

Thesis Handbook

University Honors Program

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Honors Thesis Handbook

Why write a thesis?

The word “thesis” is daunting and intimidating. It implies large size, great length, substantial research, a good deal of writing and rewriting, self-discipline, time-consumption, challenge, critical thinking, originality, analysis. Those things are exactly why you should write one.

The thesis is your capstone experience in the Honors Program: it marks your transformation from student to scholar, from the person who learns in the classroom to the person who seeks out questions, attempts to answer those questions, and thus creates knowledge to contribute to the body of scholarship in that discipline. Completing the thesis tells graduate and professional schools and employers a number of important things:

- that you’re a self-starter,
- that you are capable of carrying out a major project independently
- that you can think critically and analytically about it
- that you know how to do research.

Most important of all, completing and submitting the thesis brings a monumental feeling of self-satisfaction.

But anticipating the thesis can bring about a good deal of anxiety. While some is healthy, this handbook is designed to help demystify the thesis experience, to give you some pointers and assistance in the process, from getting started to completion. **As each college and discipline have differing requirements, this handbook is intended to be a guideline for the Honors**

Program only.

What is an Honors Thesis?

An Honors Thesis can be one of many things, depending on the discipline and college in which you're carrying it out.

- In the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the thesis tends to vary, given the discipline. It may be creative or heavily research based.
- In Architecture and Interior Design, the thesis is often creative, applying professional ideas learned in coursework to an outside situation, though it may be historical research or theoretically based.
- In the College of Arts and Sciences, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, most are standard papers of some sort—analyses of literature, political science or historical issues, etc, though some are portfolios of creative work. In the sciences, many, though not all, consist of lab reports based experiments or related kinds of activities.
- In the College of Business Administration, many students elect to take Management 475H, which is an Honors version of Management 475, required to graduate from CBA. The Honors section of that class fulfills the thesis requirement, as it contains a good deal of research. CBA students may most certainly elect to complete a thesis outside of that class, however.
- In the College of Engineering, the thesis often grows from the senior design project, though Engineering students regularly engage in research prior to taking the senior design class, and use that research project to inform the thesis.
- In the College of Education and Human Sciences, the thesis tends to vary, given the

discipline. It may be theoretical, hands-on work, heavily research based, or creative.

- In the Hixon Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts, the thesis is often creative, whether it is a theatre project, dance or music performance, or an art show.
- In the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, the thesis may be creative, such as a portfolio of photojournalism or articles, or it may be research based.
- In the College of Public Affairs and Community Service

Some generalizations we can make:

- the thesis constitutes a major project, not a term paper or report. It must be broad enough to be researchable, yet narrow enough to be focused and thorough.
- it should, in some way, contribute to the scholarship or creative movement of the discipline
- it must involve your own work, be your own project and product (some exceptions to this last point: if you're involved in co-publishing with faculty and graduate student(s) on a research project, the publication may constitute an Honors thesis. And there may be other exceptions at times.)
- the methodology will be specific to your discipline

Graduation requirements:

The Honors student who has:

- maintained at least a 3.5 GPA
- completed at least 24 hours of Honors courses, with a B or better in each Honors class, including the 189H and 395H

- submitted a Statement of Academic Interest
- submitted a Memorandum of Study
- completed the thesis

is eligible to graduate from the Honors Program.

This does not, however, mean graduation with Distinction, High or Highest Distinction. That designation is determined by your college. Most colleges require a thesis for graduation with High or Highest Distinction. Most college deadlines for submission of the thesis are different from—and generally considerably earlier than—Honors Program deadlines. Many students use the Honors Thesis for graduation with some level of distinction. In this case, you must meet college requirements and deadlines. See your college dean's or advising office for details or check your college website (college contacts are available on the Honors Program website) for details.

Getting started:

Essentially, there are two ways to go about deciding on a thesis.

1-Find a topic, then contact the academic department in which you'll be writing the thesis to find the person who is most likely to conduct research in that field.

- Contact that person, preferably by going to his/her office hours, to make an appointment to discuss your ideas.
- Bring your ideas, be organized, lay out what you think you might accomplish.
- If that person declines your request, ask if s/he has any other ideas about who might be a good advisor for the project.

2-Identify a faculty member with whom you think you'd like to work, perhaps a

professor with whom you've had a class or two, who knows your work, whose interests are similar to yours.

- Make an appointment, talk with him/her about possible topics.
- It does help if you have at least a vague idea of what you might like to work on.

Whichever route you take, EARLY is the keyword here. Don't procrastinate and wonder what to do. As early as your first year:

- Begin to seek out research opportunities in your chosen field or a field which is closely related.
- Apply for a UCARE grant with a faculty member.
- Attend the Undergraduate Research Conference
- Contract a class or two, get to know the faculty member
- In contracted classes, choose projects which really interest you, as those may eventually contribute to your thesis.
- Ask your faculty members if they know of research opportunities.
- Keep an eye on UNL E-News and HP News information, which may give you some ideas.
- Attend lectures, explore UNL, ask questions.
- Visit the thesis library, located in 2100 Neihardt
- Consider how you might put study abroad, internships, co-ops and summer research opportunities to work in this process
- Talk to people, particularly faculty in whose classes you find something which truly piques your interest.
- Consider taking the Thesis Preparation class.

