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HONORS MEMORANDUM # 2

Structure of the Senior Honors Thesis and the First Chapter

If you are planning to write a first draft of your first chapter and are still uncertain what to include and how to organize it, you may want to use the following templates to start the writing process. There is, of course, actually no such template that fits all senior honors thesis, yet most thesis include several elements that tend to fit into one of a few patterns.

Before writing your first chapter, make a few preliminary decisions about the overall organization of your senior honors thesis. Usually, a senior honors thesis includes the following elements, organized in one pattern or the other. Here are two common patterns:

	<u>Pattern #1</u>	<u>Pattern #2</u>
The Puzzle / Statement of Research Question	Chapter 1	Chapter 1
Other Peoples' Answers / Literature Review	Chapter 1	Chapter 1
Your Answer	Chapter 1	Chapter 1
Your Theory or Argument to Support This Answer	Chapter 1	Chapter 2
Brief Historical Background	Chapter 2	Chapter 1
Overview of the Structure of the Thesis	Chapter 1	Chapter 1
Empirical Cases	Chapters 3-4	Chapters 3-4
Conclusion / Summary of Findings	Chapter 5	Chapter 5

Most first chapters include at least three things—[1] the statement of the puzzle you seek to resolve or question you seek to answer, [2] a concise statement of your answer to this question (your thesis), and [3] an overview of how you will present the material that develops and supports this answer (overview of the structure of the thesis). Oftentimes, the first chapter also includes [1] a literature review that presents alternative answers to this question, [2] a fuller elaboration of the theory that supports your answer, and [3] a little background information concerning the actual cases you will examine. Sometimes one or more of the latter three elements may be presented in the second chapter.

1. **The Question or Puzzle.** Typically you open the first chapter with a crisp statement of the question that you seek to answer and an explanation why the reader should care about this question

➤ Often the hardest part of the thesis is formulating a successful research question. Usually students begin with some real world problem about which they care, such as nuclear proliferation, voting rights, or health policy. Before launching into research, however, you must also identify what aspects of this problem constitute issues that political science *as a discipline* can answer.

➤ Your first chapter explains why the research question addresses something that is both a real phenomenon that educated people outside your narrow specialty consider important *and* a puzzle that is significant in the context of the theories developed by specialists in the discipline of political science. Be wary of the obscure topic that tempts you to make it your own private preserve. It is likely to become (and remain) this. Instead, link your burning interest in a particular case or topic to issues of concern to a larger audience.

An example: If your passionate interest is opposition to Transbarbaria's oppressive military regime, you might broaden this to the question of the conditions that tend to bring down military regimes.

► Although an individual, non-recurring event may be the inspiration for the puzzle that interests you, the research question usually should not be a question about a unique or idiosyncratic event. Your research question should address some *recurring, patterned* set of events.

For example, if you are interested in the contribution of the Great Depression to the rise of Hitler, rather than ask "did Hitler come to power because of the depression?" you might ask "are fascist movements more successful in states undergoing greater social dislocations from economic depression?" The first asks about a single outcome, the second asks about a pattern of outcomes.

Another example: You are interested in the fact that most members of the Chumurt minority entered politics through class rather than ethnic organizations. Rather than ask "why has the Chumurt minority mobilized along class rather than ethnic lines?" (a question about a single outcome) you might turn this into an explicitly comparative question about a pattern of variation: why do some minorities mobilize as ethnic groups, but others mobilize as multi-ethnic classes?

► Normally the research question poses some puzzle that concerns *causes* or *consequences*. That is, your question does not simply ask "what happened?" but it asks either "why?" or "so what?"

An example: If you are interested in political institutions and ethnic mobilization, you might ask how political institutions *influence* the effectiveness of various mobilizational strategies of ethnic groups. Or you might ask how the mobilizational strategies of ethnic groups *affect* governmental stability in parliamentary systems. The first question concerns causes (ethnic mobilization is the *dependent* variable); the second concerns consequences (ethnic mobilization is the *independent* variable).

Of course, most questions that are worth asking will be more complex than any of the previous examples.

