Advising the Senior Honors Thesis: Guidelines for Tufts Faculty

Senior Thesis Policies: Information for Faculty Advisors

Petitioning for an exemption to the Dean’s List Requirement
To be eligible to undertake an Honors Thesis, a student must have been on the Tufts dean’s list twice before senior year. A student who has been on the Dean’s List fewer than two times but has the strong backing of a faculty advisor and department chair may appeal to the Dean of Undergraduate Studies for permission to waive the Dean’s List requirement. This consideration is routinely extended to transfer students. The faculty thesis advisor should write the appeal in an email message to the dean and copy the department chair. If the student does not meet criteria established by the department, the Department Chair may determine whether the student merits a waiver to the usual policy. Petitions should be submitted before October 15.

Paperwork and Grading the Senior Honors Thesis
As the faculty advisor of the senior’s thesis, you need to:
1. ensure the student registers for the correct Honors Thesis course
2. ensure the student submits the Senior Honors Thesis Candidate Form by early October
3. complete the Thesis Honors Awarded Form at the end of the thesis year
4. submit the Final Grade to SIS at the end of the thesis year

Registration: Students should enroll in the Senior Honors Thesis course for their major, registering for Senior Honors Thesis A for the first semester, and Senior Honors Thesis B for the second semester. Correct registration is important for the submission of the final grade and to award the appropriate number of academic credits. *N.B. A few majors may also require senior thesis writers to enroll in or participate in a seminar that will guide their research. This seminar is distinct from enrollment in Senior Honors Thesis A and B.*

Credits Earned: Most year-long senior thesis courses award one grade for the entire year, and although it may appear that a student is enrolled in 0 credits in the first semester and 6 credits in the second semester, for purposes of enrollment and billing, the student is actually enrolled in 3 SHUs each semester.

The Senior Honors Thesis Candidate Declaration Form is completed at the beginning of the senior year by students who intend to pursue an Honors Thesis. It is due in the sixth week of the semester. This form requires the names of two professors who have agreed to advise the senior thesis and the signature of the Department Chair. This is an electronic form.

The Senior Thesis Awarded Honors Form must be completed by the Committee after the defense. This form requires the title of the student’s Honors Thesis and the committee’s decision
on thesis honors. The options for thesis honors include: no honors, Honors in Thesis, High Honors in Thesis, and Highest Honors in Thesis. Depending on departmental policy, this form may need final approval from the Department Chair, who may hold the power to determine thesis honors for the department as a whole. This form must be submitted electronically to Dowling Hall by a specific date set by the Degree Audit Coordinator (usually, by 5:00 PM on the first day of final exams). This is an electronic form that can be found in SIS in the Faculty Forms section.

The Final Grade for the Senior Honors Thesis, as determined by the student’s thesis committee, is submitted by the thesis Committee Chair after the defense and after all work for the Honors Thesis has been completed. Grades for the Honors Thesis are posted to SIS like all other course grades. The final grade, entered for Senior Honors Thesis B, will be equivalent to two courses (6 SHUs in total) to account for the entire year of academic work. N.B. In the past, the thesis advisor entered the temporary grade of Y (for year-long) at the end of the first semester. This is no longer necessary.

Clarifying Expectations and Guiding Research

Page Length Expectations
If your department has not set clear policies about the Honors Thesis (including expected page length), you should tell your advisee how long and how extensive you expect the finished manuscript to be. A few departments set minimal page lengths (such as 65 pages) for the Honors Thesis. The student’s advisor or committee may tell the student not to exceed 100 pages (or not to exceed 80 pages, if that makes sense for your major). Setting a maximum number of pages will make life easier for the writer and his or her readers. Projects vary tremendously by discipline and by department. In the humanities, seniors usually write a 60-80 page research essay. The finished report (or group of essays) in engineering, the natural sciences, and social sciences tends to be shorter, as it is based on the findings of field research or empirical research conducted in a lab setting; however, including appendices, charts, graphs, and supporting data often pushes the total page length to approximately 45-70 pages. Some seniors choose to do a creative project in the arts, such as creating an original collection of poems, a documentary film, writing and directing a play, or another form of artistic expression; creative projects must fit within the department’s criteria for an Honors Thesis in the major.

Institutional Review Board
If your student proposes to use of human subjects for social, behavioral, educational, or medical research, you will need to guide them through the appropriate process for prior approval (or a formal waiver) from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before they proceed with their research. Undergraduates are generally unaware of IRB protocols and have no idea how long the process can take. Many senior thesis writers see their research delayed by weeks or months. If using human subjects and going through the IRB process is the best choice for the student (and no alternative makes sense), you should help the student begin the process as early as possible.
Delayed Release of Archived Honors Thesis
Students are supposed to upload their completed Honors Thesis manuscript to Tufts Digital Collections and Archives. In some cases, the public has been able to access the manuscripts. If your student’s research should not be immediately available (because of pending or future patent or publication), tell your student to select an “embargo” or temporary delay in the online release of their Honors Thesis. Students are asked to select this option when they upload their manuscript to Tufts Digital Collections and Archives. They may select to delay the release of their thesis for 6 months to 2 years. If more time is needed, you should consult an archivist in Tufts Digital Collections and Archives.

Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities in Honors Thesis Advising

Departmental Oversight of the Honors Thesis
Some departments set Senior Honors Thesis policies and guidelines, but many do not. The Honors Thesis guidelines that may be determined by the department include:

• deadlines for submitting written thesis proposals to an advisor
• mandatory thesis seminar or senior research methods course
• minimum and maximum page-length of an Honors Thesis
• form, style, and content (e.g., whether a “creative” thesis is permitted)
• mid-year approval to continue the Honors Thesis (may be determined by the Chair or by department vote with input from the Thesis Committee)
• format of the thesis defense
• Thesis Honors: in some departments, the Department Chair has oversight on the level of honors each thesis receives, based on the thesis committee’s recommendations.

If your department does not offer a senior thesis seminar or a research-methods course, you should be prepared to give your senior thesis advisee more support in research methods and time management. Because advising a Senior Honors Thesis involves a tremendous amount of work, faculty and their departments should work together to resolve issues such as matching seniors with the appropriate advisor and distributing advising duties more evenly through the department.
# The Role of the Thesis Advisor, and the Responsibilities of the Student

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<th>Student’s Responsibility</th>
<th>Advisor’s Responsibility</th>
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<td><strong>Topic &amp; Methodology</strong></td>
<td>The student must develop an interesting, focused, feasible, and worthwhile topic. This will take time and require re-thinking and lots of tweaking.</td>
<td>Your student will need your expertise in determining whether a topic is relevant, feasible, and do-able in one year. Your student will need your help in refining the topic, developing a research approach, theoretical framework, and methodology.</td>
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<td>Setting deadlines</td>
<td>The student should adhere to deadlines set by the committee or thesis advisor. If the student cannot meet a deadline, the advisor should be informed in advance. The student should be encouraged to avoid perfectionism and submit imperfect drafts on time so the advisor can give timely guidance.</td>
<td>Set deadlines for various components of the thesis: bibliography, outline, draft of lit review, draft of second chapter, etc. Make sure the student can meet these deadlines by taking into account the student’s other obligations.</td>
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<td>Meeting frequency</td>
<td>The student should be on time to all meetings with the advisor or committee, and should come prepared with questions, copies of the latest writing, etc. The student should be prepared to discuss assigned books and articles.</td>
<td>Schedule regular meetings with your advisee. Seniors need more guidance than graduate students, so plan to meet every-other week or once every three weeks. Schedule meetings of the entire committee at least once per semester (not including the defense). Full committee meetings are important to make sure everyone is on the same page and giving consistent advice.</td>
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<td>Advising</td>
<td>The student should use the advisor’s expertise. Questions can be about research issues, about theoretical approaches, whether a particular book or scholar is worthwhile for the student’s research, etc.</td>
<td>Respond with reasonable promptness to student’s questions and requests for meetings (e.g., within 1 to 3 days).</td>
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<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Students should submit drafts of thesis sections or chapters as they are completed. Pages should be spell-checked, numbered, and written in a standard font. Students should be encouraged to append specific questions or concerns about that section or chapter for the advisor’s feedback.</td>
<td>Provide written and/or verbal commentary on student’s drafts. Respond to drafts with reasonable promptness (within a week).</td>
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<td>Keeping in touch</td>
<td>Students should inform the committee if they will be travelling or away from campus for a period of time and cannot respond to emails.</td>
<td>Let your advisee know if you will be travelling or away from campus for a period of time and cannot respond to emails.</td>
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## Typical Problems Faced by Senior Honors Thesis Writers (And How to Help)

### Poor time management
You should help the student create (and follow) a year-long project timeline with firm deadlines for research steps, bibliographies, notes, drafts, and revisions. Remember that unlike someone writing a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, a senior thesis writer is taking several other courses and has less than one year to complete a significant amount of research and writing. ARC can help senior thesis writers better manage their time and stay on track.
Lack of proper scope and scale
The student will need your expertise in finding a feasible, manageable, focused, interesting, and relevant topic. Make sure the senior does not set out to write something on the scale of a dissertation or set of encyclopedias!

Poor research skills
Most seniors have not conducted extensive research. Your insight and advice, as well as the expertise of reference librarians, will be invaluable in guiding the senior. Encourage your student to consult with a reference librarian.

