Guidelines for Senior Theses in Philosophy:
What You Should Be Doing in the Semester *Before* Your Two Semesters of 700-Work

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Professors' dreams and students' realities

Every professor has the same dream when it comes to senior theses. In this dream, our thesis students write detailed, concrete, and concise proposals the semester before they start their research. Because of the well-planned roadmap outlined in this proposal and the hard thinking done during the proposal period, hit the ground running the following semester, churning out about ten pages a week, and a decent draft of a chapter every three to four weeks.

This is only a dream. In reality, students often write vague, abstract, and meandering proposals during the fall semester that provide them with little guidance as to where to go next. During the winter term, they become painfully aware of this as they explore their topic and realize that they are drowning in an ocean of material on their ill-formed thesis topic. They finally pull themselves out of this quagmire by about the third week in January, and then begin doing "real" thesis work starting in the spring semester.

Effectively, this means that there is about a semester-long lag between our dream and your reality. Please help make our dreams come true by following this timeline:

Benchmarks for the pre-thesis semester

Date for Feb's	Date For Spring Graduates	Benchmark
Early October	Early October	General meeting of potential thesis students
Second Week in March	Second Week in October	Meet with potential advisors to discuss thesis topic; meet with Jean Simmons to learn about library resources for research

Third Week in March	Third Week in October	Read review article to get sense of debates; choose debate; find "exemplary" abstract
End of March	End of October	Choose advisor; discuss abstracts with advisor
April	November	Envision chapters; submit draft of proposal to advisor
End of Spring Semester	Thanksgiving recess	Submit final draft of proposal

Stages of the proposal process

Choosing a thesis topic

If you're thinking about writing a thesis, you probably have an idea about what you'd like to write about. Most of you begin this process thinking that your thesis topic can be the title of a 200-, 300-, or 400-level course, e.g., philosophy of law, ethical theory, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, philosophy and feminism, theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of the environment, etc. Let's call these *content-based topics*. Alternatively, you might know that you want to examine some *figure-based topic*, e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, etc. As you probably know, this is too broad. Much of the early stages of this semester should be spent making your thesis as specific as possible. Here are some fruitful strategies:

(A) *Specify, specify, specify*: By its very nature, philosophy is an abstract discipline. When writing a thesis, this means that you lose a lot of constraints that you might have in another discipline. Without these constraints, the danger of meandering looms large. So discipline yourself by making your philosophical question as concrete as possible.

    a. *Nouns versus questions:* During the early pre-proposal stages, your interests can often be expressed as the title of a course (a subfield of philosophy) or the name of a philosopher. You might get more specific and cite a particular issue in the scholarship of that subfield or that figure. At this point, however, your topic is still expressible as a *noun*. For example, when I first began writing my dissertation proposal, I was interested in "explanation." However, a developed thesis topic is expressible as a *question*. To continue with my story, I became interested in "What makes one scientific explanation better than another?" Since there is an indefinite number of things to say about "explanation," you run the risk of meandering through a lot of disparate essays and stringing together a relatively undirected thesis. By constraining this question a bit more, you start placing your thesis work into a more tractable field of research.

(B) *Cross-pollinate*: If you're having trouble specifying, try seeing how you might confine your topic by seeing how it intersects with other interests. For example, if you're interested in a figure, try to narrow down the particular aspect of his/her thought in which you're interested. Is it his/her ethical theory, theory of knowledge, political philosophy, etc.? In other words, use a content-based topic

to narrow down the aspect of the figure's work that you're interested in. Alternatively, you can cross-pollinate by looking at two figures, though then you have to be very clear about what specific point of comparison you're looking at.

(C) *Defer to more battle-tested sources*: The obvious candidates are the faculty. However, other resources include:
   a. London Study Guide (<u>highly</u> recommended): http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/contents.htm
   b. Stanford Encyclopedia: http://plato.stanford.edu
   c. Jean Simmons, the research librarian for the philosophy department
   d. Finding a review article that sums things up.

(D) *Don't venture too far into the unknown:* It's a good idea to choose a thesis topic based on a course that you've taken, or, better yet, on a paper that you've written. With the many other distractions of being a senior (e.g., post-graduation plans, enjoying your last year in College with your friends), the thought of going from knowing nothing about a topic to writing a extended and polished piece of writing about that topic it is a lot to take on.

