Honors Thesis Advising Guide

To the Advisor:

We want to thank you for taking on the important role of honors thesis advisor and make sure that you and your students have the resources you need. The purpose of this manual is to put those resources, including the forms, the key dates and deadlines, and the research-based approaches for successful advising at your fingertips.

Overview of the Honors College

The Urban Honors College at Portland State University offers a rigorous undergraduate degree that is open to students of all majors. The program focuses on issues related to diverse urban cultures and requires active participation in intensive, self-directed research projects. Students who join Honors are from Oregon and beyond. To gain admission, incoming freshmen must have a 3.5 high school GPA or a 1200 combined score on the Critical reading and Math sections of the SAT or a 26 on the ACT. Transfer students or students already enrolled at PSU must have a cumulative university GPA of 3.25. Rolling admissions means that students may enter the College in any term. The Honors College serves as preparation for graduate study as well as for a wide variety of professions.

What is an honors thesis?

In the final year of undergraduate study, Honors College students complete a thesis. The thesis is a challenging project, representing a valuable opportunity for UHC students to work closely with senior faculty. To begin the thesis, students must take the Thesis Seminar, a four credit, graded course offered through the Honors College each term. In order to pass the Thesis Seminar, students must complete an approved thesis prospectus, which includes a title, a research question, an introduction, a literature review, a discussion of methodology and an annotated bibliography. After passing the Thesis Seminar, students sign up for HON 403 at two credits per term through the Honors College; they continue to meet together with the Honors faculty and their peers from the thesis seminar throughout the process. Students generally write the thesis over two terms and they give a short presentation upon completion.

The majority of our students not only complete the thesis project with excellence but also find it a powerful and useful tool for integrating the work done in their departmental major with the preparatory work done throughout the Honors curriculum. For motivated students the thesis is a signal opportunity to communicate a serious and thoughtful intellectual vision; the thesis also becomes a valuable component of an application portfolio to graduate or professional school.

Honors theses are a substantial work of roughly 30-50 pages. The thesis typically contains the following sections: introduction, literature review, methods, analysis, and conclusion.
What makes an Honors thesis different from a masters’ thesis?

At the undergraduate level, we are looking to involve students in the process of research, analysis, and academic writing. We do not necessarily expect them to make an original contribution to the literature. Rather, we are looking for students to understand and go through the process of defining and delimiting a researchable question. Students do a thorough though not exhaustive investigation of the literature; they carry out a research or analytical project; and they communicate the results or findings of that project in a thesis format.

Honors Thesis Assignment
Honors Thesis Rubric
Thesis Prospectus Assignment
Thesis Prospectus Rubric

What are the key dates in the thesis process?

May 22, 2015: Thesis due for 14-15 academic year
May 28, 2015: Thesis Presentations

Where can I find the important forms?

• **Prospectus Approval:** [Thesis Prospectus Approval Form]

• **Thesis Approval:** Students submit their Thesis online through PDX Scholar. Advisors will receive notification of submission and be asked to review it.
  • [Instructions for approving thesis in PDXScholar]

What is the role of the thesis advisor?

The thesis advisor plays a number of crucial roles in the thesis writing process: thought partner, writing consultant, process coach, and programmatic advisor.

**Thought Partner:**

• Helps students select an appropriate thesis question and clarify their ideas.
• Helps students narrow their focus and put boundaries around their project.
• Asks clarifying questions: “What do you mean by that?” “How does that relate to ___?”
• Clarifies disciplinary conventions and expectations.

**Writing Consultant:**

• Gives feedback on structure, clarity, and appropriateness of student writing. When possible, meets with students to talk through feedback rather than just delivering it in writing.
Urban Honors College

- Gives specific advice for revision.
- Encourages frequent writing rather than “binge” writing.
- Shows samples of good sentences, arguments.
- Encourages students to look at thesis examples on PDX Scholar.
- Assesses how well the students carry out the tasks described by the thesis assignment.
- Connects students with writing resources (the PSU Writing Center, OWL, Zotero / Mendeley, Library workshops, etc).

**Process Coach:**

- Shares insight and resources on how to manage a large-scale academic project.
- Encourages students to reflect on their typical work process and identify the strategies that work for them (Do they need quiet space, ambient noise? Do they work best at night or in the morning? Are they “crisis writers?”).
- May help students identify goals and set a schedule of mini-deadlines.

**Programmatic Advisor:**

- Completes thesis forms.
- Carries out assessment of thesis project according to the program rubric.

**Choosing students who are a good fit**

The Honors College does not assign mentors to students, but rather asks students to find and approach faculty members they think would be a good match and mentor for their work. The mentor-mentee match process is one of mutual selection. If a student approaches you, here are some things to consider:

- Does the student have a researchable question and a plan of action that seems feasible?
- Is my area of expertise close enough that I feel comfortable advising this student?
- What do I know of this student in other contexts (classes, etc)?

