

Writing an Honors Thesis in the English Department:

Requirements, Recommendations, and Timeline

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All English honors students complete a significant piece of scholarship or creative writing, usually in the summer and fall of their senior year, and submit this thesis to Schreyer Honors College in April of the senior year. The thesis is an ambitious, serious project that requires much advanced planning and hard work, and these guidelines are intended to walk you through the process and timeline for planning and writing a thesis, though they are not intended to replace the advice of your thesis supervisor. Although English theses vary considerably, there are basic requirements that will apply to almost all theses. They are listed here briefly and then discussed below in various sections of this guide. For students intending to graduate in the summer or fall, you will need to consult with your honors adviser and adjust the timeline and expectations accordingly.

- English Honors theses should be ambitious, well-researched, in-depth studies of a carefully focused topic of the student's choosing OR (with support of appropriate faculty) sophisticated, well-developed, and carefully honed creative projects that demonstrate the student's increasing mastery of their creative genre.
- Theses average about 50 pages in length, though award-winning theses are often longer.
- Critical theses are planned in the spring of junior year, researched in the summer before senior year, written in the fall of senior year for a grade, and polished and submitted early in the spring of senior year. Creative theses are planned in the spring of the junior year, with writing and revision taking place from that point until the thesis is submitted. Students with summer internships or jobs should consider starting research in the spring of junior year.
- All thesis writers in English take ENGL 494H for 3 credits, usually in the fall of senior year, and complete a written draft of the thesis before the end of the 494H semester. These drafts are graded by the thesis supervisor with the expectation that students will revise and polish the thesis before spring submission.
- The grade for the thesis draft will be based on the student's consistent progress in thesis planning, research and writing, regular communication with the thesis supervisor, and incorporation of the supervisor's advice into revisions of chapters. Supervisors may also take into account the ambition and originality of the developing project and, in the case of critical theses, the student's growing skills in utilizing secondary sources, analyzing and contextualizing evidence, reading perceptively and probingly, making important connections between texts and sources, crafting astute arguments, and writing and proofreading. Any additional expectations that are particular to a thesis topic or that the supervisor has identified as important may also be used in grading the fall draft.
- Students are expected to revise and polish the graded draft and to get the supervisor's and honors adviser's final approval before submission of the final draft in April.
- Students are expected to have cited all sources properly.
- Students are responsible for timely communication with the supervisor and adherence to all Schreyer deadlines and requirements.
- At the beginning of each spring semester, thesis supervisors will be invited to recommend promising critical and creative theses for university and departmental awards.
- After submission of the theses, English honors students celebrate with faculty and family members at a graduation reception in their honor.

Picking and Developing a Thesis Topic

The English department encourages its honors students to explore a range of thesis topics. Past students have completed research-oriented analyses of literature, collections of original poems or stories, novellas, graphic novels, translations, documentaries and memoirs, and rhetoric-based research into writing pedagogy, public relations, and digital media. It is important to have the groundwork for your thesis before your senior year, so honors students should plan to take courses in their sophomore and junior years that will prepare them to undertake the thesis of their choice.

Possible sources for a critical topic:

- A course paper you would like to extend.
- An interest you have not been able to pursue in class.
- A connection between two classes that you've made on your own.
- An author, set of works, or theme you want to explore in more depth.
- A critical question that has been puzzling you.
- A body of literature that you want to contextualize.
- A topic that looks forward to post-grad plans (law school, grad school, marketing career, writing career, etc.)

Things to consider when choosing a critical topic:

- Your thesis topic should be doable, given your experience, time, and resources.
- Your thesis should be something that will sustain your interest for 6-9 months.
- Out-of-the box topics are great, but be sure you have faculty support and a clear strategy for completion!
- Your topic should be focused enough so that you are digging into your texts and evidence and not skimming surface.
- The questions your thesis asks should be open to productive analysis. They should be worth asking.
- In picking a thesis topic, don't take on too much or too little. Writing on all of the plays of Shakespeare is too much; writing on just one play is too little (unless you are considering film adaptations or some expansion of the materials).
- It's okay to start with a general idea and do a bit of sleuthing before you narrow your topic. But be prepared to hone and narrow.
- Be sure to do a brief secondary literature search on your topic before you finalize your plans. Looking at critical articles and books and finding out what others have written on your topic can give you great ideas and also someone with whom to argue.

