

WRITING AN HONORS THESIS IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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Each Honors English student prepares and submits a thesis of significant scholarly research or creative writing. The thesis is completed in close consultation with a thesis supervisor during the semester *before* the student's graduation semester. In the graduation semester, the thesis is polished for final submission and approval by the thesis supervisor and the honors advisor. It is then submitted to Schreyer Honors College about a month before graduation.

Dates of final submission vary; please consult your honors advisor and the Schreyer website. (www.shc.psu.edu/academic/resources/dates)

English theses vary considerably. The honors advisors can assist in the choice of topic and thesis supervisor. The thesis supervisor guides the project. Work closely with your thesis supervisor to achieve the quality and kind of thesis that best represents your accomplishments.

REQUIREMENTS

- An English honors thesis in scholarly research and interpretation should be an ambitious, well-researched, in-depth study focused on a topic chosen by the student in consultation with the thesis supervisor. An English honors thesis in creative writing should be a sophisticated and well-crafted creative project written in consultation with the thesis supervisor, a project that demonstrates the student's increasing mastery of their creative genre. Creative projects include an introduction that 1) explains the goals of the project and 2) places it into the context of relevant creative or critical texts.
- Most theses are about 50 pages in long; award-winning theses are sometimes longer.
- For students graduating in May, theses are planned in the spring of junior year, preliminary reading is completed during the summer before senior year. Then the thesis is written in the fall of senior year for a grade, and polished and submitted early in the spring of senior year.
- The course number associated with writing a thesis in English under the direction of a thesis supervisor is ENGL 494H (3 credits). All thesis writers in English take ENGL 494H (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 submitting the thesis the following semester.
- The grade for 494H evaluates the student in the following areas: 1) consistent progress in thesis planning, research, and writing; 2) regular communication with the thesis supervisor through the 494H semester; 3) incorporation, in revision, of the supervisor's advice. Thesis supervisors will take into account any additional expectations particular to a thesis topic, the ambition and originality of the developing project, and, in the case of critical theses, the student's growing skills in employing secondary sources in original ways.
- Students are expected to revise and polish the final graded draft from 494H, using their thesis supervisor's comments to guide the work. They submit a final, polished draft to get

the thesis supervisor's approval before submitting it to Schreyer for the format review and to their honors advisor.

- Quotations and citations in English theses – including references in the introduction to creative theses – must correctly follow a standard format, such as MLA or Chicago Style.
- Students are responsible for timely communication with the thesis supervisor and adherence to all Schreyer deadlines and requirements.

DEVELOPING AN HONORS THESIS IN ENGLISH

English honors theses explore a range of topics. Honors students should plan to take courses in their sophomore and junior years that prepare them to undertake the kind and quality of thesis that will best represent their interests and skills. Sophomore and junior honors students should be formulating plans for their theses while keeping an open mind about new ideas.

Possible sources for a critical topic

- A course paper you would like to extend.
- An interest you were not 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 greater depth.
- A critical question that has been puzzling you.
- A body of literature that you want to contextualize.
- A topic relevant to post-graduate plans (e.g., law school, graduate school, marketing career, writing career, and so forth)

Things to consider when choosing a critical topic

- Your skill sets, your workload and experiences, and the timeline for completion.
- Your particular questions – they should be open to productive analysis, questions worth asking.
- Your topic should be sufficiently focused that you are neither summarizing nor skimming the surface. Chapters within the thesis should build upon each other and connect to an overarching theme or argument. So select a topic that is neither too broad nor too narrow. For example, writing on all of Shakespeare's plays is too broad, and writing on just one play is too narrow, unless you are considering film adaptations or some expansion of the materials into their contemporary context.
- Critical theses should demonstrate good research skills and effective use of secondary readings. Keeping in mind that you are seeking to have your work enter into existing critical conversations with other scholarship, your research should be sufficiently completed prior to your finalizing the thesis plan.

Things to consider when choosing a creative thesis

- The creative work should be innovative, stylistically sophisticated, and attentive to language and voice. The work should develop a sustained narrative or theme.

- 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. (You can be signed up to take the 400-level workshop in your senior year.)
- Take at least one class with the faculty member you would like to supervise your thesis prior to beginning work on your thesis.
- Schedule an initial meeting with your prospective thesis supervisor to discuss your plans for the 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 or a collection of poems (each about 50 pages). . It is very, very difficult to write a novel in one semester, so unless you already have a novel underway, writing a novel is probably not a realistic thesis project.
- Creative works should be unified (by theme, by topic, or in some other way).
- Creative works will offer an introductory reflective essay (up to 5 pages is recommended, although these can be longer) outlining the project's aims and placing the project into the context of the style and/or themes of work by other authors. The introductory reflection should address how your creative project complements or challenges work done by others. Works referred to in this essay should be documented using MLA or Chicago Style citations.

