Writing the English Honors Thesis

**EXPECTATIONS**

An honors thesis should be a substantial, scholarly, polished and lively piece of critical writing. Within the limits of what one advanced undergraduate can tackle in one semester, your essay should be an original contribution to a particular field of criticism. *The thesis should be researched well beyond the immediate primary texts under study, with appropriate secondary works defined, engaged, and cited as support for a well-informed but distinctive argument*.

**Substantial:** An honors thesis is expected to be 20 to 25 pages long. To produce excellent work on this scale, you need to maintain a schedule of drafting, feedback, focusing, and revision. Confer with your thesis director at the start of the semester to establish a schedule of written assignments, allowing time for you to articulate new ideas, for the director to respond to them, and for you to refine the argument. At least half the pages should be drafted by the middle of the semester, to allow for the necessary final shaping. *Remember that a paper of 20 pages takes more than twice as long to write as two 10-page papers: the ideas must be unified but developed steadily throughout.* The final thesis should reveal a firm, carefully-built structure that substantiates the argument. Secondary sources should be used to define the field or scholarly debate in which you intervene and to clarify your points.

**Scholarly:** Your honors thesis should synthesize the thinking of multiple scholars who have engaged with your topic, to formulate a new position of your own that is firmly grounded in the primary texts. This may be your first chance to engage with a body of scholarship on your texts and/or topic. Initially, refer to your thesis proposal (written in the semester before the thesis itself) to select useful secondary readings. Your director should also help you to identify classic or cutting-edge criticism relevant to your central question. For your own searches, start with the English library website (see Resources, below). In consultation with your director, you should compile a bibliography of possible relevant sources early in the process, preferably before the semester begins, that will establish the foundation and parameters for your research.

Working with multiple critical sources requires careful record-keeping and thoughtful synthesis. Even in the early stages of your writing and reading, keep careful records of ideas and phrases found in secondary sources and who wrote them. When you draft, remember that whenever you use an idea specific to a critic, you must cite that source; if you use that critic’s phrasing (even for a few words), you must quote and cite the page. In revising, you may eliminate some of the static citations that are peripheral to your argument and focus on your key critical interlocutors. For this scholarship, retain those quotations that set up your key issues, or offer a telling turn of phrase. Quote as briefly as possible, and integrate quotations in your sentences. Though you need to establish your scholarly context, your voice should be central here.

An honors thesis should use a consistent documentation style, whether endnotes or parenthetical references, with a Works Cited list following the most recent *MLA Style* Manual; when in doubt, consult your thesis director. As in all classes at Illinois, thesis writers are responsible to the University Student Code on academic integrity. *To avoid documentation problems, take care to document sources even in early drafts*.

**Polished:** An honors thesis is expected to be *carefully proofread* by the student before final submission. While spell-checking software can help, it will not catch all errors. You should be aware of, and check, your own, particular weaknesses in structure or punctuation. Asking a tutor or trusted friend to proofread can also be invaluable, as they will catch errors you’ve skimmed over. (As the author, it’s easy to see what should be there, rather than what is actually there, especially with small mistakes).

**Lively:** An honors thesis is expected to *develop* its argument, not just to repeat it with a mechanical accumulation of evidence. Early completion of a draft will allow you and your director to find ways to expand and enliven the thesis, to create a strong opening, and to build its momentum and sophistication through your various sub-points to a thoughtful conclusion.

**RESOURCES**

The **Literatures and Languages Library** website ([www.library.illinois.edu/llx](http://www.library.illinois.edu/llx)) links to carefully selected online resources for literature and film.

The **Writer’s Workshop** (<https://writersworkshop.illinois.edu/>) assists any university writer facing new writing challenges. Consultations can focus on concerns you specify.

**TIMELINE**

(Note that different directors may adjust this schedule)

**Prior to the beginning of the semester in which you will complete the thesis:** Consult with your director and define a schedule of reading and writing. Wanting to keep to the schedule isn't enough; plan *how* to keep it. Ask your director to read and discuss short, informal and then longer drafts as you focus on a working thesis. Consulting with your director early means you’ll begin the semester with a concrete plan in mind.

**Mid-semester:** Submit *at least half of your project to your director by this point in the semester*, if not before. You could set a definite date to submit 10-12 pages, or two dates for 5-7-page increments. You’ll revise and expand this draft over the remainder of the term. If a partial draft with a unified claim hasn’t been completed by mid-semester, you or your director may propose converting the honors thesis into an independent study. *An essay hastily composed in the last weeks of the semester should not be eligible for honors.*

**Registration for the thesis:** (See also the Preparing for Honors Thesis form).To register for an honors thesis you must fill out the registration form (on the website under “Honors Thesis Registration”) by the correct due date. See the registration form and below for that. To register for an honors thesis that will be completed in the Fall semester, register by March of the spring semester of the prior academic year; for a Spring thesis, register by November of the previous semester. The dates fluctuate slightly year to year, but these are this year’s dates:

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| ***Registration Deadline****: for those students who wish to write an honors thesis in Spring 2025, the deadline is*  ***Friday, November 15, 2024****. For those students who wish to write an honors thesis in Fall 2025, the deadline is* ***Monday, March 24, 2025.*** |

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| ***Due date for theses final drafts****:* ***the due date for honors theses******in Fall 2024 is Monday, 12/2, 2024****. Ask your director whether they prefer hard or electronic copies; you must, however, submit an electronic copy to Nancy Rahn. Whether in hard or electronic forms, all drafts are* ***due by 5pm sharp****. Please list director (and any readers) on the title page.* |

**Evaluation:** The director writes a letter of evaluation to the English Honors Committee. This Committee then reviews the letters, examines the student’s overall record, and determines which students receive honors and at which level. Students are then informed by mail of the results and, after the semester is over, sent copies of the letters of evaluation. A course grade in English 391 also is determined by the thesis director.

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