

English Honors Program

Preparing for Your English Honors Thesis: Registering for ENGL 391, Finding Directors, and Developing Thesis Proposals

***Remember that by *mid-semester of the semester before you begin writing the thesis*, you must:

1. **Find a tenure-track English faculty member who agrees to serve as your thesis director.** Remember to ask faculty whether they can direct your thesis early, as faculty availability is limited. (For more on choosing a director, see below).
2. **Fill out the thesis registration form, which includes writing a 200-500-word thesis proposal, in consultation with your director.**
3. It is also a good idea to develop a timeline and research agenda, even bibliography, sometime during the semester before you begin writing.

The Proposal and Enrollment in ENGL 391:

To write an honors thesis (and thus enroll in ENGL 391) you will submit a 200-500-word thesis proposal as part of your completed registration form which can be found available to download at <https://english.illinois.edu/academics/undergraduate-studies/honors-research/honors-research>. The proposal and registration form will be signed by your director and submitted to Nancy Rahn as a single electronic attachment (nrahn@illinois.edu); the due date will vary slightly semester to semester but typically will fall in November (for spring theses) and April (for fall theses). The Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) reviews these proposals and then gives permission for you to register in the appropriate section of ENGL 391. Nancy Rahn will supply you with the correct registration number for your director.

Overview of the proposal: Thesis proposals should be at least 200 words long but not more than one single-spaced page or 500 words. As a heading, please include your full name and the name of your director. As the word "proposal" suggests, this writing is exploratory. Its purpose is not to lock you into a narrow claim or topic, but to initiate a process of developing and focusing your ideas and research area. It outlines a research plan or a rationale for you and your faculty director to follow during your thesis semester.

Although the proposal is fundamentally an expression of your own interests as a scholar and critic, it should emerge from conversation with your director about shared intellectual interests and the primary texts and secondary research that will aid your argument. Your director's signature on the registration form attests that this project appears appropriate in scale and level for one semester of research by an advanced undergraduate undertaking a 20-25-page honors thesis. Writing a proposal is not as difficult as it may seem, because instead of a firm

thesis statement, it can be organized around a central research question or cluster of closely related questions or budding arguments.

Below is a suggested route to developing a proposal, although the exact process that leads to your thesis proposal that will be unique to you (see the website for examples sample proposals).

Finding a Topic and Director:

BEFORE APPROACHING A DIRECTOR, ask yourself: What kinds of primary texts have intrigued you? You may already know which writer(s) you want to work on. But you don't necessarily have to start by selecting your authors. You may also begin with a genre, period, or topic. You might know that you are interested in the nineteenth-century British factory novel — or just that you are interested in serial narrative, or the drama of early modern England, or gender roles and gaming culture.

What kinds of critical analysis, secondary research, or theoretical approaches have you enjoyed? Look back over all your papers, especially your thesis statements, and consider what kinds of evidence and argument you've best wielded, or which critical and theoretical approaches you found most stimulating. Your director will help you hone your research and approach but try to consider this aspect of your thesis from the start. (Of course, your thesis can also try something new).

Which professors most spur your writing and thinking? If you've established an especially productive working relationship with a tenure-track professor in a previous English course, do build on that; it will be easy to find a topic of common interest. If, on the other hand, your topic points to working with a different professor, look at the English department website list of "Faculty by Areas of Specialty," which links to tenure-track faculty research profiles: <https://english.illinois.edu/directory/specialty-areas>. You might browse publications by appropriate faculty before approaching them. Consult the Honors director if you need help.

Developing the Proposal Ideas and Intellectual Terrain:

WHEN MEETING WITH YOUR THESIS DIRECTOR, consider: Within this body of literature, what would reward further exploration? Are there understudied authors or texts? Surprising links between two different works? Could a new critical approach illuminate a familiar text or textual puzzle? If you remember being intrigued, in a previous college class, by an issue you didn't have time to explore fully, that's a good lead.

Further questions include considering the critical scholarship on this topic to date; within recent published work on this literature, what issues remain unresolved? Because an honors thesis needs to be original work (although on a reasonable scale), you will want to learn what topics currently engage or divide critics, as these are topics deserving further exploration by an imaginative undergraduate. Your director should be able to help guide you here. Look for a critical controversy that's relevant to the things you love about this literature. Merge these considerations to define a central research question.

Since there is usually more criticism out there than you can imagine, consider familiarizing yourself with the criticism on your texts and topics at the library or online, using search terms and bibliographic tools suggested by your professor or the Literature and Languages librarian. Your director can also help you focus your research.

Extending your Research Topic into a Rationale for the Proposal:

A rationale is not quite a thesis: it just explains a problem and sketches an approach or research agenda. Why is your research question worth further investigation? What can exploring it teach you and your readers? What can you reasonably hope to discover or assert about your topic? What primary and secondary literary, historical, and critical texts will you need to read, and how might you select and analyze them? In answering these questions, you are writing a proposal.

Planning Ahead and Timelines:

Some thesis directors prefer to define a plan of work the semester before you begin writing, so that you can get some of the background reading done between semesters; others will be happy to wait until the beginning of the semester itself. The office of the DUS strongly recommends having a coherent plan of action, including a preliminary reading list, in place BEFORE the semester you begin writing. In any case, your goal will be to get from:

- 1) Your research question, the semester before the thesis work begins, to
- 2) A coherent plan of how to approach writing the thesis in manageable stages, the semester before or very early in the semester of writing, to
- 3) A coherent thesis statement and substantial draft by mid-semester of the thesis semester.

This will give you time to revise and polish the thesis before it gets sent to the second and third readers. You'll choose these readers, in consultation with your director, around the middle of the semester that you write the thesis. Final theses are typically due to Nancy Rahn, your director, and your two readers the Wednesday of the penultimate week of the semester.