The Senior Thesis Proposal in American Ethnic Studies

The Department of American Ethnic Studies recognizes that it is not always easy to develop an interesting topic under the pressure of a deadline. Yet we believe that the proposal is an integral part of the process of writing a thesis and therefore it should be taken very seriously. This is one of the reasons why we have a specific course for turning in a proposal and another course for writing the thesis. A good proposal will make writing your thesis a much simpler task especially if you work on it closely with a faculty mentor; a little effort now may save you from many sleepless nights.

Thesis topics do not just drop out of the sky. A good topic is found through active exploration. The field of American Ethnic Studies offers a wide variety of interesting topics, themes, and objects of study you may wish to explain or analyze. We encourage you to write a thesis that will be meaningful to you and the field, something that will be informed by more than one discipline, comparative in certain aspects, and intersectional in perspective and approach.

There is no set formula for choosing a topic or writing a thesis in American Ethnic Studies. Yet it might be helpful as you write this proposal to keep in mind what the Department values in a senior thesis. Ideally, a thesis should seek to make an original contribution to the field; develop clear, well-reasoned arguments; analyze appropriate evidence; and develop general conclusions about your research. At or by the end of this course, your proposal should be approved for thesis writing during the next quarter.

ELEMENTS of the PROPOSAL

Use the outline provided below as a guide to writing your formal thesis proposal. Certain elements of the proposal may be excluded or combined with other elements if appropriate and necessary. The proposal should be 7-9 pages long (exclusive of the abstract page, the research plan, and the bibliography), double-spaced and typewritten in 12-point font. Margins on the left should be 1 and one-half inches; all other sides should be 1 inch. Page numbers should be posted on the top right corner of each page, except for the first. Make sure you clearly identify each separate section in your proposal by using sub-headings in italics.

Abstract (1-2 paragraphs on one separate page of its own):

Generally, the abstract will be the last section you write. The abstract gives the reader a brief, succinct overview of your thesis proposal paper: the title, the issue/theme/question you want to examine, the method or methods you will employ, the sources or objects of study you will look at, and the overall significance of your project.

Project Title (top of first page)

Introduction (1 to 2 pages)
The introduction tells the reader what you intend to study, why you are studying it, and the significance of studying it. You can be creative in this part: you can start with a question, an excerpt from a book, an anecdote, or an interesting observation. Try to convince the reader to be interested in your topic; it’s like opening the door of your house to a guest that you invited.

The reader should be able to answer the following questions after reading your introduction:
What is the issue or problem you are interested in? Why are you interested in this issue or problem? Specifically, what is the research question you are asking with respect to this issue? Generally, how will you go about answering this research question? What do you propose to do?

The introduction should be detailed enough to provide the reader with your assumptions, thoughts, and proposed direction (a “road map”), but concise enough to do all of the above in one or two pages.

Review of Literature (2 to 3 pages)

The literature background outlines the theoretical foundation for your approach, or the conflicting or ambiguous theoretical assumptions you will be testing. This is where you introduce what is known about the issue and, in particular, what others have done (if anything) to answer the major question(s) you are asking. In reviewing the work of others, you may find inconsistencies that you will want to address, or theoretical explanations for the issue you are interested in and the approaches you are taking. You might use these theoretical explanations as a guide for answering your question, or you might feel that these theoretical explanations are incomplete—leading you to elaborate, refine, or replace them. Most importantly, and only if necessary, this section tells the reader what you expect to find (that is, your hypotheses) based on the evidence provided.

The reader should be able to answer the following questions after reading your background section: What have others said about the issue you are studying? How has the work of others led you to ask the question(s) you are asking? Does the work of others provide any direction or theoretical foundation for the issue you are interested in? If so, how? Are there any voids or inconsistencies in others’ explanations that your study will address? If appropriate, what are your predictions or hypotheses, and on what grounds (based on your discussion of the literature in this section) do you make each?

Also note that in proposal writing, you might want to limit your review of literature to only the major or most important sources you can identify. I suggest a minimum of four sources and maximum of 7. Make sure you cite these sources appropriately.

Method/Approach/Design (3 to 4 pages)

This section explains how you are designing your study, the parts of your study, how you are collecting your data, the method or approach you are employing for your project, or any combination thereof. It should describe such a design and explain why you chose a design or method over others, who or what your objects of study will be, and what you will do with them. If doing a study with research respondents, it should describe them, your method of eliciting
responses, your interview protocols and consent forms that need to be approved, the instruments you will use for gathering the responses, and your instruments or techniques for analyzing the responses, or a combination thereof. If you are going to conduct interviews, include a list of guide questions, the number of respondents, and other considerations you need to take into account (e.g., how you want to select and identify them) as appendices.

The reader should be able to answer the following questions after reading your method section: What specific study design did you want to use (e.g., survey methods, interviews, experiment)? What materials and/or objects of study will you be focusing on? How will you use these materials? What issues did you address with respect to choosing these materials?

**Conclusion (1 page)**

The conclusion basically recapitulates the description, intent, and significance of the project. It discusses where the project is headed. It may include a tentative, potential, or contingent argument, claim, or hypothesis. If necessary, it could also include a brief discussion of important points to consider in undertaking the project.

**Faculty Signature of Approval (last page)**

A few lines after your last sentence, type your professor’s name with a line for their signature. Allow enough space underneath the signature line for comments.

**Research Plan (1 page)**

This is a short section that outlines, in terms of time and other considerations (e.g., costs, trips to make, and research materials to collect), a specific plan to undertake and finish the project. Include an entry for the writing period.

**Bibliography (1 to 2 pages)**

The bibliography must follow citations rules consistently.