

Senior Essays in Political Science

Yale University

Department of Political Science

These guidelines describe the Department's expectations for the senior essay and provide detailed information about the advising process, research and writing, formatting requirements, academic integrity, the use of artificial intelligence, human subjects research, submission procedures, and evaluation. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with these guidelines before beginning work on a senior essay.

Introduction

The senior essay is an optional component of the Political Science major and provides students with the opportunity to conduct original, in-depth research on a political question of their choosing under the guidance of a faculty adviser. For many students, it is one of the most intellectually rewarding experiences of their undergraduate education.

Completion of a senior essay is **required** for students seeking Distinction in the Major (formerly referred to as Honors). Students wishing to write a senior essay must apply during the spring term of their junior year. Only students who meet the eligibility requirements for Distinction in the Major at the time of application will be considered for admission. Because enrollment is limited, admission depends on identifying a faculty member willing to advise the senior essay before the registration period finalizes and on the quality of the student proposal.

Students ordinarily start to develop their senior essay in PLSC 4900: The Senior Colloquium. Year-long senior essays are completed over two terms (PLSC 4900/4901). One-term senior essays are ordinarily completed in PLSC 4900 and only in exceptional circumstances may be completed in a seminar with the approval of both the faculty adviser and the Director of Undergraduate Studies. Intensive majors complete the senior essay over three terms (PLSC 4900/4901/4903).

Regardless of where you write your 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 adviser will be your most important resource in helping you to develop the topic, questions, and motivation. There are also published guides that can help. A good one is:

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

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

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 Frank M. Patterson [grants](#) for such research on a competitive basis. Note that Patterson grants also support summer internships. Yale supports summer undergraduate research through several other programs; check the link to the “[Grants and Fellowships Database](#).”

The Advising Process

A close working relationship with an adviser is essential. Of absolute importance is for you to make and keep regular appointments and to submit drafts of your ongoing work on time. ***This means that, at the outset, you need to agree with your adviser on a schedule for meetings and preliminary drafts and complete the assignments for the senior colloquium.*** You will find some suggestions about a schedule below. Do not wait for your adviser to bring up this matter or suggest a schedule. Having a set of deadlines can have an important effect on your time management and the ultimate quality of your essay.

If you are unsure about whom to recruit as an adviser and which seminar to take, use the [Political Science website](#) to get more information about faculty interests. The ideal adviser is someone you have taken courses with and interacted with in the past. Most importantly, you will want to select someone whose research and teaching interests overlap with your own. (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.)

When considering the faculty adviser, keep in mind that the Department requires this person to be an instructor in Political Science. Such an instructor may, for example, be in the Sociology department but teach a course cross-listed with Political Science. The objective behind this rule is to have students approach their topic as a Political Scientist would. Please feel free to turn to Yale instructors who have no connection to the Political Science Department for informal advice, *but your formal adviser should preferably be an instructor in the Department*. If you have any questions about whether an instructor is qualified to advise you, please consult with the DUS.

When you are in the process of recruiting an adviser, 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 professors are also very busy people, with multiple responsibilities. Email is not the most effective way to initially contact a potential adviser; they receive dozens each day, and yours may fall through the cracks. A better strategy is to visit the instructor during their office hours, describe

your thoughts on the project, and explain why you hope to work with them. In advance of the meeting, review the information on the faculty member's personal web page, so that you are familiar with their research and how their areas of expertise relate to your topic. It may be helpful to remind them that you will also be enrolled in the Senior Colloquium.

You should plan to meet with your adviser regularly throughout the semester, and we recommend meeting at least once every three weeks. In many ways, the most crucial meetings will be the early ones, when she or he helps you to develop a topic and identify sources. Furthermore, many seniors incorporate primary materials into their essays and/or analyze publicly available information in new and inventive ways. Your adviser can help you develop an understanding of the relevant primary materials for your chosen topic and how to find, assemble, and analyze them. While your adviser can make suggestions on your research design and suggest relevant sources, it is your responsibility to conduct the research on your topic and gather the relevant literature. In addition, your adviser can provide written and oral commentary on your drafts and offer constructive criticism of your arguments and evidence. However, keep in mind that your adviser is not responsible for providing you with an answer to your research question; it is up to you to decide upon the argument you would like to make. Please know that the best senior essays at Yale make exceptionally creative arguments or draw on extensive, sometimes original, data collection or field research.

