

# Honors Thesis Handbook

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A GUIDE TO SUCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE SHACKOULS  
HONORS COLLEGE THESIS

*"I AM SO GRATEFUL FOR MY HONORS THESIS EXPERIENCE. THE PROCESS OF PROPOSING, CONDUCTING, AND DEFENDING ORIGINAL RESEARCH PROVIDED SO MUCH OPPORTUNITY FOR PERSONAL AND INTELLECTUAL GROWTH, AND I AM CONFIDENT THAT IT WILL SET ME APART IN BOTH THE WORKING WORLD AND THE ACADEMIC WORLD IF I CHOOSE TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL."*

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## What is an Honors Thesis?

Undergraduate Honors Theses are significant research projects which often serve as the culmination of months of sustained investigation into an area of a student's academic interest. Theses may take different forms based on a student's major, areas of interest, and professional aspirations; yet all honors theses must contain polished, scholarly, and original work. It results in a written product and public presentation (termed "defense").

## Why do an Honors Thesis?

Writing an honors thesis affords students an opportunity to explore in detail a topic of interest. The honors thesis also helps prepare the student for the rigors and expectations of graduate and professional school. An honors thesis, while required for all students in the Cursus Honorum and for all Presidential and Provost Scholars, is an option for any student at MSU.

## How do I get Started?

Inspiration for beginning an Honors Thesis can come from multiple areas:

- Existing research that the student is engaged in
- Elaborating on a topic from a class
- Extending a capstone project
- Consultation with faculty mentors.

## When should I get started?

Brainstorm early! It is a good idea to have a general subject in mind and a list of potential faculty mentors by the fall of junior year. In the middle of their junior year, students should meet with a potential faculty mentor to discuss a topic for their thesis.

By the beginning of their senior year, students should formally request a member of the faculty to serve as their Undergraduate Honors Thesis Director and begin to outline their project. Students should submit the Honors Thesis Form to SHC by the end of the semester BEFORE they plan to defend: [Honors Thesis Proposal Form Submission](#)

## Honors Thesis Expectations

- All students who agree to complete an Honors Thesis will be enrolled into a non-credit producing Canvas “portal,” called the Honors Thesis Portal, which outlines the process and contains assignments and resources to assist them in the successful completion of their thesis.
- Since an honors thesis requires a minimum of two semesters, students must begin at least one semester prior to intended thesis defense (and graduation term).
- Honors Theses are accomplished under the mentorship of a faculty member (Undergraduate Honors Thesis Director).
- Theses must be individual (not group) work, and must be original: the writing and analysis may build upon the research students do for a class or with a faculty advisor (e.g., in a laboratory setting), but it must extend that work into something that is both new and unique to the student.
- Undergraduate Honors Theses should both explain the significance of the research for a nonexpert audience and discuss the implications of the research for the student’s intellectual field (e.g., answer the question: “so what?”). Often the former is accomplished through a clear and accessible introduction, and the latter is accomplished through a specific conclusion. More guidance is available here: <https://www.honors.msstate.edu/curriculum/thesis-defense/context-and-communication>
- The length of theses will vary from discipline to discipline, but a good rule of thumb is that an Undergraduate Honors Thesis should be about the length of a substantial published article in the discipline.
- Theses will go through several rounds of edits, and may require post-defense revisions, before they are considered complete.
- In addition to creating a written product, students will present their theses to their committee and other members of the public. They will also answer questions about their work and its implications.

## Process of Completing an Honors Thesis

Successfully completing an Honors Thesis requires significant effort and time. It is important to review the following process carefully and ensure that the student is completing all the components in a timely and thorough manner. Should the student have any questions regarding the process of completing an Honors Thesis, they may contact [thesis@honors.msstate.edu](mailto:thesis@honors.msstate.edu) with any questions.

## Honors Thesis Proposal

### Selecting a Thesis Director

Thesis Directors and students work closely throughout the entire Honors Thesis process. It is important to select an MSU faculty member who has the appropriate research background and knowledge to support the student as they craft their thesis. The Thesis Director will help the student in selecting and refining a topic, supervise their work, gauge the timeline for the thesis, guidance on copyright rights and permissions, and provide the student feedback on their written products.

