Honors 499: The Honors Thesis

Part 1: How to Plan and Prepare Your Thesis
Topic and Proposal

Coming up with an idea:

Honors theses are typically conducted during your senior year—fall or spring semester, it doesn’t matter. If you think you might need two semesters to get this done, it’s best to enroll in the fall if you’re graduating in the spring. Either way, your junior year is the time to begin thinking of a topic and looking for an advisor. Remember that because HONR 499 earns 3-credit hours it is part of your course load just like any other credit-earning course. Keep this in mind as you probably don’t want to have those credits push you into an overload situation (where you are registered for more than 18 credit hours) because that may have financial and workload implications. Consider this when planning your senior year courses.

It’s never too soon to start thinking of a possible topic. You may already have a well-thought out project idea you’ve been kicking around for some time. If so, great. But if not, here are some suggestions:

- When were you most intellectually excited during your college career? What were you doing when that moment hit? Why was your brain lit up? What topic or idea or process were you engaged with at that moment? Why do you think it was so exciting for you?
- What is a key idea or issue from your major or minor field that you’d like to investigate further? Maybe it’s something you heard about in a class or in a conversation with a professor from that department or program. If you finished a favorite course feeling that you would have liked more time for a particular aspect of that course, you may be able to turn that feeling into an idea for a topic.
- Was there an idea or issue from one of your Honors courses that really caught your attention?
- If you don’t want to work on a topic from your major or minor, is there an extracurricular activity or something else you are passionate about that you might want to investigate further?
- If you are planning to study abroad or do an internship, perhaps there’s a connection there to a thesis topic.
- Think first in terms of questions rather than fully-formed projects. While you may have the whole thing in mind, it can be daunting to try to figure out the entire process up front. Thinking about the questions that drive you, and/or the processes in which you like to investigate and interact with the world, can be more fruitful at this stage. Working with the Honors College staff and your major professor, you can later figure out how best to engage that question.
- It’s also very helpful to talk to your favorite professors, both in the Honors College and in your major field or elsewhere. They can help you brainstorm ideas, connect you to other helpful people and resources, and they may even have a project going to which you can contribute.
- Be on the lookout for announcements about any Honors College thesis events. Sometimes the Student Honors Council organizes workshops on theses.
There are some examples of previous Honors theses later in this guide. While hardly exhaustive, they'll give you a sense of the range of topics.

Browse the online Honors thesis archive (cardinalscholar.bsu.edu/handle/123456789/14) or Wall of Pride in the Honors House for other examples.

Think about your post-BSU plans. Can your thesis be of service to you in preparing for your next academic, professional, or personal step in life? If you are off to graduate school, can your thesis project help you gain admission, earn an assistantship, or prepare you for other opportunities there?

If you are applying for a post-baccalaureate national or international scholarship, can your thesis project tie into that or otherwise prepare you for that experience? If so, this is a good question to address to Dr. Barb Stedman, our Director of National and International Scholarships.

If you are heading into the job market, might your thesis show a potential employer what you can do in a way specific to your intended career?

In sum, think about your future plans and see if your thesis can help you there as well. That way, the thesis serves as both capstone to your undergraduate career and a bridge to your future life.

Some related questions about choosing a topic:

- Is it “legal” to rework an old paper or project?

  A thesis that builds on work already done can be a fine piece of work. A paper or presentation that analyzes internship experiences, a presentation based on some aspect of work or study abroad, an article developed from your research, a video for classroom use that grew out of practice teaching—these kinds of projects represent legitimate development of work already undertaken into new and more complex forms.

  In contrast, a student who proposes to add a different introduction or a longer conclusion or a few more examples or illustrations to an already existing paper is not proposing anything that could be called an Honors capstone project. Your thesis advisor is required to confirm that your project is original and of Honors caliber.

- Can you collaborate with another student?

  Certainly, but you need to get permission during your thesis meeting, which both you and your collaborator should attend together. Most collaborative projects are advised by the same mentor, but it’s possible to have different mentors. You should each turn in a separate thesis proposal, even if the information on them is essentially the same; remember to indicate the name of your collaborator. When you submit your theses, be sure to spell out, in your separate process statements, your individual roles in the project and in its design. The finished thesis, being the work of two people, should be double the work; it must not be equivalent to a single-author thesis. Per the library’s request, each person submits a separate copy of the thesis. They will be identical except for a few parts: each student will have a unique process analysis essay, unique acknowledgments, and the title page will differ slightly as the submitting student will have their name on top of their collaborator’s. Everything else is identical. Any variations should be discussed with your advisor.

