

Honors Theses

 Like  4 people like this.

What this handout is about

Writing a senior honors thesis, or any major research essay, can seem daunting at first. A thesis requires a reflective, multi-stage writing process. This handout will walk you through those stages. It is targeted at students in the humanities and social sciences, since their theses tend to involve more writing than projects in the hard sciences. Yet all thesis writers may find the organizational strategies helpful.

Introduction

What is an honors thesis?

That depends quite a bit on your field of study. However, all honors theses have at least two things in common:

1. They are based on students' original research.
2. They take the form of a written manuscript, which presents the findings of that research. In the humanities, theses average 50-75 pages in length and consist of two or more chapters. In the social sciences, the manuscript may be shorter, depending on whether the project involves more quantitative than qualitative research. In the hard sciences, the manuscript may be shorter still, often taking the form of a sophisticated laboratory report.

Who can write an honors thesis?

In general, students who are at the end of their junior year, have an overall 3.2 GPA, and meet their departmental requirements can write a senior thesis. For information about your eligibility, contact:

- [UNC Honors Program](#)
- Your departmental administrators of undergraduate studies/honors

Why write an honors thesis?

- Satisfy your intellectual curiosity
This is the most compelling reason to write a thesis. Whether it's the short stories of Flannery O'Connor or the challenges of urban poverty, you've studied topics in college that really piqued your interest. Now's your chance to follow your passions, explore further, and contribute some original ideas and research in your field.

- Develop transferable skills

Whether you choose to stay in your field of study or not, the process of developing and crafting a feasible research project will hone skills that will serve you well in almost any future job. After all, most jobs require some form of problem solving and oral and written communication. Writing an honors thesis requires that you:

- ask smart questions
- acquire the investigative instincts needed to find answers
- navigate libraries, laboratories, archives, databases, and other research venues
- develop the flexibility to redirect your research if your initial plan flops
- master the art of time management
- hone your argumentation skills
- organize a lengthy piece of writing
- polish your oral communication skills by presenting and defending your project to faculty and peers

- Work closely with faculty mentors

At large research universities like Carolina, you've likely taken classes where you barely got to know your instructor. Writing a thesis offers the opportunity to work one-on-one with a faculty adviser. Such mentors can enrich your intellectual development and later serve as invaluable references for graduate school and employment.

- Open windows into future professions

An honors thesis will give you a taste of what it's like to do research in your field. Even if you're a sociology major, you may not really know what it's like to be a sociologist. Writing a sociology thesis would open a window into that world. It also might help you decide whether to pursue that field in graduate school or in your future career.

How do you write an honors thesis?

Get an idea of what's expected

It's a good idea to review some of the honors theses other students have submitted to get a sense of what an honors thesis might look like and what kinds of things might be appropriate topics. Check out the online [UNC Honors Thesis Archive](#). Pay special attention to theses written by students who share your major.

Choose a topic

Ideally, you should start thinking about topics early in your junior year, so you can begin your research and writing quickly during your senior year. (Many departments require that you submit a proposal for an honors thesis project during the spring of your junior year.)

1. How should you choose a topic?

- Read widely in the fields that interest you

Make a habit of browsing professional journals to survey the “hot” areas of research and to familiarize yourself with your field’s stylistic conventions. (You’ll find the most recent issues of the major professional journals in the periodicals reading room on the first floor of Davis Library).

- Set up appointments to talk with faculty in your field

This is a good idea, since you’ll eventually need to select an advisor and a second reader. Faculty also can help you start narrowing down potential topics.

- Look at honors theses from the past

The North Carolina Collection in Wilson Library holds UNC honors theses. To get a sense of the typical scope of a thesis, take a look at a sampling from your field.

- What makes a good topic?

- It’s fascinating

Above all, choose something that grips your imagination. If you don’t, the chances are good that you’ll struggle to finish.

