Writing In

Near Eastern Studies

A Guide to Independent Work

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Writing in Near Eastern Studies: An Overview

The Department of Near Eastern Studies (NES) is dedicated to the study of the peoples of the Near East and their histories, societies, politics, languages, literatures, and religions. Princeton NES’s chronological coverage is unusually broad, extending from the pre-Islamic period through the present day. Geographically, NES encompasses the area we commonly think of as the Middle East—the Arab lands, Iran, Israel, and Turkey—as well as the Balkans, South and Central Asia, and the Muslim lands of Southeast Asia. NES defines itself by its subject matter, not disciplinary approach or mode of inquiry. Members of the department draw on a wide range of methods and approaches to guide their research, selecting those most suitable to the question they are posing. Concentrators writing in NES thus enjoy extraordinary flexibility in choosing their research questions. Chronology, geography, and methodology constrain the student only in the broadest sense. A student therefore should concentrate on first identifying a research question that truly excites him or her and then select the appropriate methodology to answer that question.

Concentrators in NES write two Junior Papers (JP), one in each semester of the junior year, and one senior thesis. A JP written in the Department of Near Eastern Studies is normally an essay of 20 to 30 double-spaced pages, while a senior thesis is typically a focused essay of 70 to 100 double-spaced pages (or around 25,000 words of text excluding footnotes). Both focus on topics related to the peoples, history, societies, religions, politics and/or cultures of the Near East. Most commonly, independent work in the department addresses questions on Near Eastern history, politics, religion, and literature, but students have also tackled subjects in fields as diverse as medical anthropology and the economics of the energy industry. Although the department does not require students to use Near Eastern language sources, it does strongly encourage students who are sufficiently proficient to do so.

While the remainder of this guide is addressed to writers of the thesis, much of its advice and instruction will be helpful to writers of the JP. For more information on the schedule of JP deadlines and departmental expectations, see our website: http://www.princeton.edu/nes/undergraduates/junior-work-guidelines/

Goals of the Thesis

A senior thesis in NES should perform the following tasks:

- define a research question, and formulate and advance a clear claim (hypothesis) or set of claims;
- gather, present, and analyze evidence in support of its claim(s);
- review and engage the scholarship of others on the subject;
- assess critically the strengths and weaknesses of its own logic,
evidence, and findings;
• relate its conclusions to a larger context;
• make an original contribution to knowledge.

A thesis must have an argument. It should not be a passive review of the existing literature, a summary of facts, or a mere description of past events. The question it poses should be significant. In other words, the thesis must have and make clear what Princeton’s Writing Program calls “motive.” Motive, to recall, is what explains to the reader why the thesis is worth reading. Or, in still more direct terms, the thesis should have an answer to the question “so what?” As will be discussed below in more detail, motive can come in many different forms. But whatever form the motive may take, a thesis needs it.

Having posed a question and justified why that question deserves to be posed, the thesis should then present an analysis that marshals sound reasoning and evidence to arrive at an answer. To be successful, a thesis need not be entirely comprehensive or convincing in every aspect—the faculty recognizes that this is your first attempt at substantial scholarship—but at its core it must have an argument. A superior thesis, moreover, will address possible counter-arguments and objections, as this reveals clearly the depth and range of the student’s thinking and research.

The presentation of the student’s own reasoning and conclusions is thus the central part of the thesis. This is worth emphasizing, because all too often students fret excessively about the amount and detail of the information they put in the thesis, operating under the mistaken assumption that more is better. While a thoroughly researched thesis is always preferable to a poorly researched one, a carefully argued thesis that rests on inconclusive evidence is preferable to a sloppily reasoned or logically confused thesis that presents an abundance of details and citations. Work hard, but do not forget to work smart.
Important Dates for Senior Theses and Comprehensive Exams, 2015–2016

Here are the important deadlines for elements of the thesis, designed to assist you in planning your year’s work and encourage you to work early and smart.

One Paragraph Description of Thesis Topic: Sept. 18, 2015
Advisor Assignment: Week of Sept. 21, 2015
NES Thesis Research Funding Application: Nov. 2, 2015
Additional 20 Pages Due: Jan. 18, 2016
Additional 20 Pages Due: Feb. 15, 2016
NES Summer Thesis Research Funding Application (for Rising Seniors): March 25, 2016
Thesis Due Date: April 8, 2016
Senior Comprehensive Exam Statement: May 3, 2016
Comments from Advisor and Second Reader: May 4, 2016
Senior Comprehensive Oral Exams: May 11–12, 2016
Writing a Thesis: The Process

Writing a thesis is a challenge. It requires you, the student, to call upon the knowledge, skills, and insights you have acquired at Princeton to produce a work of original scholarship. Although you will have a faculty advisor and other resources to guide you along the way, the thesis ultimately is yours and yours alone. Working on your own, you are responsible for conceiving, researching, and writing up a piece of research worthy of an academic year’s effort.

