Economics BC 3061: Senior Thesis I

Professor Thuy Nguyen

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Office Hours: T 1-3pm
Office: Barnard Hall 234

Website: courseworks.columbia.edu
Class Time: M 12:30-2pm
Class Room: Diana 502
(Last Updated: 11/16/2026)

Course Description

> "Your thesis is like your first love. It will be difficult to forget. In the end, it will represent your first serious and rigorous academic work, and this is no small thing."
>
> — Umberto Eco, *How to Write a Thesis* (1977)

Senior Thesis is the culmination of your training as an economics major; however, it won't resemble the coursework you have completed up to this point. Where many of your classes have tasked you with well-defined problems to work on, Senior Thesis invites you to become a producer rather than simply a consumer of knowledge. It's important to recognize that conducting original research in economics requires a considerable degree of independence, initiative, and commitment. Be prepared to be excited and frustrated in equal measure! But for those who see it through, it can be one of the most rewarding parts of your undergraduate education.

Keep in mind that you're *not* alone in this journey! I'm here to support you as you carry out independent research. I urge you to make full use of that support. Meet with me early and often, and don't wait until the last minute to ask for help. Your classmates are writing theses alongside you, and some of your most useful feedback will come from them.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course you will:

1. Extract a research question from a topic of your own interest that:
    - is clearly articulated
    - is narrow enough to feasibly address within the academic year, and
    - will represent a contribution to economic science, meaning it:
        - has a non-obvious answer and
        - has not been sufficiently explored in previous work.
2. Investigate your question through several possible means, including:
    - reviewing prior, related research
    - collecting new data sets or creating new data sets by combining existing ones analyzing data
    - examining and analyzing primary and secondary sources, and
    - summarizing, developing, and applying relevant economic theory
3. Apply a broad range of skills and learning obtained in previous courses, either within or related to the economics discipline, to achieve the ends of the research project you choose.
4. Demonstrate the ability to communicate economic ideas effectively in written and oral form, including in formal presentations.
5. Develop and edit your writing (and peers') so that it follows good practices for style, grammar, and organization for research papers — i.e. the "organization and style" criteria described in the thesis evaluation form posted on CourseWorks.

Course Prerequisites

Permission of the instructor and the completion of all courses (except for the senior requirement) required for the economics department majors. Any outstanding electives may be completed concurrently.

Required Materials

- Please purchase a copy of: McCloskey, D. N. *Economical Writing, Third Edition: Thirty-Five Rules for Clear and Persuasive Prose*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. It is a concise, readable guide to good writing.
    - A copy is also on reserve at Barnard Library for our class if you need it. You simply request the book at the Barnard Circ Desk during open hours. The book will have a loan period of 6 hours. You may use the scanners in the library to scan portions of the book.

- I will post all other required reading on CourseWorks. The bulk of your reading will come from the literature around your topic.

Class Meetings

Class Structure

The senior thesis class is scheduled to meet once a week. The class meets as a group roughly every other week; on alternate weeks, students meet one-on-one with the thesis instructor (that's me!). Your grade will be based on the quality of the research paper and advancing through various milestones and deadlines throughout the year.

Courseworks

Assignments, important announcements, and other information will be posted throughout the semester on the CourseWorks page for this class (`CourseWorks.columbia.edu/`).

Class Attendance

Attendance at group meetings and individual meetings is expected. Thesis writing can feel like an isolated process, but you'll learn a great deal from seeing how your classmates work through their own research questions and challenges, and from the feedback you give and receive. Please let me know in advance (or as soon as possible) if you need to miss a meeting.

Office Hours & Contacts

My office hours are Tuesdays, 1 to 3 pm, in **234 Barnard Hall**. Office hours are time reserved just for you. Please come! I love getting to know you, whether it is about your thesis, career, senior year stress, or whatever is on your mind. If the scheduled time doesn't work, just send me an email, I will try my best to make time. The best way to reach me is by e-mail at `thnguyen@barnard.edu`.

Resources

I will continuously update resources on CourseWorks, so please check regularly for the most current materials.

Honor Code

I value Barnard's Honor Code for the integrity it fosters. The codes say, in part:

> "We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources."

Please note that The Barnard Honor Code includes relevant language for the proper use of electronic class material: any recorded class content is the intellectual property of your professor and your fellow students, and should not be distributed or shared outside of class

AI Usage Statement

Senior Thesis is a capstone demonstration of the research, analytical, and writing abilities you built over the course of your undergraduate education. They are durable skills and capabilities that will help you succeed wherever you go next. At the same time, I recognize that generative AI tools are increasingly a normal part of the writing and editing process and learning to use them thoughtfully is itself a useful skill. AI can lower the cost of learning and doing, which should mean you learn more and do more, not less!! Also keep in mind that you are completely capable of succeeding in this class without using AI. But if you do choose to use AI in your work, I want you to use it cautiously and transparently. Please adhere to the following guidelines.

For the current academic year 2026-2027, Barnard has adopted an AI Usage Scale to allow faculty to indicate whether AI use is acceptable in a given course and, where applicable, the level and type of AI permitted. The default AI usage level for all assignments in this course is **Level 1 - AI Planning** unless specified otherwise.

