

HONOURS THESIS HANDBOOK, 2025-26

Department of Political Science St. Francis Xavier University

As a fourth-year Honours student in Political Science, your major project will be your thesis. You should register in Political Science 490, a six-credit course, in your senior year. As with any other course, your mark for 490 reflects not just the “paper” (the thesis) but the whole year’s research and writing effort. Therefore, fulfilling the deadlines, meeting regularly with your advisor, and regularly submitting and revising chapters are all factors in the final grade. It is important to think of the thesis project as a full-year endeavour, beginning at the end of your third year and culminating at the end of your senior year. In fact, one of the keys to success is to **spread your efforts across all twelve months**. The discussion below will sketch out the various stages of work involved, and give you a calendar of key dates. Samples of theses may be provided if you wish—please ask your advisor or the administrative assistant for the department.

What Is a Thesis, and How Does It Differ from a Conventional Research Paper?

An Honours thesis is an exploration of a more complex topic than can normally be handled in a research paper. Inevitably, this leads to a more extended study. The Political Science Department “Procedures” statement (appended below) suggests an overall length of 50-75 pages. But more than length alone, the thesis project is distinguished by the need for a disciplined, multi-stage investigation of a subject. Thus, a thesis is composed of a series of chapters, each addressing a necessary element of the total picture. Taken together, these chapters complete your investigation in a rounded fashion. Once your overall approach has been settled, you might think of thesis work as a series of related research papers to be completed over the academic year.

Formatting the Thesis

A thesis contains several more elements than typical research papers that you are accustomed to writing as part of your course work. There also are certain format rules and ordering conventions that should be followed carefully. These rules include:

- Margins: 1 inch on all sides
- Font type and size: Times New Roman, size 11 or 12
- Spacing: double-spaced for the main body of the thesis; single-spaced for all other elements such as the title page, etc. Bibliography is double-spaced.
- Citation methods: consult your supervisor to agree upon a specific citation method and use it consistently throughout your thesis
- Order of the elements of the thesis:
 - Title page
 - Abstract (200 words max)
 - Acknowledgements, if any
 - Table of contents
 - List of tables, if any
 - List of figures, if any
 - List of abbreviations, if any
 - Chapters
 - Bibliography

- **Pagination:**
 - Use Roman numerals for numbering the front elements of your thesis, such as the abstract, table of contents, list of figures, etc (e.g., ii, iii, iv, v, vi). Although the title page counts as the first page, it should not show any page number. The numbering starts with ii on the next page.
 - Use Arabic numerals for numbering the rest of your thesis. Start with 1 on the first page of your first chapter.

First Steps: How to Settle on a Topic and Find a Supervisor

During your third year, you should feel free to drop in on any members of the Department to discuss potential thesis ideas. You may have some areas of interest, or you may be looking for suggestions. This is an informal process: talk to as many faculty members as you wish and ask for suggestions about topics and possible supervisors. This will also help you visualize how a “topic” can be transformed into a researchable thesis question. If in doubt, the Department Chair will point you toward potential supervisors in different subject areas. It is important that you sort out your thesis topic and advisor before leaving the campus at the end of your third year, as you must prepare and submit a draft thesis proposal to the Chair by 14 June 2024. Ultimately, the Chair will confirm with you who your supervisor will be before the end of your junior (third) year.

Preparing Your Thesis Proposal

By the end of April in your junior year, you should have settled on a topic and a supervisor. The next step is to prepare a thesis proposal (following discussions with your supervisor), which outlines a preliminary plan for your subject, approach, proposed chapters and content, a short preliminary bibliography, and a research ethics statement. To visualize the end result of the project, you may wish to examine completed theses from past years—these may be borrowed from the office of the Department’s Administrative Assistant, Ms. Baker.

The thesis proposal is your first attempt to define a topic, an approach, and a set of stages for the inquiry (chapters). After discussions with your supervisor, you need to set down a preliminary statement of the project. This is useful for a few reasons. It provides you with an ongoing guideline for the sequence of activities to be tackled. It also gives you a standard against which you can measure your progress through the year. Furthermore, it can be a useful reminder of the “big picture” at times when you are immersed in the fine detail of researching or writing any one chapter. Preparing the bibliography offers useful information about those materials which are available locally, as opposed to those that must be obtained through Interlibrary Loan (ILL). Since it is wise to allow at least two weeks between ILL orders and receipts of material, the bibliography will help you schedule these orders to best advantage.