- Will HONR 499 count toward my major or minor?
Credit for HONR 499 may apply toward fulfilling requirements for the major, minor, or for elective departmental credit. You should not assume that such credit will be given, however. Be sure to get the approval of the chairperson of the department involved. (See also next question.)

- What if a thesis or project is already required in my major?

Departmental requirements within your major may sometimes call for a thesis or project comparable to what the Honors College expects from its students. In that case, you do not have to sign up for both your departmental capstone course and HONR 499; your departmental thesis credit may be substituted for HONR 499 or vice versa. Students in Architecture, Art, Landscape Architecture, Music, Psychology, and many others often sign up for a departmental course rather than HONR 499. You must gain permission for this substitution during your Honors thesis meeting, and in the case of a departmental substitution you must indicate the course number on your Honors thesis proposal. If you plan, for example, to use LA 404 or MUMET 495 or ART 490 as your capstone project number, the Honors College will process a DegreeWorks exception so that LA 404 or MUMET 495 or ART 490 “counts as” HONR 499; the DegreeWorks exception will be processed only after the signed, approved thesis is submitted.

If, on the other hand, your department allows or even prefers that the capstone project course be recorded as HONR 499 (for example, HONR 499 can replace EDEL 450), then your department advisor may have to process a DegreeWorks exception for you.

- What if I am in Departmental Honors?

Students not in the Honors College who are completing Departmental Honors register for HONR 499N. Honors College students who are also completing Departmental Honors do not need to do two theses, unless they wish to do completely separate projects, but should simply register for HONR 499, which counts for both Departmental Honors and the Honors College Senior Thesis. Note that HONR 499, not HONR 499N, should be noted on your Departmental Honors registration card if you are in the Honors College. Please note that if you are submitting your completed thesis in the same semester that you will graduate, all completed Departmental Honors requirements must be documented with the Honors College by October 31 (December Commencement) or March 17 (May Commencement).

Finding an advisor:

Every thesis needs a faculty advisor. Your faculty advisor will work with you to craft your best thesis project, evaluate your thesis, and assign a course grade for HONR 499 when it is completed. Thesis advisors can be one of your Honors professors, but they don’t have to be. In fact, most students choose advisors from their major departments, professors who already know them and who, ideally, have some expertise in the thesis subject area. When you have your Honors College thesis appointment, you can discuss possible advisors at that time if you haven’t yet found one.

It’s best to approach a potential advisor as early as possible. Faculty really dislike being asked at the last minute to advise a thesis. It’s best to ask early so that the two of you can plan your thesis and arrange the best semester in which to enroll in HONR 499. Here are some tips for approaching a potential faculty advisor:
• Start identifying potential advisors and approaching them early in the semester before the semester in which you need to take HONR 499 at the latest. So that means for a fall thesis, you should be talking to people in January of that year. For a spring thesis, that means late August/early September.
• Make an appointment rather than just dropping in. If you don’t know the professor’s office hours, call the department office (or the Honors College if it’s an Honors professor) to find out.
• It helps if the professor already knows you from a previous class. If they don’t, they’ll wonder why you are asking them to do this work.
• Be up front about why you are there. If you know your topic, be able to articulate it and why you think they’d be perfect as an advisor on that project.
• If you don’t know your topic but think they might be helpful in finding one, let them know you are there to discuss possible ideas and explain why you think they might be helpful.
• NEVER say to a potential faculty advisor, “You’re my last resort,” “I can’t think of anyone good to work with,” or “If I don’t get a thesis advisor today I won’t graduate on time.” Similarly, any kind of negative attitude about the thesis (“I don’t really want to do this project”) creates an immediate disincentive for that person to work with you.
• DO say how excited you are to be working on this project, what you think you’ll get out of it, etc. Smiling never hurts.
• When they agree to advise you on your project, thank them and say you are looking forward to working with them.
• Let them know that this Honors Thesis Guide is available on our website.
• But if they say no, thank them for their time and ask if they have any recommendations of someone else who might be a good fit for you. Faculty say no for all kinds of legitimate reasons: they may already be overburdened, they may already be advising one or more theses, they may not be available during the semester you need to work on your thesis, or they may not think they’re a good fit for your topic. They’ll almost certainly tell you why they can’t work with you. Don’t take a no answer personally. This is why you’ve started early, so now you still have time to approach someone else.

