

The GHHP Secondary Thesis Chapter

PHILOSOPHY AND GOALS: The development of an undergraduate honors thesis represents a major intellectual undertaking. It demands a high level of independence as well as a detailed understanding of complex questions and the methods available to answer them. Students engaged in this process have demonstrated focus, patience, and a significant commitment to the advancement of knowledge.

Importantly, the implications of efforts like this extend far beyond the field in which they originate. Advances in basic science, for example, may serve to inform, strengthen, and expand the frontiers of medicine. Advances in history and the social sciences may shape our understanding of disease manifestation, distribution, and impact.

The effect of these discoveries, however, will depend in important ways on the context in which they are translated and applied. This chapter asks you to step beyond the focused questions of your research to consider the environment in which it may have its influence. It asks you to explore the real-world role of your work and discoveries, the institutions and infrastructure that may shape it, and the social, political, and/or ethical considerations that may be encountered along the way.

DEVELOPING A TOPIC: Students may take different approaches, depending on interests, background, and prior work. However, a general strategy is as follows:

- 1.) Connect your research to health: First identify a health-related topic area (typically a disease, condition, disability, developmental or wellness issue, etc.) relevant to the primary thesis topic.
- 2.) Narrow your focus: Within a given disease or disease category, successful papers often focus on a specific issue or content area (a symptom, disability, or complication, treatment/access issue, social/historical process, vulnerable subpopulation, etc.)
- 3.) Characterize the context:
 - a. Identify the social, political, epidemiologic, or other contextual factors most important to your disease, population, etc.
 - b. Explore the upstream trends, systems, or institutions driving these.
- 4.) (Optional) Choose a lens: If the topic still feels unmanageably broad, it can often be helpful to choose one or more evaluative strategies, depending on your experience, interests, and comfort. For example, a paper focused on children surviving paralytic poliomyelitis might take a legal approach (looking at disability legislation, either across states or nations or over time), an economic approach (looking at the economic burden in the developing world, incentives for the development of assist devices, issues of transnational funding/priority setting, and/or local access/subsidization), or an ethnographic approach (looking at social institutions, attitudes toward the diseases, and roles of disabled people across contexts), etc.
- 5.) Identify an Intersection: Identify an academic or policy question at the intersection of these focus areas. Questions may be descriptive/synthetic (organizing and drawing conclusions from existing literature), prescriptive/analytic (recommending a policy change or direction for further work), or some combination of these.

EXAMPLES: Successful questions from previous years include:

Thesis Topic	GHHP Secondary Chapter: Motivating Question:
<i>Associations Between Antigen Processing Efficiency and HIV Control</i>	Through what social, legal, and institutional channels has anti-gay sentiment contributed to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and shaped contemporary intervention strategies in Senegal (including resistance to treatment-as-prevention programs).
<i>Transcriptional and Proteomic Analysis of X-Linked Dystonia-Parkinsonism</i>	To what extent do public attitudes and disability policies regarding transportation, financing, and education drive differing outcomes for individuals with X-linked dystonia in cross-country comparisons. What programs or initiatives might serve as templates for ongoing work?
<i>Identifying factors secreted by fibro-adipogenic progenitors in skeletal muscle that stimulate satellite cell differentiation</i>	How have recent trends in U.S. healthcare financing (such as industry-academia partnerships and orphan-disease initiatives) impacted treatment strategies, equity, and outcomes for individuals with muscle-wasting degenerative diseases?

In general, write about something that interests you, and do not worry if your chapter feels tangential or distantly related to your thesis. As a multi-disciplinary student, you may often need to draw connections across fields or bring insights from one area of study into another. Use this as an opportunity to practice moving between academic styles and bodies of knowledge.

(Note that writing will follow a social-science format and should be focused, organized, and methodical. Strong papers often make use of sign-posting and subsection titles.)

STRUCTURE

An example of one possible format has been provided below, but chapter structures vary widely according to students' concentrations and interests. Trust your own judgement.

I: Abstract (1 page)

II: Introduction and Context (4-7 pages)

IIA: Disease Context (1-3 Pages):

- Identification/description of health issue (disease/condition/disease category, etc.) that thesis work addresses or explains.
- (Optional) Brief discussion of symptoms, progression, functionality, quality of life, etc.
- (Optional) Identification of sub-topic/sub-group focus of interest (breast cancer patients in rural Nigeria, school-age children with HIV/AIDs in the developed world, etc.)

IIB: Social and Political Context (3-6 Pages):

- Identification of social, geographic, historical, and systems-level factors at play in chosen context.
- (Optional) Comparison of experiences or implications across contexts.

III: Analysis

- *Policy Focus/Prescriptive Papers:*

- Evaluation of current responses/strategies to issue identified (4-6 pages). (Policies, global or local standards or programs, social, economic, organizational, or delivery initiatives, etc.)

- Identification of upstream drivers/obstacles (3-6 pages) (Historical factors, political will/stakeholders, social structures and attitudes, economic trends, transnational movements, etc.)
- *Descriptive Papers* (6-12 Pages):
 - Methodical analysis of evidence informing your chosen question. Organized logically (may be chronological, geographical, according to evaluative approach, etc.)

IV: Conclusions and/or Recommendations (3-5 pages):

- Concise synthesis of all streams of analysis, providing direct answers to motivating question. May include recommended directions for policy development or future research.