

Finding a Topic

- Inspiration can come from any source. However, the best sources are the economics classes that you took or the RA positions that you have had.
- The topic that you propose should not be completely independent from the courses that you have taken at Columbia. Presumably, the courses that you select and the topic that you hope to explore are guided by your intellectual interests.
- Look over the topics and readings from the courses that you particularly liked. See if any of them inspire you to ask questions. You can also speak with the instructors or the TAs from your classes and ask for suggestions for further readings to explore particular subject areas.
- Take a seminar in junior year. Juniors are permitted to take a “senior seminar” provided seats remain after seniors have registered. See the seminar sign up page for information on registering as a junior. The department will also offer a limited number of junior seminars. Admission to these seminars is restricted to students who are prospective honors thesis writers. Seminars not only provide you with topic ideas but also with experience writing a research paper.
- Work as an RA. Working with a faculty member on a research topic is a great way to get to know a faculty member, get experience with real economics research and perhaps to generate your own topic based on the faculty members research.
- You can also explore the Journal of Economics Perspectives which is available free online at <http://www.aeaweb.org/jep/index.php>. The JEP is a general interest journal written for economists. Journal articles are surveys of current research in a wide variety of topics and are written for knowledgeable non-specialists in a given field. The archive is searchable back to 2002.
- There are three types of research paper: 1) empirical, 2) theoretical; 3) literature review. We do not accept #3 as a senior thesis. Most theses are empirical. Very few undergraduates have the modeling experience to write a theory paper and theory papers are necessarily riskier than an empirical paper. If you would like to write such a paper, then you must have had prior experience writing proofs and or solving complex

models in economics. For the latter, depending on the topic, you may need Matlab skills.

- Keep the availability of data in mind. You will most likely be writing an empirical thesis, that is you will be using data to try to answer a set of questions. You must be able to identify the data sets that you plan to use and you must make sure that the data is available to you.