Writing a thesis may be a daunting task. But it need not be, and indeed should not be, an overwhelming one. When approached in the right manner, the process is certainly manageable. It can even be pleasant. Many students find the thesis to be the most rewarding academic experience they have at Princeton. If you take to heart the information and suggestions provided herein, this guide will help ensure that your own experience of writing a thesis is a productive and positive one.

Finding a Topic

As an Arabic proverb teaches, “Knowledge is a sea without shores.” There is no end to the amount of facts and details you can accumulate about the world. The more knowledge you assimilate, the more questions arise. Swimming in the sea of knowledge is exhilarating, but it can also be disorienting and exhausting. The horizon constantly recedes before you as each fact learned and perspective assimilated yields way to more facts, more perspectives. The researcher looking to master a topic simply by reading everything on it soon finds him or herself truly “out at sea.” Floating and without direction, that researcher expends energy as he or she spins in increasingly wider circles, aimlessly adrift.

The smart swimmer avoids drowning in a sea of data by charting a course before reaching the deep waters. The first step toward charting a course is to select your topic early. Sooner is better, but you should certainly know what general topic you wish to work on when you return to campus in September. At the very beginning of the semester, you will be asked to write a one-paragraph description of the topic that you wish to work on. This brief description will serve as the basis on which you will be assigned an advisor.

At this point it is sufficient to have selected a general focus of research, for example British policies toward the Persian Gulf after WWI, the place of Sufism in the lives of contemporary Pakistanis, Ba’athism and minorities, the evolution of Israeli policy on Jerusalem, or the depiction of married women in classical Arabic literature. These are topics narrow enough that one can survey the available published materials and other sources to acquaint oneself with significant debates in the literature, get a sense of the available sources, and begin to hone in on some specific research
questions. At this stage, exploration is fine and even encouraged. The summer is a particularly good time for background reading. Regardless of when you start, however, by the middle of the fall semester you should have a concrete idea of what topic you will write on.

**Working with Your Advisor**

Once you have been assigned an advisor, you should make an appointment to see him or her. Advisor-advisee relationships vary as much the people that make them up. Nonetheless, there are some basic expectations. First, your advisor is there to provide general guidance and advice. It is not your advisor’s responsibility to assign a research question, find sources for you, or to keep you on track. Researching, writing, and completing the thesis are all your responsibility. Your advisor can work with you to set-up a schedule for the completion of your research and writing. Keep in mind, however, that the deadlines are your deadlines, not your advisor’s. You owe it to yourself, not your advisor, to complete your thesis. After all, the final product will bear your name, not your advisor’s name.

Because the schedules, working habits, and projects of students and faculty advisors vary so greatly, there is no standard template for advising. You should meet with your advisor within two weeks of being assigned, and you should plan to meet with your advisor at a minimum of twice each semester. For most students, meeting twice per month works well.

Your advisor is obligated to read and comment on one draft of each of your chapters. Please note the final deadline for submission of rough drafts: March 18, 2016. This deadline comes three weeks before the final due date for submission of the completed thesis. If you submit a draft any time before this deadline, your advisor is responsible for reading, commenting on, and returning it to you in a timely manner. If you miss that deadline, however, you may not necessarily expect your advisor to read your draft materials.

**Formulating Your Research Question**

The most critical step in writing a thesis is converting your general topic of interest into a research question. A properly constructed question gives direction to the research and focus to the writing. It provides the kernel of the argument around which the thesis is built. Getting the question right will reduce or eliminate some of the common anxieties that plague thesis writers, such as: where is my research going? Where should my research stop? How should I organize my thesis? What material should I include and what should I leave out?
Some students zero in on a question from the very beginning. More commonly, students make their way to their question gradually, starting off with a general interest or curiosity in a given phenomenon, era, locality, society, etc. As they acquaint themselves more closely with the scholarly literature on a topic, they identify a question.

