

Honors Thesis Handbook

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 complete an Honors Thesis?

Writing an honors thesis affords students an opportunity to explore a topic of interest in detail. 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 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 mentor.

Dr. Anastasia Elder and Dr. Holli Seitz have also created useful information videos to answer [questions about what an honors thesis is and why you should consider completing one](#) and offer tips on [how to get started](#). These resources are also accessible via the [Honors Thesis webpage](#).

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. Deadlines for required paperwork are on the honors thesis website.

Honors Thesis Expectations (and answers to your FAQ's)

- All students who agree to complete an Honors Thesis will be enrolled into a non-credit producing Canvas course called the **Honors Thesis Pathway**, which outlines the process and contains assignments and resources to assist in the successful completion of an honors 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 on context and communication is available on the [Honors Thesis webpage](#).
- 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 its respective 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 (thesis defense). They will also answer questions about their work and its implications.
- All students will be expected to upload their completed thesis document, after they have passed their defense and incorporated all feedback from their committee, to [Scholars Junction](#). Decisions regarding whether the uploaded thesis will be available to MSU affiliated viewers or anyone should be made alongside the thesis director.

Process: From Start to Finish

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 with any questions.

Honors Thesis Interest Form

The **Honors Thesis Interest Form** is the first step in the Honors Thesis process and must be completed by all students intending to participate. This form is available on the [Honors Thesis webpage](#) and is typically filled out two semesters prior to the semester the student intends to defend a thesis. For example, those intending to **defend in the spring semester will fill out the interest form in the spring semester prior** (for a spring 2028 defense, this form must be completed by February 15, 2027). Completing this form does not commit students to completing an Honors Thesis but does alert the honors college about their intention so that they will receive additional Honors Thesis information and guidance.

Honors Thesis Planning & 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, offer guidance on copyright rights and permissions, help them prepare for the thesis defense, and provide the student feedback on their written products. Students should **share the thesis website and handbook** to provide their directors with information about the honors thesis and their role.

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.

Submitting an Honors Thesis Proposal

The *Honors Thesis Proposal* is a mandatory step in the Honors Thesis process and must be completed by all students intending to do an Honors Thesis. This can only be completed once preliminary work and preparation have been accomplished. This includes securing the participation of an eligible thesis mentor, discussing a project of reasonable scope, and together planning for a project. The 3-5 paragraph proposal **requires** a) description of the importance and motivation of the project, b) presentation of a question or topic to explore, c) explanation of relevant methods and data sources, d) consideration of regulatory compliance training and requirements and e) general timeline for completion.

Honors thesis proposal submissions are due the semester before the intended defense and should be 3-5 paragraphs in length. Once completed, it should be submitted, alongside proof of the thesis director's approval, according to the instructions on the [Honors Thesis webpage](#). All requested documents should be included in the [Honors Thesis Proposal Submission Form](#).

This form must be submitted by September 15th by students intending to defend in the following spring semester and February 15th by students intending to defend in the following fall semester. Early submissions are encouraged. *Students who **fail** to submit proposals by the provided dates may be **ineligible** to defend an honors thesis.*

Honors Thesis Pathway

Upon approval of the form by the Associate Dean of Shackouls Honors College, students will be invited to the **Honors Thesis Pathway** (a non-credit bearing Canvas course) to help them make timely progress and stay informed of deadlines and announcements related to completing an honors thesis. The proposal is not binding, and students may make minor changes to the scope or methods of their project, pending approval from both their thesis director and the associate dean. However, it is required to be submitted prior to taking HON 4093 (described below).

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 *Honors Thesis Pathway* (which is the non-credit bearing Canvas course).

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 thesis director will be listed as the instructor for this class and will determine the framework, timeline, goals, and grades. 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: get approval from their thesis director since they will need to serve as the course instructor, indicate their interest in the course on the signature page they submit alongside their other proposal materials, and have their thesis proposal approved.

Selecting an Honors Thesis 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 the **Shackouls 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 an HON class or know well, or they may ask for a recommendation of an Honors Faculty Member.
 - a. 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?").
 - b. It is **not** required nor expected that the honors member has research expertise in the thesis topic or discipline. Students can find a list of [Honors Faculty on the website](#) or inquire with the associate dean of the Shackouls Honors College for recommendations.

- c. Secure thesis committee members' involvement **early**! Students will be asked to submit the names of their committee members via the *Honors Thesis Pathway* 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](#).

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](#).

