggested times or using a doodle poll. Once you have scheduled your thesis defense, please communicate this information to Dr. Lucy Goodhart and Jazz Dottin.

What's a bibliography vs. annotated bibliography? Do I need either?

To work out what to read, from the scholarly literatures related to your thesis, you can talk to your advisor. You can also consult these wonderful slides on conducting a literature search from the social studies reference librarian, Aimee Slater. Once you start reading, you will find out that a bibliography is an invaluable way to keep track of all the different sources you consult. A bibliography is simply an alphabetized list of your secondary sources, formatted according to bibliographic conventions, that will help you, or later readers, to retrieve any given source.

You can either develop one bibliography that includes all these different works you examine while preparing for your thesis or you can generate specific bibliographies for each individual literature that you look at – and/or a bibliography of the sources that you actually *cite*. This sounds like a lot of work – but it needn't be! To save yourself time and energy, go to this Brandeis library page on Zotero, a reference manager software tool that is available **free** to you at Brandeis. Zotero takes a huge weight off your shoulders, because you can drag and drop the information on a source into Zotero as you find it during an online literature search and then Zotero will format and alphabetize all your sources for you in whatever formatting convention you instruct it to use. The Brandeis library also offers links to training on how to use Zotero.

You can also create what's called an annotated bibliography, in which you write a short summary of each source in your bibliography, explaining the main argument of the work along with two or three sentences about how it relates to your project. The more detailed you make the annotated bibliography, the closer you will be to writing a draft of your literature review chapter because you will have isolated the key, relevant elements of each source. Remember, however, that the literature review does not serve simply to "review" the relevant literature. Rather, it uses that literature to explain why your research question is valid and interesting.

What should I know about transcription?

Anyone who conducts interviews will need to spend a significant amount of time in the fall transcribing the written or recorded record of your conversations. If you collect interviews over the summer, then you should plan on finishing your transcription by mid-October. If you collect your interviews throughout the fall, then you should plan on finishing your transcription as soon as possible, no later than end-December, since you'll need time to analyze your data before you can begin writing full chapters that incorporate the findings.

If you've ever transcribed interviews before, you know that it takes a lot of time—up to four hours of work for each hour of recorded data. However, if your interviews are conducted on Zoom, you may find that you can use the automated transcription function to make a first pass at a transcript. Obviously, errors are numerous, but an auto-generated transcript will certainly cut down on your transcription time. For more advice and information, consult the reference librarians at Brandeis library, especially the social sciences reference librarian, Aimee Slater.

What draft chapter should I write first?

There's no one "right" place to begin writing your thesis. There is, however, a WRONG place to begin—and that's with the introduction—or what you imagine to be the first sentence of the first paragraph of the introduction because, until you have written the main installments of your thesis, you do not fully know how that first paragraph will read.

Instead, the first draft chapter that you write should be a component of the thesis that helps you to resolve outstanding questions. For this reason, many students first write a literature review chapter. Indeed, the draft chapter can be called "Literature Review" or "Debating [your topic]." In terms of length, a first draft of this chapter is often eight to twelve pages.

Why is this chapter a helpful first step? As Isaac Newton put it, anyone doing research "stands on the shoulders of giants." We can think about and conceptualize a subject because of what has been written by past scholars. The literature review thus explains to the reader how scholars think about and debate your topic and what that debate means for our understanding of what questions are relevant. The literature review is not a painstaking rehash of everything that has been written on your topic. Rather, it uses a judicious appraisal of that scholarship to justify why *your* topic is important and *your* research question is interesting and valid. Indeed, this draft chapter can often end with a succinct statement of your research question.

What draft chapter should I write second?

So what comes next? By this stage, you should already have written the first draft of your literature review chapter and your research question is likely to be clear. However, few students are able, at this point, to write one of the body chapters, which reports the results of your own primary research and discusses the relevance of your findings. Further, it is still important to write a chapter which clears the way towards this writing of a body chapter. As such, the

second chapter that you write should be another that sets up the structure of your thesis, telling readers what is coming and why. There are different options for doing this.

Many students write a background chapter. That is, they write the chapter that provides important background information about the institutions, organizational structure, demographics or history that your readers need to fully understand the data you are studying. For a thesis on whether Puerto Rico would become the 51st US state, for instance, this chapter was about the history of political parties in Puerto Rico, since the author used support for parties, who differed in their opinion on statehood, to indicate popular sentiment on the subject. For students who are using a case study analysis, such a background chapter also helps to explain why the cases you select are important and how they connect to your question and research.

A separate option, for students who have invested a lot of time and energy in collecting their own data, or accessing highly specific data, is to write a research methods chapter. An important part of any thesis is a discussion of your research methods. For those theses that are data-heavy, the discussion of research methods will be sufficiently extensive to merit a whole chapter. The advantage of writing such a chapter now is that it will remind you of your methods as you analyze your data, and that can prompt you to be on the lookout for any data issues that could result from the methods used to collect or assemble that data.

Finally, some students, who have already collected and analyzed at least some of their data over the fall term, may also choose to write one of their body chapters, in part as a test run for what lies ahead.

What draft chapter should I write third?

It is much easier to consider which chapter you write as your third draft chapter, for the January deadline! Having had more time over the winter break, you should be working on your body chapters, in which you report your findings and suggest what they imply. You can draft one of your case studies, or undertake a statistical analysis, or write up your participant observation, or share interview data, but this chapter should include analysis of your own, primary data.