(E) *Play to the strengths of the department.* While each member of the department has a broad range of interests, it is inconceivable that we could have someone who is qualified to advise every philosophy thesis that a student dreams up. Indeed, the closer your topic is to our areas of specialization, the more likely you are to get good advising and write a better thesis. In comparison to the natural sciences, humanities majors have incredible leeway in terms of how far their research departs from their advisor's. This is one reason that more humanities theses flounder—if you write about a topic of which your advisor knows very little, you're effectively asking the blind to lead the blind.
   a. *Possible solution*: *Go outside the department.* If you're dead set on researching a particular topic that isn't a good fit with the department's strengths, you might try seeing if someone in another department provides a better fit. However, please note that faculty in other departments have a greater obligation to their own majors than to you, and that no faculty member (philosophy or otherwise) has an obligation to advise a thesis on a topic which he/she judges to be in need of modification. In other words, if you really want to write a thesis, prepare to have your interests molded by your advisor.

What abstracts can teach you about your proposal

Here's an exercise I gave students in my senior seminar to help them choose a research topic. They said it was quite helpful:

1) Find an abstract in the *Philosopher's Index* that:
   a. Is relevant to your research paper; and
   b. You think is well written
2) Briefly state what you like about it (1 paragraph)
3) Write an abstract of your own research paper.
4) Give a first pass at a bibliography, containing 15-20 sources.
5) Talk to your thesis advisor about your abstract and the one you liked.

Helpful rules of thumb on abstracts:
During the early stages of developing a research project, it's a good idea to write abstracts about what you'd like to do. Don't be afraid to write many of them! A good abstract will be only 4-5 sentences long, describing the problem you're grappling with, and the solution to that problem. If a particular figure is serving as a constant foil throughout your paper, don't be afraid to name names.

Helpful rules of thumb on bibliographies:
A. Research databases
The *Philosopher's Index* is the authoritative philosophical research database. However, for those of you doing interdisciplinary work, there may be a need to examine additional research databases. That being said, *start* with the *Philosopher's Index*, as the distinctively philosophical problems have already been charted. Also remember that forays into other disciplines should be used to assist you in grappling with a philosophical problem; they should not create additional problems (philosophical or otherwise) for you. If you find your interdisciplinary forays complicating things, ask yourself the most crucial research question of all, "Is this necessary for my project?"

B. Narrowing a search
With every search, start broad and eventually narrow it down. You don't want to overlook an article because your search criteria didn't capture it. While there's always an element of trial and error to this, here's one search pattern that I find useful:
   (A) First search for terms "Anywhere;"
   (B) Take a look at the first 10-20 items on the list (these are usually the most recent). If you find an exemplary article that is exactly about what you want to be writing about, note the keywords and descriptors used in that article, and try running a search with some/all of the search criteria that distinguish that article from the others in your initial search.
   (C) If you don't find anything in the first 10-20 items that is exemplary, list the same search terms as "Keywords."
   (D) Repeat Step (B)
   (E) If you still have too many results, list those same terms as "Descriptors"
   (F) Repeat Step (B)
If you can get the list down to 50-100 items after doing this process a few times, start browsing through the abstracts. This goes much quicker than you might think. Take note of names that get mentioned a lot, as well as authors who have written several articles on a subject. Check the articles that you think are most relevant. You can probably shrink this list pretty quickly by performing this process.

Writing the proposal

All of these rules of thumb should help you write your thesis proposal. It is worth restating the department's policy on theses proposals:
   The proposal should consist of a 2-3 page description of the project that includes a suggested outline of the chapters and a short bibliography.
Note that if you do the aforementioned "abstract exercise," you should be in fine shape for getting the short bibliography in order. So what should you put in those 2-3 pages?

A. *A statement of your research question.* What is the chief thing you're trying to figure out in this thesis? What is the main issue you're grappling with? Remember to specify, specify, specify, and then specify some more. Ask as concrete a question as you can. Also involved in stating your research question is clarifying any technical or ambiguous terms. You can greatly minimize this by asking your research question as clearly and plainly as possible.

B. *A few of the dominant, existing answers to your research question.* If a research question expresses the issue you're grappling with, then answers to that question represent positions on that issue. Good scholarly work addresses the main positions on an issue, and you should be aware of what those positions are before you start your thesis research. This doesn't mean you actually have to *have already read* the representative texts of those positions by the time you submit your proposal, but it does mean that you know what you *will be reading* when you start your research (very important!). In more concrete terms, generally 1-2 sentences about any position is enough for the purposes of the proposal.

    a. Here it is worth emphasizing that you should be asking a question that another philosopher has asked before you (This feeds into not venturing too far out of your knowledge base and playing to the strengths of the department).

C. *A rough statement as to how you will answer your research question.* While open-mindedness is an important feature of scholarly research, if you're too open minded, you'll lose your sense of direction in the research process. Often starting with an intuition that one position is the best leads you to think through the consequences of that position in a more rigorous way. As a result, you become acutely aware of its limitations, and this, in turn, may lead you to *reject* or *revise* that position in a way that you wouldn't have had you simply treated it as one of many options. Belief revision during the thesis writing process is natural; however, this can only happen if you believed in something to begin with.

