

THESIS RESEARCH DESIGN SEMINAR

17.THT

Fall 2007
Wednesdays, 3-5pm
E51-063

Instructor: M. Taylor Fravel
Office: E38-632
Phone: 617-324-0222
Email: fravel@mit.edu
Office Hours: Tues, 3-5pm

TA: Adam Ziegfeld
Office: E53-354
Phone: 617- 258-5969
Email: ziegfeld@mit.edu
Office Hours: Tues, Thurs 2-3pm

Overview

This seminar is for students who plan to write a senior thesis in Political Science and is required of all MIT Political Science majors. Seminar participants will develop their research topics, review relevant research and scholarship, frame their research questions and arguments, choose an appropriate methodology for analysis, draft the introductory and methodology sections of their theses, and write a complete prospectus of the project.

Requirements

1. **Class Attendance:** As the class is largely based on student interaction, class attendance is mandatory. The course requires oral presentations and students are expected to be present to usefully criticize other students.
2. **Short Written Assignments (described below):** All assignments are due **the day before** class meets. Students should prepare a brief oral presentation for each assignment.
3. **Prospectus:** The main goal of the course is to produce a thesis prospectus. This includes:
 - A draft prospectus
 - An oral presentation of the prospectus before an audience that may include several faculty and the undergraduate advisor
 - A revised, final draft of the prospectus

The final grade will be determined after consultation with thesis advisor and is heavily weighted by the quality of the final draft of the prospectus.

Materials

Steve Van Evera. 1997. *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

All other readings will be available on the Stellar:
<http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/17/fa07/17.THT/index.html>

Two other books are highly recommended:

Charles Lipson. 2005. *How to Write a BA Thesis: A Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

Kenneth Hoover and Todd Donovan. 2007. *The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking* (9th Edition, Wadsworth, 2007)

KEY DATES

September 11	Assignment #1: Overview of two potential thesis topics
October 2	Assignment #2: Brief literature review of two topics
October 23	Assignment #3: Review and assessment of research on one topic
October 30	Assignment #4: Outline of prospectus
November 6	Assignment #5: Discussion of methodology
November 6	ADVISOR FORM
November 13	Assignment #6: Draft prospectus
December 12	FINAL PROSPECTUS

THE ROAD TO COMPLETION (AND GRADUATION)

October 30	Prospectus outline due
November 13	Draft prospectus due
December 12	Final prospectus due
February 22	1 st progress meeting with your advisor. Determine a schedule for submitting draft chapters and receiving comments.
March 7	Thesis supervisor and second reader forms due at Undergraduate Office
March 14	2 nd progress meeting with your advisor. Continue to hand in chapters and receive comments.
April 4	3 rd progress meeting with your advisor. All draft chapters should be completed and commented upon by this point.
April 11	1 st draft of thesis due to advisor and second reader
April 24	FINAL draft of thesis due to advisor and second reader
24 April – 9 May	Schedule and hold thesis defense
9 May	Institute deadline for theses
23 May	FINAL thesis due to advisor and Undergraduate Office (If you miss this deadline, you may be unable to graduate)

SCHEDULE MEETINGS AND READINGS

September 5

INTRODUCTORY MEETING

September 12

DEVELOPING A QUESTION

Assignment #1 (Due September 11th)

Select two different topics that you believe might be an interesting and rewarding subject for your thesis.

On a single sheet of paper do the following for each topic:

- Describe the topic in a simple paragraph.
- In a second simple paragraph, describe why this topic is worthy of study.
- Write a draft thesis title.
- Bring in a newspaper article that somehow is related to one of your two topics
- Be prepared to orally present this assignment in class.

Read your colleague's assignments and be prepared to discuss them.

September 19

SHARPENING THE TOPIC, DEVELOPING THEORY

Van Evera, Ch. 1.

Almond, Gabriel (with Stephen Genco). "Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics." *World Politics* Vol. 29, No. 4 (1977).

2 Award-winning MIT theses, to be determined by class interest

(Begin reading on your topics and developing a bibliography and knowledge of existing research.)

September 26

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES I: Quantitative vs. Qualitative Methods

Lijphart, Arend. "The Comparable-Cases Strategy in Comparative Research." *Comparative Political Studies* 8 (1975).