## Selecting a Topic

Students can be inspired by different experiences, including wanting to advance existing research, extend a capstone project into a new direction, or elaborate on a topic from a class. It is important to select a topic that is of interest, relevant to one's field of study, and manageable for the framework of an undergraduate thesis. **The student must work with their Thesis Director to ensure that their proposed topic meets all of these requirements.**

## Declaring Intention to Complete Honors Thesis

Students planning to accomplish an honors thesis are encouraged to share their interest in completing an Honors Thesis at least one year ahead of their prospective semester of defense with the "Honors Thesis Interest Form" on the Honors Thesis web page. Students may then review the Honors Thesis Proposal submission instructions at least one semester ahead of their prospective semester of defense. All proposals must be approved by a fThesis Director and accompanied by a 2-3 paragraph long explanation of their topic, its significance, and how the student will go about the research process.

Neither of these forms are binding and students may change their topic. They are required to be submitted prior to taking HON 4093 (described below). Upon approval of the form by the Associate Dean of Shackouls Honors College, students will be invited to the Honors Thesis Canvas Portal (a non-credit bearing Canvas structure) to help them make timely progress and stay informed of deadlines and announcements related to completing an honors thesis.

## HON 4093

We encourage students to enroll in Honors Thesis hours (HON 4093), particularly during the semester in which they plan to defend their thesis. HON 4093 is a 3-credit-hour course that students may enroll in to grant them time and course credit to devote to their thesis work (in many ways, it is handled like a Directed Individual Study course). This is NOT the same as the Canvas portal (which is non-credit bearing).

By enrolling in course credit, students can set aside time to devote to researching and writing their thesis and meet regularly with their undergraduate honors thesis director (instructor of record for the class). Students will also receive a grade reflecting their efforts. Please note that the undergraduate thesis director will be listed as the professor for this class and will determine the framework, timeline, and goals. Students are expected to arrange regular meetings with their thesis director (weekly) to discuss progress towards completion of the thesis.

This class may be taken up to two times. To be considered for enrollment in HON 4093, students must indicate their desire for enrollment on the [Honors Thesis Proposal Form](#) and have their proposal accepted by the Shackouls Honors College.

## Selecting a Committee

To successfully complete an honors thesis, students must form a committee to help them meet their goals. These three members will read and evaluate the student's paper, must attend the thesis defense,

ask the student questions during their defense, and provide necessary guidance along the way. The committee members will include:

1. The Thesis Director, a member of MSU faculty who has relevant research credentials and experience to oversee the topic and scope of the honors thesis topic. (See section above for additional description.) The director's role is to oversee all aspects of the thesis and defense.
2. Second committee member: A faculty member with relevant background and interest in a field related to the thesis topic; often the thesis director can recommend someone. Students should consider someone who can offer them additional insights and knowledge or skills to help them accomplish their project.
3. Third committee member: A member of Honors College Faculty who ensures student theses follow appropriate guidelines and can help with the logistics of the defense meeting. The student may choose someone that they have had as an instructor of a HON class or know well, or they may ask for a recommendation of an Honors Faculty Member. This member's role is to make sure that the Undergraduate Honors Theses addresses the significance of the research for a nonexpert audience and discuss the implications of the research for the student's intellectual field (e.g., answer the question: "so what?"). Students can find a list of Honors Faculty here: <https://www.honors.msstate.edu/about/faculty-staff/>

Secure thesis committee members' involvement early! Students will be asked to submit the names of their committee members via the Canvas Portal in the semester prior to defense.

## Writing an Honors Thesis

For many students, the Honors Thesis will be the longest and most intensive writing project that they complete in their undergraduate career. As such, the time and effort needed to complete the writing portion of the project should not be underestimated, and students should attempt to start their writing with ample time to complete and edit it. The advice students who have completed an honors thesis most often give to other students is that they wish they began the process earlier. Learn from past peers!

### Formatting an Honors Thesis

Honors Theses should be formatted according to the standards for article submissions in the student's field and should be discussed with their thesis director. Students may format their thesis according to the graduate school guide: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td-standards/>

It is also expected that the final document of the thesis is ADA compliant. Content published as part of Digital Collections or Scholar's Junction is considered "Digital Archival Content". MSU is committed to ensuring an accessible web environment, and students will be given resources and guidance on how to make a web-accessible document.

There is a repository on the honor's website to look at past examples. We suggest that students look at a few of them in their field to have multiple models.

