

English Honors Program: How to Write a Proposal for Your English Honors Thesis

English majors planning to write an honors thesis are required to submit a one-page thesis proposal when they register for English 391, in the semester before the thesis will be written. Thesis proposals and registration forms are due in Room 200 EB in the semester before you plan to write the thesis (about one month before the end of classes—see registration form for deadline). Thesis proposals should be typed, and should be at least 200 words long, but not more than one single-spaced page. As a heading, please include your full name and the name of your director.

As the word "proposal" suggests, this writing is exploratory. Its purpose is not to lock you into a narrow claim or topic, but to initiate a process of focusing. It sets a research plan, a rationale, for you and your faculty director to follow during your thesis semester.

Although the proposal is fundamentally an expression of your own interests as a scholar and critic, it should emerge from at least one conversation with your director about shared intellectual interests. Your director must sign the registration form for English 391 that this proposal accompanies. Your director's signature attests that this project appears appropriate in scale and level for one semester of research by an advanced undergraduate undertaking a 20-25 page paper.

Writing a proposal is not as difficult as it may seem, because instead of a firm thesis statement, it can be organized around a *central research question*. Below is a suggested route to a proposal, although the exact process that leads to your thesis proposal that will be unique to you. (A few sample proposals are attached to this handout.)

1. BEFORE APPROACHING A DIRECTOR, ask yourself:

What kinds of primary texts have intrigued you? You may already know which writer(s) you want to work on. But you don't necessarily have to start by selecting your authors. You may also begin with a genre, a period, or a topic. You might know that you are interested in the nineteenth-century British factory novel — or just that you are interested in the novel, or the Victorian era, or industrialization

What kinds of critical analysis have you enjoyed? Look back over all your papers, especially your thesis statements, and consider what kinds of evidence and argument you've best wielded, or which critical and theoretical approaches you found most stimulating. Of course, your thesis can also try something new.

Which professors most spur your writing and thinking? If you've established an especially productive working relationship with a professor in a previous English course, do build on that; it will be easy to find a topic of common interest. If, on the other hand, your topic points to working with a different professor, look at the English department website list of "Faculty by Areas of Specialty," which links to faculty research profiles. You might browse publications by appropriate faculty

before approaching them. Remember to ask early, as faculty availability is limited, and consult the Honors director if you need help finding someone.

2. *IN MEETING WITH YOUR THESIS DIRECTOR, consider:*

Within this body of literature, what would reward further exploration? Are there understudied authors or texts? Surprising links between two different works? Could a new critical approach illuminate a familiar textual puzzle?

Within critical work on this literature, what issues are unresolved? Because an honors thesis needs to be original work (although on a reasonable scale), you will want to learn what topics currently engage or divide critics, as these are topics deserving further exploration by an imaginative undergraduate. Look for a critical controversy that's relevant to the things you love about this literature.

Merge these considerations to define a central research question. If you've noticed disturbing sexual episodes in the work of a given modern author, you might try to synthesize two schools of critical thought that theorize those episodes differently. This part of the proposal-writing process may be the hardest, because you're looking for blurry areas in our knowledge, and blurry areas are, by definition, hard to recognize. If you remember being puzzled, in a previous college class, by an issue you didn't have time to explore fully, that's a good lead. Since there is usually more criticism out there than you can imagine, do take an initial survey the criticism on your texts and topics at the library or online, using search terms and bibliographic tools suggested by your professor or the English librarian, Harriett Green (green19@illinois.edu; www.library.illinois.edu/llx/).

3. *EXTEND YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION INTO A RATIONALE.*

A rationale is not quite a thesis: it just explains a problem, and sketches a plan of attack. Why is your research question worth further investigation? What can exploring it teach you and your readers? What can you reasonably hope to discover or assert about your topic? What literary, historical, and critical texts will you need to read, and how might you select and analyze them? In answering these questions, you are writing a proposal.

4. *LOOKING AHEAD:*

When you have a proposal for your project, you and your director can use the proposal to structure your work, developing your reading list and a specific schedule of writing. Some thesis directors prefer to define a plan of work the semester *before* you begin writing, so that you can get some of the background reading done between semesters. Others will be happy to wait until the beginning of the semester itself. In any case, your goal will be to get from your research question to a working thesis—and a substantial draft—by the middle of your thesis-writing semester.

Be sure to include your name and your director's name on your proposal when you submit it in Room 200 EB with your registration form for English 391. Remember also to give your thesis director a copy of the proposal as submitted.