

Honors Thesis Handbook Part 1 - Getting Started: What, Why, and Who

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Overview of the Honors Thesis Process

Broadly, the Honors thesis is an independent undertaking involving research or creative work that represents the culmination of your academic and personal endeavors as an undergraduate. This project includes three key components: 1) a written **Honors thesis**--a body of work which demonstrates a deep understanding of a research or creative topic, 2) a written **Honors reading list** which illustrates the breadth of your academic and personal development in college, 3) and an **oral defense** where you are asked to discuss both your Honors thesis and reading list. This work is accomplished in HON 498 and HON 499.

1) **Written Thesis: Your thesis end goal** is a written document where the thesis question is discussed based on your research and analysis. In the case of creative theses, this document includes information on the creative process. In both types of thesis, the student is expected to include a thesis question, relevant literature, methodology, and analysis.

Often, the Honors thesis can replace your major's capstone requirement (see Honors website for lists of covered majors at <https://honors.umaine.edu/current-students/academics/thesis/capstone/>). If your major does not accept the Honors thesis as a capstone replacement, significant expansion of a capstone project or development of a topic based on an academic minor or other significant interest can be used as a thesis.

2) **Reading List: Your reading list end goal** is a written document where you reflect on your time as an undergraduate student. This "list" is a selection of 12-15 "texts" that demonstrate your personal and intellectual growth. These "texts" are *mostly* books, but can also be articles, movies, artwork, music, TV shows, or other media that illustrate your intellectual journey, and experiences that provide a holistic understanding of you as an individual and critical thinker. The goal of the annotation or narrative is to relate the texts to your growth as a student and as a person through college and in your Honors journey. Thus the texts (broadly construed) should be works that are meaningful to you, and that meaning and impact should be the focus of the written text that you provide the committee (rather than an extensive summary).

3) **Oral Defense: Your oral defense end goal** is a 2.5 hour thesis defense where your written thesis and reading list is discussed in front of your committee. About an hour is allotted for the written thesis as well as the reading list, and a half hour is devoted to deliberation on the level of honors you will receive.

Benefits of the Thesis Process

Deciding to undertake the thesis process is a commitment to a significant amount of work, but there are important benefits to consider:

- Being one of a select group of students graduating from the University of Maine Honors College. Only around 5% of graduating seniors each year complete a degree with honors.

- An opportunity to explore, research, and create something that particularly interests you.
 - Gaining/honing a particular knowledge and/or skill set.
 - Confidence in your public presentation and speaking abilities.
 - The chance to reflect on and synthesize four years of intellectual and personal growth.
 - Developing professional relationships with advisors and mentors.
 - Demonstrate academic motivation and intellectual specialization through a well-written document to showcase to graduate programs or employers.
 - Strong sense of accomplishment on having completed a major, independent research or creative project.
 - Distinction of honors will be recorded on both your diploma and your transcript.
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More About the Honors Thesis

Determining a Thesis Topic: Theses are academic works. They present a hypothesis or assertion that is then tested, analyzed, evaluated, and defended according to the methods of the discipline. A thesis is not just another research paper—not even a very, very long research paper. A thesis will investigate the previous research on a topic, and, importantly, **it will also include your own insights and contributions to the topic**, *synthesized* from your critical engagement in the process.

In some disciplines, a creative approach can result in a different form of thesis. Students in art, music, new media, theatre, dance, or creative writing might find this more in line with their interests, aptitudes, and the expectations of their disciplines. Honors students have created paintings, composed music, written novels, made clothing, directed plays, and engaged in many other creative endeavors to fulfill the thesis requirement. Other theses might center on a new periodical, an invention, or something we might not even be able to imagine!

All creative theses include a written piece accompanying the creative work, known as the *disquisition*. The disquisition contextualizes one's creative work, discusses related research, and describes its scholarly content. Further details may be found here: <https://honors.umaine.edu/current-students/academics/thesis/forms/#disquisition>. **We strongly encourage students considering the creative option to come in and talk with the Honors Associates and/or the Honors College Associate Dean or Dean, so we can give you more specific guidance.**

The people best able to help you figure out a thesis topic are faculty members in those disciplines. It would be a great idea to ask faculty members in your academic department for ideas as you begin to consider thesis topics.

