

Independent Work in the

Department of Religion

Princeton University 2021 - 2022

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The Study of Religion: An Overview

Princeton University has long been committed to the idea that religion, like politics or art, is an important sphere of life and merits systematic attention within the curriculum. The primary responsibility for instruction in this area has, for more than half a century, been entrusted to the Department of Religion, which belongs to the Division of the Humanities. Our charge is to do our best to examine religious life, the diverse forms it has taken in different cultures and historical periods, and the questions it poses for theoretical, ethical, and political reflection. As a humanities department, rather than a seminary or theological school, we appeal to the same standards of historical and philosophical scholarship found in neighboring disciplines.

The major in Religion allows concentrators the opportunity to study diverse cultures, peoples, texts and ideologies. Some examples are African-American religions, the literature of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, the Gnostic gospels, ancient Israel, modern Jewish thought, history and contemporary American religion, philosophy of religion, religious and philosophical ethics, political thought, gender and the body in American religions, and the roles of women in contemporary Muslim societies. Department requirements are designed to introduce the students to at least four major world religious traditions of the past and present and to various approaches to the study of religion.

The interdisciplinary nature of the Department and of its faculty, whose backgrounds and research interests in the study of religion include history, anthropology, philosophy, literature, politics and ethics, means that we tend to attract majors who are a diverse group. Despite a range of interests and approaches, the Department has a strong sense of community and collegiality that is actively fostered by faculty, staff and students, both undergraduate and graduate.

Goals of Independent Work in Religion

Independent research and writing provides students with an opportunity to gain experience in original research, and develop skills as critical thinkers, careful readers and interpreters, and authoritative writers. It allows students to take greater responsibility for their knowledge and understanding of the cultural and intellectual landscapes of diverse religious traditions.

Because the study of religion is interdisciplinary by nature, research for the independent work may involve critical readings of major theoretical and philosophical texts, archival research, original work with primary texts in the original languages, and ethnographic or sociological research.

Grading Standards for Theses in the Department of Religion

Good work in the Department of Religion possesses three distinguishing qualities:

- It is based on independent research and thinking
- It states, clarifies, and defends an argument that pertains to a significant aspect of the study of religion
- It is well-written, offering a balanced evaluation of the evidence

What the letter grades mean: The Undergraduate Announcement assigns each letter grade a verbal equivalent that can help students understand the standards faculty use to evaluate written work. "A" means outstanding, "B" means good, "C" means acceptable, "D" means minimally acceptable, and "F" means failure.

When grading religion papers, the faculty takes these stipulations seriously. This entails awarding "A's" only to those papers that the grader can honestly claim to be outstanding examples of humanistic scholarship, when judged by standards appropriate to undergraduate work--and so on, for the other grades on the scale.

What an "A" paper is like: An "A" paper is outstanding in the sense that it satisfies all of the standards implicit in the basic formula and does so to the highest degree. Such a paper would therefore be elegantly written, based on research and thinking of a highly original kind, state and clarify a highly interesting thesis, and defend that thesis with especially persuasive argumentation. An "A+" paper would have all of these features while also displaying at least one characteristic that lifts it above the level of most excellent work by undergraduates over the years. An "A-" paper would be excellent in most respects but slightly flawed in one or more respects. For example, an "A-" paper might be elegantly written, based on research and thinking of a highly original kind, state a highly interesting thesis in a clear way, and include a good deal of impressive argumentation, but not succeed in responding appropriately to one of

the more important objections that could be raised against the main thesis. It might be excellent in most respects but fail to qualify its main thesis in the way that would be required to secure the perfection of the paper's argument. Or it might be outstanding in most respects while falling-short of elegance stylistically.

What a "B" paper is like: A "B" paper is good in the sense that it satisfies all of the standards implicit in the basic formula and does so to a respectable degree. Such a paper would typically include careful but not elegant writing. It would be based on research and thinking that shows some originality. It would state and clarify a reasonably interesting thesis. And it would seriously engage with potential objections. A paper that had most of these traits but also had some flashes of excellence would qualify for a "B+." A paper that had most of these traits but also had some more serious flaws would merit a "B-." Such flaws might include occasional infelicities of style, excessive dependence on suggestions made by the instructor or adviser, some degree of confusion in the interpretation of evidence, or discernible gaps in the argumentation.