Your thesis proposal should be composed of the following elements:

1. Your name and student number
2. The name of your thesis supervisor
3. Proposed title of thesis
 - This is your suggested working title. It is often difficult to find the exact phrase to reflect the subject, but wrestling with this problem can be very profitable in clarifying your intentions.
4. Statement of topic
 - Identify the subject, the question, or the problem you seek to explore, and your proposed approach. In a paragraph or two, outline your objectives for the thesis, and sketch out the relevant dimensions.
5. Proposed table of contents
 - In a paragraph each, map out the purpose and the subject matter for each proposed chapter. This divides your project into a series of stages, whose sequence will guide the discussion from

beginning to end. It may be helpful to think of each substantive chapter as the equivalent of a research paper (approx. 10-15 pages). Please include tentative chapter titles.

6. Bibliography
 - Compile a brief preliminary bibliography, listing some of the relevant books, articles, government publications, internet sources, etc. Update and expand your bibliography as the work progresses.
7. Research Ethics Statement
 - A short statement indicating whether or not your thesis research involves any interaction with human subjects (interviews, surveys, participant observations, etc.) must be included at the end of your proposal.

There are two stages to proposal submission: a draft proposal and a final proposal. The draft proposal is due on 16 June 2025, to be submitted to the Department Chair and your advisor by email. The Chair will forward the proposal to the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC), which will review it and report back to the Chair concerning any research ethics approval requirements. The draft proposal should reflect your discussions with the thesis supervisor and outline a workable thesis plan. A final thesis proposal, revised based on your supervisor's feedback, is due for submission to both your supervisor and the Chair in September when you return to campus for your senior year.

Obviously, the structure of the thesis may evolve over the course of the year, as you and your supervisor discuss the draft results. But this does not take away the crucial role of this early planning exercise.

Managing the Workload

Given the nature of the thesis as a year-long project, it is imperative that you manage your time wisely and efficiently, so as to ensure that your workload is spread out relatively evenly throughout the year rather than tilting heavily toward the second term. There is more to your thesis than just researching your topic and writing your initial drafts. Equally important are the revisions that you will need to make, based on your supervisor's feedback and comments, to improve your thesis and bring it to its final version. This process of revision can be highly time-consuming, requiring your focused attention and sometimes even a fundamental rethinking of your plan for the thesis. To allow sufficient time for this process and other requirements in the second term, **you should have the draft versions of the first two substantive chapters of your thesis completed and submitted in the fall term.** A mid-year progress report on your work is due for submission to the Chair and supervisor when classes resume in January.

Preparing Your Progress Report

The January progress report is meant to inform the Chair and your supervisor of what you accomplished during the summer and the fall semester in terms of researching and writing your thesis, and to explain what additional steps you need to take to bring the thesis to a successful completion. The report gives you the opportunity to reflect on where you stand in terms of thesis completion and take additional steps to meet subsequent deadlines.

The progress report should include the following:

1. Your name and the name of your supervisor
2. Title of the thesis
3. A brief description of the thesis topic and argument
4. A summary of what you've accomplished so far (which chapters were completed, which other information you gathered for which other chapters)
5. A summary of what you plan to do during the Winter term (which chapters still require your attention)

How the Thesis Is Graded

For the December grade, your supervisor will assess your progress to date and assign a grade based on this evaluation. Importantly, meeting the deadlines set out in this Handbook, or any other alternative milestones that you might have agreed upon with your supervisor, is very much part of this assessment, and therefore it is critical for you to keep up with the schedule.

A **complete**, revised draft of your thesis is due for submission in mid-March. It will then be read by your supervisor and a second reader (a Political Science faculty member). They will meet to discuss the final grade for the thesis, which must be submitted to the university registrar along with other final grades. The second reader may or may not provide you with written comments on your thesis. As stated previously, the final thesis mark represents an evaluation of **the whole year's research and writing effort**.