Thesis Archives: Another way to find out what projects have been done in your discipline is to look at the Honors College thesis archive. We have hard copies of theses from 1937 to the

present in Colvin and in Estabrooke, and you can search this database on our website; (<https://honors.umaine.edu/current-students/academics/thesis/search/>).

You will notice that theses range in length, and **there is no definitive answer to “how long does a thesis have to be?”** The best way to find what would be appropriate in your field is to find examples of previous theses or ask a faculty member in your department.

The Timeline for Honors and the Thesis Process

Creating and sticking to a realistic timeline is the critical first step for successfully completing your Honors thesis. Here are the required classes for the thesis process:

- HON 391 (Usually taken in third year, mandatory for Class of 2022 and after)
- HON 498 (Usually in the Fall of final year)
- HON 499 (Usually in the Spring of final year)

The thesis writing calendar (available on the Honors College website) details the deadlines within HON 498 and 499:

<https://honors.umaine.edu/current-students/academics/thesis/forms/#calendar>

Requirements of the Honors Thesis Process

- A. HON 391--Introduction to Thesis Research. Typically in the third year, your goal will be to identify a thesis topic and produce thesis prospectus.
- B. Thesis Form 1, which lists your thesis title, advisor, and includes a brief description of the topic is due at the end of the semester before you take HON 498.
- C. Enroll in HON 498, an “independent study” worth three credits.
- D. Enroll in HON 499, an “independent study” worth three credits.
- E. Your responsibilities in taking these classes include: arranging meetings (weekly, bi-weekly...) with your thesis advisor, meeting Honors College deadlines (see thesis Writing Calendar at <https://honors.umaine.edu/current-students/academics/thesis/forms/#calendar>), and making steady progress in your research, creative work, and thesis writing to receive a grade in both HON 498 and 499. The goal of HON 498 and 499 is a final honors thesis and reading list document--one defended, edited, and submitted before graduation.

HON 498 and HON 499 are real classes even though there are no set times or class meetings in an independent study. The student works independently with an advisor and spends ~10 hours/week on the research and writing for your project, equivalent to a regular 3-credit course. The advisor grades the course.

Above all, YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE TIMELY AND SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF YOUR thesis. It is this independence and commitment that separates thesis work from normal coursework.

The Thesis Advisor

A thesis advisor is an individual YOU work closely with on your thesis research and writing. Your advisor is typically a UMaine faculty member. Your advisor is your project mentor, and also grades HON 498 and 499. Co-advisors are possible--talk with the honors staff if you are thinking about co-advisors.

Finding a Thesis Advisor: Typically, students find an advisor by asking a faculty member if he or she is available to work with them on their thesis topic. The faculty member may be someone who you are already working with in a lab or on a research project, someone you had a class with, or someone with expertise in your field of interest. We recommend you start thinking about this well before you begin your thesis. If you have trouble finding an advisor, contact the Honors College's associate dean or dean

Building the Thesis Committee: In consultation with your thesis advisor, you will choose committee members who have some expertise to offer on your thesis topic. The committee must be comprised of:

1. Five total members, including the advisor
2. One designated Honors College representative (a faculty member that has recently taught in the Civilizations sequence or a tutorial)
3. One member that is NOT within the discipline of your study*

*The honors member can serve as both the honors representative AND member outside of your discipline.

The Thesis Defense

The thesis defense is the presentation and discussion of your Honors thesis and reading list. It typically involves a presentation of the research (c. 20 min.), and time for questions from your committee about the work. Both creative and research theses must follow the basic three-part defense structure:

- Honors thesis presentation with Q&A for one hour
- Honors reading list conversation with committee for one hour
- Committee deliberation for up to 30 minutes

Your defense is a presentation and discussion with your thesis committee--people YOU have selected, and who have been helping with your project! Remember, you will have spent lots of time working on both the thesis and the reading list, and therefore will have PLENTY to talk about!

Thesis Forms

Thesis forms provide deadlines to keep you on track and allows us to measure the progress of thesis students.

