Advice from Former Thesis Writers Department of Economics

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We asked former Ec thesis writers to pass along words of wisdom to future students. Here are their responses to the question: *“What do you wish you knew at the start of the thesis-writing process?”*

## Time Management

It is important to get data early. Not just have an acquisition plan and confirmation from a data source that they will give you data – it’s important to actually have it early.

I wish I knew how long data collection and manipulation would take. I wish I had started writing earlier.

I would have liked to have known that everything takes longer than expected, especially when dealing with data.

I wish I spent more time on it during summer and throughout senior year.

Knowing how unpredictable the process could become would be the most valuable; my final thesis looks so unrelated to my first write-ups. Had I known thesis-writing is so unpredictable, I might have spent less time doing less important tasks at the start and more time doing the core tasks (like building the model and collecting the data).

Allow more time for editing!!

Break your thesis into manageable chunks.

## Empirical Skills

I would have liked to have been more prepared with Stata at the outset of my thesis. If I had been more confident in analyzing using Stata, I would not have been so delayed, especially during the first revision.

I wish I knew Stata better and also had a clearer idea of my topic. Understanding econometrics is tremendously useful.

[*These comments were pre-Stata Mini Course… aren’t you now so so so thankful for it??!*]

## Topic Choice

You need to really have a topic of interest; otherwise, it’s hard to stick with it.

Don’t get discouraged if the idea is initially rejected by a professor. Instead of not writing a thesis, consider a different approach to the question and reach out to other professors.

## Advising

I wish I understood the importance of getting a good advisor.

Get a good advisor and do so early. I really appreciate my advisor for taking me on (or else I would not have had an opportunity to write a thesis), but he was very hands-off. I wish I asked him more for feedback. It wasn’t until my thesis was almost due that I realized I would have appreciated more support on the theory and econometrics of my thesis.

You should be aware that some professors will be more involved in the thesis and provide more hands on guidance, while others serve crucial roles but in a more passive way. Think about what you are looking for in an advisor and choose accordingly.

Don’t be afraid to send drafts to your adviser, even if you are not proud of them. This will prevent you from procrastinating and allow him/her to guide you.

Meeting with your advisor and other professors is arguably the most valuable part of writing a thesis.

You can really use your Ec 985 instructor and your advisor, more than you realize.

## ***Miscellaneous***

You should read a couple of theses to get an idea of what is expected and what is good format – this should be done before you even start or at least right at the beginning.

Leverage the rest of Harvard’s resources. Go to the [Ec Department Stata TF or the Harvard/MIT Data Center] if you need help or have technical questions about Stata. Ask your Ec 985 instructor to go through ideas with you. Get (unofficial) secondary advisors to bounce more ideas off of.

It would have been most useful to know at the start of the thesis-writing process how hard it is to acquire funding for theses that may require a substantial amount of money. I was well aware that the funding process was by no means easy, but a better idea for the scope at which funding was provided would have been extremely useful in figuring out ways to make my thesis more ‘affordable.’

Try to take classes during junior year that will help you find a thesis topic and an adviser … classes in the field you are interested in, which have professors who could end up as your adviser or connecting you to an adviser.

**It was painful at times, and to be honest, I was almost ready to give up… but we pushed through. I am so glad I got to do this.**