► To summarize: The first, and perhaps most important, step in a first chapter is to state precisely the real-world differences that you want to explain. This often means stating clearly at the opening, "My dependent variable is. . . ." This may represent a fundamental shift in the focus with which you have become familiar in preparing for examinations. In the latter we often focus on the independent variables in order to group authors into schools of thought.

► In addition, you must explain why the reader should care about this question. This includes both its importance in the context of political science as a scholarly discipline with theoretical concerns and in the context of the real world in which we all live.

2. **Literature Review.** Your literature review summarizes the major answers to your research question that other investigators have already offered.

► The literature review should not include every work under the sun that is distantly related to your topic; it should stress those works that present (or imply) different answers to your research question.

► The literature review should not simply present a series of summaries of relevant books and articles, it should organize the literature (grouping works where appropriate) into alternative approaches and alternative answers to your research question. The object of the literature review is to identify alternative hypotheses. Alternative theoretical approaches to your research question are usually rooted in some distinctive assumptions about what variables deserve close attention. Theories present a logic or chain of reasoning that links larger concepts to the more specific question that you have posed. The last step in this line of reasoning is a hypothesis that links cause and effect. Your literature review should make clear the assumptions, reasoning, and hypotheses in each major theory.

For example: Your research question is: Under what conditions do military regimes in the Third World survive longer? You might discover two or three broad theoretical approaches in the literature (some of these approaches may be represented by the works of more than one author). One broad theoretical approach might be dependency theory that explains political outcomes in the Third World by the intervention of foreign economic hegemony (usually advanced industrial states) in the internal affairs of the Third World. This theoretical approach is in tension with theories that explain the stability of Third World regimes by their level of institutional development or by the country's level of socioeconomic development.

These and other approaches lead to different hypotheses that specify the causal factors that influence the longevity of military regimes. The logical reasoning of dependency theory might lead you to the conclusion that this theory sees the longevity of military regimes as principally (or solely) the consequence of the degree

of support offered by the foreign hegemon; in this view neither institutional nor socioeconomic development has an independent effect on longevity. The dependency hypothesis is: Military-regime longevity increases as foreign support for the military regime increases.

Note the form of this dependency hypothesis: It links dependent variable (longevity) with an independent variable (foreign support). The *independent* variable is the cause or *explanatory* variable and, within the context of the hypothesis is *predetermined* (that is, its causes are not specified). The *dependent* variable is the effect that is determined by a cause specified within the hypothesis.

Also note that both dependent variable and independent variables in this dependency hypothesis *vary*—that is, each can take on at least two values (e.g., high vs. low, more vs. less, present vs. absent). A so-called "variable" that always assumes one value (that is always present, always low, etc.) is a constant and cannot be included in a causal hypothesis.

►After you have outlined the alternative hypotheses, you should explain why the hypotheses advanced by others are inadequate. This critique justifies the theoretical contribution you will make: you are remedying a deficiency in the existing literature.

3. ***Your Thesis.*** Either you select one of the theories and hypotheses in the literature as the best prospect or you develop an alternative answer that has not yet been offered in the literature. This is your "thesis."

►In developing your thesis you should do the following: [1] You should root this in some larger theoretical tradition. [2] You must then present the reasoning that links this tradition to specific expectations concerning the research question with which you began. [3] You should formulate your own hypotheses. [4] You should compare your proposition with the other theories identified in your literature review.

An example: Your thesis is the following: military regimes survive longer when they institutionalize the mechanisms of accountability between the armed forces and those officers who take governmental posts.

Another example: Your thesis is the following: ethnic movements are more likely to assume the form of political parties under proportional representation, but interest groups under plurality voting. (Independent variable = voting system [PR vs. plurality]; Dependent variable = organizational form of movement [party vs. interest group])

In both examples, you must explain to the reader that this thesis is an application to a specific situation of a larger analytic tradition (in the second example, political institutionalism). You should explain the assumptions in this tradition that begin the chain of reasoning leading to your hypothesis and you should lay out this logical chain for the reader.

4. ***What's Next?*** Now that you have made the grand claim that you have a better answer to the research question, you must prove it. How do you prove it? That is a question of good research design—a topic for honors memorandum #3 and a later date.