Politics 480W-01  
Politics Senior Thesis Seminar  
Course Website: http://www.willamette.edu/~mmarks/poli-480.htm

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Course Description

The purpose of this course is to provide a structured environment in which students will undertake an analytical research and writing project. The senior thesis represents the culmination of each student’s undergraduate education at Willamette University. As such, it should include the development of a clear, concise, coherent, and logical thesis argument, “original” research that goes beyond summaries of books and articles, analysis of competing claims, and a presentation format worthy of the student’s advanced knowledge of social science methodologies. Research and writing of the senior thesis is designed to prepare Politics majors for post-undergraduate careers, whether they are in graduate school, education, law, business, public service, or other professional activities.

Student Learning Outcomes

At the conclusion of this course students should be able to write an extended research paper on a topic of each student’s choosing analyzing some aspect of politics. In the research paper each student should effectively demonstrate the ability to:

1. Write well in terms of prose, grammar, and syntax.
2. Organize ideas in a logical progression of thoughts.
3. Answer an interesting “puzzle,” the answer to which is not readily obvious or apparent.
4. State a clear and cogent thesis.
5. Review and cite relevant scholarly literature on the fundamental theoretical questions involved.
7. Present the paper’s thesis balanced with an assessment of counter-arguments and/or competing explanations.
8. Include in the paper adequate and relevant evidence.
9. Maintain the paper’s proper scope so that it is not too narrow or broad.
10. Adopt an appropriate tone of analysis (not partisanship).

Course Organization

Class time and a regular classroom have been set aside for this course. However, we shall not necessarily meet as a group every week. In addition to semi-regular class meetings at the scheduled classroom hours, students will work closely with me in development and completion of their senior theses. Students will be obligated to meet with me at least once every week to discuss their projects. Each student should come prepared for these meetings to present their work-in-progress including ongoing bibliographies, outlines, writing samples, etc. In turn, I will provide both oral and written comments on student work, guidance on appropriate methodologies, and references to additional resource materials. Through this ongoing process of consultation, students will be expected to re-write drafts of their thesis until they have produced a quality piece of analysis.

Class sessions will provide a forum for students to think collectively about the senior thesis project. In addition, students in the course will have the opportunity to read their peers’ work and offer
support, critiques, suggestions, and frank assessments. Students therefore will be expected to read their peers’ work and be prepared to discuss them with a high degree of engagement and dedication.

**Written and Oral Assignments**

In addition to the final senior thesis, students will be asked to submit a preliminary 5–10 page thesis prospectus that outlines their research project, an abstract (one-paragraph synopsis of the paper), a literature review, an annotated bibliography, and an official first draft, along with revisions of the first draft in preparation for submission of the final product.

Students will also be required to make an oral presentation and “defense” of their senior thesis. Because the senior thesis is designed to prepare students for their post-Willamette careers, oral communication and defense of analytical arguments—whether they be graduate dissertations, primary or secondary school class preparations, legal briefs, business proposals, policy initiatives, or simply personal convictions—is a critical feature of the undergraduate education.

**Grading**

The course grade will be determined on the basis of the following criteria:

- Advanced planning
- Originality of topic, analysis, and findings
- Difficulty of topic
- Effort
- Improvements from one draft to the next
- Quality of writing
- Command of topic
- Extent to which the analysis represents the student’s independent thinking versus instructor input

In other words, grades will not be assigned for the individual elements of the project, i.e., the prospectus, first and second drafts, oral presentation, etc. Instead, one grade will be given for the course with emphasis on the final draft of the senior thesis but consideration given to improvements from one draft to the next as well as effort in developing the paper over the course of the semester.

Everything you turn in must be your own written work. You may not copy, borrow, or appropriate other authors’ work, unless you are doing so in the form of a cited quotation. All references to other authors’ work must be fully documented in the form of citations and/or footnotes, and direct quotes must be indicated as such with quotation marks. Suspected cases of plagiarism will be pursued vigorously and appropriate penalties (including an “F” for the course) will be applied.

**Class Attendance and Participation**

Given the collaborative nature of the senior thesis process, students are expected to participate in offering guidance and feedback to their peers. Therefore, students are expected to be prepared to discuss each other’s work in progress. Peer editing is a requirement of this writing-centered class. In addition, attendance at other students’ oral presentations is mandatory.

**Electronic Devices in the Classroom**

Laptop computers can assist in note taking and wireless Internet access on campus can aid in organized classroom exercises. However, laptop computers can also be a classroom distraction. Laptop computers are permitted in class for note taking purposes. Additionally, there may be
occasions when the class as a whole may want to use the campus wireless network to look things up online. However, please refrain from checking e-mail, online chatting, websurfing, game playing, etc. during class. If you are observed doing so during class time, you will asked to no longer bring your laptop to class. Additionally, cell phones should be turned off prior to class.

Optional Course Texts

There are no assigned readings for this course aside from the materials students will collect in the course of their research. However, students might find one or more of the following writing and style manuals useful in preparing their theses. These books can be purchased from any online book retailer (e.g., Powell’s, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc.). The purpose of these books is to provide guidance to students regarding the standards, mechanics, and goals of writing in the social sciences in general, and politics in specific. Purchase of any of these books is optional.


Course Schedule (Subject to revision)

**August 31–September 2: Course Introduction**

Discussion of the goals of a senior thesis project. Overview of expectations of the thesis. Students should think of the types of questions they would like to pursue in their senior thesis projects.

**September 5–9: Questions, Theory, and Research**

Discussion of the types of questions asked in analytical research, theoretical frameworks, and the connections between theory and research. Students should be prepared to discuss their choice of topic, the main schools of thought engaged by the topic, the types of empirical sources that will be used in the research, the significant questions raised by the topic they intend to pursue.
September 12–16: Applying Questions, Theory, and Research to Writing

Discussion of the methods by which theoretical questions are translated into empirical research. Students should continue to conduct research on the empirical aspects of their projects.

**SEPTEMBER 19: THESIS PROSPECTUS DUE**
(Including a summary, abstract, outline, literature review, and annotated bibliography).

September 19–23: Library Resources

No class meeting. Students should meet with the Social Science reference librarian at Hatfield Library to discuss the types of research materials available through the library relevant to each student’s research topic.

September 26–30: How to Construct a Senior Thesis

Discussion of the format and structure of the senior thesis. Discussion of Thesis Prospectus to get feedback from other students.

October 3–7: Some Writing Mechanics

Additional discussion of the nuts and bolts of the senior thesis format. Continuing individual conferences with me.

October 10–14

No class sessions.

**OCTOBER 17: FIRST DRAFT OF SENIOR THESIS DUE**
(including abstract and bibliography)

October 17–21

No class sessions. Submit first draft of thesis on Monday.

October 24–28

No class sessions.

October 31–November 4

No class sessions.

**Drafts to be exchanged with peer editors no later than 12:00 noon Monday, November 7.**

November 7–11: Peer Editing Sessions

Peer editing of first drafts and working second drafts of thesis.

**NOVEMBER 14: SECOND DRAFT OF SENIOR THESIS DUE**
(including abstract and bibliography)
November 14–18: Second Drafts

No class sessions. Submit second draft of thesis.

November 21–23

No class sessions.

November 28–December 2: Oral Presentations

Oral presentations.

December 5–9: Oral Presentations

Oral presentations.

DECEMBER 9: FINAL DRAFT OF SENIOR THESIS DUE
(including abstract and bibliography)