

We asked former Ec thesis writers to pass along words of wisdom to future students. Here are their responses.

Overall Feelings

It was painful at times, and to be honest, I was almost ready to give up... but we pushed through. I am so glad I got to do this.

You will grow from the thesis process. It will be stressful, and there will be sacrifices you will have to make, but I can honestly say that the process has given me greater independence and a greater sense of purpose.

For most of college I was an executor: you gave me a textbook to read or a problem set to do, and I could spit it out for you. Given the inputs, I could produce the outputs. But it wasn't until I wrote a thesis that I started asking the questions myself, deciding for myself what inputs I needed... There's a confidence that comes with it that I never had before. And the Econ Department is really great about supporting you along the way, so you don't have to worry about getting there alone.

Time Management

It is important to get data early. Not just have an acquisition plan and confirmation from a data source that they will give you data – it's important to actually have it early.

I wish I knew how long data collection and manipulation would take. I wish I had started writing earlier.

I would have liked to have known that everything takes longer than expected, especially when dealing with data.

I wish I spent more time on it during summer and throughout senior year.

Knowing how unpredictable the process could become would be the most valuable; my final thesis looks so unrelated to my first write-ups. Had I known thesis-writing is so unpredictable, I might have spent less time doing less important tasks at the start and more time doing the core tasks (like building the model and collecting the data).

Allow more time for editing!!

Break your thesis into manageable chunks.

Topic Choice

You need to really have a topic of interest; otherwise, it's hard to stick with it.

Don't get discouraged if the idea is initially rejected by a professor. Instead of not writing a thesis, consider a different approach to the question and reach out to other professors.

Advising

I wish I understood the importance of getting a good advisor.

Get a good advisor and do so early. I really appreciate my advisor for taking me on (or else I would not have had an opportunity to write a thesis), but he was very hands-off. I wish I asked him more for feedback. It wasn't until my thesis was almost due that I realized I would have appreciated more support on the theory and econometrics of my thesis.

You should be aware that some professors will be more involved in the thesis and provide more hands on guidance, while others serve crucial roles but in a more passive way. Think about what you are looking for in an advisor and choose accordingly.

Don't be afraid to send drafts to your adviser, even if you are not proud of them. This will prevent you from procrastinating and allow him/her to guide you.

Meeting with your advisor and other professors is arguably the most valuable part of writing a thesis.

You can really use your Ec 985 instructor and your advisor, more than you realize.

Miscellaneous

You should read a couple of theses to get an idea of what is expected and what is good format – this should be done before you even start or at least right at the beginning.

Leverage the rest of Harvard's resources. Go to the [Ec Department Stata TF or the Harvard/MIT Data Center] if you need help or have technical questions about Stata. Ask your Ec 985 instructor to go through ideas with you. Get (unofficial) secondary advisors to bounce more ideas off of.

It would have been most useful to know at the start of the thesis-writing process how hard it is to acquire funding for theses that may require a substantial amount of money. I was well aware that the funding process was by no means easy, but a better idea for the scope at which funding was provided would have been extremely useful in figuring out ways to make my thesis more 'affordable.'

Try to take classes during junior year that will help you find a thesis topic and an adviser ... classes in the field you are interested in, which have professors who could end up as your adviser or connecting you to an adviser.