

Yale University

Department of Political Science

Senior Essays in Political Science

Introduction

If you are a Political Science major at Yale, you will write a senior essay. The senior essay is an opportunity to go more deeply into a topic or puzzle than you ordinarily would on a final assignment for a course. Before you begin the essay the task can seem daunting. This document is designed to allay some of that anxiety by providing information about how to go about choosing a topic and an advisor and other useful details.

Most Political Science majors write their senior essays in conjunction with a one-semester seminar. A small number writes it in conjunction with an independent study, writing a year-long senior essay, or writing an intensive senior essay. We explain these distinct options below.

Whatever the venue in which you write the senior essay, you will have to develop a research topic, formulate specific questions that your essay will try to answer, and offer a strong motivation for the project – make the case to your readers that something valuable would be lost if your research questions were not answered. Your advisor will be your most important resource in helping you to develop the topic, questions, and motivation. But there are published guides that can also help. A good one is

- Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*. University of Chicago Press, 2008

Another valuable resource are reference librarians, both in the Social Science library and elsewhere in the Yale library system. Many useful sources are now available on-line; the reference librarians will often be more up-to-date about how to access these resources than is your advisor.

The One-Term Senior Essays in Conjunction with a Seminar

This is the most common way that students write their essays. Ideally, you will write an essay in conjunction with a seminar on a topic about which you have done some prior coursework, and/or taught by an instructor with whom you have worked before. Of course, the seminars being offered during the semester in which you plan to write the essay, and the availability of slots in these courses, may limit your choices.

Keep in mind that senior majors are accepted into seminars at higher rates than are other students, especially when the seniors apply through the pre-registration process. When you apply for a seminar in which you think you would like to write the senior essay, let the instructor know this.

Even if the “perfect” seminar isn’t offered, you can still write a satisfying one-term essay. Your interest can be sparked even on a topic that is new to you at the beginning of the term. Remember that how satisfying the experience is has a lot to do with how much time and effort you put into project.

How does a one-term senior essay differ from a term paper, written for a seminar? In general it is a bigger, more ambitious project than is a term paper. Many seniors incorporate primary materials into their essay, and/or analyze publically available information in new and inventive ways. Your advisor can help you to develop an understanding of what the relevant primary materials might be for your chosen topic, and how to go about finding, assembling, and analyzing them.

Because more goes into writing a senior essay than a term paper, it is basically impossible to wait until just before the deadline and produce a good essay. You should meet with your advisor regularly over the course of the semester. In many ways the most crucial meetings will be the early ones, when he or she helps you to develop a topic and identify sources.

A word about the relationship between your senior essay and assignments for the seminar in which you write the essay. Often, a term paper will be the final assignment in the seminar and your senior essay will be an extension of this paper. Whether you will produce a separate term paper as well as a senior essay is up to your instructor. In some seminars, the final project will not be a term paper; here again, it is up to your course instructor/essay advisor whether (if at all) your requirements in the course will be modified, in light of your work on the essay. What's important is that you find out early in the term how the instructor wants to handle your course assignments.

Length and format

One-term senior essays should be approximately 25 pages in length (excluding bibliography, tables and figures, or other appendices), double spaced. There is no prescribed format, but most essays use one-inch margins. You should include a title page with the title of the essay, your name, your advisor's name, and the date.

There is no prescribed system for footnoting, end-noting, or for a bibliography or reference section. What's important is to be consistent throughout. If your advisor has preferences on these matters, you should follow these preferences.

Deadlines

Your Senior Essay Prospectus outlines your plans for completing the essay. Like all Political Science forms, it is available in hard copy outside of the DUS office and on line, on the Political Science website. The Prospectus is due on the same date that your course schedule is due, at the beginning of the semester when you plan to write the essay. Check the Political Science website link for "Deadlines" to see the exact dates.

One week before your essay is due, the Political Science Undergraduate Registrar will ask you to submit its title. You will be asked for a title whether you are submitting in the Fall or Spring and whether you are writing a one-term or full-year essay. Please

respond promptly. You are free to change the title before final submission; even a working title will help the staff begin to find second readers.

