

THE HUMANITIES HONORS ESSAY PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES PART I: THE HONORS ESSAY PROPOSAL

*The following information assumes that a student will graduate in June of the senior year.
Students who are on alternate schedules should check with the Program Office regarding an individual schedule.*

What is an Honors Essay?

The honors essay provides opportunities for extensive study and writing on a topic of recognized worth and of personal interest. It is a focused investigation of a definite body of material that requires substantial research, analysis, and interpretation – a year-long project, researched and written with the guidance of a faculty tutor. It is an essay – neither a monograph nor a dissertation – of between 12,000 and 20,000 words that may be subdivided into two or more chapters.

What is an Appropriate Topic for a Humanities Honors Essay?

The topic should

- be grounded in the humanities
- draw on more than one discipline for the kinds of questions it poses and the approach it employs
- be rooted in the subject that is of deep and lasting significance to the student

How is the Topic Approved?

You must present your proposed topic to the Steering Committee before the end of the winter quarter of your junior year. The process of researching and writing a proposal begins in the Autumn Quarter of your junior year, and continues over the next two quarters. You will earn 2 units (S/NC) in Humanities 200A for developing and writing your honors essay proposal: 1 unit in winter for a draft of the proposal, and 1 unit in spring when the proposal is approved. *Each unit represents approximately 30 hours of work (60 hours over the two quarters) in developing the thesis proposal – hours devoted to research, faculty consultation, and writing the proposal.*

What is the Committee's Role?

The purpose of dialogue with the Committee regarding the proposal is to assure that each student has developed a topic that is appropriate to the scope of an honors essay, draws upon

the interdisciplinary nature of the Program, and is textually based in the humanities. (The term "text" does not limit students to written works. Many successful essays have focused on music, art, film, architecture, popular culture, etc.) The Committee's charge is to help you define an appropriate topic which meets your interests.

Time-Line for Developing a Proposed Topic

AUTUMN QUARTER:

➤ Checking in with the Director and Program Coordinator

All juniors who wish to write senior honors essays must check in with the Director and Program Coordinator in Autumn Quarter. Each student will be notified about possible meeting times. **Students who are not on campus in Autumn must check in by e-mail.**

WINTER QUARTER:

➤ The Junior Meeting

All juniors who are on campus are expected to attend the Junior Meeting (usually scheduled for early winter quarter). Requirements for proposals will be discussed, questions answered, and a packet of resource materials distributed, including sample proposals from previous years.

Students who are overseas will receive this information by mail and thus should be sure to leave an accurate address with the office. Communication by e-mail is preferred whenever possible.

➤ Honors Consultant

Hilton Obenzinger (VPUE) is the designated honors consultant who will be available for individual meetings to discuss each student's proposed topic and make suggestions of faculty to seek out, articles and books to read, and related themes to consider. The consultant will also be available for e-mail consultation with students who are overseas or otherwise not on

campus. **Each student is expected to contact Hilton** (obenzinger@stanford.edu).

You should then be sure to consult faculty in the field to help focus your ideas and discuss your method of inquiry.

➤ Preliminary Proposal

After consulting with one or more faculty members, you will prepare a two- or three-page preliminary proposal. It should be a concise description of a detailed topic, explaining how the topic will be investigated. *Although this proposal is preliminary, in the sense that you will have an opportunity to make improvements, it should be complete and as defined as possible, including provisional chapter descriptions.* Submit the proposal by email to monica.moore@stanford.edu by **Tuesday, February 17, 2009 at noon--extensions will only be granted in unusual circumstances** and must be requested in writing.

The Committee will review each proposal and offer advice and suggestions for improvement. If at all possible, students should identify a tutor for the project -- or a list of possible tutors. (The tutor is the thesis adviser who will work with the student throughout the senior year.) We strongly recommend that your proposed tutor advise you on the development of your proposal.

Your proposal must be accompanied by the official proposal coversheet – or the information called for on the coversheet must be incorporated into your overall proposal. Be sure to read and follow carefully the instructions on the coversheet. You will receive the one unit of credit only if the preliminary proposal is submitted by the due date, otherwise an “incomplete” will be entered until the draft proposal has been submitted.