Perhaps the most common mistake that undergraduates make when writing their theses is to cast their nets far too wide, i.e., selecting broad topics that are worthy of a book or two or three. Students often feel compelled to overreach out of an admirable but misplaced sense that they must come up with a “weighty” topic, and this leads them to select overly ambitious topics. Researching and writing a book can take several years, whereas you have only several months. A thesis question can almost never be too narrow.

There are several ways to narrow your research. The most obvious way to begin is to restrict the scope of research in time and space. Thus, for example a student interested in the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt from 1928 to 2008 would perhaps be well advised to address only the years through 1947. A student intrigued by the grand topic of Arab nationalism might be best off concentrating on a relatively narrow sliver of history in a single country, say Iraq between monarchical and Ba’athist rule, 1958–1968.

Such mechanical measures are helpful in bringing greater focus to a study, but in themselves they are never sufficient. Not unlike fractals, history and human society can grow in complexity the more closely one looks. After all, books and studies are routinely written about individuals, i.e., biography, and single events that unfolded in the space of just a few days or even hours. There is no necessary correlation between the chronological and geographical extent of a study and that study’s length or sophistication. There are books on the so-called “Six Day War” of 1967 that are longer than histories of either Israel or the Arabs.

To bring focus to a thesis, what is needed is a question. A good question will intrigue the reader, address an issue of importance, frame your study, and give it direction. Not least important, that question should excite you. It is the single most important factor in determining whether your experience of writing a thesis proves to be a stimulating, rewarding, and even, yes, a fun one, or instead an exercise in anxious drudgery. When a question provokes you, research and writing can become a welcomed adventure as you work to satisfy your personal curiosity and then express your thoughts. When you are indifferent to your question, research and writing alike become chores. Good, well-formulated questions lead to cogent and provocative theses, whereas bad, half-formed questions invariably lead to stale theses. Only you can know what truly fires your curiosity. Do not be shy in pursuing what intrigues you.

Scholarship, of course, is a public endeavor, not a private indulgence. Thus, when formulating your question you will need to give some thought to motive, i.e., the
reason(s) why your research will be worth reading. Motive explains what or how your research contributes to scholarship. Establishing motive should not be onerous or difficult, but it will require you to read carefully and engage with the scholarly literature on your topic. Once you have done that, establishing motive is not difficult. All you need to do is to make clear to yourself and then the reader how your research relates to what has already been published. Motive can take many different forms and combinations, including one, or more, of the below:

- Knowledge on this topic is limited. My thesis adds to that knowledge by...
- A scholarly consensus on this topic does not exist. Interpretations differ or theoretical schools clash. My thesis weighs in on this dispute by comparing the leading interpretations and contends...
- The conventional wisdom on this topic is flawed. My thesis will demonstrate this by...
- The standard theory tells us to expect ‘x’ in such cases, yet here we see ‘y.’ The reasons for this discrepancy are...
- The phenomenon of ‘x’ is an important but a complex and difficult one to study. As this thesis will demonstrate, the study of sub-phenomenon ‘y’ can yield important insights into ‘x’...

The key to making sure your final thesis has a good motive is to formulate a good research question. Your advisor can help you convert your enthusiasm for a topic into a proper research question. Do not expect, however, that your advisor will hand you a pre-formed research question. The more reading and thinking that you do, the easier you will find it to devise a suitable research question.

The best research questions often come in the form of a puzzle. Counter-intuitive observations are excellent leads to a good research question. When a given outcome or state of affairs defies our common expectation or the prediction of an accepted theory (which are typically very much the same thing), this piques our curiosity. It provokes the question, why this and not that? Such puzzles are all around us. Examples might be: Given Saudi Arabia’s official Wahhabi theology and its status as a monarchy, how does the Saudi regime publicly justify its close alliance to the US? Scholars have established a close correlation between growth in per capita income levels and democratization, yet why is it that in the Arab world the wealthiest Arab societies are proving the most resistant to democratization? The Iranian Revolution has been described by many as an emphatic rejection of Western modernity, yet then, one might ask, how does one explain that under the Islamic Revolutionary Regime the absolute and relative numbers of women receiving higher educations has increased dramatically since 1979? In each case, one must move from a general

**Examples borrowed from Kerry Walk, “Motivating Moves,” Princeton University Writing Program.**
topic—US-Saudi relations, democratization in the Arab world, the Iranian Revolution and its legacy—toward a question that might focus the thesis and guide the research and writing.