- Stay informed about Honors Program requirements—check the website regularly to be certain you're meeting them.
- In particular:
 - know the number of Honors hours you need to fulfill
 - how to contract a class
 - when the Statement of Academic Interest (your mid-Honors career checkpoint form due partway through your 4th semester) is due
 - when the Memorandum of Study (your thesis research proposal, due partway through your 6th semester) must be submitted. **Note that the MOS requires your thesis advisor's signature.**

Thesis preparation class:

If you're a second-semester sophomore, a first or second semester junior with absolutely no idea what you might do, then taking the 1 credit, 5 week Thesis Preparation class is a wise idea. This class is designed to assist you in finding a topic and a thesis advisor. Consider seriously taking this preparatory class if you're in this situation. The sooner, the better—don't wait till you're partway through your second semester junior year.

Many UCARE students use their research to support their Honors Thesis—in some instances, that research becomes the thesis. You should take care, however, to discuss this idea with your UCARE professor, to insure s/he is comfortable with that approach.

The Thesis Advisor:

Your thesis advisor is your mentor and guide in this process—use him/her. You should be

in regular contact with him/her (meetings should be established in your timeline). Email contact as well as regular meetings is important. Your thesis advisor should:

- assist you in establishing a realistic and workable timeline
- make suggestions about research areas, critics, etc.
- be aware of each step you're taking
- be involved in helping you to make decisions about research techniques and directions
- be updated on where you're going with your research, as well as what you've accomplished
- see each section/chapter of the thesis *as you complete it*, and should give you feedback on your work.

Your advisor may seem quite critical of your work at times—take this in the spirit in which it's intended: s/he wants you to produce the best possible work, for your sake. S/he should also assist you with reality checks, with what you can realistically accomplish in the limited time you have, and what you can expect of yourself.

Some Nuts'n'Bolts:

- **Scope:**

It's essential to define the scope of the project. Your initial ideas will probably need some refinement and narrowing. The thesis topic should be broad enough to be researchable and narrow enough to allow you to focus and be thorough in your treatment of the topic. Ask your thesis advisor to assist you on this.

- **Timeline:**

Once you've identified a topic and advisor, it's essential to set up a timeline of your intended progress. Be certain to do this with college thesis deadlines in mind if you intend to use the thesis for graduation with a level of distinction. The timeline and its format will vary with the discipline and the scope of the project. It's most helpful to do this in writing with your thesis advisor, so s/he knows when to expect what. Always allow some "wobble room" for surprises in research, computer problems, midterms, etc. Appendix A contains a sample timeline for general purposes. Appendix B contains a sample timeline for Humanities and Social Sciences, Appendix C a sample timeline for the Sciences.

- Registration

While you are not required to register for thesis hours if you have completed or will complete 24 Honors hours, the Honors Program encourages students to do so: up to 6 hours can be used to complete Honors Program requirements, though you should check with your department to ensure that is acceptable with your college and major. You should register for thesis hours in the department in which your thesis advisor is housed. Most students write their thesis in their major. Some colleges require students to do so for graduation with High or Highest Distinction. Most departments provide a 300 or 400 level class titled "Honors Thesis". If your department does not, discuss with your advisor registering for a 300 or 400 level independent study class and contracting it for Honors.

The Honors thesis hours on your transcript convey important messages to future graduate and professional schools and employers.

- Research

Research will vary considerably based on the discipline. Work with your thesis advisor to determine what the best approach is. Ask questions of him/her—it's important to understand

the processes involved in your discipline.

- Taking notes

Establish the system that works best for you, whether that's the "old-fashioned" was of using note cards or creating folders on your laptop . Realize that, in some instances, you won't be able to photocopy or in other ways duplicate materials, especially if you're working with original documents. **Be meticulous in writing down sources**, especially URL's. Avoiding plagiarism is critical in the research process. Again, check with your thesis advisor if questions arise.

- Writing

Most theses will require substantial writing appropriate to disciplinary standards. Some theses will approach 100 pages or more, some will be 20 pages, even less. The length depends completely upon the discipline and what you and your advisor deem reasonable. Be sure to allow time for solid, substantial revision and editing. Be certain, too, that you're aware of documentation format and requirements (i.e. Chicago,. MLA, APA, or ASA, or scientific documentation styles). Documentation should accompany each section of the thesis, both because you don't want to compile that at the last minute and because your advisor should see it for corrections.

- Theses designed other under options

Some theses will not be written, but will be creative, such as a dance performance or a sculpture or photography show. Some will consist of power points, computer programs, or other creations which are not in writing. These theses must be documented in some form, whether by DVD or CD, or some other means, as we retain a copy of each thesis in our thesis library. You and your thesis advisor will determine the most efficient and appropriate way to document this

variety of thesis.

On rare occasions, a thesis may contain sensitive material. In that situation, only the material which can be shared publicly should be submitted to the Honors Office.

