

Surviving an Honor's Thesis

In the beginning:

- You must choose a topic. The best way to do this depends on you. If you are doing departmental honors as well, be sure to find a topic that is related to your major. University honors typically prefer to see an interdisciplinary approach.
 - Be sure to pick something you're interested in. You will be devoting more time than you think to this project and will develop your own expertise with the research in your chosen field.
 - Read! Read everything you can find that is relevant to your topic. You may discover that the original topic you picked is actually too complicated or too confusing to research. Also, you might stumble upon something more interesting or easier to research.
- You must also choose an advisor. If you are completing university honors, you will need an advisor and a second reader from a different department. Keep in mind that readers should either be professors that you know well or that already research in your topic's area, but preferably both.
 - Make sure that your readers appear interested or are definitely committed to working on your project. If they are going to be extremely busy or seem hesitant to work on your project, ask someone else. The best choices are readers that are interested, can offer their expertise, and are willing and able to read over your drafts and meet with you when necessary.

So you've got a topic:

- Develop a schedule with your advisor. Make sure, even early on, that you know all the deadlines, including when printed copies need to be delivered to the honors office, and by what date you need to have your thesis defense completed.
 - Make sure all of your readers can work with this schedule and that they do not have conferences or publication deadlines, etc. that will conflict with the dates you decide on.
 - Also make sure that you decide when to have regular meetings with your advisor, not just a list of deadlines to keep your paper going. Decide whether to meet weekly, biweekly, or monthly and whether that needs to change as you get close to your finishing date. Make sure that you have something to talk about in each of

these meetings. Don't expect your advisor to hold you to the deadlines you've created.

- Start sticking to deadlines early on. Do not get in the habit of procrastinating. You'll want to make sure you do things early so that you're not worrying about finishing all the writing at the end of the semester when everything for your other classes is due.
- Spend a little time every day or every week researching publications on your topic. Schedule this time so you don't let other things conflict! Highlight and make notes as you go. You don't want to end up rereading everything once you start writing.
- Start piecing together research for your literature review as you are making notes. Figure out what ideas and publications are closely related. This should be the first section you write. Just do it! You can revise it later, but it will help you to understand your findings if you have an organized piece of writing describing previous research done in the area.
- Keep electronic and/or paper copies of all your resources and drafts so you can easily refer back to them.

If you are doing an experiment:

- Work on designing the experiment as soon as possible. You will need to get IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval, and this can take anywhere from a few days to weeks or more than a month. This requires knowing the procedure of your experiment. The IRB may ask you to revise your research proposal, further slowing the process.
- Determine a way to find subjects and compensate them for their time. You will need to make sure you have a big enough sample size.
- Put together subject files and resources you will be using in the experiment while you are waiting for IRB approval.
- Remember that an experiment means research, writing, testing, data analysis, and more writing. Schedule accordingly. Testing will take longer than you think. Participants occasionally don't show up when they say they will. Also, allow extra time in case the experiment design needs to be changed.
- Have drafts of your directions read by multiple readers. Participants should be given directions as clearly as possible. You do not want to accidentally introduce more variables by making the directions ambiguous.
- Familiarize yourself with the statistics and software tools needed to analyze the data. You don't want to be figuring out how to make a graph the night before your paper is due.

So you think you can write a paper:

- Read publications in your field for more than the content. What is the normal tone of these publications? How are the papers formatted? How formal or informal must you be? Is it acceptable to use the first person? How are sources referenced?
- Familiarize yourself with the style guide of the citation style you must write in. APA, MLA, Chicago, etc. all have different requirements for most things, especially the reference lists and in-text citations.
- Make citations as you go. It's easier to delete references than to attempt to remember and add them at the end. Also, if you do this as you go along, you will become more familiar with the chosen citation style, more familiar with each individual source in case you need to add things later, and your work will be more efficient.
- Don't hesitate to have someone else read sections of the paper. You can go to the University Writing Center for assistance with nearly any aspect of the paper, or you can find a professor or one of your readers to take a glance at individual sections. These papers are supposed to be able to be read by anyone in your field. You are not just writing for yourself; therefore, have multiple sets of eyes look at your work.

Think you're finished?

- Odds are you still have a bit more work to do. After you've written, revised, and gone over the final drafts with your readers, you have to take care of some administrative work:
 - Is your paper formatted correctly?
 - Is your paper printed on the right kind of paper?
 - How many final copies do you need to print?
 - Where do each of the copies need to go (library, etc.)?
 - How much will it cost overall? How much will each copy cost?
 - Are you paying for all the copies, or are some paid for by the university or your department?
 - Where do you pay for copies and binding?
 - Are there any forms you must fill out to turn in with the copies?
 - Have you completed your thesis defense and/or departmental poster presentation?
 - If you have any questions, call/visit the Honors offices!