SPRING QUARTER:

➤ Submit Final Essay Proposal

Each draft proposal will be carefully read by the Steering Committee and will be returned to you by the end of April with suggestions for revision and possible reformulation. You will be asked to consult one of the Committee members about these suggestions and comments.

Submit the proposal by email to monica.moore@stanford.edu **by Thursday April 30, 2009 – without exception.** This second version should be a thoughtful and careful statement of your topic that incorporates or addresses suggestions made by the Committee.

Your prospective tutor must send an email confirming his/her approval of your topic. You will receive feedback on this proposal and given the opportunity to make further revision, if needed.

Guidelines for Choosing a Tutor

Before choosing a tutor, students should discuss their options with the program director. In general, prospective honors students in ISH are urged to choose their tutors from among the Academic Council faculty or the emeriti (look in The Bulletin for the names listed under "Professors," "Associate Professors," and "Assistant Professors;" if you are not sure, check with the office). In exceptional cases, when a student requires a tutor who is none of the above, appropriate arrangements must be made with the director.

Make absolutely sure that your tutor will be on campus during the course of your research and writing in the senior year. If your tutor plans to be away on sabbatical, make arrangements to find a mentor who would agree to stand in for your tutor in your senior year (a number of Senior Essays in the Program are jointly advised by two tutors).

URP Grants for Undergraduate Research

Students in the Honors Program are encouraged to apply for Major Grants and/or small grants for research expenses through Undergraduate Research Programs (URP). If you are interested in applying for a grant in connection with your essay, you should make every attempt to submit your proposal early to ensure making the grant deadline.

See more information at

http://ual.stanford.edu/OO/research_opps/Grants.html

Please note: The URP proposal and the Humanities Honors Essay Proposal are **not** automatically equivalent. The Committee may ask you to work further on your proposal, even if you have been awarded a grant.

Developing Your Essay Proposal

Developing a successful proposal begins in the autumn of the junior year and comes to fruition in the spring. The Program provides a number of opportunities for guidance, but students must begin the process early in the junior year in order to take advantage of these opportunities.

The most common mistakes students make when developing their proposals are

- trying to include too much in the proposed study
- concentrating on theory without focusing on specific texts and specific issues

- failing to explain how the scholarly investigation will be conducted
- failing to specify, for a comparative study, why particular texts were chosen i.e., what do you hope to discover by comparing A to B rather than to other possible texts.
- not defining specialized theoretical terminology in relation to the project

To help you avoid these pitfalls, here are five important rules for developing a successful proposal:

➤ **Write about the meaning of texts, not the meaning of life or “reality”**

In the program’s experience, some of the Senior Honors Proposals have proved unworkable because their authors attempted to solve questions that were too broad or abstract.. Successful essays, by way of contrast, always pose an interpretive problem (although the texts in question need not be literary, and, indeed, might even include such artifacts as a work of film/performance, visual art, or music). To give an example, you cannot write a Senior Essay on whether Emile Zola’s portrayal of French mining towns in his novel *Germinal* is historically accurate; to do so you would have to go to France and spend years burrowing about in the archives. In other words, it would be a lifetime’s project. But you can write about the philosophical, historical, psychological, and aesthetic assumptions that inform Zola’s portrayal and about his success or failure in realizing those assumptions in fiction.

Your essay, in other words, must ultimately serve to illuminate a text or a group of texts, as they are seen and interpreted by you, within the framework of academic research and writing. The actual document or documents that you pore over as you write your essay will be a group of writings (or paintings or works of music, etc.), not “life as such,” not “life as it really was,” or the world, the past, the state, or various metaphysical essences.

➤ **Framing your topic**

You need to frame your topic in a way that makes clear the approach you will employ in your research. This might be something as straight-forward as a “close reading” of a text, or it may mean a more complicated set of theoretical perspectives (e.g., psychoanalysis and sociology of knowledge or philosophy). **It is important that you set forth the approach you choose.**

➤ **Take courses on your subject**

The three courses required for the Honors Program are not sufficient preparation in themselves. One of the most frequent sources of students’ inability to come up with a workable proposal is a failure to have taken advantage of the courses that

might have prepared them to do so. You should look for courses that provide preparation in basic theoretical principles of the disciplines that apply to your fields of interest as well as courses that provide relevant context. Members of the Committee will be happy to give advice about appropriate courses.

