

Senior Thesis Guidelines

for Students in Religious Studies
at Skidmore College

A senior thesis is an ambitious, year-long undertaking that can be an intense but amazing, intellectually rewarding experience. The process of writing a thesis is an opportunity to take further control over your own learning, to work more independently while being closely mentored by a faculty member. During one's senior year, the fall is occupied with reading and research, and then the spring is devoted to writing and rewriting. Students typically produce a multi-chapter paper, with each chapter being approximately as long as regular research papers (i.e. 15 – 20 pages).

Why write a thesis?

Because you want to challenge yourself. By digging deeper into an area of Religious Studies, you can advance your research skills and extend your analytical rigor. While developing a sustained and complex argument is certainly good preparation for graduate work, we think it a worthy endeavor on its own merits, and a satisfying culmination to your undergraduate career.

Who *may* write a senior thesis?

Students who have a reasonable expectation to graduate from Skidmore College with an overall GPA of 3.0 or higher and who anticipate achieving at least a 3.5 GPA in their major meet the minimum requirements.

However, not all students who meet these minimum requirements are allowed to write a thesis. Towards the end of fall semester, one must apply to complete the second semester of the year-long thesis writing process. The decision to proceed with writing does not rest with the thesis advisor alone, but results from the deliberations of the department as a whole, collectively evaluating the merits of the proposed project.

Please note that thesis writers still need to fulfill all the requirements of RE 375, our senior seminar, which includes its own capstone project. However, if you are writing a senior thesis, your written work in RE 371 may fulfill

the writing requirement for RE 375 (normally 20-25 pages). What this means is that thesis writers will take RE 375 and participate fully, but the writing and research you do will relate to your thesis rather than the theme of RE 375.

How do I do this?

Normally, students choose to revisit a topic from an earlier Religion course or from a previous independent study, having laid some foundation upon which build, rather than starting out entirely from scratch. But whether one is capitalizing on previous studies or striking out into newer areas, consultation with faculty is key for identifying a viable topic.

Below, we lay out the process of writing a senior thesis, from start to finish.

Phase One: Planning. Spring of Junior Year

- ❖ Talk with your professors about possible topics, and identify a faculty member who agrees to be your thesis advisor.
- ❖ In April, register for both RE 371 and (if you have not taken it previously) LI 371 in the following Fall.
- ❖ Students must complete the “Department of Religious Studies’ Senior Thesis Questionnaire” by June 15th. This form requires students to identify an advisor, formulate a specific research question, and construct a provisional plan for answering the question that demonstrates that they have done the necessary preparatory work for completing the thesis. Students must attach a preliminary bibliography along with the form.

RE 371 is an independent study, the topic of which provides you with an initial focus and which will be fine-tuned as you proceed. You do not have to start out with a thesis statement in hand. Instead, you commence with curiosity about your topic and delineate a viable set of concerns. Rather than have answers up front, one begins with some good, directed questions.

- ❖ Over the summer, you begin reading and hone your ideas.

Phase Two: Research.
Fall of Senior Year

- ❖ Set up weekly or bi-weekly meetings with your thesis advisor (and with the Scribner bibliographer for LI 371) to develop your research agenda.

Here the research process begins in earnest: the librarian helps you compile a strong bibliography, and your thesis advisor works with you to sculpt your interests and questions into a workable thesis. You read a great deal, and you define the methods and theorists you will employ in your analysis.

- ❖ By around the third week of October, you should have a preliminary draft of your annotated bibliography.
- ❖ By the first or second week in November, a proposal should be shown to the thesis advisor. The proposal delineates one's thesis and methodology, providing a chapter-by-chapter outline and a timeline for completion. If relevant, it also identifies the second reader (who may be inside or outside the department or college). The annotated bibliography is included with the proposal as an appendix.
- ❖ A finalized version of the proposal should be submitted to the full faculty of Religious Studies prior to Thanksgiving Break. Approval to proceed to the next phase, along with any feedback as to how you can improve your argument, will be communicated before the end of the semester.
- ❖ Length wise, it is expected that students will write a proposal and one chapter of the proposed thesis (approximately 20 pages)
- ❖ Over Winter Break, continue with the writing.

Phase Three: Writing & Rewriting.
Spring of Senior Year

If your proposal has been approved, you are now enrolled in RE 376.

- ❖ Weekly meetings with thesis advisor allow you to discuss your writing and rework drafts, carefully crafting and refining your argument.
- ❖ Regular meetings with your second reader help you to develop your bibliography and refine your research plan and argument.
- ❖ The week after Spring Break, a completed draft of your entire thesis should be ready for your advisor and second reader, as revisions continue.
- ❖ Before the end of classes or during the exam period, you submit your finished thesis to the faculty and make a presentation, open to the public, in which you discuss what you have written.

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