

# T H E GRADUATE



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## CHOOSING YOUR THESIS OR DISSERTATION TOPIC

Picking a topic for your dissertation or thesis may be the biggest hurdle you face in graduate school. Sure, you've got to write the thesis or dissertation, but if you choose the wrong topic, you may not even get that far.

Students report that choosing a topic can be either easy or agonizing.

Richard W. Moore, author of *Winning the Ph.D. Game*, puts it this way: "Suddenly, students are supposed to be able to select one research topic, from among thousands of possibilities. From a topic, they must develop a scholarly question and a research method to answer it; and above all else, they must be creative and original after years of being rewarded for parroting professors."

### WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

That "creative and original" part can be the first stumbling block.

"How can you make an original contribution to a body of literature that's a thousand years old?" asked one student.

"Advisers want to see a topic that is novel and interesting—something that will make a real contribution to the theoretical framework in your field," said another.

The choice isn't made lightly. Having to switch topics after five years of work because you picked one that simply can't be done, or because you picked an adviser who's never had a student finish, can seriously dampen your enthusiasm for a Ph.D.

A primary issue for many is the question of marketability. Will this topic get you a job? Will it still be an important topic in five years when you finish?

Another dilemma for some students is predicting whether they'll be able to tolerate working on their subjects for a substantial part of their lives. In the

humanities and social sciences, they'll not only be hired by their thesis or dissertation topic—they may also be the resident expert in that particular piece of minutia for a long, long time. In science and engineering, academics can switch more easily, but staying interested in one topic for quite a few years can be a problem.

Berkeley graduate students were, as always, ready to talk about this subject. We found that each department or school has its own peculiar process for choosing thesis or dissertation topics, and students have developed a variety of strategies for finding a topic that will work for them.

### WHAT ARE YOUR DEPARTMENT'S REQUIREMENTS?

Find out as soon as you can what your department expects of you in picking a topic. In the sciences, for example, your topic may depend on what research group you join, which in turn depends on who has funding. In the humanities, you'll probably work alone, so your range of choices is wider.

Schools and departments vary on timing, too. In English, according to fourth-year student JoEllen Green, students take qualifying exams at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth year. After their orals they are expected to write a 25-page dissertation prospectus within a year or so. While some English students have chosen topics before orals, many have not.

Chemical engineering students follow a different schedule. Dan Carl, a first-year student, says students pick a general project area after only six weeks, developing a list of three favorites.

"Then the faculty advisers go through a process of trying to match the people with the professor and the topic that's being funded at that time,"

Carl says. "Most people get their first choice."

While the actual topic isn't determined at this point, the research area is now decided for those students. They are limiting their choices very soon after arriving in the department and will defend their topics in the qualifying exams a year later.

Anthropology students also defend their topics in qualifying exams, but only after three years of courses and paper writing. In classics, the topic may arise in the exam, but students don't prepare a formal defense.

### FOLLOW YOUR DEPARTMENT'S CULTURAL NORMS

Is your department conservative or does your adviser favor "cutting edge" research? Even if you're given wide latitude in choosing your topic, it's wise to pay attention to the unwritten rules as well as the written ones. You'll finish sooner and much less painfully if you scope out the politics in advance.

David Schenker, a fourth-year classics student, felt free to pick a topic that wasn't in the absolutely hottest hiring area at the moment. He felt no need to search for novelty, because the department supports a "traditional, solid, conservative approach." Controversy would be hard to find in classics, anyway, he says, because "there are very few things in classics that people stay up late at night thinking about."

For Marcia Inhorn, a fourth-year anthropology student, subtle department pressure led to a choice of doing research overseas rather than in the U.S. If she hadn't paid attention to the signals, she might have missed an important clue to future employment in her field.

Anthropology is one example of a field where older, outdated theories must be avoided. To get support for the dissertation and for future projects, students pick new theoretical approaches that will appeal to funding agencies.

**WHAT'S YOUR OWN STYLE?**

Your own needs and working style should influence your choice of topic. Think about what excites you most in your field and what the master's or doctoral degree means to you. As long as you're going to work hard on something for several years, maybe you can satisfy some secret desire in the process.

"The dissertation is the last step before you reach your intellectual majority," says Dr. Carol Morrison of Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS). "For some people it's very important to have it be a special experience, and for other people there are real time demands on their lives to finish quickly."

Dr. Robert Mixson, also of CPS, suggests picking a fairly narrow, well-defined topic if you're in a hurry. If only one adviser can work with you on a topic, you might also check on the success rates of students he or she has advised, Mixson says.

You should also look at your own personality. Joshua Rosenthal, a third-year student in botany, says that in the sciences, students tend to choose between lab work and fieldwork based on whether they prefer structured or independent settings. He says that "usually lab work offers more direction, better funding, and a quicker finish. Fieldwork offers more independence."

"People know whether they want a research position or a faculty position somewhere," says Carl. "Or else, they go into it to get something that's going to make them saleable when they get out." Their choice of research group and dissertation topic depends on those plans.

Finally, take a look at your idiosyncrasies and childhood fantasies. Have you always wanted to go to the desert? Maybe you can find a research project in the Sahara. Does someone in your family have eyes of different colors? Maybe you can hook into a genetics group studying eye color.

A word of caution here: According to Morrison, basing your topic on a personal need can backfire.

"When you choose a topic that you really have a passion for, you may have

a psychological reason," she says. "At its best, that sort of passion sustains one through times of hard work; it can also enhance creativity. At its worst, it can be limiting; one could get caught in the issue."

**READ THE TEA LEAVES**

Predicting the future is difficult. In the sciences, new breakthroughs and increased public awareness have created a fast-changing game for anyone trying to find a topic that will be popular in several years. Carl talks about the recent rush in biomedical engineering.

