

English Honors Program: Writing a Proposal for Your English Honors Thesis and Registering for ENGL 391

Enrollment, ENGL 391: To write an honors thesis (and thus enroll in ENGL 391) you will submit a one-page thesis proposal as part of your completed registration form which can be found available to download at <https://www.english.illinois.edu/undergraduate/honors/>. Together, the proposal and registration form will be 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 DUS reviews these proposals and then gives permission for you to register in the appropriate section of ENGL 391. Ms. Rahn will supply you with the correct registration number for your adviser.

Overview: Thesis proposals should be at least 200 words long but not more than one single-spaced page. 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 focusing your ideas. It sets 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 at least one conversation with your director about shared intellectual interests. Your director must sign the registration form for English 391 that this proposal accompanies (they sign this virtually by sending their approval in an email to Ms. Rahn). Your director's signature attests that this project appears appropriate in scale and level for one semester of research by an advanced undergraduate undertaking a 20-25 page paper.

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. Below is a suggested route to 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).

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, a period, or a 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 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. 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 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 faculty research profiles. You might browse publications by appropriate faculty

before approaching them. Remember to ask early, as faculty availability is limited, and consult the Honors director if you need help finding someone.

Planning on applying to graduate school? We recommend writing a thesis in the fall semester so you have a polished writing sample to include with your application (that is, if you plan on applying to graduate schools directly from undergraduate without taking a break). In this case your thesis should be in the field you plan to propose as your primary area of study in graduate school. Contact the DUS for more information and/or talk to the advising office if you need guidance about this.

IN 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 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. 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 English librarian www.library.illinois.edu/llx/.

EXTEND YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION INTO A RATIONALE.

A rationale is not quite a thesis: it just explains a problem, and sketches a plan of attack. 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 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.

LOOKING AHEAD:

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 (semester before the thesis work begins) to 2) a coherent plan of how to approach writing the thesis in manageable stages (very early in the semester of writing) to 3) a coherent thesis statement and substantial draft by mid-semester; this will allow time to revise the thesis before it gets sent to the second and third readers. **Final theses are typically due the Wednesday of the penultimate week of the semester.**

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