As the three examples stand, they are each too expansive for a thesis. But they can each be narrowed. Thus, for our first example, one might concentrate on the writings of a single religious authority or declarations of a government ministry over a defined period of time, perhaps chosen to overlap with a key moment in US-Saudi relations (e.g., before and after the Arab oil embargo of 1973 or before and after the attacks of September 11). For the second, one might select a single country, such as Qatar. For the third example, one might start by searching policy statements of the Iranian Ministry of Education and/or universities regarding women and higher education and select several universities for collecting data on rates of female enrollment.

**Putting It Together: The Prospectus**

A critical step toward completing a thesis is putting together a prospectus. A prospectus lays out your research question, explains the motive, and points the research in the direction it will take in the months ahead with an outlined plan of research and writing. If that sounds like a lot to commit yourself to at the beginning of November, you can relax a little. A prospectus is not a pledge breakable on pain of death. To the contrary, a prospectus is a preliminary map or plan laying out where you think you are, where you wish to go, and how you intend to get there—i.e., the type of evidence that will help you to answer your questions, and your analytical method. Each of these components is distinct, but each is bound to the other. A change in one will necessitate a change in the others. Since it is possible, even probable, that the path your research and writing will take will deviate significantly from that laid out in the prospectus, it is important to think about the relationship between your research questions, your methods, and your collection of evidence early on, so that as you begin to revise one of these elements, you will also make any appropriate changes regarding the other elements. The exercise of drafting a prospectus accomplishes this, and compels you to conceive of the thesis and its research and writing holistically.

By giving structure and direction to the process of research from the beginning, the prospectus can thereby save you a lot of grief. The temptation to postpone writing and conduct more “background” research is always strong, and in instances where the hypothesis is poorly formed and the research question vague, that temptation becomes irresistible. The result is to fritter away precious time going around in circles, piling up reading after reading but getting nowhere with the thesis. Drafting a prospectus will help you identify sooner rather than later whether you have a properly framed research question, a compelling hypothesis, relevant and accessible evidence, and a feasible thesis.
A prospectus should, as a rule, address the following five questions:

1) What is my question? i.e., what am I trying to argue? This, obviously, is the heart of the thesis and the most important question.

2) Why is it important? Why should the reader care? Or, in other words, what is my motive? As noted above, answers to this question can take many different forms. They can vary tremendously in their stakes. A thesis on food security in Egypt might claim that its findings could help avert the impending mass starvation of millions. A thesis testing the relationship of mass literacy to the rise of Pan-Arabism might promise to refine a theory of nationalism. An analysis of an Arabic poem could claim to resolve a debate over the meaning of a disputed word or phrase. In other words, the perceived magnitude or “real life” significance of the question can take a variety of forms. If the question interests you, it is almost certainly important enough. But you do need to make clear to the reader what is at stake and how the thesis contributes to resolving the given issue.

3) Who else has tried to answer this question or written on this topic, and what are their arguments? Scholarship has a paradoxical nature. On the one hand, in its conduct it is generally a very solitary pursuit. On the other hand, it is innately public in its purpose. Research that does not seek to further general knowledge is not scholarship. An essential aspect of scholarly research thus is relating one’s research to that of others. That relationship may take many different forms. Your goal might be to challenge received wisdom head-on, to extend that wisdom further, or to identify and fill in the holes that other scholars have missed. What is important is that you situate your research in relationship to that of others. This is not as dreary an exercise as it might sound, and the good news is that typically it clarifies and sharpens one’s own assumptions and hypotheses, and in the process makes it much easier to write a thesis. Once you know clearly what you are arguing against, you can define more precisely what you are arguing for. That, in turn, tells you how to build your case and arrange your evidence.

4) Why is my argument better than the preceding ones? How will this research contribute? Coming up with a new argument, or adding new insights or evidence to a pre-existing one, is an essential objective of scholarship. Your thesis must speak to the existing literature, but it should not merely echo it. Thus the prospectus should explain how or what your argument might add to our current knowledge. The contribution can be modest, and in the case of a senior thesis it almost certainly will be. You are not expected to effect a paradigm shift in your field or to pioneer the use of a hitherto untapped body of sources. It can be enough for a thesis to compare and contrast two competing interpretations of a given event or phenomenon and to conclude in favor of one or to identify the strengths and weaknesses of both. Revisiting old sources and arguments with a different perspective is also acceptable, but you should be explicit about where you make an original contribution.
5) Why do I think I am right and why should a reader think I am right? Novelty by itself, of course, does not make for good scholarship. The conclusions of our research must also be persuasive to others. A prospectus, therefore, should make a brief case for why the research is likely to prove convincing. This part of the prospectus is, like the others, provisional. It can change. In the course of your research you may even find yourself turning one hundred eighty degrees against your original hypothesis. In order to turn against your own hypothesis, however, you must have first formulated that hypothesis. More often than we might expect, we initially arrive at our conclusions only vaguely aware of the reasoning that brought us from our premises to those conclusions. While we may “sense” or “feel” the power of our own argument, others have no access to our intuitions. And so to convince them, we must make our thinking explicit. A happy side effect of this is that this forces us to subject our own thinking to critical review and scrutinize it directly for flaws. Moreover, the more deeply we engage a topic, the more we assimilate knowledge and perspectives accessible only to other experts, and the less transparent our logic and thinking becomes to others. Saying a few words in the prospectus about why someone should buy your argument can go a long way toward clarifying your thinking, and enable you to improve both your logic and the presentation of your argument.

