Getting started on your honors thesis

Starting your thesis may seem like a daunting task; the following are some suggestions to help guide you through the process.

Choosing a thesis topic

As you start to mull over the possibilities, there are two basic questions to ask yourself:

1. *Do I feel passionately enough about this topic for it to sustain my interest for two semesters?*

   It’s not a great idea to pick a thesis topic because you think you ought to. Think about what really interests you, or what you’ve always wondered about.

2. *Do I have enough background in this topic to be able to conduct valid research or to create a thesis-level creative project?*

   Thesis offers the opportunity to immerse yourself in an independent project outside of the classroom and outside of your normal workload. While some students choose to do a thesis in their majors, others relish the opportunity to write that novel or explore post-colonial Indian culture. If you choose to do something new, though, please be sure you are competent to do so. If you want to write a symphony, but can’t read music or play an instrument, you probably want to rethink your plans. Similarly, if you loved the film “Alexander” but haven’t taken a history class (ancient or otherwise) since high school, you probably shouldn’t write a thesis on ancient Greece.

Other questions to ask:

*What is my major?*

Typically, your thesis will pertain to your major and will be advised by a faculty member in your major department. There may be some instances where this is not the case, but keep in mind that the thesis project represents the culmination of your undergraduate experience. This means that it should directly build on your course of study (so the thesis should not be on a topic that is wholly different from your major(s)).

*What background or skills do I have?*

Maybe you’re an education major, but you’ve been dancing since age 3. One student I worked with researched the choreography of Broadway musicals from three different decades, and then choreographed (and had performed) a work in each style. A biomedical sciences major who runs marathons did her thesis on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in runners. A Latina nursing major wrote a thesis on the effect of the Quincenera on the start of sexual activity in young women.
What is something I’ve always wanted to learn more about?

Perhaps you wrote a paper on the Manhattan Project and felt you only scratched the surface, or maybe you’re a runner who wants to know more about nutritional supplements.

What have other students done?

The bookcase by the window in the Honors lounge contain copies of many theses from the past few years. Take some time to look through them, and see what ideas they spark in you! You can also find recent UHP Honors theses online in Monroe Library.

Always feel free to see Dr. Berendzen or your favorite professor to discuss your ideas!

Your mentor

You will need a faculty advisor or mentor to work with you throughout the thesis process. The mentor should be someone with expertise in your area, who is willing and able to work with you throughout the course of this two-semester project. S/he will provide feedback on drafts, work with you in deciding when and where your oral presentation will take place, and assign your final grade. It is important you pick someone you feel comfortable with.

The qualifications of the mentor:

1. The mentor will usually be a professor at the university, although that is not a requirement. The mentor must have at least a masters degree in the discipline being researched, and usually will have a Ph.D., M.D., J.D., MFA or other terminal degree.

2. The mentor should be qualified in the discipline being researched. In other words, if you are writing a thesis on 19th-century American politics, your mentor will probably be in political science or history, not microbiology.

3. Be sure your mentor understands that this is a two-semester project and confirm that s/he will be available.

Finding a mentor:

You can ask:

- A professor whose course you especially enjoyed;
- A professor recommended by a professor whose course you enjoyed;
- A professor recommended by a friend;
- Get a recommendation from Dr. Berendzen or your advisor.

You can also use the Loyola departmental websites to see what research is being conducted by professors at our university. This will give you a better idea of what kind of research in which you might wish to engage.

Once you have identified a potential mentor, please email or see Dr. Berendzen and provide her with the mentor’s name and your proposed topic.
Working with your mentor:

Communication is essential to a successful working relationship with your mentor. Some of the biggest thesis disasters occur when a student meets with a mentor at the beginning of the first semester, and then shows up with a finished product at the end of the second. The role of the mentor is to guide your research, and you will get the most out of that relationship if you clarify his/her expectations, set up ground rules and meet on a regular basis.

Here are some questions you should discuss with your mentor, when you first decide to work together:

1. **How frequently should I plan to meet with you?** If you are in a lab, you may be coming in several times a week, but you should find out how frequently your mentor wishes to discuss your work with you. As a humanities professor, I generally have my thesis students come by once a week.

2. **What is the best way to contact you?**

3. **Whom do I contact if I am going to be late or to miss a meeting?**

4. **How frequently should I plan on submitting written material and how much turn-around time do you need to read it?** Remember that faculty get busy at the end of the semester, too, and nobody should be asked to read a major paper overnight.

5. **Discuss a timeline.** See below.

You should also give the mentor a copy of the thesis timeline, and let him/her know how to contact the University Honors Program with any questions.

The second reader

You should discuss with your mentor the possibility of identifying a second reader. In some ways, the purpose of the second reader is “quality control” – s/he provides another sounding board, and another set of eyes to be sure that the research is of a certain quality, that the student is being treated fairly, etc. Ideally, the second reader is involved with the project throughout the time period, providing insight and reviewing work.

The second reader may be in a related area of research that can provide a different perspective to your topic. For example, if you were writing a thesis on the representation of the prostitute in 19th-century French art, you might have an art historian as your mentor, and a historian as your second reader. If you have a second reader or co-mentor, the two professors will determine your final grade together.

A Word About IRB

If you are doing work with human subjects (interviewing, photographing, surveying, whatever), you must get approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Please discuss this with your professor, or see Dr. Berendzen for more information.