To pursue the example given above, this does not necessarily mean taking a course on Zola, but courses on the novel, on French literature, on modern French literature, on modern French history, and the like. Such courses will provide you with much needed context for the subject of your essay, suggest the sorts of questions one can pose and the strategies one can adopt as well as provide you with the rudiments of a vocabulary for addressing your topic. If you fail to take background courses, you are often in the situation of having to reinvent the wheel, and you will end up revising your essay proposal several times before it can be hammered into shape.

You will note that the cover-sheet for your proposal asks you to identify coursework that provides you with the requisite tools for the study you propose to undertake. The Committee wants to be sure that you have the necessary preparation before you dive into your research.

➤ **Consult with Stanford scholars**

Don’t try to write your essay proposal simply on your own. You are paying a handsome tuition and have a right to seek advice from the faculty. Find out who the (relative) experts on your proposed topic are, and seek them out in their office hours or make appointments with them. By checking the departmental web pages, or perusing the *Stanford Bulletin*, you will be able to determine which faculty have scholarly interests that might make them appropriate consultants for your project.

If possible, bring along a rough draft or an outline of your ideas for your proposal. Those of us in the Humanities Honors Program are happy to offer advice ourselves and to suggest other people on the faculty with whom you might usefully talk. You should feel free to consult several different members of the faculty to discuss your proposed project before you settle on whom you would like the Committee to invite to act as your tutor.

➤ **Less is More**

In preparing their essay proposals, juniors in the program are invariably ambitious. This is good, because only big and serious questions can motivate a writer to produce a first-rate Senior Essay. The hard part is to try and formulate the big question in such a way that it could be fruitfully addressed in an essay that is fifty to eighty pages long and requires no more than a year’s worth of research.

Right from the start, then, think about how to reduce and delimit the topic. Don't take on a whole writer; take on a particular aspect of his or her work. Rather than compare one author to another, say Henry James and Tolstoy, compare a book by one with a book by another (James' *Portrait of a Lady* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*), or a theme in one author (say, music in Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* with *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth). Don't take on an entire master work (e.g. *War and Peace*), take on certain episodes or concerns.

➤ **Do it now**

After reading this paragraph, immediately sit down and begin developing your Honors Essay Proposal. Worthy ideas take time and care to mature into a well-formulated and doable essay topic; be prepared to have a lot of back-and-forth between your intuitions and the piece of paper you write them down on. If you delay, you may find yourself later on having to abandon the project altogether for lack of time. Carpe diem!

Human Subjects

If your research involves "human subjects" – and this includes conducting personal interviews – University policy **requires** that you complete the appropriate forms for working with "human subjects."

See <http://humansubjects.stanford.edu>

Information is also available at the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Office in Sweet Hall.

Overseas Studies

If you plan to be overseas during winter and/or spring of the junior year, you must be sure to file an accurate address with the Program Office. Students are expected to contact the designated consultant, or any faculty member on the Committee by e-mail to receive advice and guidance. You may e-mail or fax your proposal to the Program (the program will take care of making copies). E-mail proposals must include all of the information normally entered on the "coversheet" (i.e., preliminary title, prospective tutor(s), course preparation, etc.). If you are considering the possibility of going overseas during your senior year, please think carefully about the consequences. Experience has shown that communication between student and tutor is extremely difficult from overseas; students often find themselves having to delay completion of the essay and consequently defer degree conferral. In any case, a student in the Honors Program **MUST** have a completed and acceptable honors essay proposal on file **BEFORE** going overseas in the senior year.

For further information see Part II: Writing the Humanities Honors Essay

CALENDAR for 2008-09

AUTUMN: Check in with Director and Coordinator; begin considering possible topics; take appropriate courses

WINTER: Junior Meeting; Take appropriate courses; meet with honors consultant, Hilton Obenzinger (VPUE); consult faculty; write preliminary proposal; *sign up for one unit of 200A*

By Feb 17: Preliminary proposal due
By End of Winter Qtr: Committee feedback

SPRING: Consult with faculty; if possible arrange for a faculty tutor; *sign up for one unit of 200A*

April/May: Consult designated faculty
By April 30: **Submit revised proposal**
By End of May: Committee response

~ You may be asked to make further revisions ~