Your prospectus should include a preliminary outline of the structure of the thesis. It should indicate the number of chapters the thesis will consist of, describe the contents of each chapter in a few sentences, and show how the chapters will hang together to present a coherent argument. Most theses will consist of three, perhaps four, chapters plus a short introduction and conclusion. A typical chapter would be around twenty pages in length. You are always free to change the structure of the thesis if you wish later and as many times as you feel necessary. The point of producing an outline at this point is not to settle points of mechanics such as the number of chapters or determine a final table of contents but rather to prod you into thinking about the structure of your argument as a whole.

Finally, your prospectus should include a preliminary bibliography of books and articles. The list need not be extensive, just sufficiently long to demonstrate that you have identified a body of scholarship to which your research responds and accessible sources of evidence. In most cases, about ten books or articles should be sufficient. The extent of the final bibliography will depend on the nature of the thesis, but generally should be substantially larger.

Methods

NES is an interdisciplinary department defined by its subject matter. It therefore places no restrictions on the methods or mix of methods that you might use. The question you pursue should determine your method. In some cases numerous methods might be applicable, although here, too, one should be wary of being too
ambitious. You should seek guidance from your advisor on your methodology. Methods used in NES in recent years include historical process tracing, textual analysis and hermeneutics, comparative case studies, oral interviews, thick description, and basic quantitative analysis.

Research

Balance is the key to research. You should expect to spend a considerable number of hours gathering, reading, analyzing, and poring over your sources. The conduct of original research is labor intensive. You certainly do not want to skimp on research. Cursory efforts to glean information from the surface reveal themselves even in good writing. At the same time, your time is limited, and you must guard against letting yourself get overwhelmed, lost, or seduced while conducting research. Avoiding the third can be a challenge. Research for most scholars is comparatively painless, even fun. Discovering new facts, ideas, insights, and perspectives can be exhilarating. The danger, however, is that writing is not always so exhilarating and typically is more painful. Be wary, therefore, of the temptation to procrastinate on writing by digging a little bit deeper or extending your research a little bit wider. A precise and properly framed question is the surest guide to navigating between the Scylla of scant research and the Charybdis of excessive research.

Drafting and Time Management

There is no single or best way to write a thesis. Ultimately, it depends upon a range of highly individual factors, including the state of your knowledge, the availability of sources, and the exigencies of commitments outside of your thesis. The seemingly most logical and most straightforward way to approach the writing of a thesis would be to research and write each chapter in serial, devoting an equal number of weeks to each and reserving the final weeks to revise and tighten up the various parts. This would undoubtedly be an efficient path to completing a thesis, but few, if any, theses are actually produced in this manner. Too many theses, however, are produced in precisely the opposite manner: written in a mad dash in the final weeks right before the due date. This practice you absolutely want to avoid.

The key to avoiding this practice is simple: start writing early. Alas, simple does not mean easy. Procrastination, by contrast, is all too easy. Writing for many, perhaps most people including professionals, is unpleasant, and it can be agonizing. Thinking carefully and deliberately is hard work and staring at a blank screen is intimidating. The process of writing inevitably reveals gaps in our logic and holes in our research. Facing up to these shortcomings is unpleasant. Perhaps the most common failing of students is to put off the process of writing for as long as possible.

The good news here is that writing does get easier with practice, and that it is the start of the process that is most torturous. In this sense, writing is not unlike
jumping into the cold ocean or a cold lake for a swim. The anticipation and initial entry are the worst parts. As you grow acclimated you cease to notice the cold and actually begin to enjoy the process.

