Guidelines for Senior Theses in Philosophy:
What You Should Be Doing in the Semester Before Your Two Semesters of 700-Work

Kareem Khalifa
Department of Philosophy
Middlebury College
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Professors' dreams and students' realities

Every professor has the same dream when it comes to senior theses. In this dream, our thesis students write detailed, concrete, and concise proposals the semester before they start their research. Because of the well-planned roadmap outlined in this proposal and the hard thinking done during the proposal period, hit the ground running the following semester, churning out about ten pages a week, and a decent draft of a chapter every three to four weeks.

This is only a dream. In reality, students often write vague, abstract, and meandering proposals during the Fall semester that provide them with little guidance as to where to go next. During the Winter Term, they become painfully aware of this as they explore their topic and realize that they are drowning in an ocean of material on their ill-formed thesis topic. They finally pull themselves out of this quagmire by about the third week in January, and then begin doing "real" thesis work starting in the spring semester.

Effectively, this means that there is about a semester-long lag between our dream and your reality. Please help make our dreams come true by following this timeline:

Benchmarks for the pre-thesis semester

Date for Feb's	Date For Spring Graduates	Benchmark
Early March	September	Read guidelines; attend general meeting of potential thesis students
Mid-March	Early October	Meet with potential advisors to discuss thesis topic; meet with Steve Bertolino to learn about library resources for research
Mid- to late March	Early October	Read review articles to get sense of debates; choose debate; find "exemplary" abstract
End of March	Early-Mid October	Approach advisor; discuss abstracts with advisor
April	Mid-Late October	Envision chapters; submit draft of proposal to advisor
End of Spring Semester	One week before winter term Registration (i.e. early November)	Submit final draft of proposal to both the Chair and the faculty member you hope to work with

What is a thesis?

Many students have romantic but misinformed ideas about theses and the process required to write them. Let's start with the official guidelines:

Official Guidelines:

Eligibility

1. A senior must have a minimum of a B+ average in all Philosophy Department courses to become a candidate for departmental honors.

2. A student must receive the permission of the Philosophy Department Chair and submit a project proposal to become a candidate for departmental honors.

Process

1. Departmental honors are awarded on the basis of a two-term Senior Project. This Senior Project is normally undertaken in a PHIL 0700 Independent Study in either the Fall or Spring of the senior year, and a Winter Term of Independent Study.

   A Senior Project can be:

Either: (a)   A Senior Thesis: a work of approximately 60-70 pages
                     (double-spaced) dealing with a well-defined philosophical
                     topic.

Or:

              (b)   A series of linked papers (perhaps three or four) totaling
                     approximately 60-70 pages (double-spaced) dealing with a particular
                     area of philosophy, (e.g. philosophy of mind, ethics, epistemology), a
                     particular philosopher (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Russell), a group of related
                     philosophers (e.g. the existentialists, the logical positivists.) (Often
                     this is the best option for seniors since it permits a broader topic.)

2. Normally there is one supervisor for the Senior Project from the Philosophy
    Department. (If the supervisor is from a different department, there still must be a
    designated Philosophy Department supervisor. This requirement holds for joint majors
    as well. It is the responsibility of the student to keep the Philosophy Department
    supervisor informed about the progress of the Senior Project.)

3. It is the student's responsibility to find a faculty member who is willing to supervise her
    or his Senior Project. Students planning to take PHIL 0700 in the Winter/Spring terms
    must have found a topic (or topics) agreeable to their supervisor and have submitted a
    proposal to the supervisor and the Chair one week before winter term registration.
    Those planning to take it in the Fall/Winter terms should have secured a supervisor and
    proposal already by the end of the previous Spring term (the last day of exams). The
    proposal should consist of a 2-3 page description of the project that includes a suggested
    outline of the chapters and a short bibliography. A student will not be permitted to
    register for PHIL 0700 until a proposal has been approved by their supervisor and the
    Chair.

4. There will be a second reader of the Senior Project from the Philosophy Department.
    When the topic of the project makes it advisable, there may be a third reader of the
    project from outside the Philosophy Department. Students will be advised whether to
    submit two or three copies of the Project.