- It’s doable

Even if a topic interests you, it won’t work out unless you have access to the materials you need to research it. Also be sure that your topic is narrow enough. Let’s take an example:

Say you’re interested in the efforts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and early 1980s. That’s a big topic that probably can’t be adequately covered in a single thesis. You need to find a case study within that larger topic. So...

Maybe you’re particularly interested in the states that did not ratify the ERA.

OR

Of those, perhaps you’ll select North Carolina, since you’ll have ready access to local research materials.

And maybe you want to focus primarily on the ERA’s opponents.

Beyond that, maybe you’re particularly interested in female opponents of the ERA.

Now you’ve got a much more manageable topic: **Women in North Carolina Who Opposed the ERA in the 1970s and 1980s.**

- It contains a question

There’s a big difference between having a topic and having a guiding research question. Taking the above topic, perhaps your main question is:

Why did some women in North Carolina oppose the ERA?

You will, of course, generate other questions: Who were the most outspoken opponents? White women? Middle-class women? How did they oppose the ERA? Public protests? Legislative petitions? etc. etc. Yet it’s good to start with a guiding question that will focus your research.

Goal-setting and time management

The senior year is an exceptionally busy time for college students. In addition to the usual load of courses and jobs, senior have the daunting task of applying for jobs and/or graduate school. These demands are angst producing and time consuming

If that scenario sounds familiar, don't panic! Do start strategizing about how to make a time for your thesis. You may need to take a lighter course load or eliminate extracurricular activities. Even if the thesis is the only thing on your plate, you still need to make a systematic schedule for yourself. Most departments require that you take a class that guides you through the honors project, so deadlines likely will be set for you. Still, you should set your own goals for meeting those deadlines.

Here are a few suggestions for goal setting and time management:

- Start early
Keep in mind that many departments will require that you turn in your thesis sometime in early April, so don't count on having the entire spring semester to finish your work. Ideally, you'll start the research process the semester or summer before your senior year so that the writing process can begin early in the fall.
- Set clear goals
Some goal-setting will be done for you if you are taking a required class that guides you through the honors project. But any substantive research project requires a clear timetable.

In making a timetable:

- Find out the final deadline for turning in your project to your department.
- Working backwards from that deadline, figure out how much time you can allow for the various stages of production

Here is a sample timetable. Use it, however, with two caveats in mind:

1. The timetable for your thesis might look very different depending on your departmental requirements.
2. You may not wish to proceed through these stages in a linear fashion. You may want to revise chapter one before you write chapter two. Or you might want to write your introduction last, not first. This sample is designed simply to help you start thinking about how to customize your own schedule.

Early exploratory research and brainstorming	Junior Year
Basic statement of topic; line up with advisor	End of Junior Year
Completing the bulk of primary and secondary research	Summer / Early Fall
Introduction Draft	September
Chapter One Draft	October
Chapter Two Draft	November

Chapter Three Draft	December
Conclusion Draft	January
Revising	February-March
Formatting and Final Touches	Early April
Presentation and Defense	Mid-Late April

Sample timetable

- Avoid falling into the trap of procrastination
Once you've set goals for yourself, stick to them! For some tips on how to do this, see our handout on [procrastination](#).
- Consistent production
It's a good idea to try to squeeze in a bit of thesis work every day—even if it's just fifteen minutes of journaling or brainstorming about your topic. Or maybe you'll spend that fifteen minutes taking notes on a book. The important thing is to accomplish a bit of **active production**(i.e., putting words on paper) for your thesis every day. That way, you develop good writing habits that will help you keep your project moving forward.
- Make yourself accountable to someone other than yourself
Since most of you will be taking a required thesis seminar, you will have deadlines. Yet you might want to form a writing group or enlist a peer reader, some person or people who can help you stick to your goals. Moreover, if your advisor encourages you to work mostly independently, don't be afraid to ask him or her to set up periodic meetings at which you'll turn in installments of your project.