Things to consider when choosing to write a creative thesis:

- If you plan to write a creative thesis, you should already have taken a 200-level creative writing workshop in your chosen genre and a 300- or 400-level workshop in this same genre (or be signed up to take the 400-level workshop in your senior year). It is helpful to have taken at least one class with your thesis adviser prior to beginning work on your thesis.

- In your initial meeting with your thesis adviser, the two of you will discuss the planning and execution of your creative work. Most students who write creative theses produce a collection of short stories or personal essays, a novella, a memoir, or a research-based piece of creative nonfiction (each about 50 pages), or a collection of poems (about 35 pages). When writing a collection, you may wish to include an introduction, and you will need to consider how your creative project will be unified (by theme, topic, etc.) and the project's scope. It is very, very difficult to write a novel in one year, so unless you already have a novel underway, this is probably not a realistic thesis project.

Consulting with Professors and Finding a Supervisor

- Start your search for a supervisor as early in your junior year as is possible. Thesis proposals are due in mid-April, and you will need to have a supervisor by then.
- Pick a tenure-line faculty member or lecturer active in research or writing.
- Tap the relationships you already have.
- Do the research yourself on the department website. What are faculty members working on? You can check the MLA Bibliography and look at their work more closely.
- You aren't necessarily looking for an exact match. Perhaps a professor's methodology fits yours, even if his or her period focus is different. Perhaps you have a good rapport with a professor already, and he or she is willing to step out of field to help you out. Perhaps you would benefit from having a supervisor who is familiar with feminist theory, even though the authors you want to work on are not the ones your professor works on.
- Consult with advisers or current professors about which colleagues work in areas that intersect with your potential thesis topic.
- Make appointments to meet with potential supervisors.
- Come to the meeting with some concrete ideas, but be prepared to listen to alternatives.
- If you think you've found a match, ask the professor formally if he or she is willing to supervise the thesis.
- If a professor isn't a match, that's okay! Try someone else.
- If you get a no, don't take it personally. Take the opportunity to ask for another suggestion.
- Please keep the honors advisers informed about your negotiations. We need to be aware of your successes and difficulties.
- Even in your first meeting with a professor, have a plan for completing your thesis that includes a spring consultation about the proposal, summer research, regular fall meetings with the supervisor while you are writing, submission of a draft at end of fall semester, and polishing in the spring. Sound like you are organized!
- When you have found your supervisor, confirm the above plan and make a second appointment to hone your thesis ideas.

Crafting your Proposal

- Proposals are due in mid-April of your junior year. You should be starting to plan yours by January.
- Look at other proposals for a good model.

- You will want to articulate the questions you are asking, the primary materials you are analyzing, the secondary sources that will provoke or inform your arguments, and your general methodology.
- Proposals don't offer the answers; they demonstrate the plan.
- A well formulated set of questions is the key. Your proposal will write itself if you have a set of interesting questions.
- When writing a proposal for a critical thesis, have a good general sense of whether your questions have been asked by scholars in the past and whether your theme is a common one or an innovative one. In other words, you need to do a secondary literature search and read around a bit.
- Don't wait until the last minute. If at all possible, give your thesis supervisor the chance to respond to your proposal draft and offer advice before you post it.
- Creative writers will want to consider whether to build in time for necessary research and travel, and they should include in their proposal a brief mention of the works of other writers that serve as inspiration or offer insight into the craft.

