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Religion Thesis Advice Sheet

Early steps: Junior fall/winter/spring

- Reference the past [Religion honors theses](#), and take a look at some in Rauner or the department lounge to get an idea of the requirements of a thesis, the different ways past students have structured theirs, and the scope of topics.
- Pick a topic that you are passionate about, one that you can sustain interest in during a year of work on it.
- Narrow down your topic. Then narrow it down some more. Ask yourself: Why are you interested in this topic? Why is this topic important? What question(s) are you trying to answer? Be very specific.
- Start researching your topic and scholarship about it: who are the top scholars on the issue? What are the seminal books you should read? Is the topic well-covered in the literature or barely touched yet?

Junior Spring: Submitting your proposal and planning

- Ask Marcia to see examples of past proposals to use as templates. Your proposal should include a title page, a topic overview (what you want to examine and why), methodology (how will you research your topic?), your preparation to write on your topic (coursework and other experiences; explain why you are capable of completing the research methodology you propose), a short conclusion, and a preliminary bibliography. Treat it like any other paper; write multiple drafts and edit so you have the best chance of your proposal being accepted.
- I would recommend attending the Religion thesis presentations at the end of the term to get an idea what presentations are like and what will be expected of you.
- Enroll in REL 86 and 87. I recommend enrolling in REL 86 and 87 in the Fall/Winter sequence, not Winter/Spring sequence, it gives you more time to work.

Fieldwork and CPHS Approval for Research

- If you are doing research with human subjects, you will need to get Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) approval for your research.
 - 1. *Determine which category your research falls into:* CPHS has three [categories](#) of applications: exempt, expedited, and full review. Your project will probably fall into the exempt or expedited review categories. For example, my fieldwork in Tibetan communities in India was “expedited non-clinical review”, and it seems that social science and anthropological fieldwork generally falls into that category.
 - 2. *Complete Human Subjects Protection education requirement:* You and your advisor will need to complete the Human Subjects Protection education requirement before writing your application, which you can fulfill by either completing the CITI online

- course or attending a one-hour session at DHMC. Go to the session at DHMC! You learn everything you would learn from the CITI course and save a ton of time. Check out the [schedule](#) of sessions ahead of time because they are offered only a few times a term. **Do this ASAP early in fall term!**
- 3. *Meet with a CPHS staff member:* Determine which forms you will need to submit and talk about the areas of risk in your research, what the Committee would like to see you do to mitigate the risks, and a timeline for your application. The CPHS website is confusing, but CPHS staff can guide you through it and illuminate the requirements.
 - 4. *Complete the Rapport application online:* After you complete the educational requirement the folks at CPHS will set up a Rapport account for you. Start a new study on Rapport. Write your protocol, review it with your thesis advisor, and upload it to Rapport. Ask your advisor to submit the faculty review form. You may need to complete other forms depending on your research methods; for instance, I wrote an information sheet to give to everyone I interviewed. Submit your application with lots of time to spare before you begin your research! The review process can take longer than you would expect.
- Fieldwork Advice
 - If you are doing fieldwork, do it over the summer or winter break.
 - If possible, try to take classes that will teach you about fieldwork and give you a taste of it; I found my prior experiences in ANTH 3: Intro to Cultural Anthropology and my Independent Study on my study-abroad program were essential preparation for my thesis fieldwork.
 - If you are doing research abroad, don't forget to make a travel consult appointment at Dick's House at the beginning of the term before you travel and put together a well-stocked first aid kit. Also keep an eye on the political/economic/safety situation in the area(s) you will be traveling to.
 - Set up some interviews in advance, if possible, so you can hit the ground running when you get to your fieldwork site.
 - Thank the people who help you with your fieldwork, your "informants"/collaborators/interviewees. They give you their time, energy, and knowledge; you should give them things back: buy their coffee or food if you are meeting at a restaurant; offer gifts and/or money and donations as appropriate.

Research and reading

- Take advantage of the library's abundant resources! Talk to Mr. Fontaine, the Religion department research assistant, he can purchase books the library doesn't have yet; use the [Religion resource guide page](#) and databases like ATLA Religion Plus, JSTOR, etc; and use [BorrowDirect](#) to get books from other institutions.
- Keep good notes as you research. I found it best to keep these notes digitally so I could go back later and search through them easily.

Managing sources, material, and drafts

- *Content management tools:* I highly recommend that you use [Zotero](#) or similar software ([RefWorks](#) is free through the College) to compile your bibliography, notes, interviews, and quotations. I use Zotero and it is a *lifesaver*. It's free, you just download it and put all your sources in, and then you can add notes to sources and search by terms. Zotero backs everything up in the cloud, so you can access it from any computer and won't lose it if you have any computer issues.
- *Back up everything!* Back up your laptop all the time! Use Dropbox, Google Docs, or an external hard drive and back up your thesis documents at least once a week. This will save you major headaches if your hard drive fails. In fact, go back everything up right now.

Writing

- Make writing manageable by breaking it down into chunks. Break your thesis into chapters and break the chapters down into sub-sections. Use your outline to break it down, and have a clear sense of how each section fits into the whole and what it achieves to give background information on your topic or advance your argument.
- At the beginning of your writing term set a goal of a number of pages to write during each week to keep yourself on track.
- Keep a weekly log of the number of pages you've written in an Excel spreadsheet and graph it against your page goals for each week to see your progress visually.

