

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?

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis is a significant research project, and often serves 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 honors students.

Honors Thesis Expectations

- All students who agree to complete an Honors Thesis will be enrolled into a non-credit Canvas "course" called the Honors Thesis Information Portal which outlines the steps that they must follow for successful completion of the thesis.
- Honors Theses require a minimum of two semesters to complete.
- Honors Theses are accomplished under mentorship of a faculty member (Undergraduate Honors Thesis Director) and with the help of two additional committee members.
- Theses must be individual (not group) work and must be original: the writing and analysis may build upon the research that students do for a class or with a faculty advisor (e.g., in a laboratory setting); however, 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/node/746/>
- 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 before considered complete.
- In addition to creating a written product, students will defend their theses to their committee and the defense will be open to members of the public.
- Two years after defense, Honors Theses are generally published in the MSU Library Institutional Repository archive and linked to the honors college for public availability.

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 aelder@honors.msstate.edu with any questions.

[Honors Thesis Proposal](#)

Selecting a Thesis Director

Thesis Directors and students work closely throughout the entire process. It is important to select an MSU faculty member who has the appropriate 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, and provide the student feedback on their written products. Remember that you must ask a faculty member if they would like to serve in this position, please do not assume that faculty will be able and willing to be your Thesis Director.

Selecting a Topic

Students can be inspired from different experiences, including wanting to advance existing research, extending a capstone project into a new direction, or elaborating 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 should work with their Thesis Director to ensure that their proposed topic meets all these requirements.

Declaring Intention to Complete Honors Thesis

Students planning to accomplish an Honors Thesis must submit [the Honors Thesis Proposal form](#) declaring their interest in completing an Honors Thesis. In this form, the student will be expected to explain their topic in 2-3 paragraphs, plan for any necessary research compliance training and approvals, and secure the signature of the Thesis Director. This form must be submitted to Dr. Anastasia Elder at aelder@honors.msstate.edu with the subject line "Honors Thesis Proposal – *Student Name*" the semester before the student intends to defend their thesis.

This form must be submitted by September 15th by students intending to defend in the spring semester and February 15th by students intending to defend in the fall semester.

This form is not binding, and students may change their topic, if needed. However, it is required to be submitted prior to taking HON 4093 (described below) and to be admitted into the non-credit Canvas course.

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-hour course that students may enroll in to grant them time and course credit (and grade) to devote to their thesis work. By enrolling in course credit, students can set aside time to devote to researching and writing their thesis and meeting regularly with their Thesis Director (instructor of record for the class). Students will also receive a grade reflecting the student's efforts. Note the Thesis Director will be listed as the professor for this class and will determine the framework and goals for the class. In most cases, students will arrange frequent meetings with their Thesis Director 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,

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

1. Thesis Director: A faculty member that is an expert on the topic that the student wishes to pursue for the Honors Thesis. They should be someone with whom the student has a working relationship and who will be able to guide the student to a successful creation of a thesis in their area of study. They are identified early in the process, help frame the project, and will have signed the proposal form. The Thesis Director must be a faculty member at Mississippi State University.
2. Second committee member: A faculty member with relevant background and interest in a field related to the thesis topic; often the student's advisor can recommend someone. Students should consider someone who can offer them additional insights and has knowledge or skills to help them accomplish their project.
3. Third committee member: A member of Honors College Faculty who ensures the student's thesis follows appropriate guidelines. The student may choose someone that they have had as an instructor for an HON class or know well, or they may ask for a recommendation of an Honors Faculty Member. 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 Canvas in the semester prior to defense.

Students may ask a faculty member to be on their committee in-person or via email. It is best to ask them if they would be willing to serve in this position (do not assume that they will accept). The honors college will ask students to send confirmation that each member of their committee has formally accepted their respective positions by sending an email of commitment from the committee members.

Students must keep their committee up-to-date on their progress and anticipated timeline.

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 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 students should discuss this expectation with their Thesis Director.

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/honorsthesis/>

Students may format their thesis according to MSU's graduate school guide:

<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=td-standards>

Upon the completion of the defense, students must have this signature page completed, signed by their committee members, and submitted to the Canvas Page by the last day of finals.

Honors Thesis Defense/ Thesis Week

An Honors Thesis defense is a meeting of the student, their committee, and any guests during which the student presents their thesis and answers questions about their work. The Shackouls Honors College hosts Thesis Defense Weeks every fall and spring (typically November or April), so students should plan to schedule their defense during their senior year.

Scheduling for an Honors Thesis defense takes place online. Students who are scheduled to defend in that semester will receive an email with a link to select a 1.5-hour timeslot. To schedule, the student must have the title of their thesis and the names and emails of their committee members.

Preparing for Defense

Undergraduate Honors Thesis defenses are typically scheduled for 1.5-hour timeslots but usually take about 60-75 minutes. They are open to the public, so students may invite family and friends to attend.

- 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 (where the student and any attending guests leave the room)
 - 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 typically 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.
- 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

Revisions and Submission

After students complete their defense, they will likely receive edits from their committee members. Students will need to make these suggested edits and submit their final copy to the Shackouls Honors College by the end of the semester of defense. They will also need to work with their committee members to complete the Title and Signature Pages, which will be provided on the Canvas page.

Preferred 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 page

September 15th for Spring Defenses; February 15th for Fall Defenses:

- Complete the Honors Thesis Proposal form and submit it by email to Dr. Anastasia Elder at aelder@honors.msstate.edu

Four Months Prior to Defense:

- **Identify** three-person committee

Two Months Prior to Defense:

- Have **first draft** of thesis completed; send it to the Thesis Director for review
- **Schedule** thesis defense online

One Month Prior to Defense:

- Have **second draft** of thesis completed; send it to the Thesis Director for review

One Week Prior to Defense:

- Give a **final copy** of thesis to entire 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 defense.

Before the end of the exam week:

- Submit a pdf file of the final thesis document including the signed signature page to the Honors Thesis Canvas course

FAQs

How to decide on a topic?

- Inspiration 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's 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 junior year, students should meet with a potential faculty mentor to discuss a topic for their thesis.

- By the beginning of 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.

What resources are available to me as I work on my Thesis?

There are several resources available to Mississippi State University students to help them craft high-level theses that will situate students well for their future careers.

Thesis resources include:

- Thesis Director
- Honors Faculty
- The Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Discovery (<https://www.urcd.msstate.edu/>)
- The Writing Center (<https://www.writingcenter.msstate.edu/>)
- Potential Writing Group events hosted by SHC