5. If PHIL 0700 is taken in Winter/Spring terms, the Senior Project must be completed,
    and turned in, by 5:00 PM of the Monday of the final full week of classes of the Spring
    term. In no case can work turned in after that time be considered for departmental
    honors (though it may be considered in assigning a grade for the PHIL 0700.) If PHIL
    0700 is taken in Fall/Winter, the Senior Project must be completed, and turned in, by
    5:00 PM of the Monday of the second week of Spring semester.

6. Students may be requested to give a short informal presentation of their Senior Project at
    a meeting arranged by the Philosophy Department for philosophy majors and faculty.
    Such a meeting should take place at least a week before the oral defense (see item 7), and
    normally will occur well in advance of that time.

7. Students will give a formal oral defense of their Senior Project before the readers, to take
    place within ten days of submission of the final draft. Normally such a defense lasts
    approximately one hour.

8. The readers will then make a decision concerning departmental honors. The decision is made solely on the basis of a judgment of the quality of the Senior Project and the oral defense. The three grades of departmental honors (with approximate letter grade equivalents) are:

<div align="center">

Highest Honors   (A)
High Honors   (A-)
Honors   (B+)

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9. The supervisor of the Senior Project will give the grade for the PHIL 0700 course. The course grade need not correspond precisely to the degree of honors (e.g. one could receive "Honors" for the Senior Project but an "A-" for the PHIL 0700.)

10. It is the responsibility of the student to submit a *bound copy of the thesis or set of essays* to the department before the grade deadline. *Until this is done, a grade will not be entered.* The student may also choose to give his or her department supervisor or readers a copy.

Unofficial Guidelines

So, if you want to write a thesis, you have a sense of some of the constraints you'll be operating under. Here are a few other things to consider:

1. A thesis should <u>not</u> be on any topic you so choose. Your topic should reflect an informed and synoptic consideration of the resources available to you, including:
    a. The knowledge-base of the professors in the Philosophy Department,
    b. The time you have to complete the thesis,
    c. The amount of knowledge you already have on a topic, and finally
    d. Your interests.

    If you choose a topic that does not reflect all of these considerations, you risk having a very unproductive thesis experience.
2. While supervisors should *help* you in choosing a topic, it is <u>not</u> our *responsibility* to choose a topic for you.
3. It's useful to think of the thesis as roughly four papers of similar involvement as a final paper for a 400-level seminar in the Philosophy Department. Like final papers in seminars, theses require a substantial amount of reading, drafting, brainstorming, etc. However, unlike seminar papers, you have far less structure imposed on you from a professor, so you need to be capable of motivating and organizing yourself. Furthermore, you are expected to produce four times as much output with only one additional month.
4. Since there is little structure imposed by a professor, it is a good idea to meet with your thesis supervisor on a regular basis. While different students and supervisors have different dynamics, weekly meetings are not unreasonable. This means you should have steady output on a weekly basis. However, keep in mind that it is <u>not</u> your supervisor's responsibility to check up on your progress. It is your responsibility to keep your supervisor informed of your progress.

5. There is no shame in not writing a thesis. As graduating seniors, there are both professional obligations (finding a job for next year) and good personal reasons (spending more time with your friends before you go your separate ways) that might trump your best reasons for writing a thesis.

Stages of the proposal process

Choosing a thesis topic

If you're thinking about writing a thesis, you probably have an idea about what you'd like to write about. Most of you begin this process thinking that your thesis topic can be the title of a 200-, 300-, or 400-level course, e.g., philosophy of law, ethical theory, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, philosophy and feminism, theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of the environment, etc. Let's call these *content-based topics*. Alternatively, you might know that you want to examine some *figure-based topic*, e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, etc. As you probably know, this is too broad. Much of the early stages of this semester should be spent making your thesis as specific as possible. Here are some fruitful strategies:

(A) *Specify, specify, specify*: By its very nature, philosophy is an abstract discipline. When writing a thesis, this means that you lose a lot of constraints that you might have in another discipline. Without these constraints, the danger of meandering looms large. So discipline yourself by making your philosophical question as concrete as possible.

