Thesis Advising Suggestions

Tony Spanakos

Writing a thesis is a challenge (in both the euphemistic and positive senses). It begins as either something imposed by a graduate committee or a response to an issue that emerges in your studies (hopefully the latter). Although all of your research as a graduate student aims to contribute original scholarship to one or several sub-disciplines in the field, your thesis, because of its depth and scope, is the piece of scholarship that offers the most compelling contribution. That can be a bit scary.

It is not simply a longer paper. It is a statement, an argument, a critical review of scholarly literature, and a well-organized collection of evidence to support your argument. It is also a testament to your experience as a graduate student. For this reason, it is a privilege for me to be able to work with you and other young scholars. It is also not something to be taken lightly or to be blown off until the last moment.

Like any other paper, you will revise the argument, change the case studies you use, and probably—metaphorically or literally—rip up many pieces of scrap paper containing outlines, drafts, and so on.

Here are some suggestions:

Initial Research

You probably do not know exactly what you want to write immediately. Realistically, as we do more research either the contextualization of our argument, the nature of our evidence, or the argument itself changes. That is a normal part of the process. Regardless of whether you know the argument you want to make, the topic you want to address, or the type of literature to which you want to respond, you will eventually identify all of these things.

I would suggest that you read my writing for political science handout for some basic tips. In that document I discuss four questions that one should always ask a text (What is the context? What is the argument? What is the evidence/methodology being used? Is it credible?). If you do not know exactly what you would like to study for your thesis, it would be a good idea to focus on one of these issues (a particularly scholarly theory you want to challenge, an empirical context that sounds interesting).

One good early strategy is to dedicate one to two full days, reading articles on the issue (perhaps ‘rural development programs,’ ‘problems in implementing rule of law,’ ‘something about foreign policies of regional powers’). If you have difficulty even choosing one issue, then my suggestion would be to be to spend one to two days browsing every issue for the last seven years in two to three of the leading journals in the subdiscipline of your choice. This will give you a very good idea of what data is out there and what sort of debates have surrounded the interpretation of that data. Remember, it is always easiest to write *against* a particular argument or use of data.

Whether you begin your research from a macro- theoretical or scholarly literature-based approach or you do so from a micro-empirical or case-study based approach, this intensive review of the literature should be helpful in terms of identifying a context and possible arguments.

Drafts

If we decide to work together, I will meet with you as your research develops. In order for me to be able to give you valuable feedback, I need time to read through your drafts. While I am happy to read through literature reviews and abstracts at any point, I need to read a full draft (with a bibliography) at least one month before the deadline for thesis submission. I need this time, not because I am a slow reader (which I am) but because I need to be able to give you feedback and you will need time (sometimes a lot of time) to respond to comments on the full draft.

Very often a MA thesis becomes the tie or dress one wears on the way to the graduation ceremony. At one point, you might have thought it looked good or stylish, but on the day of the graduation—with family members taking photographs, worrying about dinner arrangements, and getting a post-graduation job that will pay in any acceptable form of currency—it is not simply an obligation but an imposition.

Almost all theses require revisions. Many require very serious revisions. Do not submit a draft thinking that, having completed the word requirement, you are essentially done ‘except for the footnotes and bibliography.’ Be prepared to make serious revisions and plan your schedules accordingly.