

USNA Department of History

Honors Program

On Choosing a Topic

Writing a 30- to 40-page thesis is substantially different from writing a 15-page term paper. You will be taking many more notes, from more and harder sources in which the yield is slower, and, since you are doing original research, you may not have the benefit of existing works to guide you on your specific question. The writing process is also much more complex and time consuming on a paper of this magnitude. You will encounter challenging issues of organization, have to grapple more with articulating and proving your thesis, and write more drafts than you usually do.

It is thus very important to choose a topic that meets the following criteria:

- 1) ***It interests you.*** You have to live with this for the next year. Previous successful topics have included analyses of the Mau Mau rebellion in colonial Kenya; the quantum theory; submarines in wartime planning after World War I; British imperialism in Afghanistan; fascist collaborators in Hungary; the personal diplomacy of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill; Civil War strategies and tactics; and the politics of slavery in the Confederacy.
- 2) ***It is doable.*** Your thesis depends on the availability and adequacy of relevant primary sources. Once you begin writing you may find that you need to return to the archives to answer new questions that arise, fill in gaps in your research, and so on. Complete dependence upon a distant archive is therefore not advisable for most students. Also relevant here is whether you have the language skills your topic may require.
- 3) ***It is well defined***—chronologically, thematically, geographically, etc. Your topic needs to be big enough for you to make an original contribution and explore the issues with depth and breadth, but small enough so that you can conceptualize it and accomplish it in the allotted time.
- 4) ***It can be supported by a USNA faculty advisor.*** Is there a History faculty member who has some expertise in your topic area and can serve as an advisor? While students are encouraged to follow their interests, the Honors Committee advises students not to choose topics about which no faculty member has substantial knowledge.

Begin this process by considering what topics and questions interest you. Then determine whether your interests are researchable by identifying relevant primary sources and seeing if these sources will allow you to answer particular questions. If you realize that the primary sources are unavailable or inadequate, you will need to redesign your topic. It is therefore imperative that you begin this primary source research immediately. Waiting until the fall semester of your 1/C year to admit that your sources are too scant or not fruitful is likely to be disastrous.

The Committee emphasizes that the topic is to be explored analytically; in other words, an honors thesis should be a thoughtful and careful analysis of the topic that will increase our understanding of the past. A simple retelling or narration of a story is not an acceptable substitute for hard and searching thought about history and historical relationships. Moreover, merely restating what others have already written about a topic does not stimulate your intellectual growth, which is one of the major goals of the history honors program.