



SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Guidelines for Students Considering Writing a Seniors Honors Thesis in Philosophy

Many students desire to finish their work in philosophy with some sort of capstone experience – in most cases, the taking of a seminar during the senior year. Some students wish to do more intense, original, sustained work in the discipline than even a seminar tends to allow. For these students, undertaking a senior honors thesis in Philosophy may be appropriate.

While any student who meets the University qualifications for writing a senior honors thesis may elect to undertake such a project, the Philosophy Department strongly advises interested students to consider carefully whether writing a thesis is their best option. It is tempting to romanticize what the process of writing a long philosophy paper will be like. Many thesis writers find that the most difficult part of the project is selecting a topic that is both narrow enough to cover and broad enough to sustain their interest and merit a lengthy treatment. An abstract desire to write a thesis rarely provides sufficient or specific enough motivation to see a genuinely productive project through. For this reason, it is very important for anyone considering writing a thesis to talk with his or her departmental advisor about the possibility as soon as possible, preferably at the end of the junior year (and certainly no later than the first month of the senior year), to assess whether the undertaking of such a project would

constitute the best possible capstone experience for the student.

Once a student has decided to undertake a thesis and has put together a thesis committee (see information on how to do this below), he or she needs to submit a written thesis proposal to the Philosophy Department. This proposal, **which must be submitted to the Department no later than October 1st of the senior year** (or no later than three weeks after the start of the term, for an out-of-synch senior) should describe, in roughly 500 words (two double-spaced pages), the motivations for and goals of the project. It should also include a brief preliminary bibliography as well as the names of the members of the thesis committee. The Department will decide to approve the proposal or deny it or send it back for revision.

If the thesis project is approved, the student must register for Philosophy 093 (fall semester) and Philosophy 094 (spring semester) and must also submit a “Thesis Honors Candidate” form to the Student Services Desk in Dowling Hall (ordinarily by Thanksgiving, but the deadline shifts a little every year). A thesis project spans two semesters and counts for two credits. *Please note that, given the College’s course-credit bookkeeping, a student who elects to undertake a two-semester thesis project will receive both credits in the second semester and should take care not to exceed the six-credit-per-semester College limit in that semester.*

A student should plan to complete the final draft of the thesis and to submit it to his or her thesis committee no later than two weeks before the end of classes in the relevant semester, although dates may be negotiated according to the schedules of the members of the committee. A student should also set up a time and arrange for a space for an oral defense of the thesis, no later than the last day of Reading Period.

A student who writes a thesis receives two grades.

First, he or she receives the usual sort of academic grade (‘A,’ ‘B,’ etc.) for the thesis course. This grade is the same for both semesters of the course and will be retroactively filled in for the first one (i.e., Philosophy 93). Second, the thesis itself is given one of the following honor grades: summa cum laude, magna cum laude, cum laude, or no distinction. Even if a student who has completed a thesis does not receive thesis honors, he or she still receives full course credit for the work. (See the “Thesis Honors Program” description from the Tufts Bulletin).

Frequently Asked Questions

How should I go about deciding whether to write a thesis?

According to the general Tufts guidelines, no student may undertake a thesis who has not made the Dean’s list at least twice. A student who meets this standard and who is considering undertaking a thesis project should meet with his or her departmental advisor to discuss the possibility absolutely no later than at the very beginning of the senior year – and, preferably, in the spring of the junior year. The departmental advisor will help the student identify a possible chair for the thesis committee, who should be consulted as soon as possible.

Any student considering writing a senior honors thesis should think seriously about whether so doing is the very best way to provide an appropriate capstone experience in Philosophy. Often, there are other, less stressful and more productive ways to provide this experience.

I’ve decided that I shouldn’t do a thesis, but I’d still like to do some sort of special project. Do I have other options?

Any student who does not qualify or desire to undertake a senior honors thesis but would like to pursue independent research for credit in the major may approach any appropriate faculty member for

consent in advising or leading an Independent Study (Philosophy 193 (fall) or 194 (spring)). As a rule, the Philosophy Department encourages Independent Studies only in unusual situations. Ordinarily, faculty members will be disinclined to supervise an independent study proposed by a student who simply did not get a satisfactory thesis proposal together in a timely manner.

I have found a chair for my thesis and am ready to go ahead. How do I go about putting together a thesis committee?