**Advisor Resources**

Page on Honors Thesis Advising from the national Collegiate Honors Council

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Student Resources

Writing Center http://www.writingcenter.pdx.edu
Learning Center http://www.pdx.edu/tutoring
PSU library http://library.pdx.edu/research
PDXScholar (previous thesis examples)

Student Health and Counseling (SHAC) http://www.pdx.edu/shac
Honors Academic Advising: Brianna Avery calendly.com/bavery
OWL, Mendeley, Zotero: http://library.pdx.edu/research/citing-sources

Key Excerpts From the Literature on Undergraduate Thesis Writing and Advising


Thesis work requires that students use several different sets of skills, including critical-thinking, research, time management, organizational, and writing skills. As in any project of this magnitude, students face overarching issues as they progress through thesis work. Some students may have difficulty adequately planning their time, organizing the stages of the research process, and building in enough time for researching, writing, and editing a draft over an extended period. This is a challenging information environment in which to provide advanced research assistance. Some disciplines, particularly in the humanities, continue to work in a hybrid print and electronic environment. However, students hold a well-known preference for electronic materials, equate electronic resources with greater ease of research, and may believe that all necessary information is available electronically. Thesis advisors, by contrast, may see an advanced assignment such as a thesis as an opportunity for students to learn to use relevant print, primary source, and archival materials to expand the depth and breadth of their research and disciplinary knowledge (398).


Given how critical it is for scientists to have strong writing skills, it seems paradoxical that the teaching of writing is not central to science education (209).
One of the best opportunities that undergraduates have to learn to write like a scientist is to write a major research paper or thesis after participating in a faculty-mentored undergraduate research experience. These research experiences are known to help students develop critical-thinking skills and research methods (Lopatto, 2003; Seymour et al., 2004; Hunter et al., 2007); the skills that students are least likely to develop, however, are writing skills (Kardash, 2000; Lopatto, 2004). This is unfortunate because an undergraduate thesis is perhaps the first authentic writing experience that science students have and is, therefore, one of the best opportunities to learn scientific writing. Too often, science is taught as a collection of facts instead of as a way of thinking (Songer and Linn, 1991; Linn and Hsi, 2000), and canned laboratories and writing assignments in which students simply summarize what they have learned perpetuate this myth. Students who write theses, on the other hand, are engaged in critical and scientific ways of thinking; they ask scientific questions, synthesize literature, select appropriate methods, evaluate data, and interpret results. For some students, this is the first time they have something to contribute to an ongoing scientific conversation and, as a result, they are highly invested in their writing and are particularly receptive to writing instruction (209).

There are two common models for how to work with undergraduate thesis writers. One model is for research supervisors to work one-on-one with students. The advantage of this approach is the personalized attention that students receive. A disadvantage of this approach is the possibility that overzealous faculty might take over with extensive editing, in some cases rewriting students’ work. Although the final draft may be better, the student did not make the writing choices and therefore may not have developed much as a writer. Another disadvantage of this model is the possibility that overextended faculty might focus their mentoring on the science and neglect the writing altogether. Another model for how to work with undergraduate thesis writers is to offer a course to support student writers. The advantages of writing courses are that instructors explicitly teach the conventions of scientific writing, and the structured nature of a course helps students stay on track. Unfortunately, some science departments might have a difficult time staffing such a course given that scientists are not often well versed in writing pedagogy, and many assume that teaching such a course requires an unmanageable time commitment. (210).

Table 1. BioTAP rubric for Biology Theses

1. Is the writing appropriate for the target audience?

2. Does the thesis make a compelling argument for the significance of the student’s research within the context of the current literature?

3. Does the thesis clearly articulate the student’s research goals?

4. Does the thesis skillfully interpret the results?

5. Is there a compelling discussion of the implications of findings?

6. Is the thesis clearly organized?
7. Is the thesis free of writing errors?

8. Are the citations presented consistently and professionally throughout the text and in the list of works cited?

9. Are the tables and figures clear, effective, and informative? (211)


An honors thesis emphasizes active learning. It requires students to analyze an issue in more depth than course work can ever achieve. It entails initiating and completing a task that resembles what many students will be asked to do as part of their future professional responsibilities. An honors thesis provides practice in "doing economics" that is similar to "doing law," "doing business," or doing one of many other professional activities that eventually will engage a significant proportion of undergraduate economics majors. Self-disciplined students with a natural intellectual curiosity are most likely to excel at such a task. Successful completion of an honors thesis requires planning, organization, determination, and perseverance. Consequently, participation and success in an honors program may signal prospective employers and professional school admissions committees about valuable but difficult-to-observe attributes. Completion of an honors thesis also fosters self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment in graduates (169-70).

**Preliminary References List**