We also recommend that you elect three deadlines to help pace your progress throughout the semester. The first should be for an essay proposal of 1-2 pages. Your proposal should identify a specific question, provide a provisional answer to that question, and include a specific research plan. The proposal deadline should fall around the third week of classes. The second and third deadlines should be for drafts of your essay. By "draft," we mean a complete essay, including all elements (introduction, body, conclusion, full references, etc.). The first draft deadline should be approximately 6 weeks prior to the final essay deadline; the second should be approximately 3 weeks prior to the final essay deadline.

If you are like most Yale students, your senior essay will be the longest paper you have written to date. It would be a big mistake to attempt to write it at the last minute. Remember that a bad process often results in a weak paper. The key to writing a strong senior essay is to start early, work steadily, and seek feedback well ahead of the final deadline. Start writing as soon as possible, even well before you really feel ready to do so. Often, you will find that you are more ready than you suspect. Writing can also help you identify gaps in your research or argument. Also, it will be much easier for your adviser to give you useful feedback on an actual piece of writing than on an idea expressed verbally in a meeting.

Length and Format of One-Term Senior Essays

A **one-term senior essay** should be double-spaced and at least 25 pages long using Times New Roman 12 and one-inch margins. This amounts to about 6,250 words, excluding long verbatim quotations, bibliography, tables, and figures, or other appendices. You should include a title page

with the title of your essay, your name, your adviser's name, and the date. *You must number the pages.* Please consult your adviser to confirm any specific requirements about the format. If you and your adviser agree that you may depart from the above requirements (other than length), you must indicate that in a note attached to the essay.

You are required to pay careful attention to citations. Your essay must have a bibliography or reference section. There is no single correct format for any of these, although the Modern Language Association (MLA) style is more common in the humanities than in the social sciences. You should choose a standard citation format and adhere consistently to it throughout the essay. For guidance on the American Political Science Association format, [please see this resource](#). Sloppy and/or missing citations will not only reduce the quality of your essay, but they can also be an indicator of academic dishonesty.

Year-Long Senior Essays

The **year-long honors essay** takes on a more extensive and substantial research project than could be carried out in a single semester. Many such students conduct related research during the summer between their junior and senior years. (This is by no means a requirement. See the section about sources of funding for summer research.) Year-long essays are expected to be substantially longer than a regular term paper. The year-long senior essay is about 50-60 pages in length using Times New Roman 12-point font and one-inch margins. This amounts to approximately 12,500–15,000 words.

To write a year-long senior essay, students must apply during the spring term of their junior year. The [application](#) is usually due at the end of April. Check the website for exact [deadlines](#). Students should submit the electronic forms: (1) the senior essay application form, (2) the senior essay prospectus form, signed by the faculty adviser who has agreed to advise the essay. The application should be accompanied by a 2-page description of your proposed essay. You must meet all the requirements for an honors essay, including an average GPA in your Political Science Courses of a 3.7 and the completion of two introductory lecture courses, one core lecture course, one seminar, the methodology requirement.

The Intensive Senior Essay

During their junior year, a small number of students are admitted into a version of the major called the *Intensive Major*. To be accepted into this major, students must apply in November of their junior year. In the spring term of their junior year, they take PLSC 4900, *The Senior Colloquium*. In senior year, they enroll in 4901 and 4903 (*Senior Essay II and Senior Essay III*), where Intensive Majors pursue a year-long independent study in partnership with their adviser. The intensive senior essay is similar in scope and length to the year-long senior essay.

The Qualities of a Good Senior Essay

Senior essays require original research that analyzes and presents evidence in order to contribute new knowledge to a subfield within Political Science (Comparative Politics, International Relations, American Politics, or Political Theory).

For the purposes of the senior essay, “research” refers to the use of evidence to support an argument based on material collected, analyzed, or interpreted by the author in an original way. Examples include advancing an original argument about a political phenomenon or theory; collecting and analyzing novel qualitative or quantitative data; reanalyzing existing data in a new way; or interpreting primary source texts.

“New knowledge” does not necessarily imply the discovery of entirely unknown facts. Rather, it refers to the construction of an argument, supported by evidence, that builds on, challenges, refines, or expands existing research.

For a political science essay, of course, you should situate your essay within the best and most important literature on the politics of the question being examined (including political science literature), engage with the relevant ideas and controversies (both public and academic), bring to light important relevant evidence (with due research diligence), and engage the reader with an original, distinct, and hopefully even distinguished argument.

