

## Tips on Writing a Senior Essay

1. The single most difficult part of writing a good senior essay is articulating a problem or question, and then finding a mentor or other faculty resources to help you do the project.
2. If you have a particular interest or enthusiasm, follow up on that.
3. If you have several competing interests or ideas, sit down and do some preliminary sorting out. Narrow the field down to a few and then use faculty to help you narrow it down to one.
4. If you don't know where to begin, do an inventory check. Some questions that can help are;
  - A) Have I done a paper I would like to expand and build upon?
  - B) Have I had work in Foreign Studies or Washington that gives me resources to work with?
  - C) Which classes or teachers have touched on topics I find interesting?
  - D) Have there been books or articles that especially intrigued me.
5. Once you have identified a broad area, the next step is to try to focus the subject of the research. Good senior essays are usually nested in broad and important problems but often end up tackling one piece of the puzzle about that problem. For example, one might start with the grand problem of whether Congresspersons act as delegates or trustee, but end up with a tight study of the difference between two different issues in a particular time and the kind of representation they elicited.
6. Another step you need to take is to move from a descriptive perspective to an analytical perspective. In other words, most senior essays start out as being "about" something. I.e. I am going to write about Aristotle and women. For a good senior essay you have to move fairly quickly to being able to change your topic from being "about something" to one which answers a focused question or poses an intellectual puzzle or problem. Instead of writing "about the European Union", move to writing to answer the question of whether the monetary and fiscal reforms required by the European union have fallen disproportionately on the least advantaged.
7. The best way to come up with a question or puzzle is to know some of the literatures in the area you intend to work in. Do background reading, ask faculty for key texts in the area. Look at academic journal articles on the topic. Use JSTOR and other electronic searches. Sometimes reading several recent articles in a scholarly journal on a topic can help you identify controversies, puzzle and gaps in the literature.
8. The luckiest initial research will lead you to find two books or articles that disagree about a topic. Your thesis would then be to try to help settle the disagreement. Or find a book or articles that you disagree with. Your thesis would then try to prove the book wrong. Or, you might find that a certain

aspect of a problem has not been researched, or a theory had not been applied to a particular area.

9. In addition to posing the thesis as critical and analytical rather than descriptive and narrative work, also think about bringing significant primary resources to bear. Wherever possible try to think of evidence that is primary rather than secondary. Primary evidence is taken from a variety of original sources, including original texts, rather than somebody else's opinion. They include economic and political statistics and facts.

10. Subject matter determines length, but on average a senior essay will be in the 40 to 50-page range.

11. Think of the professional journal article as the model rather than the book.