- Completion
- Each semester, we request in HP News that seniors graduating inform Dr. Berger of that fact. You should do so immediately when you see that request. He will review your record and confirm with Records and Registration that you are eligible to graduate from the Honors Program.
- submit a thesis completion form about a month before graduation. This must be signed by your thesis advisor, and it should contain a solid abstract of your thesis, typewritten. This will be placed in our thesis catalogue.
- complete and submitted the thesis to the main Honors office by the date specified on the Honors website and in HP News in the semester in which you're graduating.
- When you bring in the final copy, you will be asked to complete an information card concerning what you intend to do after graduation.
- Once you have submitted a copy of your thesis and completed the card, you will receive your cord which you wear on the right shoulder of your gown at Honors Convocation and at commencement.

Final thoughts:

Writers of dissertations commonly experience something akin to post-partum depression that some women experience following childbirth. In many ways, this kind of scholarly and

creative process resembles giving birth. When you have “given birth” to an Honors Thesis, you should feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment. While we hope that you don’t experience anything like post-partum depression, we do hope that this experience has done a number of things for you, most important is whetting your appetite for more research of this nature. It should make a scholar of you, should make you feel as if you’ve truly accomplished the capstone to your Honors education, and should become at least a part of your gateway to furthering your education. Research is a critical part of the undergraduate experience, but it also should provide you with some lifetime skills, whether that’s doing research to buy a car or house, or expanding your education beyond the undergraduate level. We hope you take with you both a feeling of satisfaction and the desire for more.

Should you want more information, we recommend the following:

Lipson, Charles. *How to Write A BA Thesis: A Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper*. U of Chicago P: Chicago, 2005. Copies are available to check out from Dr. Lyons or Ann Koopmann.

Appendix A: General Timeline

Spring: sophomore year

- Take the Thesis Preparation Class
- Submit your Statement of Academic Interest

Fall junior year:

- If you have not done so and have no ideas about a thesis, consider taking the Thesis Preparation Class.
- If you have ideas about a thesis and/or advisor, talk with that person or people in the department.
- Begin to define your topic.

Spring junior year:

- Define your topic, find your thesis advisor.
- Submit your Memorandum of Study (this must be signed by your thesis advisor, so don't wait till the last minute.)
- Before you leave for the summer, know what you need to do to begin your research. Set yourself goals and deadlines, and keep them.

Fall senior year:

- Meet with your thesis advisor during the first week of classes, if possible.
- Set up a specific timeline for submissions to occur.
- Keep those dates.
- Meet regularly with your thesis advisor.
- The timeline should enable you to have a draft or outline of your completed project by

the end of the semester.

Spring senior year:

- Meet with your thesis advisor regularly.
- Revisions to your draft.
- Be sure to know your college deadlines and follow them carefully if they apply.
- Submit your thesis completion form by the date specified on the Honors Program website. **This must be signed by your thesis advisor.**
- Submit your completed thesis by the date specified on the Honors Program website.
- Watch for your invitation to the Honors Program Senior Reception. Inform your thesis advisor of that celebration, and plan to attend, with your advisor if possible.

Appendix B: Sample Timeline, senior year

Humanities/Social Sciences example

Summer:

- literature review
- research review well under way.

August:

- meet with your thesis advisor in the first week of classes.

September:

- literature review, research review, etc. should be completed, first chapter should be in to your thesis advisor by the end of the month. (From here on, every three weeks is a good deadline for chapters to come in.)

October:

- at least one more chapter, possibly two, one before fall break, one after, should come in to your thesis advisor.

November:

- at least one more chapter should come in to your thesis advisor.

December:

- conclusion should come in to your thesis advisor.

January:

- introduction should be in, revision should begin. (Every two weeks for chapter revision is a good deadline.)

February:

- two chapter revisions should be in.

*March:

- the final chapter revisions, intro and conclusion revisions should be done by the end of spring break.

April:

- final revisions, thesis completion form to be submitted by deadline on HP website.
- submit completed thesis by deadline on HP website.
- celebrate by attending the Senior Honors Reception

*Note: some colleges, notably Arts and Sciences, will require earlier submission of the thesis for application for Graduation with High or Highest Distinction. Be certain to know those deadlines and work with your thesis advisor and college to meet them if your goal is to graduate with a level of distinction.

Appendix C: Sample Timeline

Sciences

Most laboratory based theses should be accorded two years for completion. Ideally a thesis advisor and research topic will be identified by the end of the sophomore year.

Fourth semester:

- Begin identifying potential areas for research
- Identify advisor and research topic by end of semester

Summer:

- Begin literature search and familiarization with methodologies, technologies, and research culture

Fifth and Sixth semesters:

- Methods development
- conduct initial phases of research project

Summer

- research on project

Seventh semester

- complete research project
- primary draft of thesis

Eighth semester

February:

- complete writing of thesis

March

- Submit thesis to thesis advisor and second reader

- defend thesis

April

- present thesis at Undergraduate Research Conference
- submit Thesis Completion form to HP office by deadline on HP website
- submit completed thesis to HP office by deadline on HP website
- celebrate by attending Honors Program Senior Reception