Rarely does an excellent essay rely exclusively on articles, especially journalistic ones, found on the internet with a search engine. Read and rely on a few scholarly books too, as well as academic journal articles. A good way to get leads on what those might be is to trace the published sources identified in the footnotes of interesting books or articles you have already found. Be sure to consult your adviser about the quantity and quality of sources you are using.

Needless to say, good is an essential element to a good essay—that is to say, an essay that is clear, engaging, and otherwise “a good read.” Strive for a captivating introduction and a satisfying conclusion. Write, re-write, and re-write again, until the argument develops and flows from paragraph to paragraph, from beginning to end. You should, by all means, seek advice from all the resources Yale has to offer in the way of tutoring. For additional information, check [The Yale College Writing Center](#) website.

Plagiarism

If you use a source for your essay, you must acknowledge it. It hardly needs saying that evidence of plagiarism can result in a failing grade for your senior essay and a delay of graduation. Plagiarism is the use of someone else’s work, words, or ideas as if they were your own. You must make clear in your written work where you have borrowed from others—whether data, opinions,

questions, ideas, or specific language. This obligation holds whether the sources are published or unpublished. What counts as a source varies greatly, but the list certainly includes readings, lectures, Websites, conversations, interviews, and other students' papers. For more information, see the Yale College Undergraduate Regulations regarding [Academic Integrity](#).

AI Use

Yale's official stance on AI use is as follows: **"Inserting AI-generated text into an assignment without proper attribution is a violation of academic integrity, and using AI tools in a manner that was not authorized by your instructor may also be considered a breach of academic integrity."** For the senior essay, using AI to generate text for the senior essay is considered a violation of academic integrity and will be reported to the executive committee. The appropriate use of AI in the research process should be discussed with your adviser and the instructor of the senior colloquium.

An Important Note! Research on Human Subjects

Ethical concerns incorporated in university rules require prior approval from Yale's Human Subjects Committee for research involving gathering information from human subjects (a living person about whom an investigator gets identifiable private information through either a direct interaction with the person or through access to private data sources) in interviews, participant observation, experimental, medical, other personal records, and potentially other kinds of research. Material gathered through such research cannot be included in your senior essay unless you received prior approval. Be sure to discuss this matter early with your adviser, and both of you should consult the following links for guidance: [Human Research Protection Program](#).

Submitting the Essay

Upon completion of your essay, you must deliver a copy to your adviser.

You also need to email a copy in PDF format to the DUS Office (send to undergrad.polisci@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_Senior Essay Title.

Deadlines

Please consult the PLSC Website [Deadlines](#) tab for relevant dates. Senior essays are typically due on a Friday by 4:00 pm, a few weeks before the term ends. You must send an electronic copy to the DUS Office (undergrad.polisci@yale.edu) by the given due date.

We understand that in rare cases, unexpected or extenuating circumstances interfere with a student's plans to complete their essay on time. Please know that extensions can only be granted by your residential college dean. Instructors cannot grant an extension unless the residential college

dean has authorized one. In the event that you receive an extension, please submit a Dean's Extension to your adviser and the DUS Office.

Penalties for Late Submission

A late essay, for which there is no authorized extension, is penalized one-half letter grade (e.g., A to A-) for every three days the essay is late.

Senior Essay Grade

Your faculty adviser serves as the first reader of the senior essay and assigns the final letter grade for the project. The DUS also appoints an anonymous second reader, whose role is to determine whether the essay meets the departmental standard for Distinction in the Major. The second reader does not assign a separate letter grade, and their evaluation does not factor into the essay's final grade.

In cases where the adviser and second reader disagree regarding whether the essay meets the departmental standard for Distinction, the DUS will review the case and may consult with both the adviser and the reader and/or appoint an additional reader before making a final determination regarding Distinction.

Faculty advisers report the senior essay grade to the DUS Office, which then submits the grade through the Faculty Grade Submission system (FGS).

Senior Essay Prizes

Faculty advisers (and second readers) 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 for the best senior essay in International Relations.

Philo S. Bennett Prize for the best senior essay in Political Philosophy.

Charles W. Clark Prize for the best senior essay in Comparative Government or Politics.

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

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

At the end of the academic year, all of the majors and all faculty members will be notified of the recipients of these prizes. In addition, these essays will be posted on the Department's website: <http://www.yale.edu/polisci/undergrad/prizes.html>. If you wish to be nominated for a senior essay prize, we recommend that you encourage your adviser to do so if they deem it appropriate.