Editing

- Read through your draft and edit it multiple times, and vary the method of editing. You will notice different issues reading from a computer screen, on a hard copy, or reading aloud. I found that marking up a printed copy of my drafts was helpful to catch mistakes I had missed on the screen.
- Try to have people totally unfamiliar with your topic proofread chapters (friends, parents, siblings, etc). As the researcher/writer you spend so much time immersed in your topic you may omit important information or neglect to explain parts of your topic, but someone who is totally new to your topic will catch these and let you know if you are making the topic engaging and understandable to a non-specialist.
- I found it helpful to make a spreadsheet detailing everything I need to edit (for citations, passive voice, spelling, grammar, diacritics, paragraph structure, etc.) and check them off for every chapter as I went, so I used a consistent process and didn't forget to proofread for some aspect.

Resources on campus

- *Scholar Studies:* You can get a shared scholar study in the library for a term to work on your thesis, and it's *incredibly* helpful to have a consistent, quiet space where you can write and store all your books and materials. I would recommend applying for your writing term, when you have the most books, to save yourself the backache of carrying them all around campus. Two people share each study. You can request to share a study with a friend who is also writing a thesis. Here's the [website](#) where you can find more info and

the application.

- *RWTT Tutor*: RWTT offers a thesis **writers'** tutor program! Here's the [application](#); send it to the director of RWTT because the person listed on the application doesn't work there anymore. If you work with a tutor, I would recommend setting up a regular weekly schedule. Send your tutor drafts 2-3 days before your meeting, then leave some time after to make the edits you discuss with them, and then send drafts to your advisor for your due date with them.

Thesis Defense

- At the defense, you sit down with the faculty in the lounge and defend your thesis by answering their questions. It lasts about an hour. Your performance in the defense will affect your grade (high honors or honors).
- Be prepared to talk about how your thesis contributes to religion scholarship, what you have accomplished, and your research process. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of your research and your written thesis. Try to anticipate questions that will be asked and prepare for them.

Thesis Presentation

- Your presentation is a celebration of all your work and a chance to share your thesis with family, friends, other professors, mentors, etc.
- Before your presentation, practice in the room you will use with the projector to sort out any technological issues. Bring a backup copy of your presentation on a USB drive and e-mail it to yourself just in case your computer has issues. Usually you present using your own laptop but if it doesn't work you may be able to borrow your advisor's, or someone else's.
- Apple's version of Powerpoint, Keynote, is free for Macs and makes much more beautiful presentations than Powerpoint, I would recommend it. If you plan to export your presentation from Keynote to Powerpoint formats, keep in mind that some of the formatting/font sizes will change and give yourself some time to fix that.
- The more you practice the more comfortable you will feel giving your presentation! Practice presenting on friends before the big day, and use their feedback to improve your presentation and delivery.

Printing

- Style and typefaces (not very important, but fun): I would recommend using a classic-looking serif font, they are just more appealing than Times New Roman (something like Garamond, Goudy Old Style, Minion, etc.; I used Garmond.) The website [Typewolf](#) is quite helpful.
- Read Gnomon Copy's [thesis printing policies on their website](#).
- Submit your draft to the printer, Gnomon Copy, after your defense. Ask your advisor and other profs for any small corrections they have and make those changes. Check with Marcia about the printing specifications, make any of those changes, then send your thesis to Gnomon. Send the title page as a Word doc and the rest of the thesis as a PDF

document, and include the title page in that PDF too. If you have any color images specify the page numbers to Gnomon. The department has theses printed double-sided, so make sure that the chapters start on the odd pages so they will be on the right.

- The department will pay for one copy for you and two for school, and any extra copies are your responsibility to pay for.
- Pick up your thesis when it is printed and bring copies to the Department.

Other thesis advice

- [Columbia advice for Religion thesis writers](#)
- [Dartmouth Sociology thesis guide \(some of the material here is specifically about Sociology, but much can be applied to Religion\)](#)
- [“Thesis Writing: The Basics”](#) a helpful article
- [Harvard “Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers \(and other writers, too\)”](#)

Schedule

This is my schedule for reference. I enrolled in REL 86-87 in the Fall/Winter sequence and did anthropological fieldwork (interviews and participant observation) over winter break.

Term	Fieldwork	Research	Writing	Other
Junior Spring			Submit your proposal	Ask a professor to be your advisor and attend thesis presentations
Junior Summer	Start organizing logistics for fieldwork	Research, read, and identify important sources	Take notes, transcribe relevant quotations from your sources	Keep in touch with your advisor
Senior Fall	Get CPHS approval for research with human subjects, if needed	Research and read	Continuing taking notes Draft your outline	Set a schedule with your advisor, communicate with them
Winter Break	Do fieldwork, take notes, transcribe interviews	Continue to research and read	Outline each chapter	Discuss your fieldwork and research findings with your advisor
Senior Winter		Research as needed	Write drafts of all chapters, and start editing	Work with your advisor on writing and editing drafts

Spring Break		Research as needed	Continue to write and edit as needed	
Senior Spring			Edit as needed Submit and Print!	Thesis Defense and Presentation

Useful resources for Buddhist Studies / Tibetan Buddhist Studies

- [Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism](#)
- [The Tibetan and Himalayan Library Dictionary](#)
- [A Dictionary of Buddhism by Damian Keown](#)
- [Ranjung Yeshe Wiki](#)
- [Rigpa Wiki](#)
- [Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive Glossary](#)
- [The Treasury of Lives](#)
- [The Encyclopedia of Monasticism](#)