

A Guide to Writing an Honors Thesis in Urban Studies

(Updated Dec 10, 2023)

Congratulations on your decision to pursue an honors thesis in Urban Studies! Writing a thesis can be an eye-opening and rewarding experience, and many students consider it to be the academic highlight of their time at Brown. It can also be a complex process, and so advance planning is key. This guide outlines some of the basic requirements, timelines, and components involved in doing thesis research in the Urban Studies Program. It is not an exhaustive document, and you should consult with your thesis advisor about any questions that arise in the research or writing process.

What is a thesis?

A thesis is a substantial piece of written work that asks a well-defined question, answers it through **original research**, and places these findings in conversation with other relevant scholarship.

What is “original research”?

Because Urban Studies is an interdisciplinary program involving multiple fields (from history, to design, to environmental studies, to anthropology, etc.), the definition of what constitutes “original research” will depend on the nature of your project and the specific field of study in which you (and likely your advisor) are working. The important thing to remember is that while you absolutely will need to read what other scholars have said about your topic (a successful thesis *must* draw from and speak to a wider body of existing scholarship, aka “secondary sources”), your thesis cannot be simply a summary or re-statement of work done by others. It also cannot be purely an “opinion piece” laying out your own personal views on an issue. Rather, a core component of your thesis should analyze appropriate *evidence* (primary sources, materials, data, etc.) that you have identified, traced, collected, or generated.

For example, a student writing a thesis on the history of a particular neighborhood might track down historical documents, census records, photographs, and maps in city or local archives. A student writing a thesis on the contemporary cultural significance of that same neighborhood might engage in close reading of relevant films, social media posts, TV shows, and literature. A student writing a thesis on the impact of pollution in that neighborhood might collect environmental data about current levels of air and water toxicity, comb through public health records, and track down lawsuit documents. A student writing a thesis on the neighborhood’s response to gentrification might conduct interviews with residents, survey renters and landlords, map changes in land use and house prices over time, and observe community meetings and protests.

As you can imagine from these brief examples, Urban Studies theses often draw upon a range of methods and use both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Once you have a good sense of the topics/questions you hope to explore in your thesis, you should have a conversation with your advisor about what kinds of methods and materials would be most relevant or feasible in terms of your specific project.

What should be the scope of a thesis?

When embarking on a thesis, it's normal to feel a bit daunted at first. Students often mistakenly think that their thesis needs to cover vast amounts of material in order to "count." While a thesis is indeed a substantial endeavor (and likely the largest single project that an undergraduate will work on during their time at Brown), it's important to remember that a thesis is *not* a PhD dissertation or a book. A thesis with a clear focus on a specific issue, place, set of sources, community, etc. is often more successful (and more rewarding to research and write) than one that tries to address a wide range of topics or massive amounts of data. While most students will of course start out with a broad topic in mind, one of your advisor's main responsibilities is to help you hone the focus of your work so its boundaries are manageable and appropriate – don't hesitate to speak with them if you feel your project is becoming unwieldy. Some students also find it very helpful to read past Urban Studies theses to get a sense of the typical scope (and length); hard copies of all past theses can be found in the seminar room in Maxcy Hall (you can ask the Academic Coordinator, Matt Roth, for access to these copies and should read them in the seminar room).

What should be the length of a thesis?

Again, this depends on the nature of your project and the specific discipline in which you are working. For example, theses in the fields of history and anthropology are usually longer relative to theses written in engineering or design programs. When in doubt, ask your advisor – they should set the expectation for the page length of your final draft. In Urban Studies, theses usually consist of several chapters (introduction and conclusion chapters with 2-4 content chapters in between, plus any appendixes, images, and bibliography), though you may structure yours somewhat differently if your advisor thinks it appropriate. Typically, Urban Studies theses have been in the range of 60-80 double-spaced pages, but some excellent theses have been shorter and or longer. Again, discuss with your advisor what they expect to be a reasonable length for your final draft.

What does a thesis advisor do?

Having the opportunity to work closely with a faculty advisor is one of the highlights of the thesis experience. You should begin to think about potential faculty advisors as soon as you have decided to do a thesis and have settled on a general topic. An advisor should have expertise in an aspect of your topic (for example, knowledge of the specific period, place, methods, or issues you want to explore in your project). Your advisor should be a [core faculty member](#) within the Urban Studies Program and should be considered "regular faculty" by the university, which essentially means that they are a lecturer or a tenure-track professor (postdoctoral fellows and visiting assistant professors typically cannot serve as thesis advisors, though they can serve as second readers). Also, faculty listed as "affiliated faculty" on the Urban Studies website usually do not serve as primary thesis advisors (though there are exceptions to this), but can (and often do) serve as second readers. Note that a thesis advisor is not the same thing as a concentration advisor; they could end up being the same person, but they certainly don't have to be. Note also that your thesis advisor typically cannot be on leave or sabbatical during the semester in which you will submit your final draft.

