

Yale University  
Department of Political Science

## Senior Essays in Political Science

### Introduction

One of the requirements of the Political Science major is the 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. At first, this may seem like a daunting task. This document is designed to allay some of that anxiety as well as familiarize you with things you need to know about the essay requirement.

Most Political Science majors write their senior essays in conjunction with a one-semester seminar. A small number of students write it in the independent, one-term senior essay course (PLSC 480), the year-long senior essay courses (PLSC 490 and 491), or the intensive senior essay courses (PLSC 490 and 493). More information can be found on these various options below.

Whatever the venue in which 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 advisor 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 on-line; the reference librarians will often be more up-to-date about how to access these resources than your advisor.

### 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 at: <http://www.yale.edu/polisci/undergrad/funds.html>. Yale supports summer undergraduate research through several other programs; the link to the “Grants and Fellowships Database” is on the website.

## The Advising Process

There are several settings you can enroll in for the writing of your essay, as described in the next sections. Common to all of them, however, is the need for a close working relationship with an advisor, be it the instructor of a senior seminar in which you write your essay or an advisor for your independent research. Of absolute importance is for you to make and appear at regular appointments, and to submit drafts of your ongoing work on time. ***This means that, at the outset, you need to make an agreement with your advisor about a schedule for meetings and preliminary drafts.*** You will find some suggestions about a schedule below. Do not wait for your advisor 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.

=> [Click here for a suggested agreement that you and your advisor can use.](#) <=

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 (<http://www.yale.edu/polisci/faculty/index.html>). 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. 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 thinking about the faculty advisor, keep in mind that the Department requires that this person be an instructor in Political Science. Such an instructor may, for example, be in the Sociology department, but teach a course that is 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 advisor must 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 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 professors 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 her or his office hours (<http://www.yale.edu/polisci/hours/index.html>), 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.

You should plan to meet with your advisor regularly over the course of the semester and we recommend that you meet 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 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. While your advisor 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 advisor can provide written and oral commentary on your drafts and give you constructive criticism on your arguments and evidence. However, keep in mind that your advisor 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 depend on extensive and 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, give a provisional answer to the question, and include a specific plan of research. 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 six weeks prior to the final essay deadline; the second should be around three weeks prior to the 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 advisor to give you useful feedback on an actual piece of writing than on an idea expressed verbally in a meeting.

### **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 in the past. If you plan to write your senior essay in a seminar, review the course offerings for the full year and identify two or three potential seminars. 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 affect your choices and decisions. You may have good reasons to write your 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 and write your essay in the fall. If the ideal seminar isn't being offered, we encourage you to broaden the list of seminars you would consider taking. Surely your interest can be sparked by a topic that is new to you at the beginning of the term and you can still write a satisfying one-term essay in this case.

Be sure to take advantage of the pre-registration process and apply for a slot in the seminars that interest you. Keep in mind that senior majors are accepted into seminars at higher rates than other students, especially when applying through pre-registration. Pre-registration is a great opportunity to make a case for yourself. In the form that the DUS provides to you, explain your background, previous coursework, and any relevant experiences you have had. You should also indicate that you would like to write your senior essay in his or her course. In other words,

applying to a seminar is the first step in recruiting your 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 about your topic and how to proceed. Again, office hours are a better setting for such discussions than classrooms crowded with students trying to get into that seminar. Please also have a discussion with your instructor early in the semester about his or her expectations for your senior essay and the course's other assignments. Often, a term paper will be the final assignment in the seminar and your senior essay will be an extension of this paper. In fact, a senior essay differs from a term paper in that it is generally a bigger, more ambitious project. 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.

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 your instructor, the DUS, and the DUS Assistant.

### **The Independent, One-Term Senior Essay Course (PLSC 480)**

Some majors have a long-standing interest in a topic or a problem related to politics or public policy about which they want to write, 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 the independent, one-term senior essay course (480a in the fall, 480b in the spring) is a good option. In order to pursue this option, they must 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. It is very important, if you want to fulfill your essay requirement this way, to approach a professor in the Department with your ideas and obtain her or his agreement to work with you before the term starts. For a fall essay, it would be best to do this in the spring of your junior year; for a spring essay, make arrangements during the fall of your senior year.

Note that PLSC 480 does not fulfill the senior-seminar requirement. Seniors writing their essays in this course also need to take a seminar during their senior year.

### **Length and Format of One-Term Senior Essays**

Whether you write your essay in a seminar or in PLSC 480, one-term senior essays should be approximately 25 pages in length double spaced (excluding bibliography, tables and figures, or other appendices). There is no prescribed format, but most essays use one-inch margins. You should include a title page with the title of your essay, your name, your advisor's name, and the date.

There is also no prescribed system for footnoting, end-noting, or for a bibliography or reference section. What's important is to be consistent throughout. You may also want to consult your advisor to see if he or she has any specific requirements about the format.

### **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 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. While there is no fixed length, the year-long senior essay is usually about 50-60 pages in length.