What a "C" paper is like: A "C" paper is acceptable in the sense that it shows evidence of sustained effort to inquire into the subject matter and to write a serious paper about it. But a "C" paper shows only modest or uneven success in meeting the standards implicit in the basic formula. Most such papers are marred by somewhat awkward, stilted, or unclear writing, an ill-chosen main thesis that is either relatively uninteresting or too ambitious to defend adequately, and an argument that has trouble withstanding close scrutiny. A paper that had most of these traits but a few of the traits associated with "B" papers would deserve a "C+." A paper that had most of these traits but one or two more serious flaws would call for a "C-."

What a "D" paper is like: A "D" paper is minimally acceptable in the sense that it barely counts as completion of the assignment. For a paper to receive a "D," it must show some evidence of an attempt to satisfy the standards implicit in the basic formula. For example, the student must have studied the materials being discussed with some understanding. The paper must be of roughly the expected length and pertain to a topic in the study of religion. But "D" papers are seriously flawed in some way and perhaps in more than one way. They may be carelessly-written, lack a clearly identifiable thesis, fail to anticipate possible objections, or suffer from some combination of these weaknesses.

What an "F" paper is like: An "F" paper is a failure in the sense that it falls entirely short of satisfying the standards implicit in the basic formula.

Evaluation of Independent Work

Concentrators in Religion work with a faculty adviser assigned by the Department. In the case of the junior paper, the adviser grades the work and provides a substantive written comment outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, as well as suggestions for further research. The senior thesis is evaluated by the student's adviser and by a second faculty reader, both of whom provide substantive written feedback outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, and suggestions for discussion during the subsequent senior comprehensive oral. The adviser and reader, in conversation with the department faculty, determine the final thesis grade following the senior comprehensive oral.

Important Dates for Junior Papers and Senior Theses, 2021-2022

The following timelines for the JP and thesis provide a sense of rhythm of work over the course of the year. The department's undergraduate administrator provides a detailed calendar for concentrators and their advisers each year.

Junior papers:

Jan.14	JP proposal due
March 14	Submit draft of 15 pages to adviser
March 25	Submit complete draft to adviser
April 11	Junior Paper due

Senior

Theses: Oct.	Submit five-page thesis proposal to adviser
25	The proposal should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- description of topic, scope of the project, and methodological approach you plan to take- discussion of how your coursework at Princeton or elsewhere has prepared you to pursue the topic- a brief survey of sources and discussion of the

support among the junior majors. In the spring, juniors write a 30–40 page junior paper.

At the end of the spring semester, each junior concentrator meets with his or her JP adviser and an additional member of the faculty to discuss the student's focus of study and plans for the senior year, including course selection and senior thesis topic.

JP Proposal Guidelines:

1. Title page, including working title; student's name; department; date; signed honor pledge
2. Main body of the proposal, including:
 - Introductory section in which students present their topic and its significance and put forward the research question
 - Discussion of the state of the existing literature on the subject and how the work contributes to this scholarly conversation.
 - Consideration of the methods and sources to be used
3. Tentative outline
4. Bibliography

Methods of Inquiry: Religion is a strongly interdisciplinary department, and therefore the methods of inquiry are determined by your research question. These may include textual analysis, historical analysis, philosophical analysis, and ethnographic or sociological fieldwork. Please note that some methods of inquiry, primarily those pertaining to fieldwork, require the approval of the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees research involving human subjects (<http://www.princeton.edu/ria/human-research-protection/committee-information/>). This process may delay the start of field research, so advance planning is required.

The remainder of this guide focuses on Senior Independent work, but much of it will prove helpful to JP writers as well.

Senior Thesis

Students may feel that writing a thesis over the course of a year is a daunting task, but with good planning, a well-formulated research question, and ample use of the resources provided—in particular the advisers—it can be an enjoyable and rewarding process.

While the thesis is independent work in its conception, research, and writing, the following guidelines should offer some practical advice to students writing a work of this scope for the first time.

Finding a topic

One of most difficult stages in the process of writing a thesis is finding a suitable subject of inquiry. It is paramount that you be enthusiastic about the topic you plan to write on, but it is equally important to approach the topic from a scholarly perspective that brings the sources and methods of the academic study of religion to bear. The courses you have taken are a good starting point for further investigation, such as questions raised in the course that you would like to explore, or topics that remained unaddressed.

Building on a course paper, or elements of the JP that you did not have a chance to pursue, are also useful ways of exploring a topic. While advisers are not assigned until after the prospectus has been submitted, meeting with relevant faculty to solicit advice is a good idea at this stage.