Once you've identified a potential advisor, reach out to them to discuss your ideas for your thesis and to ask them to be your advisor. It's recommended that you don't put off this conversation too long. Some professors are advising multiple students and may not be able to take you on, so it is wise to give yourself enough time to seek out another advisor if that becomes necessary. At the latest, you should have confirmed your advisor by mid-Spring of your junior year, as their signature will be needed on your honors thesis application form due to the Urban Studies Program in mid-April.

The working relationship students have with their thesis advisors can vary greatly, depending on the nature of the student's project and the advising style of the faculty member. Some advisors like to be very involved in the thesis process and prefer to meet regularly with their advisees to get updated on their progress, discuss findings, and review drafts. Other advisors are more hands-off in their approach and are happy to let students run their own projects with a few check-in meetings over the course of the year. Either approach is fine – the important thing is that students are aware of their advisor's expectations and all parties are on the same page. For this reason, it's recommended that you discuss not only the topic of your thesis with your advisor but also their preferences for how often they would like to meet, when they want to read drafts, etc. If any difficulties arise in your relationship with your advisor, you can reach out to the Urban Studies DUS (Prof. Lauren Yapp) with your concerns.

What is a “second reader”?

Your thesis will be read and evaluated by two people, your advisor and a “second reader.” Like your advisor, a second reader should also have expertise in an aspect of your thesis topic (ideally, an expertise different from but complementary to your advisor's). Second readers do not need to be affiliated with the Urban Studies program or be at the rank of “regular faculty” (so, postdoctoral fellows and visiting assistant professors can serve as second readers), but they *do* need to be affiliated with Brown University. Usually, students will reach out to potential second readers in the Fall of their senior year (though earlier is absolutely fine too) and have them confirmed by October. As with advisors, the working relationship with second readers can vary – some do like to meet regularly with students and are willing to read drafts along the way, while others prefer to have one or two conversations with students about their thesis and then read only the final draft when it is ready. Again, either arrangement is fine, the important thing is to clarify expectations from the beginning.

Can my thesis have an “applied” or “creative” component?

The short answer is “it really depends.” Generally speaking, an honors thesis cannot consist solely of a creative project or policy proposal. As per the definition above, it must be based on original research, seek to answer well-defined questions, marshal appropriate evidence, and situate itself within a wider body of relevant scholarship. Depending on the specifics of your project and the assessment of your advisor, it may be possible to incorporate a creative or applied component into your thesis if it does not detract from or seek to substitute these essential scholarly components. For example, some students doing community-engaged research may plan to create a “deliverable” for

the people or organizations they have worked with (for example, a policy proposal, a video, a toolkit, etc.); their thesis advisor should be able to advise them on whether that “deliverable” should be included/discussed in the thesis itself or should be completed separately. Likewise, students wanting to create an urban planning or design proposal as part of their project should discuss with their advisor how best to integrate that into the thesis structure. In all cases, the applied or creative component of a project should be informed by the research the student has carried out and engage with the core intellectual questions at stake in the thesis – otherwise, the applied or creative component might be better suited for a capstone project rather than an honors thesis.

What is the Internal Review Board (IRB) and does it apply to my project?

Some research that involves living human beings – such as interviews, surveys, participant observations, psychological experiments, etc. – may require permission ahead of time from a group at Brown known as the [Internal Review Board \(IRB\)](#). In Urban Studies, we recommend that you speak with your advisor about whether or not they think your project needs to go through the IRB review process. This process can take some time, so it is recommended that you discuss this with your advisor early on and definitely before you begin to collect data. Regardless of whether or not your project needs IRB approval, it is also important that you have a conversation with your advisor about research ethics as applies to your proposed research.

Do I need funding and where can I find it?

Not all thesis projects will require funding; for instance, many relevant sources are available for free in local libraries or online collections. However, certain kinds of research can involve expenses, such as purchasing data sets or software, making copies of archival materials, or transportation and accommodation costs for research that involves travel. When you start to make plans for your research, you should also estimate the potential expenses involved and consider applying for funds to cover those expenses. Depending on the nature of your project, Brown offers many options for funding student research. These include (but are not limited to):

Open to Urban Studies concentrators: (see links for details and deadlines)

- [The Harriet David Goldberg '56 Endowment](#): A fund offering research support to undergraduates ranging from \$500 up to \$3000, depending on the project. Only urban studies concentrators are eligible to apply, and those writing their thesis in urban studies are given priority. Applications reviewed on a rolling basis.
- [Marisa Arpels '01 Undergraduate Teaching and Research Award](#): A fund offering research support ranging to undergraduates ranging from \$500 up to \$3000, depending on the project. Concentrators in Urban Studies should propose a study that addresses urban environmental issues, preferably in the city of Providence, and/or which affect low-income communities and/or affect the developing world.

