

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A SENIOR THESIS

Based on guidelines by Timothy J. Ryan (last draft July 19, 2018) and updated by Ariana E. Vigil (March 2022)

The purpose of this document is to lay out my expectations and process for advising a senior honors thesis.

What is a senior thesis?

A senior thesis is a capstone research project at the end of a student's undergraduate career. To complete a senior thesis, you conceive, conduct, analyze, and then present an original research project. A senior thesis differs from an undergraduate course paper in that it is a far more substantial undertaking: a yearlong focus on a single project. It is also evaluated against a conceptually different benchmark. Course papers often focus on specific competencies—demonstrating an understanding of different theories, or the ability to implement a particular analytical approach. As such, a flawed course paper can succeed if it is strong in a particular area.

In contrast, a thesis is about generating new knowledge. It is not training to do some aspect of this, or a simulation of it—it is the thing itself. It is a more mature undertaking, and therefore evaluated more holistically.

In recent years, students have written about a wide variety of subjects, including

- [A network analysis of antioppression in Orange County violence prevention and survivor services](#)
- [A Feminist Textual Analysis of the 2013 Tomb Raider Video Game](#)
- [Placing Appalachian Women Writers in a Conversation with Ecofeminist Principles](#)
- [Queer Students Understanding UNC's Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\) as an Authoritarian Structure](#)

To invoke a sports metaphor, course papers are like playing catch or going to batting cages to practice your swing. A thesis is playing the game.

Who should write a senior thesis?

A senior thesis is not designed for everyone. While there are numerous benefits, the tradeoffs are that it will consume time that otherwise could be spent taking additional courses, completing an internship, cultivating extracurricular interests, and more. It can be an invaluable experience for some people—it was for me—but students sometimes opt to write a thesis even though their time could be better spent elsewhere. The skills a senior thesis develops are more specialized than many students perceive.

My view is that students who have excelled in their major coursework and are giving serious thought to pursuing a doctoral degree should probably complete a senior thesis. The experience can be helpful in developing specific research skills and getting a feel for what a doctoral program might be like. Additionally, many graduate programs may require an example of the kind of scholarly work that a thesis develops. On the other hand, students whose ambitions lie

elsewhere—a professional degree (MSW or JD) or non-profit work, for some examples—should probably not complete a thesis. There are of course exceptions. A student entering law school might still desire and benefit from a capstone research experience at the end of college. But if you ask a faculty member to advise your senior thesis, expect to receive questions early on about your career goals. And if you are not confident that you want to aim at a research-intensive vocation—if you see the thesis experience to acquire a feather in your cap—expect to be pushed on whether a senior thesis is a good idea for you.

What senior theses do WGST faculty advise?

Generally faculty are more comfortable and interested in advising theses that align with their own area of expertise. Your primary advisor's area of research should align with your thesis topic. For outside readers, the topic can be a bit more removed.

Faculty prefer that you have taken a course with them before you ask them to advise your thesis—this will give you a sense of their perspective and help you start with a good rapport.

What is the timeline for a senior thesis?

Students who want to complete a thesis will then enroll in WGST 695H (3 credits) and WGST 691H (3 credits) in the Fall of their senior year; their thesis director will be the instructor of record for 691H.

At UNC, students begin to develop their senior projects in the spring of their junior year. We recommend you start having conversations with potential advisors as soon as you have an idea, or even a general topic, for your project. You must complete the Honors Thesis contract by the conclusion of the Spring semester of your junior year.

Thesis students must undertake work on the thesis over the summer. The academic year simply proves to be too compressed a timeline to finish a high-level empirical project. ‘

Once the academic year begins, you will meet regularly with your advisor—usually biweekly. At each meeting, you'll go over what you've done and come up with a game plan for what to do before the next meeting. (This almost always involves a written assignment of a few pages.) And thus, the project will progress.

During the academic year you will also attend two workshops with other WGST honors students (see below)

Workshops

Students writing Honors Theses will also complete several workshops with one another. The WGST Chair, Director of Undergraduate Studies, or another faculty member will help students establish a workshop schedule. Workshops will be student-run. A faculty member will be present at the outset of each workshop and available to answer any questions. If there is only 1 student

completing an honors thesis the department will invite students in related units to join the workshops.

We suggest the following:

September: meet with other writers to go over research question, topic, and ideas.

November: Students applying to graduate school should exchange a copy of their writing sample prior to the meeting and receive feedback during the meeting. Students not applying to grad school should exchange ~10 pages of a draft.

February: Students exchange a selection of writing (~10 pages) and receive feedback during the meeting.

March: Presentation Rehearsal: Students practice their final presentation with the group.

Mechanics

The student should follow rules of style and format described in the MLA Style handbook or the University of Chicago Manual of Style, according to their faculty advisor's recommendation.

For a guide on the rubric against which faculty will evaluate this thesis, please refer to the [Honors Thesis Rubric on the WGST website](#).

Thesis Defense

Successful completion of the honors work does not automatically confer honors in WGST. Once the student has submitted the honors thesis to the faculty advisor, a committee composed of the advisor and two additional faculty members will review the thesis and conduct an oral defense of about one hour in length. After having determined whether the thesis justifies the award of honors, the committee will recommend to the Chair of the Department of WGST whether the student should be awarded a degree "with honors" or, in rare cases, "with highest honors." The award "with highest honors" indicates superior achievement in all aspects of the student's honors work.

Following the oral examination, the student will make any changes deemed necessary by the committee members and submit one unbound copy of the finished thesis prepared according to the "Guidelines for the Submission of Honors Essays" (please refer to the Honors Program's website: <http://honors.unc.edu/index.php/hnrs-enrolled/research.html?start=2>) to the Director of Undergraduate Studies. An additional bound copy should be given to the Women's and Gender Studies Department library.

Any other tips?

I'll circle back to where I started. Much of your undergraduate career has been training in how to synthesize and produce knowledge. The best thesis projects go beyond training, and make meaningful, notable contributions. I know of thesis projects that have landed in undergraduate research journals, received coverage in the popular press, and even been published in highly respected peer-reviewed outlets (quite an achievement for those interested in an academic

career). I urge you to begin your project with these possibilities in mind, and to undertake your work with commensurate dedication. If you work hard, the sky is the limit.