Thus another benefit of the prospectus is that it makes you put your thoughts on paper and get started writing in the fall. After the prospectus, the next hard date on the NES calendar is the submission of the final thesis on April 11, 2014. You are urged to submit a draft of the thesis to your advisor by March 21, but you are not required to do so. In other words, from November through April you will be free to research and write your thesis as you deem most appropriate. Your advisor can guide you, but executing your plan of research and writing is your responsibility. Hence the term “independent research.”

For reasons noted above, there can be no standard writing schedule for senior theses. Nonetheless, four general suggestions can be offered. One is that by the end of December you should have completed a draft of one chapter. It need not be—indeed almost certainly cannot be—refined. But by committing a good chunk of your argument to paper, even if in very rough form, earlier rather than later, you will be far better able to recalibrate your research and schedule as appropriate.

The second suggestion is that you should not start by trying to write the introduction. Indeed, the introduction will almost always be the last section of the thesis that you write. As you will discover through the process of research and writing, your initial assumptions and expectations will be confounded, and you will change them. It is only upon completing the thesis as a whole that you comprehend fully what you have accomplished. Only then can you write a proper introduction that lays out your hypothesis and the structure of your argument with a description of the contents of each chapter.

The third suggestion is that you start writing on whatever point or issue you feel most eager to discuss. In other words, you do not need to start by writing chapter one. It is perfectly legitimate to begin by taking up a question that you project will be covered in the third chapter. Again, the essential thing is to start writing and to start building your argument. If you discover that your argument is moving away from your planned outline, adjust your outline.

A fourth suggestion is to resist the urge to pour into your writing all the details, facts, and information you have accumulated. In the course of your research, you will collect vastly more information than you can possibly use in your writing. Excess detail, even if interesting, only dogs your writing and distracts the reader. Keep the emphasis throughout on your argument. If you have something to say that does not bear directly on the main points of your argument, leave it out.
Revising, Proofreading, and Copyediting

Revision is critical to effective writing. Before submitting any draft to your advisor, be sure to have read it through at least once, preferably twice. Submitting unrevised drafts wastes your time and that of your advisor. It will create a poor impression if reading your draft requires your advisor to struggle to follow your train of thought and unpack one turgid sentence after another. As you read your own work, you should be on the lookout, of course, for typos and grammatical errors, but in the early stages of revision pay especially close attention to the development and presentation of your argument. Above all, strive for clarity. This includes improving the style of your writing by cutting convoluted sentences and purging passive voice constructions that hide rather than show, as well as paying close attention to the development and presentation of your argument.

Once you are confident that the structure and content of your chapters and of the thesis as a whole are sound, you should turn to copyediting. Prior to submitting your thesis, you should proofread it very, very carefully, looking for all manner of mechanical errors. Although flawless copyediting will not turn a mediocre thesis into an outstanding one, sloppy copyediting—incomplete sentences, missing verbs, repeated instances of pronoun-noun agreement, etc.—will mar an otherwise excellent thesis.

Proofreading may not be intellectually demanding, but it does require concentration and attention to detail. This is especially true when you proofread your own writing. Due to your intimate familiarity with the text, you are prone to overlook missing words and other errors by subconsciously substituting what should be there for what actually is, or is not, there in reality. Some ways around this problem are to slowly read the text aloud to yourself or to read it in reverse, from back to front.

The best way to check your work is to have a second or third set of eyes go over your text not only to look for mechanical errors but also to give you feedback on the content and style of your writing. Agreeing with a friend or two to read each other’s drafts is an excellent way to improve the appearance and the content of your writing.

Thesis Writing Support

http://www.princeton.edu/writing/university/undergraduate/
The Princeton Writing Program and its team of graduate Fellows offers a variety of support for Senior Thesis writers. Opportunities include workshop, peer review groups, and the popular boot camp series. Please follow the above link for more information.
Formatting, Style, and Mechanics

1. **Title page**: See the example in the appendices.

2. **Signature**: On the last page of the text you need to print the statement, “This thesis represents my own work in accordance with university regulations,” and sign it on each copy.

3. **ToC**: A table of contents listing the title and page number of each chapter should follow the title page. On a page preceding the table of contents, you may wish to acknowledge any special assistance or support that you received in writing your thesis.

4. **Font**: Popular fonts such as Times New Roman, Calibri, Cambria, etc., are the most effective, but there is no rule excluding less common fonts. Do not, however, use a cursive or all-bold font, and avoid fonts that are decorative but hard to read.

5. **Length**: A thesis in NES should normally run between 70 and 100 pages. If you need more space, and your advisor agrees, you may exceed 100 pages, but such instances should be rare.