Beginning your research

In consultation with your supervisor, come up with a reading list for the summer. If writing a critical thesis, it should include both primary (the literature, films, authors, or evidence you are analyzing) and secondary materials (articles and books about your topic). If writing a creative thesis, your reading list will likely include mostly primary texts in your chosen genre, but may also include books about writing and the writing life.

Finding primary materials:

Students should work with their supervisor to develop a list of primary texts or bodies of evidence that will become the focus of the students' analysis. In consultation with the thesis adviser, creative writers should have a summer reading list that will serve as research and inspiration.

For scholars, the scope of your primary materials should extend beyond what you would cover in the classroom, but do not take on too much. Students should consider how many and what sorts of texts are necessary in order to answer the questions posed by the thesis. This, above all, should dictate the primary reading. Are there materials that need to be on the primary reading list because they complete a set, fill in a gap, or help the student make connections? Then include them! In the end, it is the quality of your analyses that will matter. If you can sustain an analysis of a single novel for fifty pages, offer a thorough account of the secondary criticism on that novel, and make a real contribution to that criticism, then one important novel may be enough. A 25-page plot summary of a single novel, however, is not an honors' thesis.

Finding secondary materials:

For your secondary materials, look for studies that are foundational (that established the field or methodology for your topic), studies that offer fresh and provocative

approaches to your topic, and studies that are really close to your topic (even if they aren't foundational or innovative.)

Use all of the library's databases and the internet to search for pertinent secondary materials. The following sources are a good place to start:

Library databases or subscriptions (just general ones):

Cambridge Collections Online
 Cambridge University Press Journals
 JSTOR
 Literature Online (Lion)
 MLA International Bibliography
 Oxford Handbooks Online
 Oxford University Press Journals
 Project Muse
 ProQuest
 Wiley Online Library Journals and eBooks

Internet sources:

Google Scholar
 Google Books
 Amazon

Becoming adept at keyword searches of these databases is critical! Try to identify the key words in your topic that are most likely to yield pertinent studies. Also, be sure to use the following trick for finding the best secondary materials: start with your most pertinent and most recent secondary sources, and use the bibliographies and footnotes you find there to work backwards and to locate other pertinent secondary sources. If two or three very current articles cite the same older work, you have probably found a foundational critical study.

Reading List

By the time summer begins, have a preliminary reading list, maybe five primary works and ten secondary works if you are writing a critical thesis, and ten to fifteen primary works if you are writing a creative thesis.

Schreyer Research Grants, Erickson Grants, Liberal Arts Enrichment Grants

Please consult with Schreyer about summer research funding, research travel funding, and other ways to support ambitious research projects. There are also Erickson grants (deadline January 8, 2018) and Liberal Arts Enrichment Grants (deadline May 1 for summer 2018) available to rising seniors with research expenses. Please look for current information to apply for summer 2018:

https://undergradresearch.psu.edu/summer_discovery/
<http://la.psu.edu/current-students/cen/funding/apply>

Summer research

(Students with summer internships or time-consuming jobs should begin this work in the spring)

- Set a schedule for yourself: 200 pages of reading per week, for instance.
- Keep a handwritten notebook where you jot down connections and ideas. Put down short citation and page numbers at every opportunity so that you don't have to track them down later.
- Buy or print out the books and articles and write all over them! It helps.
- Alternate between critical works and primary works so that you make connections from the beginning.
- Follow critical trails while they are fresh. If you see a pertinent footnote in one work, go find the source cited there.
- Via e-mail, bounce ideas off of your supervisor!
- Try putting findings into a preliminary outline of your thesis chapters, so that you can construct a fuller outline at the end of the summer.
- Don't be afraid to change your argument or focus as you research. This is often a necessary process. Make use of what you find in your readings and let them suggest your arguments rather than trying to force your readings into an old and now less useful plan.
- Be careful not to get too distracted or to let yourself spend weeks on a wild goose chase. If an idea isn't going anywhere, ditch it. If sources aren't productive, move on. If there are no studies that address your question, assume that you have a great question and go ahead and answer it with your own critical skills.
- Learn to skim critical works initially to establish that they will be helpful. Read them closely once you're sure they're helpful.
- If you feel like writing a few paragraphs, go ahead!
- *By the end of the summer, try to have most of your reading done. Prepare an outline of your thesis based on the reading. Come up with a schedule for the fall writing.*