   1) *Nouns versus questions:* During the early pre-proposal stages, your interests can often be expressed as the title of a course (a subfield of philosophy) or the name of a philosopher. You might get more specific and cite a particular issue in the scholarship of that subfield or that figure. At this point, however, your topic is still expressible as a *noun*. For example, when I first began writing my dissertation proposal, I was interested in "explanation." However, a developed thesis topic is expressible as a *question*. To continue with my story, I became interested in "What makes one scientific explanation better than another?" Since there is an indefinite number of things to say about "explanation," you run the risk of meandering through a lot of disparate essays and stringing together a relatively undirected thesis. By constraining this question a bit more, you start placing your thesis work into a more tractable field of research.

(B) *Cross-pollinate*: If you're having trouble specifying, try seeing how you might confine your topic by seeing how it intersects with other interests. For example, if you're interested in a figure, try to narrow down the particular aspect of his/her thought in which you're interested. Is it his/her ethical theory, theory of knowledge, political philosophy, etc.? In other words, use a content-based topic to narrow down the aspect of the figure's work that you're interested in. Alternatively, you can cross-pollinate by looking at two figures, though then you have to be very clear about what specific point of comparison you're looking at.

(C) *Defer to more battle-tested sources*: The obvious candidates are the faculty. However, other resources include:

1) London Study Guide (<u>highly</u> recommended): http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/contents.htm
2) Stanford Encyclopedia: http://plato.stanford.edu
3) Routledge Encyclopedia: http://www.rep.routledge.com/
4) Philosophers' Index On-Line: http://csaweb106v.csa.com/ids70/advanced_search.php?SID=e32eg0ue stcqojbno9q2sqd7m4
5) Steve Bertolino, the librarian liaison for the Philosophy Department
6) Finding a review article that sums things up.

(D) *Don't venture too far into the unknown:* It's a good idea to choose a thesis topic based on a course that you've taken, or, better yet, on a paper that you've written. With the many other distractions of being a senior (e.g., post-graduation plans, enjoying your last year in College with your friends), the thought of going from knowing nothing about a topic to writing a extended and polished piece of writing about that topic it is a lot to take on.

(E) *Play to the strengths of the department.* While each member of the department has a broad range of interests, it is inconceivable that we could have someone who is qualified to advise every philosophy thesis that a student dreams up. Indeed, the closer your topic is to our areas of specialization, the more likely you are to get good advising and write a better thesis. In comparison to the natural sciences, humanities majors have incredible leeway in terms of how far their research departs from their advisor's. This is one reason that more humanities theses flounder—if you write about a topic of which your advisor knows very little, you're effectively asking the blind to lead the blind.

1) *Possible solution*: *Go outside the department.* If you're dead set on researching a particular topic that isn't a good fit with the department's strengths, you might try seeing if someone in another department provides a better fit. However, please note that faculty in other departments have a greater obligation to their own majors than to you, and that no faculty member (philosophy or otherwise) has an obligation to advise a thesis on a topic which he/she judges to be in need of modification. In other words, if you really want to write a thesis, prepare to have your interests molded by your advisor.

What abstracts can teach you about your proposal

Here's an exercise I gave students in my senior seminar to help them choose a research topic. They said it was quite helpful:

1) Find an abstract in the *Philosopher's Index* that:
   a. Is relevant to your research paper; and
   b. You think is well written
2) Briefly state what you like about it (1 paragraph)
3) Write an abstract of your own research paper.
4) Give a first pass at a bibliography, containing 15-20 sources.
5) Talk to your thesis advisor about your abstract and the one you liked.

Helpful rules of thumb on abstracts:

During the early stages of developing a research project, it's a good idea to write abstracts about what you'd like to do. Don't be afraid to write many of them! A good abstract will be only 4-5 sentences long, describing the problem you're grappling with, and the solution to that problem. If a particular figure is serving as a constant foil throughout your paper, don't be afraid to name names.

