CHOOSING A SENIOR THESIS TOPIC

The senior thesis is essentially a research paper for which you are given a great deal of freedom in topic selection. **You may choose virtually any topic to investigate as long as it can be developed into a clear position that can be proven with logical, academic writing.**

You must choose an issue you can defend with research, but you need not use an obvious, controversial issue! Yes, common topics like abortion, gun control, and capital punishment may be argued, but in the past some of the most interesting and successful senior thesis topics have been further off the beaten path. Past topics have ranged from indoor tanning to hunting, from Barbie dolls to four-stroke motors, and from the Cold War to macramé. The sky is the limit—as long as you can develop the topic into an argument.

**REMEMBER:** The SENIOR THESIS is an **ARGUMENT**

Definition #2 of the word *thesis* (in *Webster’s New World Dictionary*) is “A proposition maintained or defended in argument.”

The ability to make a proposal or take a position and then support it with research-based logic is a key writing skill. This sort of “academic argumentation” is a very important skill to learn: it demonstrates an ability to both think and communicate clearly in many different contexts.

*The senior thesis project charges you with the task of taking a strong position, maintaining it, and defending it with valid argumentative techniques.*
EXAMPLES OF PAST SENIOR THESIS TOPICS:

- Three-party political system in America
- Peer pressure on girls in high school
- Career training in high school vs. “academic” training
- How did [musician, painter, etc.] influence modern [music/art]
  - The effect of underage drinking on America
    - Global warming
- The effects of media advertisements (commercials)
  - Punishments for animal abusers
- Preserving farms/farmland in America
  - Videogames as addictions
    - Censorship of books
    - Military spending in the US
- Salary caps in professional [baseball / basketball/ etc.]
- [Historical event / war] should have been prevented
  - Discrimination against smokers
- Anti-depressants [or other medicine] are over-prescribed
- [_______] is a way of protecting the environment that should be adopted worldwide
- [Organized crime / political corruption / big business] impacts American policymakers
- Improving American penal/prison/criminal justice system
  - [_________ policy/legislation] should be [reversed/changed/etc.]

NOTE: Be wary of sports, music, illnesses, and careers. These topics tend to be difficult to argue about. Not impossible, but difficult. If you decide to choose one of these, think carefully about your focus question!
The following is a list of IDEAS for topics that were posted on a college’s web site. It is a very good list with many workable subjects.

1. Should pornography be restricted by law?
2. What is the impact of automation on American culture and lifestyles?
3. Should newspaper reporters be required to reveal their sources?
4. Should law or custom regarding American funeral practices be revised?
5. Should parents and other interested citizens censor textbooks and other literature for children in schools?
6. Where and how, if at all, should sex education be conducted?
7. Should the United States have mandatory military conscription? For whom?
8. Should laws regarding minimum wage (or the forty-hour work week) be revised?
9. Should mandatory (or voluntary) prayer be permitted in public schools?
10. Should the government provide child day care centers for working parents?
11. Should donors or their families be compensated for organ donations? How should people be selected to receive donor organs?
12. Should homosexuals be permitted to serve in the armed forces?
13. Should genetic engineering be controlled by law?
14. What impact on the family (or the workplace) have changes in gender roles had?
15. Have the large salaries of professional athletes had a negative impact on the athletes or the sports?
16. How should colleges manage their athletic programs in relation to their academic goals?
17. Do certain children’s toys create social or emotional or other problems?
18. Should public servants (like school teachers, hospital workers, trash collectors) have the right to strike?
19. Should imports of foreign cars or other foreign products be limited or restricted by law?
20. Should academic freedom for teachers and students be limited by law?
21. Does society have an obligation to protect privacy as a basic individual right?
22. Should sex and violence on television or in the movies be restricted?
23. To what extent does the private life and private morality of a public figure affect his or her ability to serve the public interest?
24. Should divorce laws be changed in ways that will be more equitable or just for all the parties?
25. What restrictions should be placed on polygraph testing (or drug testing or personality testing such as Meyers-Brigg Type Indicator) either for the criminal justice system or for the workplace?
26. What place should "creationism" have in the public education system?
27. Should controversial speakers (on whatever subject) be allowed on college campuses?
28. What types of regulations of smoking in public places should the legal system impose?
29. Do "beauty" contests (Mr. America, Miss America, etc.) serve any purpose in society?
30. Are American Indians being treated fairly in today’s society?
31. What prevention techniques and/or penalties should be applied to child molestation and child abuse?
32. Does the American system of justice need reform to ensure that criminals are properly punished?
33. To what extent should individuals have the protection of the law and the assistance of the medical establishment in terminating their own lives?
34. What should be done to protect the rights of minorities (of all kinds) in America today?
35. What techniques should the public schools use to strengthen literacy at all grade levels?
36. Should children be required to attend school past the age of sixteen?
37. Should a rating system be required for song lyrics?
38. To what extent should advertising aimed at children be regulated by law?
39. Should the courts require that contracts and other legal documents be written in non-technical language so that clients can understand the documents?
40. Should English be declared the official language of the United States?
41. To what extent should bilingual education be offered in public schools?
42. What role should the federal government take in dealing with the problem of AIDS, homelessness, or other widespread social, medical, and economical problems (pick only one problem for a focus)?
43. Should surrogate motherhood be either banned or regulated by law?
44. Should adoption records be open rather than sealed?
45. Should unapproved drugs be made available as a last resort to patients with conditions for which conventional treatments are known to be ineffective?
46. Should tobacco companies be held responsible for smoking-related illnesses and deaths?
47. Should bartenders be held responsible for the behavior of their patrons?
48. Is rehabilitation of felony offenders possible? Desirable?
49. Should the federal government provide health care for all citizens who cannot afford their own?
50. Should juvenile offenders be tried and punished as adults?

http://www.tcc.edu/students/resources/writcent/handouts/writing/restopics.htm

YOUR TOPIC MUST BE APPROVED BY YOUR INSTRUCTOR!