FINDING A THESIS SUPERVISOR

- Start your search for a thesis supervisor at the end of your sophomore year or beginning of your junior year. Thesis proposals are due in mid-April of the junior year. You must have a thesis supervisor by then.
- Consult with your honors advisor about your ideas for the thesis and supervisor. You might also consult with your current professors about which colleagues work in areas that intersect with your potential thesis topic.
- Consider professors with whom you have a good rapport to see who might be interested in helping you craft your thesis. But also consider professors you don't know but whose work seems relevant to your interests. You do not need an exact match. For instance, a professor's methodology might fit yours, even if the focus of their research differs.
- Choose from the tenure-line faculty members and the teaching faculty active in research or writing (that is, do *not* choose a graduate student as a thesis supervisor, no matter how much you may have loved a class with that person).
- Make appointments to meet with potential thesis supervisors. Offer some plans with concrete ideas. Be open-minded. Be prepared to listen to alternatives. Discuss the professor's willingness to supervise the thesis -- sometimes faculty are already committed to other projects. If a faculty member cannot agree to supervise, use the opportunity to ask for further suggestions about your topic and a potentially appropriate supervisor.
- When you find a professor to work with, offer a plan for completing your thesis that includes a spring consultation about the proposal, summer research, and regular fall meetings with the thesis supervisor. Be organized!
- After you have found a professor who agrees to supervise the thesis, inform you honors advisor. Please confirm your plan in an email with your thesis supervisor.

CRAFTING THE THESIS PROPOSAL

- For students graduating in May, thesis proposals are due in early April of the junior year. You will be cued by Schreyer to complete the thesis proposal form on their SRS site. But start planning well before that date.
- Look at other proposals and at completed theses for good models. 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/>
- Critical research thesis proposals should articulate the questions being asked, identify the primary and secondary materials to be used, and hypothesize about a general argument to be made. You might not have specified your conclusions yet, but a well formulated set of questions is key. Creative thesis proposals will identify the genre of writing and situate your work within the critical context of that genre.
- The thesis proposal form requires a bibliography (in standard documentation format) of sources consulted. This will reveal how your project is in conversation with other relevant work.
- Once you have drafted your ideas for your thesis proposal, consult with your proposed thesis supervisor and your honors advisor. Do not submit a proposal without getting the approval of your thesis supervisor and honors advisor! Expect to get feedback on your plans. Give your thesis supervisor and your honors advisor time to respond to your proposal draft and offer advice before you submit it on the Schreyer website, because it's complicated to make changes once you submit the form for them to sign off on.

PLANNING THE PROJECT

- In the semester before the ENGL 494 semester, consult with your thesis supervisor to develop a reading list to be completed before you start writing. For theses written in the fall (for May graduation), this will be summer reading; for theses written in the spring (for December graduation) this reading will have to be compacted over the holiday break.
- For critical research theses, read in both primary (the literature, films, authors, or evidence you are analyzing) and secondary materials (articles and books about your topic). For creative theses, read primary texts in your chosen genre, along with such secondary sources as reviews of these works and articles and books about writing and the writer's life.

Finding primary materials

- The primary materials you're using should extend beyond what you've done in classwork, but do not take on too much. In the end, it is the quality of your analysis that matters. 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. Note, however, that a 25-page plot summary of a single novel is not worthy of honors in English.

Finding secondary materials

- Look for important secondary studies that offer fresh and provocative approaches to your topic or genre as well as studies that articulate the relationship between your topic and general literary history.
- Library and internet databases will assist your work. Library databases or subscriptions (just general ones) you might wish to consult include: America's Historical Newspapers, Cambridge Collections Online; Cambridge University Press Journals; JSTOR; MLA International Bibliography; Oxford Handbooks Online; Oxford University Press Journals; Project Muse; ProQuest; Wiley Online Library Journals and eBooks. Internet sources include: basic Google searches for your primary materials; Google Scholar; Google Books.
- Think flexibly about useful keywords to use when searching databases. Also, consider using the resources found in the notes of scholars whose work you have discovered you like. Using their resources will assist your work in identifying pertinent secondary sources. If two or three very current articles cite the same older work, you have probably found a foundational critical study.
- Look into possible grants to assist your work. **Schreyer Research Grants, Erickson Grants, and Liberal Arts Enrichment Grants** are available. Consult with the Schreyer Honors College about summer research funding, research travel funding, and other ways to support ambitious research projects. Erickson grants (deadline in early February) and Liberal Arts Enrichment Grants (deadline in early May) are available to rising seniors who will incur expenses for their research. Please look for current information:
 - https://undergradresearch.psu.edu/summer_discovery/
 - <https://la.psu.edu/current-students/undergraduate-students/scholarships-and-funding/enrichment-funding>

