GETTING STARTED ON YOUR THESIS

The thesis is not merely a capstone project representing the culmination and integration of what you have already learned, it is primarily a stepping-stone in the next phase of your career and may well serve as the launch pad for further success. It should represent your best effort and will demonstrate your ability to pursue a process of discovery.

You might start by thinking about a book or scholarly effort that has caught your imagination and ask “Why?” What was it about the book, article, story, etc that caught your attention?

The honors thesis/project is a baccalaureate-level thesis, not merely an extended term paper. However, if you have a good idea about your thesis early in your undergraduate career, there is no reason term papers cannot be used as constitutive components that address various aspects of the research questions you will pursue in your thesis.

Some programs (e.g. BBR, ID, Physics) have a senior thesis/project as a graduation requirement. In such cases, the UHC will coordinate their requirements so that the student is NOT required to do two such projects. If you face thesis requirements outside of the UHC, please let us know about it as soon as you can as accommodations are possible and the two can work together.

The thesis is normally a significant effort written in a style appropriate to the discipline under the supervision of your mentor. It is based on an independent investigation undertaken by the student. The student’s grade in the research-credit courses will be based in part on the thesis produced. The thesis will be suitably bound, will become a permanent part of the UHC library, and will be catalogued in the Valley Library data base (digital copy and signed release form are part of the requirements).

The thesis may be a laboratory experiment, an engineering construction, artistic creation, musical composition or other acceptable scholarly project. Original or secondary research is acceptable. If the nature of the thesis is such that it cannot become a permanent part of the UHC collection, the student must prepare an appropriate written record of the project and include photographs or a video/audio tape of creative efforts (in music, for example) as appropriate. The supporting written material should explain the project, its background and significance; this written material should explain the project, its background and significance; this written material, suitably bound, need not have the organization or structure of a full thesis, but will accompany the record of the project in the UHC archives.

Group or coauthored projects are acceptable. However, each Honors student in the group must submit an individual written report or thesis and sit for an individual examination. With interdisciplinary projects, your mentor will help you determine what is appropriate.

It is difficult to anticipate all the variations of senior theses or projects that may be undertaken by UHC students. These guidelines may be modified to suit individual projects with the prior approval of the UHC.
The proposal is a 1-2 page statement of intent for what you want to research, investigate and pursue. It contains a cogent “thesis statement”. It asks a question, frames a hypothesis or charts a course. Formats vary by discipline but as a rule of thumb the proposal establishes a clear focus by framing a research question. These range from empirical research questions or hypotheses to a statement of intent in the humanities. In either instance, the purpose or research question should be concisely stated and specific goals outlined. The proposal establishes the principal question you plan to address, establishes a context for your question, grounds it with an academic justification, and outlines what steps you are going to take toward the objective posed by the question. To the extent possible, you also want to indicate the findings you expect to discover. The objectives should be clear to anyone reading the proposal whether or not they are steeped in your particular brand of research or investigation.

Generally, proposals are brief but will be invaluable later when someone asks why you did not investigate or address another issue. The mentor’s signature (above his/her typed name) indicates the proposal that was approved incorporated a particular design based on the question you had at the time, not some other question. It is a contract, as it were, that helps protect the student.

INTRODUCTION AND INTENT

The implication is that you will define an area of interest, provide a clear thesis statement, including an explanation of the significance of your question, conduct a literature search, perform research, write a thesis, and defend your scholarly product. You will need to select a research project that can be completed in a given period of time and will usually ask a single question. It may be necessary for you to determine if the equipment needed to answer the question is available and who will underwrite the expense of research; the equipment and materials for the research are, in some cases, provided by the faculty mentor but not always. For students working in many fields of the humanities/creative arts, you should insure that there are faculty available who feel qualified to oversee your project before you invest a great deal of time. A key to success is working closely with your mentor.

Once an area of interest is defined and a thesis statement formulated, you will need to research your topic. Select a couple of texts initially for a general overview and then go to journal articles and books. Use data bases in the library—to decrease the expense of literature search, request literature for only the past ten years, (or five years if the literature is extensive) and use this as a “wedge” into the older literature. Evaluate the literature—do not simply read it! Use a logic rather than simply writing notes in narrative fashion; the goal is to hone your “critical thinking” skills. It will help to attend the open portion of other thesis defenses or research seminars and to read the many research posters you will find around campus.
The next step is to prepare a thesis proposal that contains an introduction, steps forth your question, hypothesis, or issue, outlines the materials and methods you will follow to address your question, and includes a bibliography of literature cited. This is written in the future tense and accomplishes three things. 1) If accepted by your mentor, it serves as a binding agreement that the proposed research is acceptable for an Honors thesis. 2) You have a major portion of your thesis introduction, materials and methods and literature cited sections outlined in advance. 3) At the conclusion of the Introduction to Thesis class, the signed proposal is placed in your UHC file.

The components of the thesis are comparable for all disciplines and the thesis itself should be written in the past tense. The components listed below are in the order presented in a thesis and not in the order they should be written. In all cases, disciplinary-based standards take priority, so if you think your project is unusual, your mentor can provide appropriate guidance. Use style guidelines acceptable to your field of study—consistency is always a watchword.