DO NOT BEGIN WRITING ANY PORTION OF YOUR SENIOR THESIS PROJECT BEFORE RECEIVING PERMISSION FROM YOUR TEACHER!
THE FOCUS QUESTION

After deciding on the subject for your Senior Thesis Project, brainstorm possible **focus questions** for it. The focus question is the question your essay will ultimately answer. Focus questions should be:

1. **Arguable**: Intelligent persons should be able to answer your focus question with an assortment of supportable responses. There should be no single, all-encompassing “right” answer. (So questions that could be definitively answered by finding a couple good web pages or encyclopedia articles definitely make poor choices.)

2. **Neither too broad nor too narrow**: Since you’re writing a 6-8 page essay, your question should not be so expansive that it would require 10, 20, or 100 pages to answer—if it can be convincingly answered at all! Conversely, it should also not be so simplistic that it could be supported in 1 or 2 pages. (Definitely do not use *yes* or *no* questions!)

**SAMPLE FOCUS QUESTIONS:**

- **POOR**: Is cheerleading a sport?  (*Too narrow, since a yes or no question…*)
- **BETTER**: Why is cheerleading a sport?  (*A bit vague…*)
- **BEST**: Should cheerleading be recognized as a sport by the Michigan High School Sports Association?

- **POOR**: Does drug addiction negatively impact families?  (*Firstly, a yes or no question; also, who could argue with this?*)
- **STILL POOR**: How does drug addiction negatively impact families?  (*Again, not exactly an argument—the essay would turn into a list*)
- **BETTER**: Because drug use is voluntary, should it be considered an addiction?
- **BEST**: Because drug use is voluntary, should drug addiction treatment be covered by health insurance providers?
PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

After you craft your focus question, consider the availability of resources. This thesis paper is a research paper, so difficulty in finding data on a particular topic can make writing difficult—or even impossible.

On the other hand, don’t give up too quickly on something you really want to write about, either. A motivated researcher can find information to support any topic. With Michigan State University so close, and with the Internet at your fingertips, you should be able to find valid sources for almost any topic.

To make sure your focus question is not a “dead end,” conduct preliminary research. Spend between 30 minutes to an hour looking for documents that will help answer your focus question. If you cannot find at least FIVE reliable, useful sources, you might want to consider altering your focus question. Or even your topic altogether. If, however, an abundance of valid, academically useful evidence is readily available, your topic is probably safe.
Now that you have a topic for your Senior Thesis Project that you have formed into a focus question, you will write a business letter to your teacher explaining your topic choice and your reason for picking it, among other things.

Format this letter on the page in standard business letter form (1.5” margins, etc.). Think of this as “real life” practice, for at some point in your lives you will each most likely need to write a business letter of this sort.

As for content, here is your guide:

- **First Paragraph:** What is your topic? Why did you choose this subject? You can also explain why it is a valid, mature choice for a senior-level project.

- **Second Paragraph:** What is your focus question? Explain what you hope to prove in your essay. (Hint: be sure it is an argument, that someone could disagree with you.)

- **Third Paragraph:** In a couple sentences each, explain the three “best” sources you found during your preliminary research. Make sure to give the basic data on each, too (title, author, etc.)

- **Fourth Paragraph:** You will be required to use one “primary source” in your senior thesis; explain it here. You should also suggest one “back up” primary source, just in case your first choice doesn’t pan out. (We’ll talk later about what a primary source is and isn’t.)

- **Fifth Paragraph:** Basically, copy the sample paragraph. In this paragraph you are explaining that you understand plagiarism and the amount of work the project involves, and you are affirming that you will work hard on it and take it seriously.

See below for a sample letter!  

**ORIGINAL SOURCE:** [http://english4crosby.blogspot.com/](http://english4crosby.blogspot.com/)
The topic of my Senior Thesis Project is acupuncture and the effect acupuncture has on patients recovering from severe illnesses, focusing on how this unique treatment affects the elderly who are sick. This subject is of interest to me because I love working with the elderly, especially those in need. In addition, I intend to focus on alternative medicines next year in college. I hope to be accepted as a pre-med student to pursue a career in naturopathic medicine. My Senior Thesis will introduce me to the fundamentals of this area of study.

In my paper I will answer the following question: “How can acupuncture ease the recovery process of patients suffering from severe illnesses?” With documented evidence I will prove that patients, especially the elderly, can greatly benefit from acupuncture in comparison with patients who do not receive acupuncture in treatment.

I have located books and magazine articles, including many articles on the MEL (Michigan Electronic Library) database. I plan to use those sources extensively. The following are the three best sources I have discovered in my initial research:
For my primary source I have contacted Dr. Anne Davies, a licensed, registered acupuncturist, who has years of experience treating the elderly using acupuncture techniques. Hopefully I can secure an email interview with Dr. Davies. As an alternate primary source, I am also planning to visit the Park Lake Elderly Home, which I discovered on the Internet has an in-house acupuncture and holistic health program; perhaps I can speak with the administrators or doctors who run that program..

I am aware of all the major requirements and due dates, and I agree to take pride in my Senior Thesis Project. I will fully participate in the project and respect the comments and suggestions of both my peers and instructors. I understand the definition of plagiarism and promise not to plagiarize; I will maintain integrity by correctly citing all my research sources. Finally, I will strive for excellence in all work that makes up this important project, producing a paper truly worthy of a senior-level graduation requirement.

Respectfully,

Sign Here in Blue or Black Ink!

Jane Doe
DDHS Senior, Class of 2011