The deadline for the senior essay itself is 4:00 pm of the last day of classes of the term during which you are writing it. Again, check the website for exact dates. Extensions can be granted only by your residential college dean. Instructors cannot grant an extension unless the residential college dean has authorized one.

With your advisor, you should set up a schedule of deadlines for turning in outlines and drafts.

One-Term Senior Essays Written in an Independent Study

Some majors have a long-standing interest in a topic or a problem related to politics or public policy which they want to write about, but no seminar is offered that is related to their topic. Such students will frequently have worked with a faculty member in the past in a related course or project, and may have already taken the relevant seminars before their senior year. For these students, writing a senior essay in the context of a one-term independent study course (480a in the Fall, 480b in the Spring) is a good option. They indicate this option on their Senior Essay Prospectus. Obviously, they have to recruit an advisor who is willing to work with them to develop a reading list and fulfill all of the other tasks involved in writing the essay.

Note that 480a and 480b do not fulfill the senior-seminar requirement; seniors writing their essays in an Independent Study need to take a seminar during their senior year.

Length and format

One-term senior essays written in conjunction with independent studies should be of the same approximate length as other one-semester essays: 25 pages (excluding bibliography, tables, etc.) and double spaced. All other requirements regarding submission, formatting, and deadlines are the same as those described elsewhere in this document for authors of one-semester essays.

Year-Long Senior Essays

Some students elect to use the senior-essay requirement to take on a more extensive and substantial research project than could be carried out in a single semester. A small number of students write year-long senior essays. Many such students carry out related research during the summer between junior and senior years. (This is by no means a requirement. See below for sources of support for summer research.) The year-long senior essay is about 50-60 pages in length.

To write a year-long senior essay, you must apply during the Spring term of your junior year. The application is due in early April (check the website for exact deadlines).

For this option, you would take two courses related to your essay. In the Fall of your senior year, you would take 490a, *The Senior Colloquium*, a course designed to hone your research skills by sharing your work with fellow students and the instructor. (Note that 490a counts as a senior-year seminar.) In the Spring you would take 491b, *The Senior Essay*, in which you work closely with your advisor to complete the essay. You receive a temporary grade of Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory in 490a; once you have completed the senior essay, you receive a letter grade, which applies, retroactively, to 490a and to 491b.

The Intensive Senior Essay

A small number of students, during their junior year, enter a version of the major called the *Intensive Major*. To be accepted into the intensive major, you need to apply in November of your junior year. During the spring of their junior year, intensive majors take PLSC474b, *Directed Reading and Research*. Fall term of senior year, intensive majors take PLSC 490a, *Senior Colloquium*, and spring term take PLSC 493b, the independent senior essay course for intensive majors. PLSC490a/493b, a year-long independent study course with a faculty advisor, directed by their essay advisor. The intensive senior essay is similar to the year-long senior essay in scope and length.

Finding an Advisor

Whether you write a one-semester or year-long senior essay, you will work closely with a faculty advisor. For most of you, your advisor will be the instructor of the senior seminar in which you have elected to write your essay. In all cases, you need to “recruit” an advisor: give him or her the sense that you are hard-working, committed, and independent. Yale faculty are committed to research and enjoy guiding students through what is usually their first research experience. But keep in mind that Yale faculty are also very busy people, with multiple responsibilities. Email is not the most effective way to initially contact a potential advisor; they receive dozens each day and yours may fall through the cracks. A better strategy is to visit the instructor during his/her office hours, explain your thoughts on the project, and explain why you hope to work with this advisor. In advance of the meeting, review the information on the faculty member’s personal web page, so that you will know whether this particular instructor has expertise in the general area of your interest. (It’s not that he/she has to have published on “your” topic, but you usually would not ask an international relations expert to advise you on an essay in, say, political philosophy.)