Open to all Brown students: (see links for details and deadlines)

- [Research at Brown \(RAB\)](#): RAB grants support student-initiated research projects and travel to present their research at conferences. Students may submit proposals for up to \$500 of funding at any time. Applications are considered on a rolling basis.
- [Undergraduate Teaching and Research Award \(UTRA\)](#): If your thesis project involves significant collaboration with a faculty member on a shared research project, you may be able to apply for an UTRA grant to fund it. The amount of funding depends on the project budget.
- [Royce Fellowship](#): If your thesis project involves a significant community-engaged component, you may be able to apply for a Royce Fellowship to fund it. Currently the award is \$4000. Royce Fellows also participate in a series of workshops in the year following their summer research, where they discuss their research with the rest of their cohort and share their findings with the wider Brown community.
- [Engaged Research Mini-Grants](#): Similar to the Royce Fellowship in that the research must have a community-engaged dimension, these mini-grants are designed to fund more modest components of a project up to \$500.
- [Edward Guiliano '72 Global Fellowship](#): This fellowship supports community-engaged scholarship, artistic, and research projects around the world. Awards range from \$750-5000 depending on the scale of the project and travel distance.
- [John Hay Library Undergraduate Fellowship Program](#): The John Hay Library Undergraduate Fellowship Program supports original research using the collections at the John Hay Library. Over eight weeks in the summer, a cohort of students will build research skills using primary sources to develop an original project. Projects can take the form of a traditional research paper, or may be creative or digital in format, but all projects must make primary and substantive use of the rare books, manuscripts, artwork, and/or other objects at the Library. Projects do not have to be completed by the end of the summer; the fellowship can serve as a start for a senior thesis. Award is typically \$4000.
- [Center for Contemporary South Asia Fellowship](#): These grants facilitate research for a senior thesis exploring topics related to South Asia (and usually involving research in South Asia and often in collaboration with a local NGO or academic), up to \$5000 per project.

Other tips for finding funding:

- If you are a double concentrator, ask your other department if they have any grants set aside for their students to fund thesis research
- Reach out to other centers or institutes on campus that are relevant to your specific research topic (for example, the Watson Institute, if your project is located outside of the US); they may have their own funds to support undergraduate work

- Ask your advisor if they know of any funding opportunities for undergraduate students in their field, either at Brown or elsewhere
- Don't forget external funding opportunities – depending on the nature of your project, there may be organizations outside of Brown that offer grants to support student work on relevant topics.
- If you plan to pursue a PhD after graduation and belong to a group historically underrepresented in research careers, you may be eligible for a [Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship](#) or the [Summer Research Early Identification Program](#). The former is open to sophomores only and the latter to rising sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

When should I get started?

Most students start to give serious thought to their honors thesis in the Fall or early Spring semester of their junior year. Outlined below is a suggested thesis timeline for current juniors planning to graduate in the Spring. Items in **red** are deadlines set by the university or components required by the Urban Studies program. Otherwise, the dates for submitting chapter drafts to your advisor are suggestions; in practice, you should work out a schedule with your advisor that makes the most sense with your project topic and thesis structure.

Please note that students not graduating in the Spring (“.5-ers”) should consult with the DUS and their advisor about when to register for the two required URBN courses and when to submit their initial proposal and final draft.

Junior Fall:

- Brainstorm ideas for thesis topics, questions, etc.
- Using online and library resources, read widely on the issues your thesis may address; start building a list of relevant books and articles
- Reach out to faculty at Brown with expertise in your chosen thesis topics; take classes with them and/or meet in their office hours for preliminary discussions of your ideas and research plans; ask them for recommendations of what authors you should read to prepare
- If you think your thesis will require significant funding (for example, if you know you'll need to travel to another country or city), start looking into fellowships and grants. Some may have deadlines coming up soon and/or may require letters of recommendation from your thesis advisor.

Junior Spring:

- Continue to think and read about your thesis topic, gradually honing in on some specific aspect of it that you'd like to explore
- Ask a faculty member affiliated with Urban Studies to be your thesis advisor. Discuss your research plans for the summer and next year; if relevant, ask them about funding opportunities, IRB review, etc.
- If necessary, apply for fellowships and grants to fund your research.

