

Writing the English Honors Thesis

EXPECTATIONS: An honors thesis should be a substantial, scholarly, polished and lively piece of critical writing. Within the limits of what one advanced undergraduate can tackle in one semester, your essay should be an original contribution to a particular field of criticism. The thesis should be researched well beyond the immediate primary texts under study, with appropriate secondary works defined, engaged, and cited as support for a well-informed but distinctive argument.

Substantial: An honors thesis is expected to be 20 to 25 pages long. To produce excellent work on this scale, you need to maintain a schedule of drafting, feedback, focusing, and revision. Confer with your thesis director at the start of the semester to establish a schedule of written assignments, allowing time for you to articulate new ideas, for the director to respond to them, and for you to refine the argument. At least half the pages should be drafted by the middle of the semester, to allow for the necessary final shaping. Remember that a paper of 20 pages takes more than twice as long to write as two 10-page papers: the ideas must be unified but developed steadily throughout. The final thesis should reveal a firm, carefully-built structure that substantiates the argument.

If a partial draft with a unified claim hasn't been completed by mid-semester, you or your director may propose converted the honors thesis into an independent study. An essay hastily composed in the last weeks of the semester should not be eligible for honors.

Scholarly: Your honors thesis should synthesize the thinking of multiple scholars who have engaged with your topic, to formulate a new position of your own that is firmly grounded in the primary texts. This may be your first chance to engage not just with a critic or two, but with a body of scholarship. Initially, refer to your thesis proposal (written in the semester before the thesis itself) to select useful secondary readings. Your director may identify classic or cutting-edge criticism relevant to your central question. For your own searches, start with the English library website (see Resources, below).

Working with multiple critical sources requires careful record-keeping and thoughtful synthesis. Even in the early stages of your writing and reading, keep careful records of ideas and phrases found in secondary sources. When you draft, remember that whenever you use an idea specific to a critic, you must cite that source; if you use that critic's phrasing (even for a few words), you must quote and cite the page. In revising, you may eliminate static citations that are peripheral to your argument, and focus on a few key critical interlocutors. Retain only quotations that set up your key issues, or offer a telling turn of phrase. Quote as briefly as possible, and integrate quotations in your sentences.

An honors thesis should use a consistent documentation style, whether endnotes or parenthetical references, with a Works Cited list following the *MLA Style Manual* (7th ed.). As in all classes at Illinois, thesis writers are responsible to the University Student Code on academic integrity. To avoid documentation problems, take care to document sources even in early drafts, use a print edition of the *MLA Style Manual* (excerpted at www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/citation/mla/), and consult your director about any sticky points.

Polished: An honors thesis is expected to be carefully proofread by the student before final submission. While spell-checking software can help, it will not catch all errors. Honors students should know to check their own weaknesses in structure or punctuation.

Lively: An honors thesis is expected to *develop* its argument, not just to repeat it with a mechanical accumulation of evidence. Early completion of a draft will allow you and your director to find ways to enliven the thesis with a strong opening, and to build its momentum through your various sub-points to a thoughtful conclusion.

RESOURCES

The **Literatures and Languages Library** website (www.library.illinois.edu/llx) links to carefully selected online resources for literature and film. The English librarian, Harriett Green (green19@illinois.edu), is especially interested in assisting honors thesis writers.

The **Writer's Workshop** (www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/) assists any university writer facing new writing challenges. Consultations can focus on concerns you specify.

TIMELINE

The first two weeks of the semester: Consult with your director and define a schedule of reading and writing. Wanting to keep it isn't enough; plan *how* to keep it. Ask your director to read and discuss short, informal writings as you focus on a working thesis.

Mid-semester: Submit at least half of your project to your director by this point in the semester, if not before. You could set a definite date to submit 10 pages, or two dates for 5-page increments. You'll revise and expand this draft in the rest of the term.

November for Fall, March for Spring: Select two appropriate faculty members as readers for your thesis, consulting with your director. Also check the English department website list of "Faculty by Areas of Specialty." Email faculty members or visit their office hours, briefly describing your project and asking if they are willing to serve as readers. Readers are ordinarily faculty members in the English Department, but when appropriate, one reader may be a faculty member from another department. In Fall 2016, you must send the names of your readers by email to Professor Stevens by **November 1st**.

Due date: Honors theses are due no later than one week before the last day of classes: in Fall 2016, **Wednesday, November 30th**; in Spring 2017, **Wednesday, April 26th**. Submit 4 hard copies **by 5:00 p.m.:** one to the director, one to each reader, and one to Nancy Rahn, to be filed in 200 EB. Please list director and readers on the title page. Report covers are not necessary; large clips will suffice.

Evaluation: The director and the two readers each write letters of evaluation to the English Honors Committee. On Reading Day, this Committee reviews the letters, examines the student's overall record, and determines which students receive honors and at which level. Students are then informed by mail of the results and, after the semester is over, sent copies of the letters of evaluation. A course grade in English 391 also is determined by the thesis director.