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 academic year of their defense. One of the expectations upon completion of an Honors Thesis is to **publish it in MSU Scholars Junction**, an open access repository of campus wide research. This must be discussed with the thesis director since it has ramifications for publishing work elsewhere and may be impacted by restrictions from grants. The presentation will provide guidance on how to use other's work in a manner that acknowledges the rights of any copyrighted material and encourage students 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 Days

An honors thesis defense is a presentation of the student's thesis paper to their committee and any guests during which the student delivers a talk and answers questions. A student **must** provide a copy of their thesis paper to each committee member one week in advance of their scheduled defense. (Plan accordingly to allot time for revisions!) SHC hosts Thesis Defense Days every fall and spring (November

or April). Dates are listed on the thesis website and are scheduled in relation to the university academic calendar.

Scheduling for Honors Theses defense days takes place online. Students who are scheduled to defend in that semester must schedule through Canvas by the date indicated in the *Honors Thesis Pathway*. In order to schedule, students **must** have the title of their thesis and the names and emails of their confirmed committee members. Students must ensure their thesis directors and committee members are also available during the time they select before they schedule it.

Thesis Defense

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

- Undergraduate Honors Thesis defenses function similarly to 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 20-30 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 who have **not** provided a copy of their honors thesis paper to their committee at least 3 days in advance of their scheduled defense will not be allowed to defend their thesis.*
- Students **must** have prepared and printed a signature page for the defense. Signatures are collected upon successful completion of an oral defense and turned into the Shackouls Honors College main office immediately after the defense. See *Honors Thesis Pathway* on Canvas for guidance and examples.
- Possible Results of Oral Defense
 - Pass with No Revisions
 - Pass with Minor Revisions -Committee agrees that the Director will confirm 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
- Upon successful defense
 - Collect signatures on the printed *signature page* and turn in the *signature page* to the SHC Main Office immediately after defending. This signifies successful completion of oral defense. Students are encouraged to take a picture for their own records, as well.
 - Complete any required revisions or resubmissions before the listed deadline. The thesis director is responsible for completing and turning in *Report of Completion form* after required revisions and the final paper is accepted.
 - 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 *Honors Thesis Pathway* on Canvas.

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 *Honors Thesis Pathway*), where they will designate which permissions they will give MSU for the distribution and display of the document on Scholar's Junction.

Relevant Resources/Links

- [Honors Thesis webpage](#)
 - This page includes instructions for proposal submission, defense schedules, and other helpful information
- [Scholars Junction](#)
 - Contains a repository of past, successful, honors theses and is where all future successful honors theses will be uploaded
- Associate Dean Elder
 - Dr. Anastasia Elder can answer any complicated questions about the thesis process for students and faculty members alike
- For any further questions, please reach out to thesis@honors.msstate.edu

Timeline

Be sure to stay up to date with the *Honors Thesis Pathway*. It is also beneficial to create a tailored, personal timeline. Maintaining timely progress in the *Honors Thesis Pathway* by doing assignments by listed due dates & meeting regularly with the thesis director to check progress (and writing) will make successfully completing an honors thesis much more achievable.

The following is the recommended timeline for a student who plans to begin thesis planning during the spring of their junior year and defend a thesis during the spring of their senior year. Please adjust these dates if you intend to start earlier or defend during the fall.

Spring of Junior Year

- Identify topic & thesis director
- Discuss & plan thesis with thesis director
- Complete *Honors Thesis Interest Form* by 2/15
- Attend *Starting your Honors Thesis Workshop*

Summer Before Senior Year

- Conduct background research
- Determine, with thesis director, if IRB is needed
- Draft & submit proposal

Fall of Senior Year

- Submit honors thesis proposal form and description by 9/15
- Enroll in *Honors Thesis Pathway*
- Collect and analyze data
- Start writing!
- Attend Copyright Workshop

Spring of Senior Year

- Write and revise
- Finalize title and abstract
- Finalize honors thesis draft with your director
- Schedule your defense

April & May of Senior Year

- Submit final draft to the committee
- Complete any outstanding *Honors Thesis Pathway* assignments
- Prepare oral presentation
- Honors Thesis Defense
 - Present your thesis
 - Submit completed signature page
- Submit thesis finisher biography page
- Complete final revisions
- Check all paperwork
- Complete *Honors Thesis Survey*
- Upload approved thesis to Scholars Junction

Important Dates

September 15th

- Honors thesis proposal due date for prospective **SPRING** defenders
- Honors Thesis Interest Survey due date for prospective subsequent **FALL** defenders

February 15th

- Honors thesis proposal due date for prospective **FALL** defenders
- Honors Thesis Interest Survey due date for prospective subsequent **SPRING** defenders

March/October

- Year before defense: Look for and attend *Starting Your Honors Thesis* workshop
- Attend Mandatory Library Workshop (announced via the *Honors Thesis Pathway*)

November/ April

- Honors Thesis Defense Days
- All forms & final thesis for thesis finishers are due by end of exam week

**GOOD LUCK TO ALL OF OUR
HONORS THESIS STUDENTS!**



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