Brainstorming and freewriting

One of the biggest challenges of a lengthy writing project is keeping the creative juices flowing. Here's where freewriting can help. Try keeping a small notebook handy where you jot down stray ideas that pop into your head. Or schedule time to freewrite. You may find that such exercises "free" you up to articulate your argument and generate new ideas. Here are some questions to stimulate freewriting.

- Questions for basic brainstorming at the beginning of your project:
 - What do I already know about this topic?
 - Why do I care about this topic?
 - Why is this topic important to people other than myself
 - What more do I want to learn about this topic?
 - What is the main question that I am trying to answer?
 - Where can I look for additional information?
 - Who is my audience and how can I reach them?
 - How will my work inform my larger field of study?
 - What's the main goal of my research project?

- Questions for Reflection Throughout Your Project:
 - What's my main argument? How has it changed since I began the project?
 - What's the most important evidence that I have in support of my "big point"?
 - What questions do my sources **not** answer?
 - How does my case study inform or challenge my field writ large?
 - Does my project reinforce or contradict noted scholars in my field? How?
 - What is the most surprising finding of my research?
 - What is the most frustrating part of this project?
 - What is the most rewarding part of this project?
 - What will be my work's most important contribution?

Research and note-taking

In conducting research, you will need to find both **primary sources** ("firsthand" sources that come directly from the period/events/people you are studying) and **secondary sources** ("secondhand" sources that are filtered through the interpretations of experts in your field.) The nature of your research will vary tremendously, depending on what field you're in. For some general suggestions on finding sources, consult the [UNC Libraries tutorials](#).

Whatever the exact nature of the research you're conducting, you'll be taking lots of notes and should reflect critically on how you do that. Too often it's assumed that the research phase of a project involves very little substantive writing (i.e., writing that involves thinking). We sit down with our research materials and plunder them for basic facts and useful quotations. That mechanical type of information-recording is important. But a more thoughtful type of writing and analytical thinking is also essential at this stage.

Some **general guidelines** for note-taking:

First of all, develop a research system. There are lots of ways to take and organize your notes. Whether you choose to use note cards, computer databases, or notebooks, follow two cardinal rules:

1. Make **careful distinctions between direct quotations and your paraphrasing!** This is critical if you want to be sure to avoid accidentally plagiarizing someone else's work. For more on this, see our handout on [plagiarism](#).
2. Record **full citations** for each source. Don't get lazy here! It will be far more difficult to find the proper citation later than to write it down now.

Keeping those rules in mind, here's a template for the types of information that your note cards/legal pad sheets/computer files should include for each of your sources:

- Abbreviated subject heading
 - two or three words to remind you of what this sources is about (this

shorthand categorization is essential for the later sorting of your sources)

- Complete bibliographic citation
 - author, title, publisher, copyright date, and page numbers for published works
 - box and folder numbers and document descriptions for archival sources
 - complete web page title, author, address, and date accessed for online sources
- Basic notes: facts, quotations, and arguments

Depending on the type of source you're using, the content of your notes will vary. If, for example, you're using US Census data, then you'll mainly be writing down statistics and numbers. If you're looking at someone else's diary, you might jot down a number of quotations that illustrate the subject's feelings and perspectives. If you're looking at a secondary source, you'll want to make note not just of factual information provided by the author but also of his or her key arguments.
- Your interpretation of the source

This is the most important part of note-taking. Don't just *record* facts. Go ahead and take a stab at *interpreting* them. As historians Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff insist, "A note is a thought." So what do these thoughts entail? Ask yourself questions about the context and significance of each source.

 - Interpreting the **context** of a source:
 - Who wrote/created the source?
 - When, and under what circumstances, was it written/created?
 - Why was it written/created? What was the agenda behind the source?
 - How was it written/created?
 - If using a secondary source: How does it speak to other scholarship in the field?

