

## Advice on Writing an Honors Thesis

### *Determining your Research Strategy*

When selecting a research strategy, you should define your variables and specify the geographical unit or units that you will study and why you have selected this (these) unit(s) and not others. What years will you analyze? On what issue will you focus? Explain exactly what your main sources are (e.g. interviews with 10 specific people, election returns from the 2000 mayoral race in Newark, San Diego's city budget for 1980-2000, polling data from the 2001 New York Democratic primary).

As you consider your honors paper research strategy, think through the following questions:

1. Explicitly state the definition of your major terms (e.g. variables).
2. How will you measure your independent and dependent variables? Why are these good measures?
3. What sources will you use to support your argument? Interviews? Government documents (such as the Census or city council meeting minutes)? Survey data you collect? Survey data others have collected and made public? Newspaper and magazine articles?
  - a. Be specific: Explain exactly what your main primary sources are. If you are conducting interviews explain who you plan to interview and what you hope to learn. If you are digging through archives, where will you start? Do you have data that you will collect for analysis? (e.g., election returns from the 1995 New Orleans local election; poll data from the ABC News poll conducted during September and October of 1996; all of Harold Washington's campaign ads from the 1983 Chicago mayoral campaign)
4. What geographical unit will you study? Why you have selected this unit and not others (e.g., local governments in the state of California, the city of Los Angeles, all cities in the U.S.). What years will you analyze? (This is an explanation of your research design)

### *Some Types of Analyses:*

- **Case study:** one or few units studied in detail, with multiple methods e.g., using long interviews, analysis of documents and observation
  - Choose the case because it has – or lacks – an important variable; in contrast to other designs, in which the sample should be representative
  - Good with unusual or rare phenomena, or for a critical test
  - Good when there is little previous research – use it to generate hypotheses and modify theories
  - Best to do comparative case studies with multiple cases
- **Cross-section:** lots of units at a single point in time (e.g. a survey of American citizens conducted in November 2008)
- **Panel:** The same units at multiple points of time (e.g. 3 surveys of the same group of citizens, asked questions in November 2000, 2004, and 2008).
- **Time series:** multiple cross sections (e.g. 3 surveys of American citizens in November 2000, 2004, and 2008, with a different group of people in each survey)

## Advice on Writing an Honors Paper

- **Experiments:** provides control and randomization

### *Data Collection Options for you to consider:*

- **Interviews: questioning the respondents**
  - Survey (your own or existing)
  - In-depth
  - Considerations:
    - Question wording
    - Question type (open-ended or closed-ended)
    - Question order
    - Overall questionnaire design
    - Response rate
    - Mail, Telephone, or in person
    - Quality: e.g., anonymity, characteristics of the interviewer
    - software
    - elite interviewing
- **Document analysis (archives)**
  - Government (Census, debates or votes in city council minutes, mayoral papers, agency or commission reports, court cases)
  - Note that some of these documents are in turn based on other methods; e.g. the Census's Current Population Survey is a survey, and you may be best off directly examining the data rather than citing the Census's report
  - Best used for objective, official phenomena (e.g., election returns, congressional voting, judicial decisions, official speeches, laws passed, government expenditures).
  - News media (newspapers archived in Nexus or Dow Jones)
  - Interest group archives (e.g., the papers of the NAACP)
  - Private individuals (letters, diaries)
- **Content analysis**
  - To derive numerical data from non-numerical written or verbal records
- **Observation**
  - You directly or indirectly observe the behavior or its traces
  - Does not rely on verbal responses to queries from you
  - e.g. travel with the candidate and see how she campaigns
  - e.g. hang out with a group of people and record their conversations
  - e.g. of indirect: volume of transportation as a gauge of interest in a parade
- **Quantitative data analysis**
  - Crosstabs, Regression, Means tests, etc.
  - Specify the source of your data.

## Advice on Writing an Honors Paper

### *Data and Evidence*

#### **1) What is your Research Question?**

e.g. What factors affect whether someone identifies as a Republican or a Democrat?

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#### **2) What is your Hypothesis/Hypotheses?**

e.g. Demographic factors and social factors affect party identification: H1: Older people will be more likely to be Republican, H2: Women will be more likely to be Democrats, etc...

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#### **3) What are your Independent and Dependent Variables?**

e.g.  $IV + IV + IV + IV = DV \rightarrow$  age + gender + occupation + region = party identification

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**4) What Data do you need to test your hypotheses? How will you measure your IVs and DVs? (Be Specific – What year(s) will you study? What specific geographic unit(s) will you study (e.g. all cities in California, the city of Los Angeles, the nation of South Africa)? )**

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