"This was a strange year," he says, "because all the news was coming out about biomedical engineering being really great, so you had a lot of people who were interested in getting into those spots on the research teams. It was perceived as a saleable commodity when you get out—as leading edge."

A trendy topic runs the risk of increasing the competition. Green says, "I was going to do a different topic and then I heard a rumor that this woman who's very, very good was coming out with a book vaguely on my area, so I said 'no way am I touching this topic.'"

Choosing your topic because a given professor won the Nobel Prize this year can also backfire; the professor may be too busy to give you the support you need.

**PICK A TOPIC YOU CAN MANAGE**

Feasibility is a buzz word that actually makes sense when you're narrowing down your topic. If you pick a topic that requires you to go to Asia repeatedly for source material, or a topic for which you can't find a sample group, you may never finish.

Mixson says that "it's extremely important, because it affects how long they're going to be at the University tremendously. The ones who are here the longest picked topics that didn't fit their faculty very well. They can't get the kind of advice and support they need."

Morrison describes two kinds of topics: "ones that are practical, and ones that truly engage the heart." For the latter, she says, "the advantage is

clear—to be able to do original research in an area that you care deeply about is really exciting."

The drawback, according to Morrison, is that "when you want to do research in a new field, there are a couple of problems. One is that there's no money. The other is that you can't take a piece of a question; the area is delineated but the question is not, because there's not enough knowledge. There's not the rigor that's imposed by already existing knowledge shaping questions."

If you choose an uncharted topic, she says, you must be very sure you have a good adviser: "someone who would have some idea of how to shape order out of chaos and be relatively demanding and rigorous."

Inhorn described the good fortune she encountered in finding her sample group and meeting the people who could give her access. She knew her general subject and what part of the world she wanted; on an exploratory trip, she pulled together the technical support that would make the topic feasible.

For professional students in field placements, feasibility often comes from the job. A sponsor, a study group, or the equipment you need may make the difference in whether your topic is possible.

**THINK ABOUT YOUR CAREER**

This is what it's all about for most graduate students, isn't it? Aside from the few who are really only interested in knowledge for its own sake, most students do care about their job prospects.

The thesis or dissertation certainly has an impact on that future. Trying to figure out how your topic will help or hurt is the most time-consuming part of narrowing down the choices.

"There are certain topics that are discouraged, because they won't get you jobs," says Green. "Faculty don't want to say you can't do it, but on the other hand everyone knows you won't get hired. So they try to get us to stick to literature, but people generally end up doing what they want to do. What most people do is write a thesis or dissertation about whatever they want,

but they'll make sure at least one chapter is eminently marketable. When they go on the market, they send out that chapter. No one has time to read your whole thesis or dissertation anyway."

For some, the topic itself is less important than the quality of the work when it comes to finding a job. Dave Melnick, who received his M.S.W. last May, says that while he expects his thesis to be discussed in job interviews, "it's really mostly practice in doing research."

"Students want to learn how to use computers, because that's where this society's going, especially for people in policy and administration and even direct service people," he says.

Rosenthal believes that the quality of the work is not separate from the advantage of learning *how* to work. Your advisory committee, he says, "needs to know that what you're doing is fundamentally exciting and that you know what you're doing; that you can manipulate literature and do research."

The dissertation committee can help with placement in some fields; thus, a topic that appeals to an influential professor would be a good choice. If you've picked out a topic you're sure will draw funding or jobs in five years, you still must look for an adviser who can help you with contacts on the job market.

"Students should look at employment options more carefully," says Rosenthal. "The investment in graduate school is a big chunk of your life; if you walk out there and you're not trained for any job it can be pretty demoralizing. But there may not be a professor who specializes in your area (to serve on your committee)."

If your field is one in which people stay with the same specialty forever, your topic should provide material for future work. Marcia Inhorn says, "It shouldn't be too narrow. It should have other dimensions so that in the future you'll at least have some leads; you'll have enough work done so that you can come back and sort of spin off."

**ASK YOURSELF THE \$64,000 QUESTION**

The toughest choice many students make in narrowing down their topics is a very basic one: Do I choose the topic I love best or the one that will get me a job when I'm done?

For a lucky few, the answer is simple: They happen to love a topic that's also marketable. For the rest, this question can cause untold agony before (as well as hours of second-guessing after) they've chosen their topics.

Gambling on the hot topic of the future can be risky, but students told us their peers have done it. The other choice is to pick what Morrison calls "something that truly engages the heart."

"I'd rather work on something that I'm going to enjoy, and I think I can do a better job getting it written," says Schenker. "In classics it's such a long shot getting a job anyway; I don't know if people really think about getting a job so much."

Mixson says that "if there are no jobs in the area that you truly love, reality suggests that you do something else. You can take course work in the thing that you love and still get into it later."

For professional master's students the thesis is often seen as "practice doing research"; the actual topic is less important. For them, according to Melnick, the topic is often "something that's really close to their hearts, that they can pour out and be passionate about."

Even in a field like English, where jobs don't grow on trees, it's safer to pick a topic you can enjoy. Green says, "We tell students you just have to go with what you like. If you do that, you'll do a really good job and you'll be able to defend it well. If you pick something just because it's trendy and you don't like it, then you'll have real problems if the topic somehow dies."

On the other hand, she says, "You

might look for an adviser who it coincides with, or if you're really ambitious you look for someone who's really trendy and it doesn't matter what they do."

Finally, you don't have to give up a topic you love just to get a job; you can always go back to that topic later. If you're planning to spend your life in intellectual contemplation, chances are you can work on your truly favorite topic for a tenure book. If you're not going into an academic job, then your topic is probably less important for hiring anyway, so you can pick the one you love.

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