6. **Quotations**: All quotations must be translated and accompanied by the text in the original language.
   
   a. If short, from Western languages, with Roman alphabets, include the original language quotation in either the main body of the thesis or in the notes.
   
   b. If short, from Near Eastern languages, include the original language being translated within the body of the text or in the notes. You may use the script proper to the language, or transliteration. See also point (13).
   
   c. If long, append a copy of the original language text (i.e., it should be bound in with the thesis).

7. **Transliteration and Foreign Terms**:

   a. In transliteration, you are best advised to follow the practice of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, but you may choose another system. Whatever system you choose, be sure to be CONSISTENT and PRECISE.

   b. Foreign Names and words well known in English may be spelled in their commonly known forms (e.g., sheikh, pasha, ulema, etc.). Be consistent.

8. **Margins**: Leave adequate margins for binding purposes of approximately 1 and 1/4" on the left side and 3/4" on the right side of the page. Number all pages,
including endnote pages, consecutively.

9. **Style:** In matters of style, when in doubt, follow the Modern Language Association Style Sheet (available at the bookstore). Be consistent.

10. **Bibliography:** The bibliography should have separate sections for primary and secondary sources. Give full bibliographical information so that the editions you have used can be identified.

   a) In annotating, even if you have not made a direct quotation but are paraphrasing, give the reference.

   b) If the annotation appears as endnotes, they should be double-spaced; if they appear as footnotes, they may be single-spaced. It is preferable that long quotations be double-spaced, especially if the quotation is a translation.

11. **Paper and Printing:** Theses must be printed only one side of standard size (8.5 x 11) paper. The normal 20 lb. printing paper is fine.

**Submission of the Final Copy**

No later than 4:30 pm on April 8, 2016, you are to submit two hard copies of your thesis to the NES departmental office in Jones 110 and e-mail one electronic copy in PDF to the Undergraduate Administrator, James LaRegina (laregina@princeton.edu). The hard copies are for your advisor and second reader, and they should be bound unless prior agreement is made with the advisor. Soft binding, such as coil or velo binding, is perfectly acceptable. Hard binding is not required. The department will retain one bound copy and return the other to the student. The electronic copy will be forwarded to the Mudd Manuscript Library.
The Comprehensive Exam

The comprehensive exam is oral and will last up to one hour. The thesis advisor and second reader will administer the exam, which will consist of two parts, a defense of the thesis and a discussion of the student’s overall experience in the department as represented in the “comprehensive statement.” For the thesis defense, you should consider the reports of your advisor and second reader and be prepared to respond to them. You will be asked to begin the defense with a statement no longer than ten minutes maximum in which you describe the thesis and its goals and provide a preliminary response to the written comments of your readers. Your readers will then conduct the exam by asking questions. This part of the exam can extend to forty minutes.

The second part of the exam will address the student’s course of study in the Department. One week prior to the beginning of the oral exams, the student will submit a “comprehensive statement.” The statement on the first page should list the student’s eight departmental courses, language courses taken, independent work completed, and any other courses or experience that might be relevant, such as study-abroad or internships related to the Near East (see p. 23 for the template). On the succeeding pages, the student should write an essay of between approximately 750 and 1,500 words that discusses the student’s scholarly life in the department. The essay should be reflective in nature. It is intended to provide you the opportunity to ponder your time in the department and your course of study. There is no set format to the exercise, but you should seek to describe the development of your interests and focus in the field of Near Eastern Studies in the context of the courses you have taken, including perhaps courses outside the Department, and the independent research you have conducted. Questions that you might address: what led you to choose NES as a major? What guided you in your course selection? What courses made the most impact? How did you choose your independent research topics? Can you identify any unifying themes in your coursework and research? If you studied abroad, what if any lessons did you learn? Has the study of the Near East changed the way you perceive the world around you?

You will not be graded for your skill in selecting courses and research topics such that they coalesced in such a way as to reveal to you the meaning of life and the world. Honest reflection is all that is required. Accordingly, expression of disappointment or regrets about course selection or research topics is wholly admissible.
NES Grading Standards for Theses

An A or A- thesis defines a research question and formulates and advances a clear claim (hypothesis) or set of claims. It gathers, presents, and analyzes evidence in support of its claim(s) while reviewing and engaging the scholarship of others. It assesses critically the strengths and weaknesses of its own logic, evidence, and findings. Finally, it relates its conclusions to a larger context and makes an original contribution to knowledge. An A-level thesis is clear, gracefully written, and well organized. It demonstrates that the writer has conducted a close and critical reading of texts and grappled with issues raised in the relevant scholarly literature. Its argument shows intellectual creativity, is sensitive to historical or cultural context, and is supported by a well-chosen variety of specific examples or pieces of evidence.