Interpreting the **significance** of a source:

- How does this source answer (or complicate) my guiding research questions?
- Does it pose new questions for my project? What are they?
- Does it challenge my fundamental argument? If so, how?
- Given the source's context, how reliable is it?

You don't need to answer all of these questions for each source, but you should set a goal of engaging in at least one or two sentences of thoughtful, interpretative writing for each source. If you do so, you'll make much easier the next task that awaits you: drafting.

The dread of drafting

Why do we often dread drafting? We dread drafting because it requires synthesis, one of the more difficult forms of thinking and interpretation. If you've been free-writing and taking thoughtful notes during the research phase of your project, then the drafting should be far less painful. Here are some tips on how to get started.

- Sort your "evidence" or research into analytical categories

If you've been forcing yourself to put subject headings on your notes as you go along, you'll have generated a number of important analytical categories. Now, you need to refine those categories and sort your evidence. Everyone has a different "sorting style":

- Some people file note cards into categories.
- The technologically-oriented among us take notes using computer database programs that have built-in sorting mechanisms.
- Others cut and paste evidence into detailed outlines on their computer.
- Still others stack books, notes, and photocopies into topically-arranged piles.

There is not single right way, but this step—in some form or fashion—is essential!

- Formulate working arguments for your entire thesis and individual chapters

Once you've sorted your evidence, you need to spend some time thinking about your project's "big picture." You need to be able to answer two questions in specific terms:

- What is the overall argument of my thesis?
- What are the sub-arguments of each chapter and how do they relate to my main argument?

Keep in mind that "working arguments" may change after you start writing. But a senior thesis is big and potentially unwieldy. If you leave this business of argument to chance, you may end up with a tangle of ideas. See our handouts for some general advice on formulating arguments and thesis statements.

- Divide your thesis into manageable chunks

The surest road to frustration at this stage is getting obsessed with the big picture. What? Didn't we just say that you needed to focus on the big picture? Yes, by all means, yes. You do need to focus on the big picture in order to get a conceptual handle on your project, but you also need to break your thesis down into manageable chunks of writing. For example, take a small stack of note cards and flesh them out on paper. Or write through one point on a chapter outline. Those small bits of prose will add up quickly.

- Just start! Even if it's not at the beginning

Are you having trouble writing those first few pages of your chapter?

Sometimes the introduction is the toughest place to start. You should have a rough idea of your overall argument before you begin writing one of the main chapters, but you might find it easier to start writing in the middle of a chapter of somewhere other than word one. Grab hold where your evidence is strongest and your ideas are clearest.

- Keep up the momentum!

Assuming the first draft won't be your last draft, try to get your thoughts on paper without spending too much time fussing over minor stylistic concerns. At the drafting stage, it's all about getting those ideas on paper. Once that task is done, you can turn your attention to revising.

Revising

Peter Elbow, in *Writing With Power*, suggests that writing is difficult because it requires two conflicting tasks: creating and criticizing. While these two tasks are intimately intertwined, the drafting stage focuses on creating, while revising requires criticizing. If you leave your revising to the last minute, then you've left out a crucial stage of the writing process.

See our handout for some general tips on [revising](#).

Some specific advice for revising an honors thesis:

- Juggling feedback from multiple readers

A senior thesis may mark the first time that you have had to juggle feedback from a wide range of readers:

- your adviser
- a second (and sometimes third) faculty reader
- the professor and students in your honors thesis seminar

You may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of incorporating all this advice. Keep in mind that some advice is better than others. You will probably want to take most seriously the advice of your adviser since he/she carries the most weight in giving your project a stamp of approval. But sometimes your adviser may give you more advice than you can digest. If so, don't be afraid to approach him/her—in a polite and cooperative spirit, of course—and ask for some help in prioritizing that advice.

See our handout for some tips on getting and receiving [feedback](#).