**TITLE**

The title may differ from the proposal title depending on the results of the research. It should be simple, direct, informative and should include the issue studied, the aspect or system studied, and the variables manipulated if experimental research was undertaken. In the humanities or in the arts, titles should be evocative and help the non-expert understand what your project is about. Titles are crucial for how your scholarship is indexed and cataloged so think about it carefully. A title serves as a “frame.”

**ABSTRACT**

This appears at the front of the thesis itself, it is a condensation of the thesis into a single paragraph. It should explain why the research was done, how the problem was addressed, major results and conclusions drawn. The format is determined by the discipline.

**INTRODUCTION**

The introduction is a summary of relevant background information that leads logically to the question being asked or the hypothesis being tested. Facts and opinions of others should be carefully documented with references, your goal is to set the stage for your own work.

**THESIS STATEMENT**

A clear, concise statement of what it is that drives your scholarly efforts needs to appear early on. It is a clear question or statement of intent. “A thesis is a statement that summarizes the central idea of the paper.” You should be able to summarize you intent in a single sentence or two.
The thesis statement serves three functions:*

1) establishes a boundary around the subject
2) charts an orderly course for writing the paper
3) gives the reader an idea of what to expect.

The thesis statement must be properly worded:

1) be clear, comprehensible, and direct
2) predict major divisions in the paper
3) commit the writer to an unmistakable course.

For example:

The role of women as professional rodeo athletes has been altered drastically in the past one hundred years, shifting from all-around competition against both men and women to a narrow field of gender segregated events.

OR

The lack of clear definition of the limits of allowable persuasion has created problems in adjudicating criminal cases; in curbing the activities of such cults as the Temple of Jim Jones, the Unification Church of Reverend Sun Myung Moon, and the Church of Scientology; and in protecting the religious freedoms and civil liberties of cult members.


**MATERIALS OR METHODOLOGY**

This section tells how you did your work, not why it was done. In the physical and natural sciences, research notebooks are customary and should form the basis of this section. The International Degree also requires a log, (see ID guidelines for further details). One approach to writing this section is to list all factors that influenced your results and address each of them; for example, species used, techniques used, how specimens were handled, age of animal, weight of animal, statistical methods, etc. In other disciplines, progress logs are also common. The discussion should be clear so that others can evaluate the relevance of what you did in terms of the question you asked. Consult your mentor for details that should be included. While theses in the humanities or arts fields utilize a slightly different format, the goal is comparable.

**RESULTS**

In the results section of empirical and experimental theses, you present and summarize your data but you do not interpret them. The results can be presented in the form of tables and graphs or straight narrative description. For tables, like objects should be organized to read vertically and columns should not be separated by lines. Graphs can be in the form of points or histograms and should show the standard deviation or error. To summarize the data, draw the readers attention to significant differences and patterns. Work with a statistician. Data are significant only if tested appropriately. Your goal is to present the “facts” you found in a clear fashion. Writing up results requires considerable crafting/creativity; do not take it lightly.

Creative performance theses may omit this section as described above and substitute as appropriate.
DISCUSSION

Begin this section with what you discovered that is new and then relate your results to what others have found. Evaluate the meaning of your results and explain unexpected results. End with a conclusion and remember that you cannot prove a hypothesis—only support or refute it. If your work is not empirical in the classical sense, you should still discuss the conceptual implications of what you found. Theses in the arts and humanities have equally definitive guidelines that reflect accepted standards of the discipline. Creative works still may include a discussion of the project’s relevance and implications.

Your mentor will be an invaluable guide to how to structure your work.

LITERATURE CITED/BIBLIOGRAPHY

Use full citations, list only those referred to in the thesis. Get your style standardized at the outset, it will be most helpful in the long run. Your discipline has recognized standards and those are the ones you should adopt. Consistency is the standard. Do not underestimate the time required to produce a professional level bibliography. Textbooks should be utilized judiciously.

DUAL THESIS REQUIREMENTS

The UHC has worked with the International Degree and Bioresource Research to adopt guidelines that are harmonious with one another and do not impose unnecessary hurdles for students. You need create only one thesis to satisfy the requirements of the respective programs. Our goal has been to allow students maximum flexibility. See staff in the UHC, ID, BRR or Physics for further details.

WORKING WITH A MENTOR

Students select a mentor to guide their thesis work. It is your responsibility to discuss with them how often they expect to confer in person, the pace and schedule of your research, your writing and the succession of drafts of your document. Students who establish and maintain regular interaction have a friend for life, those who present their mentors with difficulties and “finished” products are likely to have to explain themselves. Work out a schedule with your mentor, stick to it, treat your thesis work as you would all other obligations.

You must take the initiative to familiarize your mentor with UHC thesis guidelines and provide them with a copy of the “Mentor Guidelines” (copies are available in the UHC or online).

An informed mentor is likely to be a cooperative mentor and the responsibility for keeping them informed is yours. Check-in early and often.