Seniors should use the suggestions from the junior conversation to explore potential thesis topics during the summer and be prepared to present an idea of these directions to the Departmental Representative early in the fall. Keep in mind the requirement that thesis work take place within the context of your area of focus within the major, and

that you are expected to have taken the relevant coursework in preparation for the senior independent work.

The assignment of advisers by the Department will be made following your first meeting with the Departmental Representative and take into consideration your topic and the adviser's fields of interest.

The next stage is to become acquainted with the relevant primary and secondary literature related to your topic so that you can begin to move from topic to a refined research question. Ask yourself: What have other scholars said about the topic? What sorts of sources and methods have they used? What questions remain open that you wish to pursue? Are there two or more conflicting perspectives, which you may be able to reconcile or can you provide definitive support for one over the other(s)?

Once you have been assigned an adviser and developed a topic, you should make an appointment to meet with your adviser and begin the process of refining your research question.

Formulating a clear and concise research question is a critical stage in the process of writing a thesis. While your topic may be very broad, your research question will serve as a focusing lens. A properly constructed question gives direction to the research and focus to the writing. It provides the catalyst for the argument, around which the thesis is built. A well-formulated research question helps you define the scope of your thesis; it may suggest a structure and direct you to particular sources. Your goal in the thesis will be to weigh the evidence and offer your answer to this question.

As your research continues you will focus your topic still further; sometimes, what you had planned as a portion of the thesis may emerge as the primary focus. This is to be expected, so you should be open to following exciting leads, provided that you remain in control of the process.

Methods of Inquiry: Religion is a strongly interdisciplinary department, and therefore the methods of inquiry are determined by your research question. These may include textual analysis, historical analysis, philosophical analysis, and ethnographic or sociological fieldwork. Please note that some methods of inquiry, primarily those pertaining to fieldwork, require the approval of the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees research involving human subjects (<http://www.princeton.edu/ria/human-research-protection/committee-information/>). This process may delay the start of field research, so advance planning is required.

Writing a Thesis Proposal

In the proposal, students set out their research question, suggest sources, and set forth a plan for writing. The prospectus is not a contract—it is a preliminary map or plan laying out where you think you are, where you wish to go, and how you plan to get there. The exercise of drafting a proposal compels one to refine your research question and to formulate a clear plan for the research and writing. The proposal, conventionally five pages long, should include at least:

- A description of topic, scope of the project, and methodological approach you plan to take
- A discussion of how your coursework at Princeton or elsewhere has prepared you to pursue the topic
- A brief survey of sources and discussion of the kinds of evidence you plan to use
- A discussion of the contribution your work will make to the existing scholarship in your area
- A preliminary bibliography
- A preliminary outline of the structure of the thesis.

PLEASE NOTE: Your adviser may require that you submit a revised proposal before you move to the research and writing phase.

Working with Your Adviser

What advisees can expect of their advisers. Advisees can expect to meet with their advisers regularly, to have drafts read within a reasonable, agreed-upon amount of time, to receive detailed and constructive feedback. Although your adviser is your primary sounding-board in this process, you should take advantage of the human resources at Princeton and seek advice from other members of the faculty within the Department and beyond.

What advisers can expect of their advisees. Advisers can expect an advisee to take the initiative, to cooperate in setting up a detailed work schedule, to keep to the general departmental schedule for the completion of independent work, to show

up punctually for scheduled meetings. Adviser will expect to be given a reasonable amount of time to read and comment on drafts.

The Process of Writing

While there is no single correct way to write a senior thesis, it is essential to begin the actual writing at an early stage, since the processes of research and of writing are intimately linked.

The best of academic writing combines thorough research, clear argumentation, and conviction of the significance of the intellectual contribution. One good way to acquire the skills of the art of academic writing is to bring a new depth of vision to ones reading. Take a work that you have found powerful and persuasive, identify what makes it so for you, and emulate the author's strengths.

Your research question is the catalyst of the entire thesis and will guide the course of the research and writing. Your primary goal is to answer your research question satisfactorily. A strongly formulated presentation of your thesis should take the form "I argue that / I claim that / I prove that..." rather than "I examine / juxtapose / survey / study / shed light on."

Remember that your goal is to offer a plausible and persuasive interpretation of your data rather than absolute proof that your hypothesis is correct.

