

Haverford College
Department of History

Selecting a Thesis Topic: Preliminary Guidelines

Dear Junior History Majors:

As you know, all History majors spend their senior year working on a two-semester Senior Thesis. The exercise of writing a thesis mobilizes the critical skills you have developed as a history major. The experience will be demanding but rewarding. Part of the challenge of writing a thesis entails identifying a good topic. It is important to start this process now because the summer months offer you an opportunity for exploratory reading and thinking. Once classes begin, the Senior Thesis Seminar moves forward rapidly in terms of assignments. You will submit an initial proposal in the second week of the semester, and this schedule does not give you much time. By narrowing your interests sooner rather than later, you will avoid frustration and disappointment. Producing original research is a slow process and requires discipline and focus for a full nine months. Below, you will find some guidelines for defining a thesis topic as well as a checklist of things to do before leaving campus for the summer.

Suggestions for choosing a topic:

(1) Success or failure of a thesis depends on the choice of topic. You cannot create a winning essay around an undoable topic. Suggestions for brainstorming: build on coursework – classes taken at Haverford or abroad. Try to think about a class you took or something you read in a class that intrigued you, a question that you wanted to explore further once the class had ended. You want to build on a foundation of knowledge not start an unexplored field.

(2) Review histories about a subject of interest and begin narrowing from that subject (a broad general category) to a topic (a specific issue). Frame your topic in terms of a question or series of questions. Figure out what is at stake in answering the questions: so what? Why should we care?

(3) Think small not big. You are not re-writing an entire field. Thinking small allows you to say something original.

(4) Determine what types of evidence you could consult to explore your topic. Reading the footnotes and bibliographies in history texts can point you toward sources. The sources ultimately determine the topic: you need to respond to what the evidence provides. Thus, it is good to think about sources even as you generate questions.

(5) Use your language skills: if you can read a foreign language, try to use these skills (use them or lose them!) in developing a topic. The flip side of this suggestion is to verify that documents are available in English for a given topic. If not, then you need to modify your topic.

(6) Talk to professors and librarians and listen to their suggestions. It is important to remain focused but also flexible. Do not ignore advice even if it requires you to reconsider your chosen topic.

Common mistakes to avoid:

(1) Do not choose a topic of which you have no prior knowledge or about which no feasible primary materials exist.

(2) You should select your topic with care – it has to sustain you for a year. Don't make a flip decision. You want research to develop your interests not exhaust them.

(3) Perseverance is good but obstinacy is bad. If you cannot find sources after looking for several weeks, then consider changing your topic. A smart historian responds to the evidence – evidence makes a topic interesting and lack of evidence makes it frustrating.

(4) Be realistic about what you can and cannot do given your language skills, your location, and your time frame.

Checklist of things to do now before the summer:

- Contact a professor or professors and explore some initial ideas.
- Generate a short list of books to read over the summer.