Helpful rules of thumb on bibliographies:

A. Research databases

The *Philosopher's Index* is the authoritative philosophical research database. However, for those of you doing interdisciplinary work, there may be a need to examine additional research databases. That being said, *start* with the *Philosopher's Index*, as the distinctively philosophical problems have already been charted. Also remember that forays into other disciplines should be used to assist you in grappling with a philosophical problem; they should not create additional problems (philosophical or otherwise) for you. If you find your interdisciplinary forays complicating things, ask yourself the most crucial research question of all, "Is this necessary for my project?"

B. Narrowing a search

With every search, start broad and eventually narrow it down. You don't want to overlook an article because your search criteria didn't capture it. While there's always an element of trial and error to this, here's one search pattern that I find useful:

(A) First search for terms "Anywhere;"

(B) Take a look at the first 10-20 items on the list (these are usually the most recent). If you find an exemplary article that is exactly about what you want to be writing about, note the keywords and descriptors used in that article, and try running a search with some/all of the search criteria that distinguish that article from the others in your initial search.

(C) If you don't find anything in the first 10-20 items that is exemplary, list the same search terms as "Keywords."

(D) Repeat Step (B)

(E) If you still have too many results, list those same terms as "Descriptors"

(F) Repeat Step (B)

If you can get the list down to 50-100 items after doing this process a few times, start browsing through the abstracts. This goes much quicker than you might think. Take note of names that get mentioned a lot, as well as authors who have written several articles on a subject. Check the articles that you think are most relevant. You can probably shrink this list pretty quickly by performing this process.

Writing the proposal

All of these rules of thumb should help you write your thesis proposal. It is worth restating the department's policy on theses proposals:

> The proposal should consist of a 2-3 page description of the project that includes a suggested outline of the chapters and a short bibliography.

Note that if you do the aforementioned "abstract exercise," you should be in fine shape for getting the short bibliography in order. So what should you put in those 2-3 pages?

A. *A statement of your research question*. What is the chief thing you're trying to figure out in this thesis? What is the main issue you're grappling with? Remember to specify, specify, specify, and then specify some more. Ask as concrete a question as you can. Also involved in stating your research question is clarifying any technical or ambiguous terms. You can greatly minimize this by asking your research question as clearly and plainly as possible.

B. *A few of the dominant, existing answers to your research question*. If a research question expresses the issue you're grappling with, then answers to that question represent positions on that issue. Good scholarly work addresses the main positions on an issue, and you should be aware of what those positions are before you start your thesis research. This doesn't mean you actually have to *have already read* the representative texts of those positions by the time you submit your proposal, but it does mean that you know what you *will be reading* when you start your research (very important!). In more concrete terms, generally 1-2 sentences about any position are enough for the purposes of the proposal.

    a. Here it is worth emphasizing that you should be asking a question that another philosopher has asked before you (This feeds into not venturing too far out of your knowledge base and playing to the strengths of the department).

C. *A rough statement as to how you will answer your research question*. While open-mindedness is an important feature of scholarly research, if you're too open minded, you'll lose your sense of direction in the research process. Often starting with an intuition that one position is the best leads you to think through the consequences of that position in a more rigorous way. As a result, you become acutely aware of its limitations, and this, in turn, may lead you to *reject* or *revise* that position in a way that you wouldn't have had you simply treated it as one of many options. Belief revision during the thesis writing process is natural; however, this can only happen if you believed in something to begin with.

D. *Chapter sketches*: There are a few different formulas for this. Here are two that I like quite a bit:

    a. *The related papers approach*: Perhaps your travails in trying to find the perfect research question go unfulfilled throughout this semester. Perhaps you're just interested in too many things to write a single lengthy work. That's okay! The department guidelines on Senior Projects states:

A Senior Project can be:

Either:

(a) A Senior Thesis: a work of approximately 60-70 pages (double-spaced) dealing with a well-defined philosophical topic.