Fall Writing

Standard expectations for the thesis

- 50 pages is an average length, though theses of original poetry are often closer to 35 pages. In a critical thesis, this might mean analyzing three to five novels by an author or tackling a major work such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In a creative thesis, this might mean writing a novella, a collection of 3-5 short stories, or a collection of 25-30 poems.
- Critical theses should make good use of research and secondary readings.
- Creative theses should show an awareness of contemporary literary styles and the authors who have inspired you.
- In critical theses, your analyses of both primary and secondary texts should delve below the surface and offer an insightful and probing argument about your subject.
- Creative theses should show innovation, sophistication of style, attention to language and voice, and the ability to sustain and develop a narrative or theme.

- In a critical thesis, the chapters should build upon each other and connect to an overarching theme or argument.
- The final draft of a critical or creative thesis should reflect the advice you received from your supervisor.
- The writing should be precise, fluid, and free of errors.

Strategies

- Think of the critical thesis as 3 twelve-page term papers plus a substantial introduction and conclusion that connect the parts to the whole. Think of the creative thesis as the all-important first 50 pages you would show a literary agent, a publisher, or an admissions committee for an advanced degree in creative writing.
- Set deadlines for the submission of each chapter or creative work with your supervisor.
- If writing a critical thesis, write your central chapters first and your introduction last.
- Read one or two award-winning theses to get a sense of the scope and depth of a successful thesis. <https://honors.libraries.psu.edu/search/> Recent winners or nominees include: Samantha Mitchell, “Split Skin,” 2015; Jessica Myers, “Transcending Body: Lucretius, Whitman, and the Atoms In Between,” 2015; Kyle Tresnan, “Technology in the Writing Center: Can Peer Tutors Use Online Programs to Help Writers?” 2015; Samuel Borowik, “An English Translation of O Triste Fim De Policarpo Quaresma,” 2014.
- Set aside time each day for your thesis writing.
- Incorporate time into your schedule for the second drafts of each section.

Communication with Your Supervisor

- You should plan to meet with your supervisor on a regular basis in the fall of your senior year.
- Set up meetings at least once a month. Making these appointments is your responsibility.
- Try to give a supervisor two weeks minimum to read a work and respond.
- Do not put your supervisor in the position of having to track you down! Do not put the honors advisers in the position of having to track you down! Do not miss meetings or fail to communicate when communication is expected. Even if you get behind schedule, you need to stay in communication with supervisor and with the honors advisers.
- Try to listen to advice and either take it or respond to it in an informed way. Advising honors theses takes a lot of effort and time. There’s nothing more frustrating for a supervisor than a student who never uses or responds to the advice given. If you disagree or want to go in another direction, initiating a healthy dialogue is better approach. Sit down with your supervisor and talk it out. As long as you have done your fair share of the listening, most supervisors will be perfectly willing to listen, too.

A Graded Draft

- A complete draft of your thesis is due at the end of the fall semester. This draft has all of the writing, but it may not yet be fully developed or polished.
- You will get a grade for your draft, and it will be evaluated as a draft, not a final thesis. The supervisor may also take into account your diligence and effort.
- A's are not automatic. If your work has been below the bar, if you have not been responsible in committing time to your thesis and meeting regularly with your supervisor, if you have not responded to advice given, then you cannot expect an A.
- Occasionally, students get in over their heads and are not quite done with a draft in December. If the supervisor feels that you have been diligent during the fall, a deferred grade may be granted so that you can finish the draft over break. Deferred grades are exceptional. Students who neglect the thesis work in the fall will be given a low grade for the thesis work rather than a deferred grade.