When should I complete my full thesis draft, and what should be in it?

You'll want to have your full first draft completed by mid-March, to give your advisor and the additional readers time to read through the draft and give comments. You'll work on drafting your thesis in stages, following the guidance here. Ideally you will have drafted your body chapters by the end of February with the introduction and conclusion drafted in early March. Your full draft will include all of the chapters you have already written, in revised form, so that the first full draft contains the best, most recent version of any chapter.

What should I work on while I wait for feedback my draft?

There are many ways to use your time productively while you wait for your advisor, and your other readers, to return your draft. Here are some suggestions:

1. Make sure that your bibliographic references and footnotes are all in order.
2. Prepare any supplementary material, such as appendices or photos.
3. Solicit the opinions of additional readers. If friends and family have agreed to read for grammar, style and typos, now is the time to email your work to them.
4. Double-check your thesis formatting.
5. Catch up on your other coursework.

Why do I have to leave time for revising draft chapters?

Revision is crucial to the successful outcome of your thesis project. It is almost always clear to thesis graders which students have had time to revise their theses, and which students have not. If you have already edited and refined your earlier chapter drafts, the revision that you do toward the end of your writing process will not be too onerous.. In other cases, revision may be substantial and may result in full-scale reorganization of chapters, scaling back your argument, or adding in additional information to fully make your case.

What should I do if the thesis is due soon, and I still have a lot to write?

If at any time your thesis feels overwhelming, seek help. There are a number of places at Brandeis you can turn to, including academic advising and the Brandeis Counseling Center. You should also remember that **any thesis is a good thesis**. As long as you can turn in a thesis you will finish this process, even if your final thesis is not as strong as you had hoped. Even if you feel embarrassed, you should contact your advisor to let him or her know about your concerns. Most advisors have seen this happen with a student at least once. You may be surprised to find that they are unflappable and can offer concrete ideas.

Many students do hole up in the last few weeks before their theses are due and spend intense periods of time writing, particularly over the April vacation. If you have had trouble writing and have not already done so, it's time for you to go through a checklist of reasons why you may not be writing effectively. Do you have writer's block? Have you been procrastinating? Are you too busy with other commitments? Whatever the reason, you need to find the cause and address the problem. Sometimes students motivate themselves by getting a writing "buddy"—a friend, who may also be writing a thesis, who will sit with them in the library for predetermined times. In other cases, students have identified work locations that are less distracting or times of the day when they prefer writing and have had success writing after making adjustments to their routine.

If you are writing, but just writing slowly, there are strategies that you might try to ensure that you get the thesis finished in time. For example, you should focus on writing the parts of the thesis that are the most crucial to your argument, skipping any parts that contain subsidiary

information and only returning to those sections once you have finished the most important sections. Likewise, if you had planned on writing a thesis with four body chapters, you can evaluate (in conjunction with your advisor) to see if you can get away with one or two fewer chapter. You should also consider enlisting friends and family to help you proofread and/or finish any bibliographic references and formatting. They may be glad to help!

Chapter 6: Formatting the Thesis

What kind of citation format should I use?

Any approved citation format is fine (APA, Chicago, or MLA), as long as you remain consistent in your formatting throughout your thesis. Generally, students follow the citation format that is standard in the discipline with the strongest influence on their thesis, with APA as the standard for the social sciences. Your may want to consult your advisor about his or her preferences for citation format. For information on all styles of citation, see this page from the Brandeis library.

Do I need to include a bibliography if I used footnoted references?

Yes! Whether you use footnoted citations or in-text parenthetical citations, you will need to include a bibliography of works cited (also known as a references section) at the end of the thesis with the full citation for any books, articles, chapters, data sets, newspaper content, or online sources that you have cited in the thesis text.

Should I include appendices?

You can certainly include appendices, but this is not necessary. Some common forms of appendices include: a table of the interviewees contacted, a sample interview schedule, a glossary of foreign terminology, statistical results, descriptive statistics for your data, and maps.

Can I include images in my thesis?

Yes, some students choose to have photographic images in their theses. Some theses investigate a visual topic for which images are a natural support. In other cases, images help to enrich the written text. These images can either be included in the appendices or in the text.

What are the formatting requirements for the thesis?

Because IGS is an interdisciplinary major, there is no specific format that theses are required to follow. Students should keep in mind, however, that the thesis is a work of scholarship, and should be consistent and professional in its presentation. For this reason, and to make it easier for your advisor to note margin comments, theses must be double spaced, with standard margin sizes and a font of at least 11 point. Theses should include a cover sheet (or title page) and a table of contents before the Introduction and body chapters. Any appendices and a full references section should be clearly marked following the Conclusion. A title page template, prepared by the Brandeis library, can be found here.

Appendix

All of the documents below are accessible using a Brandeis email:

Recent Thesis Titles in IGS

General Honors Thesis Timetable for Juniors and Seniors

Applying for a Fellowship for Data Collection Abroad

Instructions for Registering for IGS 99D

Slides on Conducting a Literature Review

Brandeis IRB Guide for Student Researchers

Brandeis IRB Guide to Defining Human Subjects Research and Determination Tree

Brandeis Library Guide to Citation Styles

Brandeis Library Template for Thesis Title Page

A Guide to your Thesis Defense Presentation