Or:

(b) A series of linked papers (perhaps three or four) totaling approximately 60-70 pages (double-spaced) dealing with a particular area of philosophy, (e.g. philosophy of mind, ethics, epistemology), a particular philosopher (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Russell), a group of related philosophers (e.g. the existentialists, the logical positivists.) (Often this is the best option for seniors since it permits a broader topic.)

Option (b) is oft-overlooked and -underrated by students. In my opinion, it gives you the most freedom to examine the things you want to do, and you don't get bogged down with the agonies of organizing a thesis. In this case, your chapters should be structured something like this:

    i. *Chapter 1*: Topic 1 in particular area, about particular philosopher, or about particular group of related philosophers.

    ii. *Chapter 2*: Topic 2 in same area, about same person/people as Chapter 1.

    iii. *Chapter 3*: Topic 3 in same area or about same person/people as Chapters 1 and 2.

    iv. *Chapter 4 (if necessary)*: Topic 4 in same area or about same person/people as Chapter 1 through 3.

b. *Weighing alternative positions*: So you've got your research question, you've sketched the positions in your introductory paragraph to your proposal. A very natural way of showing how your preferred position is to be preferred consists of setting up chapters in the following manner:

    i. *Chapter 1*: Detailed articulation, evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of Position 1.

    ii. *Chapter 2*: Detailed articulation, evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of Position 2.

    iii. *Chapter 3* (if necessary): Detailed articulation, evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of Position 3.

    iv. *Chapter 4*: Detailed articulation of your preferred position, showing how it has all of the strengths and none of the weaknesses of the previous positions you've discussed.

c. *The genealogy*: Depending on the nature of your project, it may make a lot of sense to trace the historical development of a particular concept over the course of several philosophers' works:

    i. *Chapter 1*: Earliest philosopher/philosophical school on a particular issue; evaluation of his/her/its pro's and con's.

    ii. *Chapter 2*: Second earliest philosopher/philosophical school on the same issue, evaluation of how he/she/it responded to his/her/its predecessor's pro's and con's.

    iii. *Chapter 3*: Etc.

    iv. *Penultimate Chapter*: Second earliest philosopher/philosophical school on the same issue, evaluation of how he/she/it responded to his/her/its predecessors' pro's and con's.

    v. *Ultimate Chapter:* More synoptic view of the whole tradition you've discussed. What lessons are to be drawn about the historical period or concept you've studied?

d. *The lengthy argument*: If you're VERY confident of the position you'll be adopting, then think of the chain of reasoning you'd need to adopt in order to defend that claim. If it's an interesting position, then you'll probably have a number of key premises that will require a good deal of clarification and defense from potential objections.

    i. *Chapter 1*: Articulation and defense of the first core premise in your argument.

    ii. *Chapter 2*: Articulation and defense of the second core premise in your argument.

    iii. *Chapter 3*: Etc.

    iv. *Final Chapter*: Articulation and defense of conclusion in your argument, i.e., of the position you wish to defend, as well as a review of the line of reasoning that got you there.

While there may be other ways of organizing a thesis, these four strike me as reliable schemata for organizing a longer philosophical essay[1]. It's <u>very helpful</u> to choose which of these frameworks you'll use to organize your thesis during the proposal stage, as it guides your writing process in very clear ways, e.g., it gives you clear objectives to shoot for in a given chapter, thus making the writing of the dissertation less like a unique task and more like writing three or four papers in a course.

E. *Bibliography:* How you organize your chapters should provide you with a clue as to what your bibliography for your proposal will look like. For example, if your schema consists of Weighing Alternative Positions, then representative texts on each of the positions evaluated, as well as important critical literature about those representative texts, will constitute the bulk of your bibliography; a genealogy will require important primary and secondary texts of the philosophers you're discussing; etc.

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[1] Personally, I think that the four strategies canvassed above have different degrees of difficulty, which, ranging from easiest to hardest, runs as follows: related papers approach, weighing alternative positions, genealogies, and lengthy argument. However, different people have different strengths and different thesis topics are better suited for different strategies, so perhaps you'll find that you rank them differently.