A B+ or B thesis demonstrates many aspects of A-level work but falls short of it in either the organization and clarity of its writing, the formulation and presentation of its argument, or the quality of research. Some theses in this category are solid works containing flashes of insight into many of the issues raised in the relevant scholarly literature. Others give evidence of independent thought, but are not entirely clear or convincing in the presentation of their argument.

A B- thesis demonstrates command of the research material and understanding of historical or cultural context but provides a less than thorough defense of the writer’s independent argument because of weaknesses in writing, argument, organization, or use of evidence.

A C+, C, or C- thesis lacks a cogent argument and offers little more than a mere a summary of ideas and information, is insensitive to historical or cultural context, suffers from frequent factual errors, unclear writing, poor organization, or inadequate primary research, or presents some combination of these problems.

Whereas the grading standards for written work between A and C- are concerned with the presentation of argument and evidence, a thesis that belongs to the D or F categories demonstrates fundamental inadequacies.

A D thesis demonstrates serious deficiencies or flaws in the student’s command of the research material and construction of a cogent argument.

An F thesis, fails to demonstrate competence in the research materials or the construction of an argument, and/or is unfinished. Above all, an F thesis indicates a student’s lack of effort.
**Funding**

**NES Funding: Summer and Academic Year Funding**
The Near Eastern Studies Department has a limited amount of funds for travel and other research expenses for NES senior thesis writers who would like to conduct thesis research over the summer and/or during the academic year.

Eligible students should submit via the [SAFE (Student Activities Funding Engine) website](http://www.princeton.edu/nes/undergraduates/nes-senior-thesis-funding/) an application for funding via email in March of their junior year for summer funding and in early November of their senior year for academic year funding. Students who did not receive summer funding will receive preference during the academic year. Check the departmental website below for the precise dates.

An application should consist of two parts: a) a statement of no more than 500 words briefly describing the thesis and its significance and explaining the need for funding; b) a budget outlining total expected costs and the availability of other funding (e.g., funds award by the ODOC).

Because resources are limited, no guaranty of funds can be made and students are advised to apply to all potential sources of funds.

Students can direct questions to the undergraduate administrator.


**Office of the Dean of the College Senior Thesis Funding:** This is the main source of funding for thesis research. Students can apply for funds for travel and other research expenses. ODOC invites two rounds of applications, one in the spring for rising seniors to conduct summer research, the other in the fall for academic year research. Further information can be found here:

Resources

NES Librarian: The NES librarian, Dr. James Weinberger, is always available to offer guidance and suggestions regarding resources in Firestone Library and especially the NES collections in the library.

Weinberger, James W.
jwwein@princeton.edu
609-258-3279
Firestone B-15-P

Writing Center: Located in Whitman College, 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, who may sign up to work with a graduate student fellow from the department of their choice. The Writing Center also holds 50-minute regular conferences seven days a week, and drop-in hours Sunday through Thursday evenings. Enter through Baker Hall.

www.princeton.edu/writing/appt

Princeton Data and Statistical Services: If you will be using or looking for quantitative data and statistics, this web page (a superb resource) can help you get started:

http://dss.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/dataresources/guides.cgi

Academic Support at Princeton: Balancing the demands of a thesis with your coursework and other pursuits at Princeton can be a challenge. If you think you could use some advice or assistance, ASAP offers a wide-range of expertise:

http://www.princeton.edu/asap/

Institutional Review Board: The conduct of research on human subjects raises a number of ethical questions. If you will be conducting research on living individuals, including conducting interviews, you may need to receive clearance from Princeton's Institutional Review Board:

http://www.princeton.edu/ria/human-research-protection/index.xml
Sample Thesis Title Page

(TITLE)

(AUTHOR)

A senior thesis submitted to the Department of Near Eastern Studies of Princeton University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

(Month Year)
Comprehensive Exam Form

NES Senior Comprehensive Exam Personal Statement

Name
May 2016

Departmental Courses

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.

Language Courses

Study-Abroad, Summer, and Other Coursework, Internships, Experience, etc.

Independent Research

Fall semester JP title and advisor’s name:
Spring semester JP title and advisor’s name:

Senior thesis title and advisor’s name: