

Faculty Guidelines for Senior Honors Theses

Our deep appreciation goes to all the faculty members who have contributed their time and expertise to the hundreds of students who have chosen to do Senior Honors Theses over the years. The theses are the culmination of their undergraduate academic career and would simply be impossible without the enthusiastic support of our faculty. We hope that the following guidelines will help you through the process of directing a thesis and sincerely thank you for your time.

Overview of the Process:

We expect the students to be responsible for the majority of paperwork associated with the process, and the forms are available at the Office of Undergraduate Research's website at www.undergraduateresearch.uh.edu. Students are expected to start the process at least a full year before their graduation, and in certain fields as much as two years in advance.

- 1) **Eligibility.** The student must first establish eligibility with the faculty member serving as Director of Undergraduate Studies in the proper department.
 - a) Typically, this requirement is met by any student with a 3.25 overall G.P.A. and a 3.5 G.P.A. in major.
 - b) Students who are not members of The Honors College are eligible for an Honors Thesis, and receive the designation "Honors in Major" on their transcript upon completion.
 - c) Exceptional students with lower G.P.A.'s can be allowed to do a thesis, but their preparation and commitment should be of the highest level. It is helpful to The Honors College for the Director of Undergraduate Studies to include a letter explaining the nature of the student's academic situation and to articulate a rationale for support of the thesis project if the G.P.A falls below the minimum requirements.

- 2) **A Second Reader** is usually (but not always) recruited from within the department.
 - a) The First Reader often recommends a specific colleague; however, it remains the student's ultimate responsibility to approach the Second Reader.
 - b) The Second Reader must be available for the oral defense and be aware of the specific time commitments involved.
 - c) In the case of interdisciplinary theses, the Second Reader should come from the second discipline.

- 3) **The Role of the Second Reader.**
 - a) The role of the Second Reader is dependent on the nature of the project. Many Second Readers do not participate in the thesis project until the defense. However, there are Second Readers that serve as a second advisor to students, especially for students completing an interdisciplinary thesis.
 - b) At the very least, the student should meet with the Second Reader once each semester before the defense to keep the Second Reader informed of the progress of the thesis.

- 4) **Prospectus.** The student works with the Thesis Director to write a brief prospectus, usually three to five pages in length.
 - a) The prospectus should be completed before registering for thesis hours, but after preliminary research – such as literature reviews or beginning work in a lab – has commenced.
 - b) Students are not bound by the prospectus, but it should accurately reflect the intended research and give some justification for the project’s originality and importance within the field.
 - c) Depending on the discipline, a list of relevant source material may also be required.
 - d) If there are special skills needed to complete the thesis – for work with technical apparatuses or statistical or analytic techniques, for example – these should be identified at this point and specific means for gaining those skills should be outlined in the prospectus.
 - e) As the student’s thesis progresses, the original project may evolve in a way that differs from the original prospectus. For example, particular results from an experiment may dictate a necessary shift in what will be examined in the thesis. Any major changes should be reflected in the prospectus, and all committee members should receive a copy of the updated prospectus from the student.

- 5) **Honors Reader.** Once the Second Reader approves the prospectus, the student submits the Prospectus Approval Form along with the prospectus to The Office of Undergraduate Research at The Honors College, and an Honors Reader is assigned.
 - a) The Honors Reader and the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Research and The Honors College must also approve the prospectus.
 - b) Students can approach specific members of The Honors College to be the Honors Reader, but the process is usually handled administratively.
 - c) The student will be notified electronically when the Honors Reader has been assigned.

- 6) **The Role of the Honors Reader.** The Honors Reader serves as the representative of The Honors College.
 - a) It is the Honors Reader’s primary responsibility to ensure that the thesis merits that the student graduate with the Honors distinction.
 - b) Honors Readers will review the final draft of the thesis to ensure that it adheres to the original prospectus, that it is grammatically correct, and is an appropriate length.
 - c) The Honors Reader’s expertise is often in the student’s discipline but not always.

- 7) **Honors Funding Resources.** The Honors College reimburses the student for the binding of the thesis up to \$150.
 - a) The student must present the binding receipt to receive reimbursement.
 - b) The First Reader is asked to sign in support of the reimbursement.
 - c) The binding reimbursement form is available online at www.undergraduateresearch.uh.edu.

- 8) **Thesis Hours.** The student registers for the Senior Honors Thesis Course (usually 3399H) through the department. (The student can register before the prospectus is completed).

- a) The First Reader will assign a dot grade (a continuation) at the end of the semester.
 - b) The Honors College will also send the Thesis Director a brief form to fill out assessing the student's progress up to that point.
 - c) The student then signs up for the second semester course (usually 4399H).
 - d) The First Reader is responsible for assigning the grades for both courses after the defense, and must put in a change of grade form for the first semester through the department.
- 9) **Work Constraints.** Usually, (but not always) the First Reader is the only faculty member to work closely with the student on research and text preparation, and it is important that the student be aware of time limitations and be prevented from overtaxing any reader.
- a) The First Reader should work with the student to set out a calendar for when the various steps of the thesis should be completed.
 - b) Sufficient time must be allotted by the student for preliminary revisions before a defensible version is presented to the other readers.
 - c) The Second Reader and Honors Reader will require at least two weeks to read the defensible version before the defense.
 - d) Grammatical and mechanical problems should be eliminated in preliminary drafts. Students with particular difficulties with grammar and the mechanics of writing are urged to seek help from the UH Writing Center or other outside resources, but the Thesis Director should convey the importance of good writing skills to the student.
 - e) Guidelines for the format of the Senior Honors Thesis should be available from each college, although some colleges use the guidelines for graduate theses. Although the Dean's office is responsible for verifying that the guidelines have been followed, it is assumed that the readers will not sign a thesis that has not been properly formatted. General guidelines are available at www.undergraduateresearch.uh.edu.
- 10) **The oral defense** should be completed two weeks before graduation, although some departments require more time for processing the thesis.
- a) It's often very difficult to arrange a time for all three readers to be present at the defense, and the student should be reminded to begin scheduling the defense early.
 - b) The oral defense usually runs an hour and begins with a brief presentation by the student.
 - c) The faculty readers may decide whether others are allowed to view the defense. If the student would like to invite guests, the student should ask the committee members in advance if this is permissible.
 - d) If department facilities are not available, The Honors College has several rooms that can be used for conducting oral defenses.
 - e) Readers frequently ask for some final revisions before passing the thesis, and typically the Thesis Director checks to see that the revisions were faithfully executed.
 - f) Readers may ask for a second defense, if major revisions are necessary.

g) If the student fails the oral defense, it is possible to change the thesis hours courses to independent studies (3398/4498), in which case the Thesis Director would be responsible for assigning a grade based on work completed.

11) **Signatures.** The student should bring at least three signature pages to the Oral Defense.

- a) The readers should not sign until the thesis is approved and final revisions have been made. Often, when the revisions are minor, the Thesis Director is the only one to withhold a signature.
- b) Once the signature pages are signed by all three readers, the student will turn in at least three copies of the thesis for binding; each copy should have an original signature page. Two copies are for the MD Anderson Library and one copy is for The Honors College.
- c) At present, there is no central process for binding, although it is usually handled by the administrative personnel in either the Dean’s office or the particular department.
- d) The format for the signature page follows the format for MA and Ph.D. theses, with appropriate substitutions.

12) **Graduation.** As soon as the grades for 3399H and 4399H have been turned in, the student may graduate, but only after the thesis returns from the bindery will the transcript carry the designation “Honors in [M]ajor.” Students who are slow submitting the final version or late defending the thesis may not have the designation until the semester after they have graduated.

13) **Evaluations.** Finally, we will ask the First Reader to fill out two evaluation forms: the Defense Evaluation Form and the Final Evaluation Form (both available online).

- a) Both forms should be submitted to Karen Weber for the student’s file. The Final Evaluation form includes the opportunity to recommend the student for “The Outstanding Student Thesis Award”, which is presented at The Honors College Awards Banquet in May.
- b) These forms do not serve as the grade sheet for the course. The Thesis Director is responsible for assigning the student’s grades within the particular department.



Typical Theses

Previous Theses. Copies of all previous Honors Theses can be found in the Honors College's Estess Library, as well as in the M.D. Anderson Library and sometimes in department or college collections. We encourage students to look at previous theses when they first begin a project, in order to become familiar with general expectations.

Experimental Sciences. A Senior Honors Thesis in an experimentation-based discipline typically arises from close collaboration with a faculty member on an existing research project. Ideally, you will identify a significant aspect of that research and craft a smaller project representing your own work. The thesis should include an introduction explaining the relevance of your work to the broader field of study, a brief literature review, pertinent explanations of all technical innovations and processes, and an appropriate representation of results achieved. On average, the thesis will be between 30-60 pages.

Humanities and Social Sciences. The Senior Honors Thesis in these disciplines is typically envisioned and executed entirely as a written piece of work. This kind of thesis might resemble a long research paper in form, but it is different than a class paper. It tackles a problem that others have not yet addressed adequately, or it approaches the problem from a new angle. Research into what others have said and done is the essential first step, but your thesis should go beyond prior work to include your own insights and critical thinking. You should have an acquaintance with the relevant scholarship and display originality in the formulation of your arguments. Typically, such a thesis will run 50-75 pages.

Visual Arts, Performing Arts, or Creative Writing. The creative Senior Honors Thesis consists of a substantial body of work that displays your best creative work over the course of your undergraduate career. Your thesis should also include an introductory essay contextualizing your creative work within the field and offering critical insights into your creative process. Works of fiction usually run 50-100 pages, while poetry typically has somewhat fewer pages. The page requirements will vary greatly depending on the project.

Some pitfalls to avoid

Although we realize that every discipline has different ways of approaching and evaluating Senior Honors Theses, we have seen many problems arise that could be avoided with a little foresight.

1) **Don't let the student take on too broad or difficult of a topic.** Although it is important that the student's excitement for the questions be encouraged, they will not necessarily know what is possible to accomplish in a single year. The burden for that decision rests largely on the readers at the time of the prospectus. Ideally, the work for a Senior Honors Thesis is roughly equivalent to the work for two three-hour courses, but the vast majority of students spend a great deal more time on their projects. The majority of students who abandon the Honors Thesis do so because they simply do not have sufficient time for the project they began.

- 2) **Don't let the student take up too much of your time.** We don't want your first experience with an Honors Thesis to be your last. Discuss frankly with the student what your expectations and constraints are and make sure that he/she is aware of other resources available to students at the University of Houston or through The Honors College. We do not expect the Second Reader or Honors Reader to be heavily involved until the defensible version, although individual readers vary in their commitments.

- 3) **Be clear about deadlines, and the order in which work must be accomplished.** The Thesis Director may set any intermediate deadlines for work that seems appropriate, and students are often helped by having set dates for the completion of the various steps. If it is important to the Thesis Director, for example, that the student complete a literature review before beginning research, the student needs to know this and needs to know how that effects the rest of the scheduling.

- 4) **Don't lose contact with the student.** There's no other way of making sure that progress is being made toward the thesis. At the beginning of the process, deadlines for reaching certain plateaus should be established and maintained. If the student is having difficulty, everyone will recognize that fact earlier if there's a deadline. There will be less work for the faculty members and the student if there's no last minute rush to finish the project.

- 5) **Insist on an appropriate amount of originality from the student:**
In some situations, a literature overview is an appropriate project for a Senior Honors Thesis, and it is very unlikely that any undergraduate student will accomplish truly ground-breaking work, but the purpose of the Honors Thesis is to encourage the student along that path. If the student is not designing his/her own research from the ground up, they should at least understand why the design decisions were made in the way that they were and what relevance these decisions have to the project as a whole.

People to contact for help

Questions can be directed to Karen Weber, the program manager for the Office of Undergraduate Research (713-743-3367/kweber@uh.edu) or Stuart Long, the associate dean of undergraduate research and The Honors College, (long@uh.edu). Questions may also be directed to William Monroe, the executive associate dean for The Honors College at 713-743-9007 or at wmonroe@uh.edu.

Thanks again for participating in one of the most important capstone experiences the students can have. The Honors College truly appreciates your help.