

Getting Started on a Honors Thesis

1) Plan to get some serious help on *developing* a topic and then on *refining* the topic. While it is possible to do these things on your own the process is likely to go much better if you get help. In addition, expect to have to adjust the topic several times as you go along, not just at the beginning but later on. You are not expected to have a fully developed topic when you start working with an adviser. Part of what an adviser helps you to do is to develop the topic. This can be done best, however, once you have a general subject in mind (or more than one, and your adviser helps you think through which one to pursue).

2) One way to work your way toward a possible subject is to:

Think about an area, region, country, part of the US, etc – do you have a preference for some part of the world? Or for some particular type of people?

Think about a broad *subject matter* – the environment, arms control, health care, etc. in which you have some considerable interest.

Think about a more *specific subject* that fits within the area or region and within the broad subject matter – if you are interested in California and crime, think about a specific subject that is related to crime in/and California (gang violence in LA, police brutality, what do to with child molesters, etc.)

Think about the *time frame* in which you are interested – past, present, or future (How did the US get to be the dominant actor in international politics? Or, just how and in what ways is it dominant now? Or, is it likely to retain this dominance in the future – and why?)

Think about what you would like to work on pertaining to the topic. A relevant theory bearing on this topic? The policy issue or issues involved in it? The history of the matter that is highly relevant for explaining or understanding it today? The sort of action you would like to recommend be taken to deal with it?

A good place to start in thinking about topics in this way is with courses you have taken. What intrigued you? What seem still to be unresolved or open questions? Were problems raised that you would like to pursue in a different place, or time, or issue area, or . . .?

3) Then think about your topic in terms of the following:

Do you have a specific question you want to pose about it and then try to answer?

Do you have a strong contention pertaining to the topic that you would like to develop and then test, or try to refute?

Do you have an interpretation or explanation pertaining to the topic that you want to present and support with your research?

Do you have a problem, central to the topic, which you would like to suggest how to solve?

4) Then get some advice on the research – on sources and possible sources, on difficulties with prospective sources – along with advice on how to refine the topic. Think about the research skills that you have or can acquire in the appropriate time frame and those that would be needed to pursue your topic. Test what you have done to this point against some else's reactions to that. If you have an adviser, discuss this. Do these together because a topic has to be understood in terms of information availability, and also in terms of the scale and nature of the research involved. For instance:

a. If the topic calls for a great deal of research you need to try to decide whether this is feasible in terms of the time available, the nature of the sources of information involved, in the costs involved, and in terms of your capabilities (language capabilities, data-handling capabilities, etc.)

b. If the topic involves information that is apt to be very unevenly available (such as if peripheral information is available but central information about it is secret, or confidential, or very hard to get at), is the topic feasible to tackle?

c. If the topic calls for some travel to get information, is this feasible?

d. If the topic calls for language skills, or data analysis skills, or other specific skills, will you have those, or can you revise the required research to match the skills you do have?

e. Note that if your topic requires financial resources to pursue, the UROP program (see their webpage at <http://www.urop.uci.edu/grants.html>) does have funding available (\$1000 range), on a competitive basis, for student research.

5) Develop a timeline, starting back from the deadline for finishing in time to get your degree or finish the end of the academic year. This includes not only that deadline but:

The deadline for being nominated for awards for your thesis.

The deadline for turning it in to your advisor for a last reading and your last-minute corrections.

The deadline for the first reading of the entire thesis by the advisor.

The deadline for the early draft or drafts of chapters.

The deadline for completing the bulk of the research so the writing can begin.

The deadline for completing the initial research blocking out the overall dimensions project, to determine what else has to be done.

The deadline for completing the preliminary shaping of the topic and beginning the serious research.

The deadline for applying for funding, if this is needed.

Almost always the time available is barely sufficient and the sooner a timeline is prepared the better for grasping that fact and acting accordingly.