- Refine your argument

It's especially easy in writing a lengthy work to lose sight of your main ideas. So spend some time after you've drafted to go back and clarify your overall argument and the individual chapter arguments and make sure they match the evidence you present.

- Cut and paste

Again, in writing a 50-75 page thesis, things can get jumbled. You may find it

particularly helpful to make a “reverse outline” of each of your chapters. That will help you to see the big sections in your work and move things around so there’s a logical flow of ideas. See our handout on [organization](#) for more organizational suggestions and tips on making a reverse outline.

- Plug in holes in your evidence

It’s unlikely that you anticipated everything you needed to look up before you drafted your thesis. Save some time at the revising stage to plug in the holes in your research. Make sure that you have both primary and secondary evidence to support and contextualize your main ideas.

- Save time for the small stuff

Even though your argument, evidence, and organization are most important, leave plenty of time to polish your prose. At this point, you’ve spent a very long time on your thesis. Don’t let minor blemishes (misspellings and incorrect grammar) distract your readers!

Formatting and final touches

You’re almost done! You’ve researched, drafted, and revised your thesis; now you need to take care of those pesky little formatting matters. An honors thesis should replicate—on a smaller scale—the appearance of a dissertation or master’s thesis. So, you need to include the “trappings” of a formal piece of academic work. For specific questions on formatting matters, check with your department to see if it has a style guide that you should use. For general formatting guidelines, consult the Graduate School’s [Guide to Dissertations and Theses](#)

Keeping in mind the caveat that you should always check with your department first about its stylistic guidelines, here’s a brief overview of the final “finishing touches” that you’ll need to put on your honors thesis.

- Title page

Check with your department about the specifics requirements for your title page. In general, it should include the following information, centered on one page:

- Title
- Your Name
- Honors Thesis
- Name of Department
- University of North Carolina
- Year

In addition, in the bottom left corner, you need to leave space for your adviser and faculty readers to sign their names. For example:

Approved by:

- Acknowledgments (optional)

This is not a required component of an honors thesis. However, if you want to thank particular librarians, archivists, interviewees, and advisers, here's the place to do it. You should include an acknowledgments page if you received a grant from the university or an outside agency that supported your research. It's a good idea to acknowledge folks who helped you with a major project, but do not feel the need to go overboard with copious and flowery expressions of gratitude. You can—and should—always write additional thank-you notes to people who gave you assistance.

- List of tables, illustrations, abbreviations, and symbols (if applicable)

Formatted much like the table of contents.

- Table of contents

You'll need to save this until the end, because it needs to reflect your final pagination. Once you've made all changes to the body of the thesis, then type up your table of contents with the titles of each section aligned on the left and the page numbers on which those sections begin flush right.

- Page numbering

Each page of your thesis needs a number, although not all page numbers are displayed. All pages that precede the first page of the main text (i.e., your introduction or chapter one) are numbered with small roman numerals (i, ii, iii, iv, v, etc.). All pages thereafter use Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.).

- Text matters

Font: Your text should be double spaced (except, in some cases, long excerpts of quoted material), in a 12 point font and a standard font style (e.g., Times New Roman). An honors thesis isn't the place to experiment with funky fonts—they won't enhance your work, they'll only distract your readers.

Margins: In general, leave a one-inch margin on all sides. However, for the copy of your thesis that will be bound by the library, you need to leave a 1.25-inch margin on the left.

- Citations/footnotes and works cited/reference pages

These parts of the thesis will vary in format depending on whether your discipline uses MLA, APA, CBE, or Chicago (also known in its shortened version as Turabian) style. Whichever style you're using, stick to the rules and be consistent. It might be helpful to buy an appropriate style guide. Or consult the UNC Libraries [citation tutorial](#).

How do I defend my honors thesis?

Graciously, enthusiastically, and confidently. The term defense is scary and misleading—it conjures up images of a military exercise or an athletic maneuver. An academic defense ideally shouldn't be a combative scene but a congenial conversation about the work's merits and

weaknesses.