Introduction

The Introduction is part and parcel of the thesis. In it you set forth (1) the research question; (2) how previous literature addresses the question, and where it falls short; (3) your methodology: how you intend to go about answering the question in a different way. (4) If you wish to do so, you provide a preview of the results of your analysis; however, you may choose to maintain a degree of suspense and unfold your thesis in the following chapters. Finally, you may delineate the scope of your research: explain what is not going to be discussed, and why.

Note: A preface (which is optional) is different form the Introduction. In your preface you may choose to describe your intellectual autobiography — the process that led to the writing of your senior thesis, and thank your parents, friends, and professors.

The Introduction is often the last chapter to be written, since it offers a panoramic overview of the project.

The Main Chapters

The structure of your thesis will depend on the nature of your project, but a typical thesis in the Religion Department contains a number of chapters each supplying an essential component of your overall argument. It may be practical to think of each chapter as an independent term paper. Keep in mind that as you continue the research and writing the structure of your chapters may change: what began as a small section of a chapter may emerge as a topic in its own right, requiring a full-fledged chapter.

Make sure the structure of your argument is sound: avoid offering conclusions that do not actually follow from the propositions; circular argumentation; and overstating the evidence. Try to anticipate objections and respond to them in the course of each chapter. Be sure to present the opinions of your interlocutors as generously and accurately as possible.

Conclusion

In the Conclusion, you may wish to summarize in brief what you have done, but that is not the main objective of this part of your senior thesis. Demonstrate what its implications may be for further research, and what questions remain open.

Bibliography

Every senior thesis must include a list of works cited and consulted. Be sure to consult a style guide such as the Chicago Manual of Style for proper format.

Style and Format:

Please consult the undergraduate section of our website, <http://religion.princeton.edu> for full guidelines regarding the format of junior papers and senior theses.

Senior Comprehensive Examinations

In the Department of Religion, senior comprehensive exams take the form of an oral defense of the students' theses and a discussion of their career in the Department. Three people will be present at the Senior Comprehensive Examinations: the student, the adviser, and a second reader. The examination will last approximately 75-90 minutes.

For the thesis defense, first consider carefully the comments of your adviser and second reader. You may be asked in these comments to think about other issues or to look into other questions and you should come to the examination prepared to respond in detail. For the second part of the Comprehensive, please be prepared to expand upon your comprehensive statement, and to discuss the logic and development of your work in the Department.

The senior comprehensive statement consists of a form (see appendix) listing the Departmental courses you have taken, the title of both junior and senior independent work projects and the advisers' names. Additionally, your statement should include a two- to three-page description of the education you have received in religious studies. You should describe the development of your interests and focus in religion in the context of the courses you have taken, including courses outside the Department, and the papers you have written.

Funding for Independent Work

Majors who require research funding for independent work may apply to the Religion Department, other individual academic departments, and other offices and programs on campus through the Student Activities Funding Engine (SAFE). The online application process requires a full account of your research proposal, a detailed itemized budget, planned itinerary, and the name of your thesis adviser. We encourage you to start working on your application materials early so that you have ample time to meet the strict deadlines set by the various funding sources.

Resources

Religion Librarian: The Religion Librarian, Wayne Bivens-Tatum, is available for guidance and to offer suggestions regarding resources for research in religion.

Wayne Bivens-Tatum
B-8-N Firestone Library
609-258-6367
rbivens@princeton.edu

Writing Center:

The Writing Center offers free one-on-one conferences with experienced fellow writers trained to consult on assignments in any discipline. Special 80-minute conferences are available for JP and Senior Thesis writers at any stage in the writing process, who may sign up to work with a graduate student fellow from the department of their choice at <http://www.princeton.edu/writing/appt>. Additionally, Independent Work Mentors from the Writing Center prepare workshops and programming to aid juniors and seniors in their research. Students should regularly check or subscribe to the Princeton Undergraduate Research Calendar (PURC) for upcoming programming, which cover topics ranging from preparing funding proposals to note taking, and from making an argument to draft review.

APPENDIX:

JUNIOR PAPER TITLE PAGE SAMPLE

TITLE

by

Student's Name '23

Submitted to
The Department of Religion, Princeton University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Supervisor: Professor's Name

April 11, 2022

SENIOR THESIS TITLE PAGE SAMPLE

TITLE

by

Student's Name '22

Submitted to
The Department of Religion, Princeton University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Supervisor: Professor's Name

April 4, 2022