Ragin, Charles. *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) Chs. 3-4.

Lieberson, Stanely. "Small N's and Big Conclusions." In Charles Ragin and Howard Becker, eds., *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry* (1992).

Brady, Henry and David Collier. *Rethinking Social Inquiry*, (2004), Chs. 2 and 7

(Continue to develop your research question and build a bibliography on your topics of interest. Beginning thinking about a thesis advisor)

October 3

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

Assignment #2 (Due October 2)

Write a review of the literature relevant to both of your topics from the first assignment. Find at least a dozen references—books, book chapters, and journal articles—on both topics. Skim them quickly. Then write two papers, one on each topic, two pages in length.

- Provide the basic bibliographic information for each citation.
- For each citation provide a short paragraph on the research question and the findings.
- Summarize the literature development in each of your topics, ending with an assessment of the major puzzles or questions that remain to be explored.

(Refine your research question and continue to develop a bibliography.)

October 10

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Adam Ziegfield will present his dissertation research.

(Continue to develop your research question and build a bibliography on your topics of interest. Start meeting with prospective thesis advisors)

October 17

DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION STRATEGIES

This week, we will meet with a reference librarian to discuss data sources on political science topics available at the library and beyond.

➔ This session will meet in the Digital Instruction Resource Center (DIRC), the Libraries' room in Bldg. 14

(Continue to develop your research question and build a bibliography on your topics of interest.)

October 24

CLASS PRESENTATIONS OF EXISTING RESEARCH

Assignment #3 (Due October 23)

Find one example of important research related to one of the topics you identified for the September 12 class. This can either be a book or an article. Write a two-page paper in which you discuss the research method and findings of the study. This paper should do the following:

- Describe the research focus of the study, why it is significant, its general method and most important findings.
- Identify the principal dependent variable and independent variables involved in the study and describe how they were measured.
- Assess the findings. Did the study, on its own terms, succeed?

(Refine your research question and continue to develop a bibliography.)

October 31

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES II: Case Studies and Small-N Comparisons, Strategic Action Models

Assignment #4 (Due October 30):

Pick a thesis topic and provide an outline of the prospectus.

Readings

Van Evera, Chapter 2.

Bennett, Andrew and Alexander George. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (2005), Chs. 9-10.

Snyder, Jack. "Richness, Rigor, and Relevance in the Study of Soviet Foreign Policy." *International Security* Vol. 9 No. 3 (Winter, 1984-85), 89-108.

Petersen, Roger. 1999. "Mechanisms and Structures in Comparisons." In John Bowen and Roger Petersen, *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.)

Tsebelis, George. *Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Chapters 2, 3, 6.

(Continue to develop your research question and build a bibliography on your topics of interest.)

November 7

ADDRESSING METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Assignment #5 (Due November 6)

Write a memo that discusses the methodological and data analysis issues associated with your project. Address these topics:

- Variables – What are your principal variables?
- Measurement – How will you measure these variables?
- Data – Where will you get your data?
- Case Selection – Which cases are selecting and why?

November 14

ADDRESSING METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES (cont.)

Continue presentations from previous week.

Assignment #6 (Due 13 November)

Draft Prospectus due.

The prospectus should be based on previous assignments and contain the following:

1. Title of the Thesis
2. Problem Statement – the question that the thesis will answer and the importance of answering this question.
3. Literature review – what others have written on your topic and what gaps remain to be filled by your research
4. Research design – discussion of variables, measurement, data and case selection
5. Expected findings and conclusions of your research
6. Chapter Outline

November 21

(informal class – bring your questions)

November 28

METHODOLOGICAL PITFALLS

David Collier and James Mahoney, “Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research,” *World Politics* Vol. 49, No. 1 (1996): 56-91.

Geddes, Barbara. “How the Cases you Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics.” *Political Analysis* 2 (1990).

Mahoney, James and Gary Goertz. “The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Research.” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 98, No. 4 (2004).

Robert Adcock and David Collier, “Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 95, No. 3 (2001): 529-546.

December 5 and December 12

PRESENTATION OF PROSPECTUS

Other faculty will be invited to attend the presentations to ask questions and evaluate the projects. A draft prospectus is due two days before the oral presentation. A final draft is due shortly after final presentations.