The thesis committee consists of at least two people: your chair, who must be a full-time Philosophy Department faculty member, and a second member, ordinarily another Philosophy Department faculty member. In some cases, your chair may suggest engaging a third reader as well. Your chair will help you determine appropriate candidates for rounding out your committee. You should meet with potential committee members (don’t just e-mail or phone them) to discuss your proposed project as soon as possible. Don’t forget that part of what it is to be a professor at Tufts is to advise senior honors theses: people will not, in principle, be put out by your asking them to serve on your committee, and if they turn you down, it will be because they are already committed to helping other people or because they feel your topic lies outside their areas of expertise. In both cases, you should ask them to think about who else might be an appropriate committee member.

How often should I meet with the chair of my committee?

You and the chair of your committee will work out a schedule of meetings. Some advisors, for example, wish to meet students on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, or whenever a student has produced some writing. You should also work out some sort of arrangement with other members of your committee. Students tend to meet with other members of their committees once or twice per term, or on an as-needed basis; but arrangements

vary from case to case. In any event, you should keep your readers apprised of your progress and of important dates and meetings.

Do I need to hand a paper in at the end of the first semester of thesis work?

You and the chair of your committee will discuss goals and expectations at the beginning of the project. Most students will want to aim to produce at least some genuinely useful formal writing by the end of the first semester of the process.

How long should the thesis be?

The ideal length of a thesis, of course, depends to a great degree on its topic. However, in most cases a Philosophy thesis will require no more than 50 pages, and often 35 or so will do.

The “Thesis Honors Program” at Tufts is described in the Tufts Bulletin as follows:

The Thesis Honors Program allows students to pursue a program of independent study usually leading to a senior thesis and a qualifying examination. (In some fields, the thesis may take the form of a creative project or research experience.) The principal purpose of the program is to give special impetus to the development of self-reliance, individual initiative, habits of critical analysis, and correlation of knowledge. Intensive specialization in a field of knowledge may be considered an appropriate corollary in some cases, depending on the student’s individual approach and the particular area of investigation. Students pursuing the Plan of Study major or a CIS thesis are eligible for thesis honors.

Since this is an honors program, admission is restricted to students whose names have appeared on the Dean’s List at least two times before the senior year. Students may take on an honors thesis with one semester on the Dean’s List if they have transferred to Tufts or have received special permission from their department. Applications

should be made no later than the end of the junior year. The student is responsible for finding an advisory committee. While three members are recommended, the committee may have two members, one of whom may be outside the student’s major department. Admission to the program requires formation of an advisory committee, consent of the student’s adviser, and approval either of the chair of the student’s major department, or in the case of a CIS thesis the CIS Board. The membership of the advisory committee and the title of the thesis must be registered with the Academic Resource Center.

The advisory committee will be chaired by a member of the student’s major department or by the sponsor of the thesis in the case of Plan of Study. The committee will direct the student’s reading and research or other creative work, and will guide the student in preparing for a qualifying examination in the area of investigation. All such programs will include a thesis course, which normally will count as two one-semester credits. Students who would like to be recommended for degrees with honors by departments or programs that require a thesis should be aware that a thesis within their own department is required and a CIS thesis will not usually count as a substitute.

The thesis may be of a creative, critical, or historical nature or may embody critical analysis of the results of experiments carried out by the student under supervision. Its subject and scope will be agreed upon in advance by the student and sponsor and approved by the committee. The completed thesis will be presented for consideration no later than two weeks before the last day of classes of the student’s final semester.

Each candidate, for a degree with thesis honors, is required to undergo an examination on the thesis and on the principal area of investigation (or major concentration). The specific character of the examination is determined by each department or advisory committee and may be oral or written or both. After the defense, a final copy of the thesis,

in electronic form, should be submitted to Tisch Library.

The department or advisory committee is empowered to determine the level of thesis honors to be awarded, basing its recommendation on an evaluation of the thesis. Degrees are designated bachelor of arts or bachelor of the science, with highest thesis honors, with high thesis honors, or with thesis honors. (Thesis honors will be indicated on the student’s transcript, but not on the diploma.) Students who, in the judgment of the department or advisory committee, have not attained the standards required for a thesis honors designation but whose work is worthy of a degree, are recommended for the bachelor of arts or bachelor of science degree subject to the general regulations. Students who, in the judgment of the department or advisory committee, have attained the standards required for a thesis honors designation may also receive the degree *summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, or *cum laude*, in accordance with the procedures governing degrees with distinction.

After the defense, a final copy of the thesis should be submitted to Digital Collections and Archives (DCA). Beginning in academic year 2008-2009, the DCA will accept thesis submission electronically as an alternative to submitting a bound paper copy. Please contact the DCA for more information on how to submit your thesis. For answers to frequently asked questions and a style sheet, visit the Web site: www.ase.tufts.edu/wts/seniorthesis.asp.

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