Appropriate use of AI includes:

- You may use AI for spell-checking and basic grammar correction (e.g., Grammarly, MS Word).
- You may use AI to proofread and provide editorial feedback on drafts you have already written yourself, but not to generate or substantively rewrite content on your behalf.
- You may use AI for planning, brainstorming, and initial research, such as topic exploration and outlining. Any sources suggested by AI must be independently verified before use.

Inappropriate use of AI include:

- You may not use entire sentences or paragraphs suggested by AI without providing quotation marks and a citation, just as you would to any other source.
- You may not have AI write a draft (either rough or final) of an assignment for you.

To reiterate, any and all use of AI software at any stage of completing assignments for this course must be properly cited in your work; neglecting to do so may constitute a violation of the College's Honor Code. If you have questions about what is permissible at any point in the semester, please reach out to me. Please also note that this policy applies only to this class, and it is your responsibility to check with each instructor if ever you are unsure about what constitutes academic honesty in their class.

Students with Disabilities

If you believe you may encounter barriers to the academic environment due to a documented disability or emerging health challenges, please contact me and/or the Center for Accessibility Resources & Disability Services (CARDS). Any student with approved academic accommodations is encouraged to contact me during office hours or via email. If you have questions regarding registering a disability or receiving accommodations for the semester, please contact CARDS at (212) 854-4634, cards@barnard.edu, or learn more at barnard.edu/disabilityservices. CARDS is located in 101 Altschul Hall.

Wellness Statement

It is important for undergraduates to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make yourself—your own health, sanity, and wellness—your priority throughout this term and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

- Primary Care: http://barnard.edu/primarycare
- Counseling: http://barnard.edu/counseling
- Wellness: http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about

Affordable Access to Texts Statement

All students deserve to be able to access course texts. The high costs of textbooks and other course materials prohibit access and perpetuate inequity, and Barnard librarians are partnering with students, faculty, and staff to increase access. By the first day of advance registration for each term, you should be able to view on CourseWorks information provided by your faculty about required texts (including ISBN or author, title, publisher and copyright date) and their prices. Once you have selected your classes, here are some cost-free methods for accessing course texts, recommended by the Barnard Library:

- Find out if your faculty has placed the texts on reserve at Barnard Library or another Columbia library, and look for course texts using CLIO (library catalog),
- Borrow Direct (request books from partner libraries),
- Interlibrary Loan (request book chapters from any library), and NYPL.

Students with financial need or insecurity can check items out from the FLIP lending libraries in the Barnard Library and Butler Library and can consult with the Dean of Studies and the Financial Aid Office about additional affordable alternatives for getting access to course texts. Talk with your librarian and visit the Barnard Library

Schedule and weekly learning goals

The schedule is tentative and subject to change. See CourseWorks for more details.

WEEK 01, 09/07 - 09/11: **Group Meeting**

- What is a thesis?
  - Guidelines
- What are your ideas for topics?
  - Broad is OK for now (no wrong answer!)
- What questions do you have for me?

WEEK 02, 09/14 - 09/18: **Individual Meetings**

- Work on narrowing down your topic
- Identify relevant sources and document each with a reading reflection (see template on Courseworks)

WEEK 03, 09/21 - 09/25: **Group Meeting**

- What makes a good thesis?
  - Read examples of previous theses
- Begin your annotated bibliography and find data sources

WEEK 04, 09/28 - 10/02: **Individual Meetings**

- Gain focus on your research question
- Continue compiling data sources and adding to annotated bibliography
- Continued research and writing will help you narrow down your topic

WEEK 05, 10/05 - 10/09: **Group Meeting**

- What makes a research question interesting? And how to win a Nobel Prize?
- Share your thesis statement and annotated bibliography
- Deliverable: Turn in annotated bibliography

WEEK 06, 10/12 - 10/16: **Group Meeting**

- Research Design Workshop with Fatima Koli from Empirical Reasoning Center
- Begin operationalizing your thesis statement
- Start writing your thesis proposal

WEEK 07, 10/19 - 10/23: **Group Meeting**

- Workshop with Social Sciences Librarian Jennie Correia
- Continue refining your thesis proposal

WEEK 08, 10/26 - 10/30: **Individual Meetings**

- Deliverable: Turn in thesis proposal

WEEK 09, 11/02 - 11/06: **Individual Meetings**

- Feedback on draft, next steps

WEEK 10, 11/09 - 11/13: **Group Meeting**

- Deliverable: Draft of introduction and/or literature review
- Begin work on formal presentation

WEEK 11, 11/16 - 11/20: **Individual Meetings**

- Continue work on draft and presentation

WEEK 12, 11/23 - 11/27: **No Meetings (Thanksgiving Holiday!)**

- Deliverable: Draft of formal presentation (optional)

WEEK 13, 11/30 - 12/04: **Individual Meetings**

- Make individual work plan for spring thesis completion

WEEK 14, 12/07 - 12/11: **Group Meeting**

- Formal presentations; final submission due date **Dec 9**.