
How to Write a BA Thesis

**A PRACTICAL GUIDE FROM
YOUR FIRST IDEAS TO YOUR
FINISHED PAPER**

SECOND EDITION

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CONTENTS

I. GETTING STARTED

- How to Read This Book 3
- 1 Introduction to *How to Write a BA Thesis*, Second Edition 9
- 2 Useful Nuts and Bolts 13
- 3 More Nuts and Bolts 22

II. FRAMING YOUR TOPIC

- 4 Taking Effective Notes and Avoiding Plagiarism 41
- 5 How to Build a Reading List 70
- 6 Refining Your Topic, Writing a Proposal,
and Beginning Research 76

III. CONDUCTING YOUR RESEARCH

- 7 What Is Good Thesis Research? 101
- 8 Using Case Studies Effectively 113
- 9 Every Thesis Should Have a Thesis 127

IV. WRITING YOUR BEST

- 10 Planning and Prewriting: How Do They Help Your Thesis? 139
- 11 Writing Your Best 159
- 12 Effective Openings, Smooth Transitions,
and Strong Closings 175
- 13 Good Editing Makes Good Writing 193
- 14 Presenting Information Visually 209
- 15 Presenting Your Work to Others 245

V. WORKING YOUR BEST

- 16 Working Efficiently 251
- 17 Overcoming Problems 263
- 18 What to Do If You Get Stuck 283

VI. SCHEDULING AND COMPLETING YOUR THESIS

- 19 Thesis Schedule 287
- 20 Tips and Reminders 295
- 21 Frequently Asked Questions 303
- 22 What to Do When You're All Done 314

VII. DEALING WITH SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

- 23 Thesis Defense and Second Readers: Questions and Answers 323
- 24 A One-Semester Thesis 326

VIII. CITING YOUR SOURCES AND GETTING MORE ADVICE

Appendix 1: Best Sources for More Help 333

Appendix 2: Footnotes 101 339

Appendix 3: Advice for New Faculty Advisers 435

Acknowledgments 439

Index 441

1 INTRODUCTION TO *HOW* *TO WRITE A BA THESIS,* SECOND EDITION

Writing a senior honors thesis is the capstone of your college studies. This book is designed to help you at every stage of that process, to pass along the experience of students who have gone before you and suggestions from teachers who know what works best, what doesn't, and what challenges you might face as you complete your research and writing.

All your previous college courses, readings, draft papers, and revisions have prepared you to write a BA thesis. You've taken the introductory and intermediate courses in your major, delved into more specialized topics in advanced courses, and written research papers. All of them prepare you to tackle your BA thesis, which many students say is the most rewarding project of their college years.

Why do so many students find it so worthwhile to research and write a thesis? Partly it's because they can choose the topic themselves. Partly it's because they can explore a subject in real depth. Partly it's because the research proves (to themselves and to employers and graduate schools) that they can take on a major independent project and complete it.

As an independent project, the BA thesis is different from all your previous courses. Until now your teacher always specified the assignment. If the course was about the French Revolution, you couldn't write about India's democracy. Now you can choose whatever you want.

That freedom is daunting. So is the length of the paper. It's longer than a normal seminar paper and requires more sustained research.

Don't worry. I will guide you through the entire process and show you how to ask others, especially professors and librarians, for guidance. I'll share what I've learned in advising students, and I'll share the answers they've given.

Let me begin with a few general points. I hope you find them helpful.

First, pick a subject that really interests you. After all, you'll be working on this project for several months, so you'll want something that keeps you

interested. At this stage you don't need to have a precise topic, but you do need to know what really interests you.

Second, pick an adviser you can work with, someone who knows your subject and likes helping students. I'll give you some ideas about how to find the right person and then how to work with him or her.

Third, working with your adviser, move from your broad area of interest to focus on a specific research topic. The goal here is to move from your broad area of interest to a more well-defined topic. Your broad topic might be ancient warfare. Your more precise topic might be Rome's second war against Carthage or the differences between Athenian and Spartan militaries.

