

Guidelines for writing a thesis proposal

If you are applying to the Honors Program in Political Science, read the guidelines below for tips on how to write your honors thesis proposal. The proposal is an important part of the honors application.

What is a thesis?

A thesis is a scholarly investigation of a puzzle or problem in your field. It deals with its topic in greater depth than a term paper can. Thesis topics in Political Science can cover a very wide array of subjects ranging from a close rereading of a classical political theory text, to original survey research on a policy question, to an empirical investigation of a theoretical claims made in the literature.

The most important thing to remember is that a good thesis hinges on having a good research question.

When to start?

It is never too early to start thinking about what might interest you for a thesis topic. The second half of your junior year is when you should give it serious thought and begin preliminary investigations of your topic so that you can write a good thesis proposal.

Choosing a topic

The first thing to do is discover what your interests are. What courses have really sparked your interest? What readings? What issues in the news? Choose an area that you have had course work in (or related to). Do not try and write a thesis on China when you have had no courses on China. Do not try and write a thesis on Locke when you have had no political theory.

Your initial thinking will most likely be toward a broad area: party systems, genocide, liberal theory, etc. A final thesis topic, however, has to be more than a vague subject area. Your job is to do enough investigation to turn that broad area into a narrower issue, and eventually a researchable question. It must be sufficiently broad enough to interest others and be deemed worthy of scholarly investigation, but sufficiently narrow enough that you can do it justice in a thesis.

To give focus to a broad topic, read widely in some subject area that you find interesting looking for anomalies, puzzles, or surprises. At this point, you should just be jumping into an area to absorb more knowledge about it while looking for those puzzles. Is there a debate in the literature that has not been empirically investigated? Did you find a burning question that is understudied? **The main point is that you need to explore and read a lot before you can even formulate a workable research question. You have to learn a lot just to know what the important and interesting questions are.**

There is no magic recipe to narrowing the topic and eventually turning it into a question. The best advice is to talk to professors in the classes that got you interested in your area, and also to read about it from different angles. For example, if you are interested in genocide in Rwanda you will want to read both the general literature on genocide and the literature specific to Rwanda. If you are interested in recent changes in abortion laws in South Dakota, read both about that as well as about abortion politics more generally.

Work toward the question

When they apply, very few students have a fully refined question. But the closer you are to some initial questions the better. The ultimate question in the thesis must not be too broad (though it probably will be at the proposal stage).

Here are some examples of questions that are good starts (proposal stage), but much too big ultimately:

- How can we explain rapid economic development?
- How can we explain the success of the social revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries?
- What are the effects of negative campaign ads on voter behavior?

During the initial thesis semester, the above questions can then be further narrowed to:

- Given the idea that access to natural resource endowments have played an important role in promoting economic development in industrialization of UK and US, why did Korea and Taiwan, both resource-poor countries industrialize at a similar rate?
- Given what we know about revolutions, why is it that North Korea has not seen a revolution against the present regime?
- Given what we know about the effects of negative campaign ads, why do we not see lower voter turnout in this election (the expected outcome?)

Most of you will end up with a “why” or “how” question. It is explanatory rather than descriptive. Sometimes students will investigate a “what” or descriptive question that is not studied in the literature. Here there will be a very heavy emphasis on primary sources.

Summing up

In general, people move from a general subject area or topic, to a question:

- **Subject area:** The Rwandan genocide or US policies on assassination.
- **Slightly more narrow subject area:** The impact of the genocide on women. Or, how the US policy on assassination has changed.
- **More manageable question:** What has the specific impact of the genocide been on women survivors and what implications do their situations have for future stability? Or, what has caused the change in US assassination policies over time and, given a particular set of moral considerations (or foreign policy goals, etc), is the current policy a reasonable one.

Your proposal should be as far along in this process of moving from general area, to topic, to question as possible.

Writing the proposal

Your proposal should:

- explain the topic or question that interests you;
- give a sense of the importance of it;
- show or reflect that you have done preliminary research;
- indicate what background courses you have to prepare yourself for this area of research;
- if you have spoken to potential advisors, indicate who. (You need not have an advisor at application.)

Submitting your proposal

There are two components of the application.

The Google Docs form must be submitted by **4:00 pm PST, Thursday, July 16th, 2026**.

The proposal must be submitted by **4:00 pm PST, Thursday, July 23rd, 2026**.

Give yourself plenty of lead time to proofread and complete your application. Late and incomplete applications will NOT be accepted.

A reminder that the proposal should NOT exceed two pages (double spaced, typed). Edit as needed.

1. Go to bconnected.berkeley.edu and login to the bDrive using your CalNET ID.
2. Click “Create” if you are just starting to write your proposal and save the file when finished, or “Upload” if you completed your proposal via another word processing program (e.g., Microsoft Word).
3. Check the box next to the file or folder you’d like to share.
4. Click the Share icon on the top right corner of the screen.
5. Type in the following addresses in the “Add People” or “Invite People” text box: psadvise@berkeley.edu, cidon@berkeley.edu, smcd@berkeley.edu, and elwolfgram@berkeley.edu Choose the access level “Can View” from the dropdown menu.
6. Click “Send & Done” (or it may appear as “Share & Save”).