That said, the defense probably won't be like the average conversation that you have with your friends. You'll be the center of attention. And you may get some challenging questions. Thus, it's a good idea to spend some time preparing yourself.

First of all, you'll want to prepare 5-10 minutes of opening comments. Here's a good time to preempt some criticisms by frankly acknowledging what you think your work's greatest strengths and weaknesses are.

Then you might want to try anticipating typical questions:

- What is the main argument of your thesis?
- How does it fit in with the work of Ms. Famous Scholar?
- Have you read the work of Mr. Important Author?

NOTE: *Don't get too flustered if you haven't! Most scholars have their favorite authors and books and may bring one or more of them up, even if the person or book is only tangentially related to the topic at hand. Should you get this question, answer honestly and simply jot down the title or the author's name for future reference. No one expects you to have read everything that's out there.*

- Why did you choose this particular case study to explore your topic?
- If you were to expand this project in graduate school, how would you do so?

Should you get some biting criticism of your work, try not to get defensive. Yes, this is a defense, but you'll probably only fan the flames if you lose your cool. Keep in mind that all academic work has flaws or weaknesses, and you can be sure that your professors have received criticisms of their own work. It's part of the academic enterprise. Accept criticism graciously and learn from it. If you receive criticism that is unfair, stand up for yourself confidently, but in a good spirit.

Above all, try to have fun! A defense is a rare opportunity to have eminent scholars in your field focus on YOU and your ideas and work. And the defense marks the end of a long and arduous journey. You have every right to be proud of your accomplishments!

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#).

Kenneth Atchity. *A Writer's Time: A Guide to the Creative Process from Vision through Revision*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986.

Do you have problems budgeting your time and sticking to a schedule? Atchity helps you find the right amount of structure and discipline without stifling your creative side.

Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff. *The Modern Researcher*. Fifth edition. Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

Barzun and Graff are both historians. Thus, their tips on conducting research are particularly well-suited for writing history.

Peter Elbow. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Elbow is an English professor and places a good bit of emphasis on creative writing. Writers of history and the social sciences, however, will also find many of his suggestions helpful.

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. *"They Say/I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

This handbook gives a very helpful overview of some of the ways arguments are presented and discussed in academic writing; it can help you find the right language for summarizing, criticizing, supporting, and otherwise responding to other people's texts and for expressing your own arguments.

Anne Lamott. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Pantheon, 1994.

Lamott takes a holistic approach to the writing process. She may help you understand how your approach to writing reflects your larger approach to life in general. In addition to psychological reflections, Lamott offers some blunt, pragmatic advice.

Christopher Lasch. *Plain Style: A Guide to Written English*. Stewart Weaver, ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

The first third of this book discusses the career and philosophies of Christopher Lasch, a prominent historian who detested jargon and urged a "plain style" of expression on his graduate students and colleagues. The rest of the book presents Lasch's basic style guide that he compiled for his students. He offers tips on everything from word choice to punctuation.

William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Fourth edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002.

Originally published in 1959, this classic writing guide has stood the test of time. Like Lasch, Strunk and White emphasize clarity and conciseness.

Their warnings against “overwriting” and “overstating” offer a useful corrective to puffed-up prose.

Kate Turabian. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, Dissertations*. Sixth edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

For questions about the particulars of grammar, style, and citation format, Turabian is a must. She bases her guidelines on *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the accepted style book for some disciplines within the humanities and social sciences.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout (just click print) and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

If you enjoy using our handouts, we appreciate contributions of acknowledgement.

[Make a Gift](#)

The Writing Center · Campus Box #5137 · SASB North Suite 0127 · UNC-CH · Chapel Hill, NC 27599 · **CSSAC Home** · <http://cssac.unc.edu/>

phone: (919) 962-7710 · **email:** writing_center@unc.edu

© 2010-2012 by The Writing Center at UNC Chapel Hill.