If you plan to write your senior essay in conjunction with a seminar (as most majors do), review the course offerings for the full year and identify two or three potential seminars. You may have good reasons to want to write the essay in one semester, but flexibility can also be an advantage. If the perfect course (for you) on African politics or the U.S. presidency is only offered in the Fall, it may be worth it to change your plan to write the essay in the Spring. Be sure to apply for a slot in the seminar through the pre-registration process, and use the form provided to indicate your interest in writing the senior essay in this course. Be sure to make a case for yourself:

explain your background, previous coursework, and any relevant experiences you have had. In other words, in this situation, applying to the seminar is the first step in recruiting the advisor. Once you have secured a slot in the seminar, be sure to meet with the instructor early, confirm his/her willingness to advise you on the essay, and have a full, substantive discussion with him or her of your topic and how to proceed. Again, office hours are a better setting for such discussions than are classrooms crowded with students trying to get in to the seminar.

If you are unsure about whom to recruit as an advisor and which seminar to take, use the Political Science website to get more information about faculty interests (go to the “Faculty and Staff” link). Although the ideal advisor is someone with whom you have taken courses and interacted in the past, many students have good experiences working with instructors with whom they have never worked before.

When thinking about the faculty advisor, keep in mind that the Department requires that this person be an instructor in Political Science. By “instructor” we mean faculty holding an appointment in the Department. The objective behind this rule is to have students approach their topic as a Political Scientist would. Obviously you are free to turn to for informal advice to Yale instructors who have no connection to the Political Science Department, but your formal advisor must be an instructor in the Department. If you have any question about whether an instructor is qualified to advise you, please consult with the DUS.

Occasionally, students take a seminar with the intention of writing a senior essay and then, during the semester, change their minds. If you find yourself in this situation and would like to opt out, you should contact the instructor and the DUS.

Submitting the Senior Essay

Upon completion of your essay, you will deliver a hard copy to your advisor. We recommend that you bind the thesis in some way, but expensive professional binding is not recommended. You will also submit an electronic copy, in *Word* or PDF, to the DUS office (send to christine.cavanaugh@yale.edu). You must include the entire essay (all text, tables, bibliography, etc.) in one electronic file. Please name the electronic version of your essay as follows: Last name_First name.

Penalties for Late Submission

Students who do not submit a senior essay by the deadline must submit a Dean’s excuse to their advisor and to the DUS office, explaining why the essay is late. Note that Yale College does not allow majors who fail to complete their senior project to graduate.

Late essays are penalized one full letter grade (e.g., A to B) for every week they are late, on a prorated basis.

Sources of Funding for Summer Research

During part or all of the summer between their junior and senior years, some students choose to conduct research related to their eventual senior essay project. Some carry out research in the United States, others abroad. The Political Science Department distributes, on a competitive basis, Frank M. Patterson grants for such research (Patterson grants also support summer internships). Application deadlines are posted under “Summer Research Funds” in the “Undergraduate Program” link on the Political Science website. Yale supports summer undergraduate research through several other programs; the link to the “Grants and Fellowships Database” is on the website.

The Grading of Senior Essays

Your faculty advisor will serve as first reader of your senior essay, and will assign it a letter grade. The DUS will also appoint a second reader, who will assign a grade of Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. In the rare case of a failing grade from the first reader or an Unsatisfactory grade from the second, you will be asked to revise the essay and resubmit it. Once it has been resubmitted, a third reader will be assigned.

If the essay is written for PLSC 480a, the grade on the essay is the grade for the course. If the essay is written in a seminar, the adviser will report the grade to the DUS office and will calculate the grade for the seminar based on the essay and the other components of the grade.

Your grade on the senior essay goes into the calculation of graduation with distinction in the Major. To graduate with distinction in Political Science (as in all majors), you must receive an A or A- on the senior essay (as well as course grades of A or A- in 75% of your Political Science courses).

Senior Essay Prizes

Faculty advisors may nominate senior essays, whether written in the Fall or Spring Semester or as year-long projects, for the following prizes:

James Gordon Bennett Prize Best senior essay in International Relations.

Philo S. Bennett Prize Best senior essay in Political Philosophy.

Charles W. Clark Prize Best senior essay in Comparative Government or Politics.

Frank M. Patterson Prize Best senior essay on the American Political System.

Percival N. Clement Prize Best senior essay in support of the principles of the American Constitution and its first ten amendments.