

WRITING AN HONORS THESIS IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Updated January 2022

Honors English students, following Schreyer Honors College requirements, compose 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, while the student is enrolled in English 494H.

In the graduation semester, students polish and submit their theses for approval by the thesis supervisor and the honors advisor and then submit them to Schreyer Honors College. Dates of final submission vary; please consult your honors advisor and the Schreyer website.

(<https://www.shc.psu.edu/>)

AN HONORS THESIS IN ENGLISH

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 proficiency of their chosen creative genre(s).

The critical / literary studies thesis

A critical / literary studies thesis might arise from a range of possibilities: a course paper you would like to extend; an interest you were unable 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). Consider also your skill sets, your workload and experiences, and the timeline for completion. The questions you're asking should be open to productive analysis, questions worth asking.

The topic should challenge you, so that you're neither summarizing nor skimming the surface of the primary and secondary work under consideration. Chapters within the thesis should build upon each other and connect to an overarching theme or argument. The thesis should be as clear and concise as possible. Make sure the argument is structured, with each chapter and each paragraph having a clear role to play in the development of the argument.

Because the thesis is a scholarly product, it will demonstrate good research skills and effective use of secondary readings. It will also be grammatically correct. Your work will be entering existing critical conversations with other scholarship, so your research should be sufficiently

completed prior to your finalizing the thesis plan. Your work should have properly formatted notes and bibliography, whether in Chicago, MLA, or APA style.

Note length stipulations: Honors theses in critical / literary studies may be as short as 8,000 words but no longer than 15,000 words. If the thesis is shorter or longer than these advised limits, explain your thinking and decision-making in the introduction of your thesis.

The creative thesis

The creative thesis will be an innovative, stylistically sophisticated work, attentive to language and voice. The work should develop a sustained narrative or theme. Most students who write creative theses produce a collection of short stories or personal essays, a novella, a memoir, a research-based piece of creative nonfiction or a collection of poems. 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).

Students should already have taken a 200-level creative writing workshop in the chosen genre(s) and a 300- or 400-level workshop in this same genre(s). (You can be signed up to take the 400-level workshop in 494H semester.) Ideally, students will have studied creative writing with the faculty member who will serve as supervisor, but note that this is a suggestion and not a requirement. Schedule an initial meeting with your prospective thesis supervisor to discuss your plans for the execution of your creative work.

Note this requirement! Creative works will offer an introductory reflective essay (five to eight pages) 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. It should 1) explain the goals of the project and 2) place it into the context of relevant creative or critical texts. Any works referred to in this essay should be documented using Chicago, MLA, or APA style.

Note length stipulations: Honors theses in creative writing may be as short as 8,000 words but no longer than 15,000 words. If the thesis is shorter or longer than these advised limits, explain your thinking and decision-making in the introductory reflective essay.

THE THESIS SUPERVISOR

Schreyer Honors College requires thesis proposals to be submitted in early April of the year before graduation. For this reason, you must have a thesis supervisor by March, so that you can draft your proposal under the supervisor's direction.

The first step in finding a thesis supervisor is having a meeting with your honors advisor in order to talk through your thesis interests. When identifying a thesis supervisor, consider professors with whom you have a good rapport; professors whose creative or scholarly interests seem like they might dovetail with your own; professors willing to oversee experimental work. You do not need an exact match with any given professor's work or interests. For instance, a professor's methodology might fit yours, even if the focus of their research differs.

Before approaching a potential thesis supervisor, meet with your honors advisor to confirm that this would be an appropriate fit for you. After meeting with your honors advisor, you will be making an appointment to meet with the potential thesis supervisor. During that meeting, you will 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, then check back in with your honors advisor.

CRAFTING THE THESIS PROPOSAL

For students graduating in the spring semester of any given year, thesis proposals are due in early April of the prior year. As with other deadlines, the Schreyer Honors College will prompt you to complete the thesis proposal form on the SRS site. Start planning the thesis as soon as a supervisor has been identified. 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 / literary studies thesis proposals will 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(s) of writing, identify the writing method and approach, and situate the work within the critical context of that genre.

Both kinds of theses require, at the proposal stage, 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 the thesis proposal, consult with your proposed thesis supervisor and your honors advisor, allowing them sufficient time to offer suggestions. 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, because it's complicated to make changes once you submit the form for them to sign off on.

PLANNING THE PROJECT

One semester prior to 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 / literary studies 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, the quality of the analysis matters much more than pages generated. 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 twenty-five page plot summary of a single novel is not worthy of honors in English.

Finding secondary materials. Look for important secondary studies offering 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 of both primary and secondary writings can assist your background research. Think flexibly about useful keywords for searching databases. Also, consider using the resources found in the notes of scholars whose work you have discovered. Using other scholars' resources will assist your work in identifying pertinent additional primary and 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 and Liberal Arts Enrichment Grants are available to rising seniors who will incur expenses for their research. If you are a Paterno Fellow, ask the fellows assistant if grants might be available to assist your work. Also consult this link:
<https://la.psu.edu/research/undergrad-research>

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH / WRITING and the 494H SEMESTER

During the semester and/or break before the 494H semester, set a rigorous schedule for reading and note-taking. 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! As you continue reading, you might find that your ideas and goals change. That's a success! Be aware that if your original idea isn't going anywhere, you need to keep pushing to find a new idea. If your sources aren't helping you develop new ideas, find new sources.

Try putting findings or notes or creative materials into a preliminary outline of your thesis chapters, so that you can construct a fuller outline before you formally start writing during the 494H semester. Writing is a form of thinking, so start writing and see where your ideas go. Drafting helps refine both ideas and purpose.

Keep in contact with your thesis supervisor. You can use email for this, or zoom, if your professor prefers. Let your supervisor know about how your reading is going and any new ideas you have.

Strategies for success in the 494H semester

Remember you are getting three honors course credits for ENGL 494, so treat this time commitment seriously! Three credits total 135 hours, so use your time wisely. Incorporate time into your schedule for the multiple drafts of each section.

Set aside time each week for your thesis preparation and writing.

Plan to meet with your thesis supervisor on a regular basis (every other week is typical) 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. Set deadlines for the submission of each chapter with your thesis supervisor.

Be responsible: Aim to allow your supervisor two weeks to read and respond to your written work. Be in regular communication with your thesis supervisor. Also, don't make your thesis supervisor or the honors advisors track you down. Arrive at meetings promptly. If the honors advisor or thesis supervisor drops 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 advisor.

Remember that advice is given to you to help you improve. Listen to your thesis supervisor's advice and suggestions. If your honors advisor, your second reader, offers suggestions, listen to these suggestions, too! Follow the advice or else respond 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 or honors advisor about the project. Let your supervisor and honors advisor 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.

The thesis supervisor evaluates your consistent progress toward completion, your regular communication about your work, and your effort to acknowledge and use the supervisor's feedback. Your supervisor is the one who determines your grade, even though the honors advisors are the professors of record for the 494H course. Remember that the grade for 494H evaluates your draft, not the final thesis.

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) attention, in revision, to 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 / literary theses, the student's growing skills in employing secondary sources in original ways.

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. The Schreyer Honors College's deadlines are firm. 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. See the guidelines: shc.psu.edu/academic/thesis/formatting.cfm

At the time the thesis is submitted to Schreyer for format approval, submit the final draft to your thesis supervisor and 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 seriously the feedback offered at this point.

The second Schreyer deadline is for final submission, at which point your thesis 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 Co-Advisors, Professors Claire Colebrook and Carla Mulford