

Thinking about a Senior Thesis?

Some thoughts for Juniors (and ambitious Underclassmen!)

Harvard University
Department of Economics
August 2019

Whether you're a junior or an ambitious sophomore or freshman, there are many things you can do to prepare for the possibility of writing a senior thesis. This short guide aims to share some practices and activities you can engage in *before* your senior year to help you have a successful thesis experience.

Do I really want to write a senior thesis?

Did you like Ec 970? Did you enjoy an RAship? Are you curious? Is your favorite beach-reading material *Econometrica*? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you should think about writing a senior thesis. Check out the letter from Professor Benjamin Friedman on more reasons to write a thesis: <http://economics.harvard.edu/senior-thesis>.

Pretty easy things to do

Get to know your professors. Get to know your professors. Also, we recommend that you get to know your professors. This is something you should do in every class, but in particular in all of your Ec classes. You can chat with professors in office hours or by appointment, you can attend Ec events and strike up a conversation, you can invite professors to your House Faculty Dinner, etc. Waiting until junior year to talk with professors in order to find a thesis advisor is too late. (Ok, don't panic, it's not *too* late. But it's quite late and will make advisor-hunting more difficult.) Get to know profs every chance you get, so that when you *are* looking for an advisor, you already have some people who know you, like you, and know you're an interesting, curious young scholar in the making. Even if you don't end up writing a thesis, you'll have made some great connections with some amazing professors. This is invaluable.

Take an Ec 980 junior seminar. These seminars are the next level of Ec 970. They are small courses, taught by Ec professors, focused on a particular area, and they are reading and writing intensive. Junior seminars are a great (and highly recommended) stepping stone to a senior thesis. Each class does their own lottery, so please check the website for instructions. <https://economics.harvard.edu/junior-seminars>

Look for a research assistantship (RAship). Some are listed formally on the Department website, but lots of RAships are obtained less-formally, by talking with professors and expressing your interest in an RA opportunity. An RAship is a way for you to experience a

research project being led by a more experienced person. It will help you see if you enjoy research and will give you some excellent experience you can apply to your own thesis research. <http://economics.harvard.edu/jobs-raships-funding>

Go through the Excel thesis advisor list on the Department website. If you're not sure where to start looking for professors whose interests you share, this list is sortable by professors' fields of interest and is a great place to find a few names to get you going. Once you have some professors' names, you can check out their websites, skim some of their research, and narrow down your list to a few potential profs who are working in areas similar to your interests. This is not only a useful practice for advisor-hunting, but **it's also a great way to look for profs to approach about potential RAships.**

<http://economics.harvard.edu/senior-thesis> ("Sortable Thesis Advisor List")

Take Ec electives in a field you're interested in. This seems pretty obvious, but we didn't want to overlook anything.

Once you've decided to take the plunge

Aim to get an **advisor** before you leave campus in May of your junior year. For off-cycle students, aim for the end of December or early spring semester.

Practice **Stata** any opportunity you have and learn to use it properly. Take advantage of the Ec Department Stata/R Team! <http://economics.harvard.edu/stata>

Read journal articles in areas you're interested in to help hone down your thesis topic.

Start thinking about **data** early. Like, early. Seriously, you really want to start E-A-R-L-Y (see comments on pp. 3-4 if you're still not convinced). You have to think about it, look for it, collect it, organize it, clean it, and analyze it. There will be an average of 327 problems at each of these phases. There will *always* be delays, errors, hang-ups, and countless other issues that you cannot foresee, so start early.

At any point in this process, please keep in mind that **you can always chat with an ec advisor for more advice** on things to do and how to do them. They can also brainstorm thesis ideas with you or they might even be able to connect you with a senior who's working in a similar area.

Advice from Former Thesis Writers

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?”

Overall Feelings

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.

You will grow from the thesis process. It will be stressful, and there will be sacrifices you will have to make, but I can honestly say that the process has given me greater independence and a greater sense of purpose.

For most of college I was an executor: you gave me a textbook to read or a problem set to do, and I could spit it out for you. Given the inputs, I could produce the outputs. But it wasn't until I wrote a thesis that I started asking the questions myself, deciding for myself what inputs I needed... There's a confidence that comes with it that I never had before. And the Econ Department is really great about supporting you along the way, so you don't have to worry about getting there alone.

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.

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.