Some frequently asked questions about advisors:

• Can you have more than one advisor? Yes, you can, but you’ll need to designate one as the “first” advisor. She or he will be the one assigned to the course and will award your grade.
• Can you change advisors? Remember that once you have signed up for HONR 499 and informed the Honors College of who your advisor will be, that is the person who will award your grade for the course. If an emergency arises and you must change advisors, you should talk with the Dean, Associate Dean, Honors Fellow or designee first, after which you must submit a signed Change of Advisor form to the Honors College. If such a change is necessary, it must be completed by the midpoint of the semester in which you are enrolled in HONR 499, so that the grade sheet will be sent to the correct advisor.
• Can the product of an Undergraduate Honors Fellowship be used as a thesis? The work supported by an Undergraduate Honors Fellowship can be used to develop a subsequent Honors Thesis, but the Honors Thesis cannot be an immediate, direct product of an Undergraduate Honors Fellowship.
The Honors thesis meeting

Early in the process you will need to have your thesis topic approved by the Honors College. When you are ready to discuss your thesis project, call the Honors College at 765-285-1024 and tell the staff you wish to make a thesis appointment. They’ll schedule a meeting for you with the Dean, the Associate Dean, the Honors Fellow, or their designated representative.

As with the meeting with a potential advisor, you need to be ready for this meeting. That means doing some thinking and planning. Ideally, this is a meeting to approve a thesis plan so you can get going and get registered for HONR 499. When you arrive for your meeting, make sure you have the following things with you:

• A solid idea with evidence of a solid foundation. That means you’ve done some basic research into the topic. You have a clear idea of what you want to do and why, and you have some sense of where your work fits into its field.
• A clear trajectory and plan for how you will execute and complete the project.
• And in general, show that you’ve already done this planning and thinking. Don’t arrive with simply the germ of an idea or a vague notion of something you might do. Show you are on top of things.

That said, if you’ve done this thinking and still don’t know what you want to do for your thesis, go ahead and schedule a thesis meeting. We’ll do our best to help you generate an idea. You won’t leave this meeting with a formal thesis approval, but assuming you’re walking out with an idea, after you’ve followed up on the idea you can submit a formal thesis proposal from (with the advisor’s signature). If accepted, that signed proposal will count as your formal thesis meeting and you won’t have to schedule a follow-up appointment unless you want to do so.

The two major types of Honors theses: research and creative

The range of topics and projects undertaken by Honors thesis students is vast. But in general they fall into two main categories: research theses and creative theses. What's the difference?

Research theses:

In general, a research thesis is probably what you first think of when you think of a thesis. It's a written paper that explains the results of a research project. Page lengths can vary, but many in the humanities or social sciences are in the 35-page ballpark or greater. In contrast, a thesis that’s built on hundreds of hours of lab work may be only 15 pages. Your advisor will advise you on this issue.

Creative theses:

While thesis projects resulting in a written paper are of course creative, this category refers to projects for which the end product is something other than a written paper. This category typically includes projects from the visual arts (painting, sculpture, etc.), the performing arts (music, theater, dance), and from media arts (telecommunications, filmmaking, etc.). That’s just small sampling, however. Works of computer science, applied technology, fashion design, and even woodworking would apply here. It’s a pretty vast category. The key thing is the character of the end product. That character is expressed in something other than a research paper. That said, creative projects must be built on a solid intellectual foundation and that requires research as well. So, all thesis projects are
research-based. It's the character of that research’s expression in the final product which determines whether it is a research or creative thesis.

**The Process Analysis Essay:**

Whether you are doing a research or creative project, you must write a process statement. This could also be called a meta-analysis. What that means is that you are reflecting critically on the *process* of carrying out your thesis project. The product (the written research paper or the creative product) contains the *results* of your process. For example, a ceramic coffee mug or an urban plan requires a lot of knowledge to produce, but *how* it was produced (the design thinking, technical issues, etc.) is not necessarily evident from simply looking at the mug or the plan. So a process analysis provides discussion of the information for why the mug or plan or whatever is a significant application of academic knowledge and judgment. Your process analysis reflects on *how* you carried it out. Discuss the research you did (i.e., the process of research you engaged in, not the results of that process – those results are your actual thesis), what you learned about yourself and about your learning process, any great insights or challenges you had along the way, what you think your thesis project means, etc. It also helps the reader/spectator/listener know how to approach the product. In a sense, this essay is a guide, or sales pitch even, for the experience anyone engaging your thesis is about to have. Prepare the reader for your thesis.

If you do a creative thesis, this process statement will be a more substantial document because readers of your thesis may not be able to fully appreciate your creative product. For example, if your creative thesis was a dance recital, readers won’t likely have seen the recital, nor will they necessarily be able to understand your creative process just from looking at the dance. In the process statement you’ll tell readers about that process. Likewise, if your thesis is scientific and involves lots of specialized terminology that most general readers would not know, your process analysis is a place to talk about the work in layperson’s terms. Here’s another example: imagine viewing a Picasso painting. That painting speaks for itself as a work of art. But what if we had Picasso standing next to it talking about how and why he made it? What he says would be his process analysis. The work of art and the statement aren’t the same thing, and one cannot replace the other, but both are valuable. This is a major learning moment for you because it is vitally important that you reflect on why and how you learned, not just what you learned.

