

# Honors Thesis Handbook

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A GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL 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. Thesis 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 which they must follow for successful completion of the 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 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/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 be open to members of the public.
- In two years, honors theses are generally published in the MSU Library Institutional Repository archive and be linked to honors college for public availability two years after defense.

## 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 [shackoulshc@honors.msstate.edu](mailto:shackoulshc@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 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.

### 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 signature of the Thesis Director. This form must be submitted to Dr. Anastasia Elder at [thesis@honors.msstate.edu](mailto:thesis@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 15<sup>th</sup> by students intending to defend in the spring semester and February 15<sup>th</sup> 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).

## 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 undergraduate honors thesis director (instructor of record for the class). Students will also receive a grade reflecting the student's efforts. Note the undergraduate 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. The Thesis Director
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 student theses follows 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. 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.

## 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 should be sure to discuss this 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/honorstheses/>

Students may format their thesis according to the graduate school guide:

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

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 and their committee and any guests during which the student presents their thesis and answers questions about their work. SHC hosts Thesis Defense Weeks every fall and spring (typically November or April), so plan to schedule one during their senior year.

Scheduling for Honors Theses 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, students 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 90 min timeslots but usually take about 60-75 minutes. They are open to the public, so students may invite family and friends to come.

- 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 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.
- 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 complete the **Signature Page**. The signature page and the final copy of the thesis will be submitted to the Honors Theses Canvas Page.

## 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 15<sup>th</sup> for Spring Defenses; February 15<sup>th</sup> for Fall Defenses:

- Complete the [Honors Thesis Proposal](#) and submit to Dr. Anastasia Elder at [thesis@honors.msstate.edu](mailto:thesis@honors.msstate.edu)

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 defense.

Before the end of the exam week:

- Email a pdf file of the final thesis document including the [signed signature page](#) to the Canvas Course

## FAQs

What are the important Deadlines and Due Dates?

- Submit the Honors Thesis Form to SHC by the end of the semester before the student plans to defend.
- Submit the names of all faculty members on the student's committee to SHC in the first month of the semester the student plans to defend their thesis. Typically done with signing up for a defense time.
  - Please note: students MUST have permission from all members of their committee to submit their names to SHC. It is a good idea to ask faculty members—including Honors faculty— if they will serve on the committee well in advance.
- Schedule defense during thesis week, typically November or April. This is done in conjunction with the Undergraduate Research Office—look for announcements and be sure to communicate with the committee to schedule a date and time.
- Students should work closely with their Thesis Director and make changes to drafts based on their feedback.
- Give final thesis to committee members 1-2 weeks prior to defense (plan for this!). The Thesis Director must approve the draft before the student sends it out to other committee members.

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 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:  
[https://www.honors.msstate.edu/sites/www.honors.msstate.edu/files/HONORS%20THESIS%20FORM\\_1.pdf](https://www.honors.msstate.edu/sites/www.honors.msstate.edu/files/HONORS%20THESIS%20FORM_1.pdf)

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.

These resources include:

- Thesis Director
- Honors Committee Member
- The Office of Undergraduate Research
- The Writing Center
- Writing Groups