It is YOUR responsibility to turn in these forms by the Honors College deadlines.

There are six thesis forms to complete in your thesis process, the first of which is due **before the end of your third year** (or the semester before enrolling in HON 498). thesis forms can be found on the Honors College website:

<https://honors.umaine.edu/current-students/academics/thesis/forms/#forms>

Please read ALL directions closely on each form before submitting them to the Honors administrative office (146 Estabrooke).

More About the Honors Reading List

All Reading Lists are different, depending on the writer and texts chosen, but we have some examples of good ones on our website:

<https://honors.umaine.edu/current-students/academics/thesis/reading-lists/>

The Reading List can be written in one of two formats: narrative or annotated (see the examples on our website). Both serve the same purpose in describing your experiences, thinking, and intellectual growth after four years as a member of the Honors College at University of Maine.

A Preceptor's Take on the Reading List

"I generally describe the goal of the reading list as an opportunity to explore who you are as a thinking, feeling, acting human, how you fit within the various communities in your life, and how what is most important to you as you leave the College will move you to act in those communities in the coming years... I stress the word "most" a lot - that most of the text should be traditional book-like things, most of them should come from your University years, most of them should be things that weren't assigned to you in class, but that they should work within those suggestions to produce something that is authentic and that they're proud to share as a statement (or set of questions) about who they are at this moment in their world and how these texts and experiences interacted with each other to shape that person into being." -Jordan LaBouff, CLAS-Honors Preceptor of Psychology

Special Considerations

What if I want to use human/animal subjects in my thesis research?

If you have a thesis idea that would involve human subject research, you may have to complete an IRB (Institutional Review Board) application before any research begins. This process is routinely done by many faculty and Honors students. Contact the Honors staff for more information and review the IRB page: <https://umaine.edu/research-compliance/human-subjects/>

What if I want to use my group capstone project as my thesis?

The Honors thesis process is an *individual* project, however here are the guidelines for acceptance of such a thesis:

- There is a strong rationale for the thesis to be related to a group project.
- The student, the advisor and the dean of the Honors College meet prior to the start of the thesis work to discuss the structure of the project.
- It must be clear, in writing and from the outset, what part of the work is the thesis student's responsibility and what is the group's responsibility.
- The thesis student, after the completion of the thesis but before the defense, produces a reflection on the nature of the endeavor with the group: how it worked and what was valuable. This reflection should be included as the last appendix to the thesis.
- The student produces a thesis in which there may be some shared text/material, but which also includes the student's individual contributions to the project. Work done by the group should be appropriately cited.

The dean of the Honors College will make the final determination as to the acceptability of the thesis proposal.

What if I want to write a collaborative thesis?

The Honors College is open to exploring options for joint thesis work by pairs of honors students. The Honors College will accept proposals for collaborative theses under the following policies:

- There is a strong rationale for the thesis to be collaborative.
- There are two collaborators; both are Honors students.
- The two students have the same thesis advisor (they may and probably should have some different thesis committee members).
- The students, the advisor, and the dean of the Honors College meet prior to the start of the thesis work to discuss the structure of the project.
- It must be clear, in writing and from the outset, who is responsible for what part(s) of the work.
- Every attempt should be made to have a joint meeting of all members of both thesis committees as per the requirements for individual theses.
- Each student, after the completion of the thesis but before the defense, produces a reflection on the nature of the collaboration: how it worked and what was valuable. This reflection should be included as the last appendix to the thesis.
- The students produce two theses in which there may be some shared text/material, but which also includes their individual contributions to the project. Work done by the collaborating student is appropriately cited.
- The students and the committees can opt for either 1. One three-hour joint defense with both students and both committees 2. Two individual, standard defenses. In either case, the discussion of the reading lists should be separate.
- Level of honors and grades for HON 498 and 499 is determined separately for each student.

The dean of the Honors College makes the final determination as to the acceptability of the collaborative thesis proposal.

Next Steps

Hopefully this document has been useful in your decision to undertake the Honors Thesis. **If you still have questions, please come see the Honors Associates, Associate Dean, and/or the Dean!** We are here to help you.