- If applicable, apply for IRB approval.
 - Attend the honors thesis workshop series led by the DUS (Prof. Lauren Yapp) in February and March to help you further define your research questions and methods
 - **Draft and submit** your honors thesis application (aka “the thesis proposal”) to the Urban Studies Academic Coordinator (Matthew Roth) and DUS (Prof. Lauren Yapp) by the mid-April deadline.* This proposal needs to be reviewed and signed by your thesis advisor prior to being turned in (the second reader’s signature is not needed at this time). *(For Spring 24, it the deadline is Friday, April 19th)*
 - Plan out your summer research and make any necessary logistical arrangements (booking travel, locating archives, identifying data sets, contacting organizations or individuals you hope to meet with, etc.)
- *the exact date will be announced in the preceding semester*

Summer between Junior Spring and Senior Fall:

- Carry out the bulk of your research (e.g. collecting primary sources, generating data, conducting interviews and observations, doing close readings of texts or media, etc.)
- As the focus of your thesis becomes clearer, continue to read secondary sources, i.e. relevant articles and books, adding them to your draft bibliography as you go along.
- Start to keep track of your initial analysis of the materials you’re encountering in your research; jot down any preliminary answers to your research questions that might be emerging by this point
- Check in with your thesis advisor, according to the schedule that you set together.
- At the end of the summer, **submit a report of the primary research you have done so far and an updated bibliography of the secondary sources you think you will use for your thesis.** This report should be about 3-4 pages double spaced (not including bibliography) and be emailed to both your thesis advisor and the DUS before the start of the Fall semester. **The DUS and your advisor will review your report and determine if you’re on track to complete the thesis.** If so, the DUS will give you a code to register for URBN 1981 in the Fall.

Senior Fall:

- **Register for URBN 1981 “Honors Thesis Workshop” (S/NC)** and complete assignments/readings as required for that course throughout the semester.
- In early September, meet with your advisor to review your summer research and ask them to suggest additional primary sources and secondary works, beyond those identified in the proposal. Your advisor will also review the methods and materials you are using to answer your original research question.
- **Reach out to and meet with potential second readers for your thesis. By mid-October, you should have one confirmed.** You can simply have them confirm their role via email, cc’ing your thesis advisor and the Urban Studies DUS.
- If necessary, continue any research that still needs to be completed. Ideally, you should finish your research by mid-Fall, so that you can shift to focusing primarily on analyzing this research, outlining your thesis structure, and starting to draft chapters.

- In October, submit a tentative outline of the thesis to your advisor. Identify major themes to be examined and sources to be consulted in the proposed thesis chapters. Submit a detailed outline of one specific chapter for your advisor to review.
- In November, submit a more developed outline of thesis (including more detailed outlines of each chapter) and a bibliography. Clarify the argument you will make. Incorporate any feedback from your advisor and peers in the URBN 1981 thesis workshop.
- In December, submit the first draft of one chapter to your advisor. Make a plan with you advisor and second reader for when they would like to see drafts of which chapters over the coming months.

Senior Spring

- Register for URBN 1972 Senior Honors Thesis II (grade) in the section of your advisor.
- Continue to meet with your peers from the Honors Thesis Workshop to review drafts and discuss progress over the Spring semester.
- In January, submit a draft of a second chapter to your advisor. Incorporate into your writing any feedback so far from your advisor on previous drafts.
- In February, submit a draft of your third chapter to your advisor. Incorporate into your writing any feedback so far from your advisor on previous drafts.
- In March, submit draft of any remaining sections of the thesis (e.g. introduction and conclusion, another chapter, sections of previous drafts that have needed considerable revisions, etc.) to advisor. Incorporate into your writing any feedback so far from your advisor on previous drafts.
- By the end of March, submit a full draft of the entire thesis (including introduction, conclusion, bibliography, and any appendices) to your advisor. Incorporate into your writing any feedback so far from your advisor on previous drafts.
- In mid-April* submit your complete final draft of your thesis to your advisor and second reader (it can be sent to your committee via email). Also collect signatures from your advisor and second reader on the Thesis Submittal Sheet; this should be included with the bound, physical copy you will submit to the Urban Studies department a few days after you have submitted it to your committee. *(For Spring '24, the deadline for submitting a completed final draft is April 19th, and the bound/ signed copy is due by April 23rd).*
- Advisors and second readers will submit their written evaluation of the thesis to the Urban Studies Program Director by early May.
- In early May* the Urban Studies Program will hold the Honors and Capstone Presentations and Celebration, where thesis writers will briefly present the finding of their thesis to faculty and peers. At this time, the Urban Studies Program also submits its honors recommendations to the Dean of the College. *(For Spring '23, the presentations will likely be held on May 3rd).*

**the exact date will be announced in the preceding semester*

- For more information, you can contact Professor Lauren Yapp, Director of Undergraduate Studies at the Urban Studies Program, lauren_yapp@brown.edu, office hours sign-up sheet [here](#).