Writing concerns
Send the senior to an ARC Writing Consultant! Writing Consultants will not proofread or edit, but they will get to the root of various writing problems and help the student improve prose style, grammar, diction, tone, paragraph development, or myriad other issues. Ideally, a senior should work with the same Writing Consultant throughout the year.

Poor revision and editing skills
Students frequently do not know how to interpret their advisor’s suggestions for revision, or they don't know how to make extensive revisions. You may need to help the student prioritize the revision issues in a one-on-one meeting. It will also help to send the student to a Writing Consultant at the ARC.

Difficulty handling feedback
Students often receive what appears to be conflicting advice from different committee members. In some cases, students do interdisciplinary research, and they may encounter difficulties maneuvering among the disciplines or finding a methodology or writing style that can embrace two or more fields or satisfy two advisors used to different research conventions. The Committee must help the student understand how to integrate criticism from two or three perspectives.

Unintentional plagiarism
Remind your students of the importance of keeping meticulous notes and distinguishing their own language and ideas from that of their sources. In some cases, advisors (or a Writing Consultant) may need to help students integrate quotes and paraphrases properly. Tisch Library offers training on software that can help students avoid plagiarism and format a bibliography in the proper style.

Handling Problems and Lack of Progress
If the student is not making progress, not meeting deadlines, or floundering, schedule a meeting with the student as soon as possible to address these concerns. If the student continues to struggle and is not making progress, have a discussion with the student to consider alternatives to the Honors Thesis, or inform the student that they are not likely to receive any honors. The best
Policy is open, honest, and timely communication with the student.

Mid-Year Review of Senior Honors Thesis

All thesis committees are strongly encouraged to conduct a mid-year review (usually in December) to determine if the senior should be permitted to continue with the Senior Honors Thesis. If it becomes apparent that the student is not likely to finish the Honors Thesis satisfactorily, it is in everyone's best interest to suspend the Honors Thesis and allow the senior to turn it into an independent study. For most students, the best time for this to occur is in mid-December or early January while the student still has time to go through the Spring Semester add/drop process. A few academic departments have instituted a departmental mid-year review for all senior thesis writers. Communicating a concrete mark of satisfactory progress to a student (such as a minimum of 25 pages of a draft toward the thesis by December 5) will help keep students on track and give faculty advisors a concrete measure by which to determine a student’s likelihood of completing the Honors Thesis on time for their graduation date.

How to Suspend an Honors Thesis

The primary thesis advisor should notify the student’s Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education about the difficulty the student is facing and the likelihood that the student will not be able to complete an Honors Thesis. The dean will be able to tell you your options (with the goal of helping the student graduate on time), how to submit an Enrollment Correction Form to re-register a student for a senior special project or independent study instead of an Honors Thesis, or how to submit paperwork to allow the student to bail out of the Honors Thesis unscathed.

The Senior Honors Thesis Defense

Each Senior Honors Thesis culminates in a defense, which is similar to a dissertation defense but scaled back to the level appropriate to an undergraduate student. All members of the thesis committee must be present during the defense. The defense of the Senior Honors Thesis must take place at the end of the second semester, before final exams begin. The defense may take place shortly before or during the Reading Period. Most defenses are closed defenses, with just the student and the thesis committee present, but students may request an open defense, or the department may require a public defense open to the entire community.

The defense usually lasts from sixty to ninety minutes and has four parts:
1. Student’s presentation or talk
2. Question-and-answer period, with discussion
3. Private deliberation among the committee members without the student present
4. Feedback to student. (The final grade may be divulged at this time, and depending on departmental policy, the committee may inform the student if she or he has earned thesis honors.)

Within this framework, thesis defenses can vary tremendously, depending on departmental...
guidelines and the nature of the student’s research. For example, students who have conducted empirical research may give a longer formal presentation, while defenses in the humanities may involve a longer discussion period, and students who have completed a creative project may give a public performance or exhibition, followed by an artist’s talk. You should discuss the defense format with your advisee well before the event. The primary thesis advisor should also take the lead in managing the defense and keeping it on track.

**Resources for Faculty Senior Thesis Advisors**

Dean of Undergraduate Studies can answer questions about Honors Thesis policies and deadlines. Contact the dean for information about the Undergraduate Research Fund, which can be used to help defray student expenses tied to their research.

Dean of Undergraduate Studies  
Carmen Lowe  
627-4239

Your student’s Associate Dean of Undergraduate Advising can advise you about how to respond appropriately to a senior who is not making progress on the thesis, wants to take an Incomplete for the Honors Thesis, or may not graduate.

Associate Deans of Undergraduate Advising: 627-5985

The Academic Resource Center provides extensive support to supplement your role as a Senior Thesis advisor. They offer senior thesis workshops, support groups, one-on-one writing consultations, and help with public speaking and time management.

ARC web address: http://go.tufts.edu/arc