Thesis Presentations

Toward the end of the second term, the Department convenes a seminar to enable thesis writers to present the results of their work to a general audience of fellow students and faculty. Traditionally these sessions have been quite informal, aimed at giving student researchers an opportunity to take 15-20 minutes each to describe the topic, approach, key findings, and conclusions. **This presentation is not included in the grading process.**

At the End

Following the grading process, your draft thesis will be returned to you. Any corrections or revisions can be done at this time, and a **final hard copy must be submitted to the Department Assistant along with an electronic/digital copy (editable)**. The printed copy will be bound and placed in the Department's collection of honours theses.

KEY DATES, 2025-26

Initial Meeting of Honours Students & Chair	January 2025
Draft Thesis Proposal to Chair & Supervisor for DREC	16 June 2025
Final Thesis Proposal to Chair & Supervisor	19 September 2025
Draft of First Chapter to Supervisor	31 October 2025
Draft of Second Chapter to Supervisor	1 December 2025
Progress Report to Chair & Supervisor	16 January 2026
Draft of Remaining Chapter(s) to Supervisor	16 February 2026
<u>Complete</u> Revised Draft to Supervisor	16 March 2026
Oral Presentation of Thesis	Late March/early April 2026
<u>Final</u> Revised Thesis to the Department	13 April 2026

Departmental Policy on Honours Theses and Advanced Major Papers (as of May 2022)

Honours Theses

- Honours theses in the Department of Political Science must be between 50 and 75 pages (doubled-spaced).
- Complete drafts will be submitted to the thesis supervisor by **no later than the end of March**.
- Theses will be evaluated and given a final grade by the supervisor following consultation with the second reader. Grades and reports on each thesis will be submitted to the Chair of the Department before the deadline for final grades.
- Honours theses should demonstrate sufficient sensitivity to the literature, critical skill, familiarity with library and other research tools, writing ability, and ability to organize a large block of material to earn at least a 75 in a 400-level Political Science course. The approximate conversion to a letter grade is A=99-80; B=79-70; C=69-60; D=59-50; F= less than 50.
- Selection of a topic for an honours thesis will normally be made in consultation with faculty during the academic year preceding that in which the student is to graduate. The final version of the thesis proposal must be registered with the Department Chair by the end of the first week of classes of the senior year. Students will present a written progress report to the supervisor and Department Chair during the first week of the winter term.
- Second readers should be designated early in the second term. As well as contributing to evaluation of the thesis and the determination of a final grade, second readers have the option of providing written comments to the supervisor and student. The supervisor will convey the final grade assessment to the student.
- Honours students will present the results of their work to a Department seminar organized for this purpose between the deadline for submission of final drafts and the end of classes.

Advanced Major Papers

- Senior papers are a requirement for the Advanced Major degree in Political Science.
- Senior papers should be approximately 22-25 pages (double-spaced) in length.
- Senior papers will be done in the fourth and/or final year of the student's program of studies, normally in conjunction with a senior seminar.
- The topic of the senior paper will be determined through consultation between the student and the course instructor, who is responsible for supervising and evaluating the senior paper.

Ethics Approval: Undergraduate Research Projects

Ethics approval is required for all undergraduate research with human participants.

Honours Students: In accordance with Tri-Council policy, all honours students' research with human participants must be approved by the University Research Ethics Board. Once the Department of Political Science Research Ethics Committee (DREC) completes its review of such files, the Coordinator of the DREC, on behalf of the student, forwards the file to the University REB for final deliberation and approval. This two-part process is intended to recognize departmental expertise in subject areas and to meet the Tri-Council guidelines. The StFX REB does not wish to delay honours students' research, so every effort will be made to review these projects in an efficient manner. However, special attention will be paid to research projects involving high risk and/or particularly vulnerable groups of participants.

Other Undergraduate Research: Ethics approval for other undergraduate research and for course-based research will continue to be reviewed at the departmental level only.

Students are required to complete the “StFX Research Ethics Board Application,” available: <https://www.stfx.ca/research/research-ethics-board/forms-templates>

For additional information of the University REB, please refer to: <https://www.stfx.ca/research/research-ethics-board>