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

- Set a schedule for your reading before the semester in which you will be enrolled in ENGL 494 and writing. Of course, you will continue to read while you are writing during that semester. But concentrate now on getting the foundation for what you want to say.
- Work on developing connections and ideas across your readings. Take the time to take notes! Alternate reading between primary and secondary materials so that you make connections from the beginning. If you see a pertinent footnote in a scholarly work, find the source cited there, and add it to your reading list.
- Try putting findings into a preliminary outline of your thesis chapters, so that you can construct a fuller outline before your start writing.
- Recognize that, as you read, your ideas might change. If your original idea isn't going anywhere, work on a new idea. If your sources aren't helping you develop new ideas, find new sources.

- Keep in contact with your thesis supervisor. You can use email for this. Let your supervisor know about how your reading is going and any new ideas you have.
- Writing is a form of thinking, so start writing and see where your ideas go. Drafting helps refine both ideas and purpose.
- By the end of the break, 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 semester of writing.

ENGLISH 494H SEMESTER

Strategies for success

- Set deadlines for the submission of each chapter or creative work with your thesis supervisor.
- Set aside time each week for your thesis writing. Remember you are getting 3 honors course credits for ENGL 494, so treat this time commitment seriously!
- Incorporate time into your schedule for the multiple drafts of each section.
- Plan to meet with your thesis supervisor on a regular basis throughout the semester. Set up a schedule and keep to it. Remember that the thesis supervisor has agreed to help you with your work, so respect your supervisor's time. Don't miss meetings or have nothing to show.
- Be responsible: Aim to allow your supervisor at least two weeks to read and respond to your written work. Be in regular communication with your thesis supervisor. Don't make your thesis supervisor or the honors advisors track you down. Arrive at meetings promptly. If the honors or thesis supervisors drop you a line by email, answer it promptly. Even if – especially if – you fall behind, stay in communication with thesis supervisor and with the honors advisors.
- Remember that advice is given to you to help you improve. Listen to your thesis supervisor's advice and suggestions. Follow that advice or else respond to it in a mature and informed way. If you disagree with suggestions offered you, or if you wish to go in another direction, initiate a fruitful dialogue with your supervisor about the project. Let your supervisor know that you are listening.

The graded Thesis Draft submitted during the 494H semester

- A complete draft of your thesis is due at the end of the 494H semester.
- Remember that the grade for 494H evaluates your draft, not the final thesis. Your supervisor evaluates your consistent progress toward completion, your regular communication about your work, and your effort to acknowledge and use the supervisor's feedback.
- Also remember that A level grades are not automatic. If you've been less diligent about your project, if you've not demonstrated responsibility with the writing and in meetings, and/or if you have not been responsive to advice given, it's not likely that your thesis supervisor will consider your work merits an A grade.

REVISION AND SUBMISSION OF THESIS

- The final thesis is due according to the Schreyer Honors College's deadline, near the middle of the student's final semester. Schreyer's deadlines are firm.
- Students may use the beginning of their final semester to polish and revise the thesis completed as the work of ENGL 494H the semester before using the ongoing advice of the thesis supervisor.
- A complete revision should be given the thesis supervisor within 45 days of the conclusion of the 494H semester. This will allow time for one final revision before submission to Schreyer and to the honors advisors. You **MUST** proofread your thesis **BEFORE** submitting it at this stage.
- The first Schreyer deadline is for formatting approval. Students are responsible for making sure to follow the most up-to-date formatting and submission guidelines on the Schreyer website. Here is the link to formatting guidelines:
www.shc.psu.edu/academic/thesis/formatting.cfm
- At the time the thesis is submitted for format approval with Schreyer, it is also due to your honors advisor. The honors advisor might require revisions concerning the clarity of presentation to non-specialist readers, grammar and usage errors, and so forth. You must have the approval of your supervisor and your honors advisor for your thesis to be approved by Schreyer, so be sure to take feedback at this point seriously.
- The second Schreyer deadline is for final submission, at which point your supervisor and your Honors Advisor must approve your thesis. Follow the Schreyer guidelines for submitting the final version of your thesis and getting the digital signatures of approval from your thesis supervisor and your honors advisor.

For questions, please contact the English Honors Advisors, Professors Carla Mulford and Christopher Reed