Only *you* can identify the broad area that interests you. Only you know if you enjoy reading about ancient warfare more than about medieval or early modern war, or reading Romantic poetry more than late Victorian novels. Only you know if you are primarily interested in Plato's thought or Augustine's, or perhaps a topic that has interested many thinkers, such as "what makes for a good life?"

What your faculty adviser can do is listen as you explain your interests and your prospective topic, and, with that in mind, help you move from a general subject like the French Revolution to a more specific one like "why did the Terror happen?" or "did Napoleon continue the French Revolution or end it?"

Those question marks are important. **Fourth, turn your specific topic into a question you can answer.** Posing that question, explaining why it is interesting, and answering it will be the heart of your thesis.

Don't worry if you can't answer the question right now. Actually, worry if you *can*. If you can already answer it, the topic will quickly bore you. It's okay to have a hunch about the right answer. But if the answer's already set in stone, carve a different statue.

The goal is to find a question that interests you and that you can eventually answer as your research unfolds. As you explain why the question is interesting, you will draw in the reader.

Your adviser can be a great help here. Work closely with her to narrow your topic and formulate your specific research question. She's done it many times before, not only when she advised other students but in her own work. Thanks to her training and experience, she knows what good research questions are, and she can help you formulate yours. But remember, you first need to know what interests you and why.

Finally, almost all students have the same worry as they begin a BA thesis: Can I really complete a big independent project? Can I write a research paper longer than any I have written before?

The answer is almost always yes, you can. That's not simply wishful thinking. It's based on my experience and knowing a trick that will really help you succeed.

Here it is. Once you have focused on your specific topic or question, do *not* concentrate on writing a thirty-five- or forty-page paper. Not only is that daunting; it's not how your real research and writing are done.

All serious research involves breaking down a large project into several key components and then tackling each one separately. If you are writing a book, those components are chapters. If you are writing a BA thesis or journal article, the components are short papers. Each of these short papers, or sections, is probably six to eight pages.

A typical thirty-five-page paper has

- a brief introduction, which states the question or problem, and why it matters;
- four or more sections that explain different aspects of the issue; they lay out the evidence, how others have seen the problem, and how you see it; these sections answer your answer or prove your point; and, finally,
- a conclusion, which summarizes what you have found and its larger meaning.

Look at the journal articles you have read in history, English, political science, or sociology. They all have that same structure.

The key, then, is those four, five, or six middle sections. Each is a short paper covering a different aspects of your topic. You've written dozens of these shorter papers in college, and you already know how to do it. That's all you need to do here. Don't worry about writing a thirty-five-page paper. Just write several six-page papers that fit together.

The only difference from your previous course papers is this: instead of writing one on topic A and another on topic B, you will be writing one on topic A₁, then one on topic A₂, and so on. Those topics are closely related, and taken together, they will answer your thesis question.

Your adviser should play a crucial role in helping you define what topics A₁, A₂, and A₃ should be. Think of them as the basic architecture of your thesis. You should work with your adviser to plan that basic structure as

soon as you have narrowed your topic and are ready to begin research. You want to know, “What should I cover in the middle sections?” Then you’ll come up with a few ways to do that, to break down your larger topic into its constituent parts. Then write each one separately (A₁, A₂, etc.) and hook them together. In the process, you might decide you need to add or subtract a section or to rearrange their order. That’s very common, and it’s not a problem.

The key is to separate the larger topic into its component parts, write each one as a separate paper, and hook them together. Then write your introduction and conclusion, and you’re done.

Tip: The best way to complete a longer project like a BA thesis is to

- break it down into separate tasks, such as the literature review or methodology section, then
- write each section as a separate, stand-alone paper, and finally
- link them together into one longer paper.

Keep that trick in mind as we travel through the project.

Now let’s get started.