Do I have to write a thesis in ESS?
No. ESS minors are not required to write a thesis. It’s your choice whether you fulfill the Capstone requirement with a thesis in your major department that incorporates the study of an educational issue, an ESS thesis (assuming you’ve done the requisite Research Lab), or the traditional Capstone course. We encourage qualified students to consider writing a thesis.

Can I write a thesis?
You need two things to write a thesis: (1) a viable idea for a thesis, and (2) a faculty member who is willing to supervise your thesis. For an ESS thesis you also need the Research Lab pre-requisite.

Should I write a thesis?
All of the capstone options give you an opportunity to do original research on a question of your choice. You get to choose the question, and you get to choose the approach. It can be a uniquely rewarding learning experience. You should think of the capstone experience as a way to build on what you have learned in college and produce something you can call your own.

If you are planning to go to graduate school, or are considering work after graduation involving policy, consulting, or public relations, then you should think very seriously about writing a thesis because it will resemble the work you will do after graduation more closely than any of your other writing assignments. The process of writing a thesis may also give you ideas to pursue in your subsequent career.

Are there any reasons not to write a thesis?
Yes. You shouldn’t write a thesis if you are doing so mainly because of extrinsic reasons (e.g., you think it will look good on your resume, you imagine someone else will be disappointed if you don’t). At some level, you have to want it. You should not write a thesis if, realistically, you do not have the time to devote yourself to it wholeheartedly. The thesis is a project that requires a commitment over an extended period of time. You also should not write a thesis if you have not come up with a viable idea by the spring of your junior year, even after discussing possibilities with your peers, professors, and advisors.

How do I register for the different capstone options?
If you are completing the capstone requirement with a thesis in your major department, you will not register for any ESS capstone course. You will simply complete all requirements for conducting a thesis in your major department and round out your ESS minor by taking an additional 3 credits in ESS. If you are completing an ESS Thesis, you will register for ESS 48600 Senior Thesis, after successfully completing at least 2 credits of ESS 47602 Research Lab prior to the fall of your senior year. If you are taking the traditional capstone course, you will register for ESS 43640 Seminar in Educational Research.

If you choose either of the thesis options, you and your thesis advisor(s) will also need to fill out the Senior Thesis Proposal/Contract form, which outlines a few basic issues that you and your faculty advisor(s) need to agree on prior to conducting the thesis. If you choose
the ESS thesis, you will ask the Associate Director of ESS to enter the electronic approval code for ESS 48600 Senior Thesis so that you can register for it. You may do this in person or via e-mail.

What's the difference between a senior thesis and a term paper?
There's a big difference. For a term paper, you write about a topic; the “thesis” of your paper the point you want to make. The senior thesis is a research project, centered on a question. You pose a question, explain why it is a question worth asking, describe how you intend to answer the question, apply your methodology to the question to investigate, and draw a conclusion.

How long does it have to be?
The department does not set a minimum length. Most senior theses are between 30-50 pages. Most capstone projects are between 20-40 pages.

What should I do now if I am thinking about writing a thesis?
Talk to your peers and professors about your ideas and figure out who would be the best member of the faculty to serve as your thesis advisor. Talk to your professors and run your ideas past them; ask their advice on developing a good research question. If you think they would make a good thesis advisor, ask if they will be available next year, and if they would consider working with you. If they are unable to supervise your thesis, ask if they can suggest someone else.

What if I don't have an idea or question, yet?
This is normal. Developing the thesis question is the most difficult part of the process, and it takes time. But now is the time to discuss possible ideas and topics with your professors.

What can I do during the summers to prepare for my capstone experience?
The summer is an excellent time to read. You will want to know what others have written on your question. Talk with your advisor about important books or articles on the subject, and find out how to do searches of your own. Figure out what research resources are available to you.

Is there a book about how to write a thesis?
How to Write a BA Thesis by Charles Lipson (Univ. of Chicago Press) is a very good resource.

Any advice on picking a topic?
Write about what you know or care deeply about. Have you written a paper that you would like to expand or follow up? Have you encountered particular books or articles that have been particularly meaningful to you, or that you have strongly agreed or disagreed with? Have you gotten any ideas through your experience studying abroad or through work? Has a particular course sparked your interest? Has the research you did via the ESS 47602 Research Lab inspired you to conduct an independent project in this area?

How do I formulate a research question?
The following framework is adapted from Booth, Colomb and Williams, The Craft of Research (University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 48).

Think in terms of three nesting steps:
1. Topic: I want to investigate ________,
2. Question: in order to find out (who, what, why, whether) ________,
3. Rationale: in order to better understand (how, why, what) ________.