**Does your thesis project involve research on humans or animals?**

If so, read this next section.

Academic institutions have commonly-accepted rules and constraints in place when research is conducted using humans or animals. This is well and good as it protects those beings from harm. If engagement with human beings or animals is involved in the thesis project (e.g., surveys, interviews, observation of any kind, recombinant DNA molecules, infectious agents, biohazardous materials, etc.), you must inquire about the need for review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for possible clearance on human and animal subjects research before the project begins. This is a requirement of federal law. Do not assume this is unnecessary. The definition of human subjects research is sometimes surprising. Interviews for journalistic purposes, for example, are usually not considered research; but if the results are gathered into statistics, even informally, they may be subject to this law. Your advisor should raise this issue with you, but you are ultimately responsible for making sure your thesis work complies with IRB standards if you are using humans in your research. Failure to do this can, in extreme cases, result in financial penalties for you and your advisor. At a lesser level, failure to comply could result in your work being invalidated and unusable in the thesis, and it could interfere with your graduation. It is sometimes thought that projects that will not be published do not
require IRB approval. That’s not true in our case as all Honors theses are considered published when they are submitted to the Bracken Library.

The IRB process takes time. While some projects are approved within 2-3 days, others take 2-3 weeks. If you are planning to conduct research of this nature that may be subject to IRB regulations, and you will do so outside of the local area or outside the United States, that process always requires contact with the IRB. In those cases the approval process can take even longer. Contact them 1-2 months before you plan to leave, the earlier the better. If your project must be approved by the IRB, both you and your advisor must pass an online certification course that takes several hours to complete. Also, if your project needs IRB approval you must get that approval before beginning your research. The IRB will not retroactively approve a project that has already been completed. Finally, when you prepare your IRB proposal paperwork, be sure it is error free (including writing errors). Any errors may delay the approval process.

It is better to be safe than sorry, so if it is even remotely possible your project might need approval, if you are talking to humans or working with animals or biological agents, go ahead and make the call to the IRB to discuss your project.

The Office of Research Integrity can assist you in determining if your project needs IRB approval. Before you begin any project that may even remotely be subject to IRB approval, contact them at orihelp@bsu.edu or call 285-5088 and ask to speak to one of their graduate assistants.

You can find out more here: http://cms.bsu.edu/about/administrativeoffices/researchintegrity/humansubjects.

Here are some examples of previous thesis projects:

These thesis examples give you a sense of the range of projects Honors students have been doing. They are all, by the way, winners of the annual Joe and Carol Trimmer Awards for Outstanding Senior Honors Thesis or Project, a $1000 prize awarded to both the best research and best creative thesis. Winners are celebrated during our annual senior recognition ceremony.

2016  Gabrielle C. Boyd, "Nobody Panic (But the Emergency Exit is Locked): A Sketch Show"
Mentor:  Jennifer Blackmer

Allyson Garrett, "Breathing in Harmony": An Assessment of Unique Inspiratory Muscle Training Techniques Utilized by Patients with COPD in Pulmonary Rehabilitation
Mentor:  Nicole Koontz

2015  Stephanie Ann Sink, "Walt Disney, the 1964-65 World’s Fair, and the Emergence of Audio-Animatronics."
Mentor:  Bruce Geelhoed

Mentor:  Vanessa Ament

2014  Kelly McMasters, Streets of Buenos Aires
Mentor:  Mark Sawrie

Brittany Russell, *Spanish Heritage Language Learners in East Central Indiana: Teacher's Attitudes and Beliefs*
Mentor: Lisa Kuricak

2013  Megan Harris, *Indiana’s Miscegenation Laws: An Ineffective Racist Agenda.*
Mentor: John Scott Parkinson

Audrey Van Acker and Alaina Hartman, *Literacy in Delaware County.*
Mentor: Karen Thatcher

2012  Elise Rorick, *Opening the Box: Exploring the Myth of Pandora.*
Mentor: Jacinda Russell

Tyler Wolford, *Hospital.*
Mentor: Christine Shea

Mentor: Paul Ranieri (English)

Abigail Hines, *Between Beats.* Mentor: Andrew Hosey (Digital Corps)

Mentor: Guohe Zheng.

Eric Spall, *Three Camps: Drumming and Drummers in the American Civil War.* Mentor: Nicole Etcheson (History)

The form you will need to make your thesis proposal official:

[Senior Honors Thesis/Creative Project Proposal](#)
This link takes you to a fillable PDF for you to complete and print for required signatures.