D. *Chapter sketches*: There are a few different formulas for this. Here are two that I like quite a bit:

    a. *The related papers approach*: Perhaps your travails in trying to find the perfect research question go unfulfilled throughout this semester. Perhaps you're just interested in too many things to write a single lengthy work. That's okay! The department guidelines on Senior Projects states:

A Senior Project can be:

    Either:

(a)   A Senior Thesis: a work of approximately 60-70 pages (double-spaced) dealing with a well-defined philosophical topic.

    Or:

(b)   A series of linked papers (perhaps three or four) totaling approximately 60-70 pages (double-spaced) dealing with a particular area of philosophy, (e.g. philosophy of mind, ethics, epistemology), a particular philosopher (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Russell), a group of related philosophers (e.g. the existentialists, the logical

positivists.) (Often this is the best option for seniors since it permits a broader topic.)

Option (b) is oft-overlooked and -underrated by students. In my opinion, it gives you the most freedom to examine the things you want to do, and you don't get bogged down with the agonies of organizing a thesis. In this case, your chapters should be structured something like this:

  i. *Chapter 1*: Topic 1 in particular area, about particular philosopher, or about particular group of related philosophers.
  ii. *Chapter 2*: Topic 2 in same area, about same person/people as Chapter 1.
  iii. *Chapter 3*: Topic 3 in same area or about same person/people as Chapters 1 and 2.
  iv. *Chapter 4 (if necessary)*: Topic 4 in same area or about same person/people as Chapter 1 through 3.

b. *Weighing alternative positions*: So you've got your research question, you've sketched the positions in your introductory paragraph to your proposal. A very natural way of showing how your preferred position is to be preferred consists of setting up chapters in the following manner:

  i. *Chapter 1*: Detailed articulation, evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of Position 1.
  ii. *Chapter 2*: Detailed articulation, evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of Position 2.
  iii. *Chapter 3* (if necessary): Detailed articulation, evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of Position 3.
  iv. *Chapter 4*: Detailed articulation of your preferred position, showing how it has all of the strengths and none of the weaknesses of the previous positions you've discussed.

c. *The genealogy*: Depending on the nature of your project, it may make a lot of sense to trace the historical development of a particular concept over the course of several philosophers' works:

  i. *Chapter 1*: Earliest philosopher/philosophical school on a particular issue; evaluation of his/her/its pro's and con's.
  ii. *Chapter 2*: Second earliest philosopher/philosophical school on the same issue, evaluation of how he/she/it responded to his/her/its predecessor's pro's and con's.
  iii. *Chapter 3*: Etc.
  iv. *Penultimate Chapter*: Second earliest philosopher/philosophical school on the same issue, evaluation of how he/she/it responded to his/her/its predecessors' pro's and con's.
  v. *Ultimate Chapter:* More synoptic view of the whole tradition you've discussed. What lessons are to be drawn about the historical period or concept you've studied?

d. *The lengthy argument*: If you're VERY confident of the position you'll be adopting, then think of the chain of reasoning you'd need to adopt in order to defend that claim. If it's an interesting position, then you'll probably have a number of key premises that will require a good deal of clarification and defense from potential objections.

      i. *Chapter 1*: Articulation and defense of the first core premise in your argument.

      ii. *Chapter 2*: Articulation and defense of the second core premise in your argument.

      iii. *Chapter 3*: Etc.

      iv. *Final Chapter*: Articulation and defense of conclusion in your argument, i.e., of the position you wish to defend, as well as a review of the line of reasoning that got you there.

While there may be other ways of organizing a thesis, these four strike me as reliable schemata for organizing a longer philosophical essay[1]. It's <u>very helpful</u> to choose which of these frameworks you'll use to organize your thesis during the proposal stage, as it guides your writing process in very clear ways, e.g., it gives you clear objectives to shoot for in a given chapter, thus making the writing of the dissertation less like a unique task and more like writing three or four papers in a course.

E. *Bibliography:* How you organize your chapters should provide you with a clue as to what your bibliography for your proposal will look like. For example, if your schema consists of Weighing Alternative Positions, then representative texts on each of the positions evaluated, as well as important critical literature about those representative texts, will constitute the bulk of your bibliography; a genealogy will require important primary and secondary texts of the philosophers you're discussing; etc.

Comment [KK1]: Any other ideas that I've overlooked?

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[1] Personally, I think that the four strategies canvassed above have different degrees of difficulty, which, ranging from easiest to hardest, runs as follows: related papers approach, weighing alternative positions, genealogies, and lengthy argument. However, different people have different strengths and different thesis topics are better suited for different strategies, so perhaps you'll find that you rank them differently.