



Education, Schooling, & Society

Advice on the ESS Capstone

This handout addresses some of the basic questions students may have about the capstone experience.

Do I have to write a thesis in ESS?

While you do have to complete the capstone research requirement, you do not have to write a formal thesis. It's your choice whether you take the traditional capstone seminar or fulfill the requirement via a thesis in your major department or an independent ESS thesis. We encourage qualified students to consider writing a thesis.

Can I write a thesis?

You need two things to write a thesis: (1) a viable idea, and (2) a faculty member who is willing to supervise your thesis. For an ESS thesis you also need the Research Lab pre-requisite.

Should I write a thesis?

All of the capstone options give you an opportunity to do original research on a question of your choice. You get to choose the question, and you get to choose the approach. It can be a uniquely rewarding learning experience. Think of the capstone experience as a way to build on what you have learned in college and produce something you can call your own.

If you are planning to go to graduate school, or are considering work after graduation involving policy, consulting, or public relations, then think seriously about writing a thesis because it will resemble the work you will do after graduation more closely than any of your other writing assignments. The process of writing a thesis may also give you ideas to pursue in your subsequent career.

Are there reasons not to write a thesis?

Yes. Don't write a thesis if you are doing it mainly for extrinsic reasons (e.g., you think it will look good on your resume; you imagine someone else will be disappointed if you don't). At some level, you have to want it. Don't write a thesis if, realistically, you do not have the time to devote yourself to it wholeheartedly. The thesis is a project that requires a commitment over an extended period of time. And don't write a thesis if you do not have a viable idea for it by the spring of your junior year.

How do I register for the different capstone options?

If you are completing the capstone requirement with a thesis in your major, you will not register for any ESS capstone course. You will simply complete all requirements for writing a thesis in your major and finish your ESS minor by taking an additional ESS elective. If you are writing an ESS Thesis, you will register for *ESS 48100 (Senior Thesis)* after successfully completing at least 2 credits of *ESS 47602 (Research Lab)* prior to the fall of your senior year. If you are taking the traditional capstone course, you will register for *ESS 43640 (Seminar in Educational Research)*.

If you choose either of the thesis options, you and your thesis advisor(s) will also need to fill out the Senior Thesis Proposal/Contract form and submit it to the associate director by April 15.

If you write an ESS thesis, ask the ESS associate director to enter the electronic approval code for *ESS 48100 (Senior Thesis)* so that you can register for it in spring of your senior year.

What's the difference between a senior thesis and a term paper?

There's a big difference. For a term paper, you write about a topic; the "thesis" of your paper is the point you want to make. For a senior thesis, you do research centered on a question you pose. You explain why it is a question worth asking, describe how you will answer it, apply your methodology to investigate it, and draw your conclusion(s).

How long does it have to be?

The department does not set a minimum length. Most senior theses are between 30-50 pages. Most capstone projects are between 20-40 pages.

What should I do now if I am thinking about writing a thesis?

Talk to your peers and professors about your ideas. Ask for advice on developing a good research question. Decide who would be the best member of the faculty to serve as your thesis advisor. Ask if she/he will be available next year, and if she/he would consider working with you. If they are unable to supervise your thesis, ask if they can suggest someone else.

What if I don't have an idea or question, yet?

This is normal. Developing the thesis question is the most difficult part of the process, and it takes time. Now is the time to discuss possible ideas and topics with your professors.

What can I do during the summers to prepare for my capstone experience?

The summer is an excellent time to read. You will want to know what others have written on your question. Talk with your advisor about important books or articles on the subject, and find out how to do searches of your own. Figure out what research resources are available to you.

Is there any book about how to write a thesis?

How to Write a BA Thesis by Charles Lipson (Univ. of Chicago Press) is an excellent resource.

Any advice on picking a topic?

Write about what you know or care deeply about. Have you written a paper that you would like to expand? Encountered particular books or articles that have been particularly meaningful to you, or that you have strongly agreed or disagreed with? Gleaned ideas through a work or study abroad experience? Has a particular course sparked your interest? Has the research you did via the *ESS 47602 Research Lab* inspired you to conduct an independent project in this area?

How do I formulate a research question?

The following framework is adapted from Booth, Colomb and Williams, *The Craft of Research* (University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 48).

Think in terms of three nesting steps:

1. Topic: I want to investigate _____,
2. Question: in order to find out (who, what, why, whether) _____,
3. Rationale: in order to better understand (how, why, what) _____.