<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/honortheses/>

## Copyright Rights and Permissions

Students will be expected to attend a [Copyright Rights and Permissions](#) presentation given by a representative from the library during the semester of their defense. Perhaps they plan to publish their work in a journal, or the work was done through their Thesis Director's grants. This presentation will help them understand how to use other's work in a manner that acknowledges the rights of any copyrighted material and encourage them to consider which selection they will make for access, permissions, and licensing when they submit their own work to Scholar's Junction.

## Honors Thesis Defense/ Thesis Defense Days

An honors thesis defense is a presentation of the student's work to their committee and any guests during which the student delivers a talk and answers questions about their work. SHC hosts Thesis Defense Days every fall and spring (November or April).

Scheduling for Honors Theses takes place online. Students who are scheduled to defend in that semester must schedule through the website by the date indicated in the Honors Thesis Portal. In order to schedule, students must have the title of their thesis and the names and emails of their confirmed committee members.

Students must have a signature page completed, signed by their committee members, and turned into the main office immediately after their defense.

### Preparing for Defense

Undergraduate Honors Thesis defenses are typically scheduled for 90 minute timeslots but usually take about 60-75 minutes. They are open to the public, so students may invite family and friends.

- Undergraduate Honors Thesis defenses are run like Master's Thesis Defenses, and follow this general format:
  - Introductions
  - Student Presentation
  - Public Q&A
  - Committee Q&A
  - Committee Deliberation
  - Announcement of Result
- Presentations should last about 30 minutes. Students should introduce their project to the general public, provide an overview of their research methods, highlight their important arguments and findings, and explain the implications of their research for their academic and intellectual field.
  - Presentations should have a visual component (e.g., PowerPoint) with clear and informative slides.
  - Students should practice their presentation before their defense!
- Students should expect to answer questions from each committee member about their methods, their findings, and their conclusions. Students should try to anticipate what these questions might be and think about what their answers will be.

- Students must have a prepared signature page printed for the defense. Signatures are collected upon successful completion.
- Possible Results:
  - Pass with No Revisions
  - Pass with Minor Revisions -Committee signs off on Thesis; Director ensures that revisions are made
  - Pass with Major Revisions – All committee members must approve revisions before signing off on Thesis
  - Fail – Committee determines that the Thesis does not meet the requirements or expectations of an Undergraduate Honors Thesis
- Post Defense:
  - Turn in the signed signature page to the SHC Main Office immediately after defending.
  - Complete any required revisions or resubmissions before the given deadline
  - Upload the final copy of the thesis and the Copyright Rights and Permissions form to Scholar's Junction and the Honor Thesis Portal.

### Revisions and Submission

During the defense, students will be made aware of the potential need for editing their written document. Committee members will require revisions and additions to the thesis document. Students will need to complete these under the guidance of their thesis director.

Once revisions are made and upon approval from their director, students must submit the final version of their thesis document to the Shackouls Honors College by the end of the semester of defense. This is done by submitting the final product to the Canvas Portal.

In addition, students are asked to submit their finalized thesis to Scholar's Junction – MSU's Institutional repository. They will also be expected to provide a Copyright Rights and Permissions Form (accessed through the Canvas Portal), where they will designate which permissions they will give MSU for the distribution and display of the document on Scholar's Junction.

## Timeline

Outlined below is the ideal timeline for completion of the honors thesis. Students will be reminded of these deadlines on the Honor Thesis Canvas Portal

Eight months prior to defense: September 15<sup>th</sup> for Spring Defenses; February 15<sup>th</sup> for Fall Defenses:

- Complete and submit the Honors Thesis Proposal on the website

Four Months Prior to Defense:

- **Identify** three-person committee

Two Months Prior to Defense:

- Have **first draft** of thesis completed; send to advisor for review
- **Schedule** thesis defense

One Month Prior to Defense:

- Have **second draft** of thesis completed; send to advisor for review

One Week Prior to Defense:

- Give a **final copy** of thesis to committee for review. The Thesis Director must approve the draft before the student can send it out to other committee members
- Remind committee members of the date, time, and location of the scheduled defense.

Before the end of the exam week:

- Complete the remaining Canvas Portal assignments.

For any further questions, please reach out to [thesis@honors.msstate.edu](mailto:thesis@honors.msstate.edu)