Spring revision and submission

- Winter break and spring should be devoted to revising the thesis. By the start of spring semester, the supervisor will have read and responded to your first draft. If you haven't received feedback, go ahead and ask for it.
- In January and February, the thesis writer should revise and polish the thesis using the advice of the supervisor.
- **Near the end of February, the thesis writer should give the supervisor the revision of the thesis and ask for any last bits of advice.
- In early March, the student submits the thesis draft to Schreyer for formatting approval. This can be the same second-to-last draft given to the professor. It does not need to be the final draft. Please consult the Schreyer website for submission details. Here, however, is the link to formatting guidelines as of 2017:
<https://www.shc.psu.edu/academic/thesis/formatting.cfm>
Students are responsible for making sure that these guidelines are the most up-to-date.
- In early to mid-March, the thesis writer adopts the supervisor's final advice and proofreads the thesis.
- Before the last week in March, the thesis writers should get two copies of the very final draft of the thesis bound inexpensively. English honors advisers require that the theses be bound!
- At the same time, the thesis writer should print out a signature page according to Schreyer guidelines.
- A copy of the thesis and the original signature page need to go to the thesis supervisor, and he or she needs to sign the signature page. (This schedule assumes that your supervisor has seen and responded to a second draft of your thesis. If, for any reason, you skipped a second draft, your supervisor may need additional time to read and approve of your final draft. It is not advisable to skip the second draft recommendations. See asterisked item above **.)
- At the beginning of the first week of April, the thesis writer needs to retrieve the signature page from the supervisor and turn it in to the honors supervisor along with the second bound copy of the thesis.

- The honors adviser reads the thesis and signs the signature page in time for the student to upload the approved thesis, retrieve the signature page, and take the signature page to Schreyer on the designated day. Honors advisers may e-mail student to give the okay to upload the thesis. No thesis should be uploaded without the okay of the honors adviser.

Compact Thesis Timeline (Check Schreyer for Actual Dates) For students intending to graduate in the summer or fall, you will need to consult with your honors adviser and adjust the timeline and expectations accordingly.

- February and March of Junior Year – develop thesis ideas.
- March of Junior Year or earlier – meet with and confirm potential faculty supervisor.
- Early April of Junior year – draft proposal, get feedback from supervisor.
- **By mid April** of Junior year– enter thesis proposal onto Schreyer student records page.
- Late spring of Junior year – meet with supervisor to plan summer reading. Start your research if you anticipate a really busy summer!
- Summer before Senior year – read and research. Stay in touch with supervisor via e-mail.
- Fall of Senior year – Write thesis draft, meet with supervisor monthly.
- **End of fall semester** of Senior year– Thesis draft is due for a grade.
- Late December and early January – Thesis supervisor gets comments back to student.
- Late January and Early February, student revises thesis based on supervisor comments.
- **Beginning of last week of February** – student gives supervisor second draft of thesis.
- **Early March** – Student submits second draft of thesis for format check.
*****In spring, 2018, this date will be Friday, March 2*****
- Early- to mid-March – Student receives advice from supervisor about second draft. Student then revises, proofreads, and readies the final draft for submission.
- **Third week of March** – Student gets two copies of thesis bound (inexpensively) and prints out signature page. One copy of the thesis and the signature page are given to thesis supervisor for approval.
- **End of March** – After supervisor has approved thesis, student picks up signed signature page from supervisor and takes signature page and a second copy of thesis to the English Department honors adviser.
- **Two weeks before thesis deadline**– Department honors advisers read all theses and contact students, giving them permission to upload their theses and pick up their signature pages.
- **Mid-April – Thesis** writers must upload their theses by the date Schreyer specifies.
*****In spring, 2018, this date will be Monday, April 9*****
- **Mid-April** – Thesis writers, according to last name, will take signed signature page over to Schreyer. Schreyer should contact you with instructions.
- **May – Congratulations**, you have graduated with honors in English! Please invite your family to our department’s honors reception!