To write a year-long senior essay, students must apply during the spring term of their junior year. The application is due in early April (check the website for exact deadlines: <http://www.yale.edu/polisci/undergrad/deadlines.html>). Along with the Year-Long Senior Essay Prospectus form (<http://www.yale.edu/polisci/undergrad/forms.html>), students should submit the following to the DUS Office: 1) a two-page statement of the project, signed by the faculty advisor who has agreed to supervise the student's essay, and 2) an up-to-date transcript. Normally a successful candidate will have at least an A- average in Political Science and a B+ average outside the major. It is expected that no more than fifteen students will be admitted.

Students who are admitted take two courses related to their essay. In the fall of their senior year, they take PLSC 490a, *The Senior Colloquium*, a course designed to hone their research skills. In this course, they develop a research prospectus for the senior essay, begin their research, and share their progress on a weekly basis with their instructor and their fellow classmates. (Note that 490a counts as a senior-year seminar.) In the spring, they take PLSC 491b, *The Senior Essay*, in which they work closely with their advisor to complete the essay. Note that students receive a temporary grade of Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory in 490a. Once they have completed the senior essay, they receive a letter grade, which applies retroactively to 490a and to 491b.

### **The Intensive Senior Essay**

During their junior year, a small number of students are accepted into a version of the major called the *Intensive Major*. To be accepted into this major, students need to apply in November of their junior year. During the spring of their junior year, Intensive Majors take PLSC 474b, *Directed Reading and Research for Junior Intensive Majors*. In the fall term of their senior year, they take PLSC 490a, *The Senior Colloquium*, and spring term take PLSC 493b, *Senior Essay for Intensive Majors*. By taking PLSC 490a/493b, Intensive Majors pursue a year-long independent study in partnership with their advisor. The intensive senior essay is similar to the year-long senior essay in scope and length.

### ***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 and 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 advisor, and both of you should consult the following links for guidance:

<http://www.yale.edu/hrpp>

[http://www.yale.edu/hrpp/resources/docs/HSCStudent\\_projects1-19-10.pdf](http://www.yale.edu/hrpp/resources/docs/HSCStudent_projects1-19-10.pdf)

### **Submitting the Essay**

Upon completion of your essay, you must deliver a hard copy to your advisor. We recommend that you have your thesis bound, but this is not required. (If you choose to bind it, we recommend TYCO Printing, DocuPrint & Imaging, or Staples.) At the very least, it should be stapled. You may want to ask your instructor what he or she prefers.

You also need to email an electronic copy, in *Word* or PDF, to the DUS Office (send to [undergrad.polisci@yale.edu](mailto: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.

**Note:** You must submit a hard copy to your advisor, but we ask that you do not deliver a copy to the DUS Office as well. Instead, please send an electronic copy only to [undergrad.polisci@yale.edu](mailto:undergrad.polisci@yale.edu).

### **Deadlines**

Your Senior Essay Prospectus form is due on the same date that your course schedule is due, at the beginning of the semester in which you plan to write the essay. This form will outline your plans for completing the essay and, like all Political Science forms, it is available on the Political Science website (<http://www.yale.edu/polisci/undergrad/forms.html>). Please submit a hard copy of this form to the DUS Assistant in Rosenkranz Hall, Room 130. Check the Political Science website to see the exact date it is due (<http://www.yale.edu/polisci/undergrad/deadlines.html>).

Mid-way through the semester, the Political Science Undergraduate Registrar will ask you to submit your tentative essay title. Please respond promptly. The title should give a clear idea of what your research is about. We need working titles early on to help the staff assign appropriate second readers to your essays. You are free to modify the title before final submission.

Please check the Department's website (<http://www.yale.edu/polisci/undergrad/deadlines.html>) to learn the date the senior essay is due and know that it is due no later than 4:00 p.m. on that day. By 4:00 p.m., you must give a hard copy to your advisor. You must also send an electronic copy to the DUS Office ([undergrad.polisci@yale.edu](mailto:undergrad.polisci@yale.edu)). (Please do not deliver a hard copy to the DUS Office.)

We understand that in rare cases, unexpected or extenuating circumstances interfere with a student's plans to complete his or her 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 Excuse to your advisor and the DUS Office that explains why the essay is late.

### **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 each three days the essay is late.

### **Senior Essay Grades**

Your faculty advisor will serve as the first reader of your senior essay, and will assign it a letter grade. The DUS will also appoint an anonymous second reader, who will assign a grade of Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. (The second reader's grade does not average into your final grade.) In the rare case of a failing grade from the first reader or an Unsatisfactory grade from the second reader, you will be asked to revise the essay and resubmit it.

Note that in order to graduate from Yale College, a student majoring in Political Science must achieve a passing grade on the senior essay.

If the essay is written for PLSC 480, the grade on the essay is the grade for the course. If the essay is written in a seminar, the advisor will report the grade to the DUS Office and will calculate the grade for the seminar based on the essay and the other course requirements. Please consult your advisor (not the DUS Office) for your final essay grade.

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

### **Senior Essay Prizes**

Faculty advisors (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>.