

# THE HONORS THESIS BIBLE:

(HOPEFULLY) HELPFUL ADVICE FOR PRODUCING  
YOUR HONORS PROJECT

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# 01. Thesis Process Overview

Writing a thesis is probably not the right word for the type of project you will be doing, but it's a start. An honors thesis is a large research project that incorporates reflection upon both what you are doing and the intellectual journey you take. It's a big project, but it doesn't have to be completely intimidating.

This document will help you understand the basics of putting together a thesis project. Its goal is to get you familiar with the kind of work that you need to be doing to organize, schedule, and complete an honors thesis. I'm not interested in giving you a list of hoops to jump through or a collection of institutional details that must be fulfilled. Instead, I'm interested in getting you excited about doing an honors thesis.

Your honors thesis process consists of 4 parts: Pre-Research, Research, Production, Defense. Pre-research is setting the stage for your thesis. It requires developing a topic to study, picking a thesis director and a committee, and developing a project proposal. This is one of the shortest parts of the thesis process but it can easily become the longest if you don't get on it quickly. We'll talk about developing a good project at a later date but for now let's say that developing your project a bit before you talk with your potential director is the key. If you have no idea what you're doing and/or a vague idea with no demonstrable thought put into it, you are welcoming a long and potentially painful thesis process. So being on top of your pre-research requirements is key.

Research is exactly that. However, some students might feel like they don't know how to do good research. This dilemma is tied to the dilemma of having a poorly articulated project. If you don't have a clear goal in mind, you can easily get bogged down in reading everything that comes across your desktop or be so anxious about the size of the project that you don't do anything and you end up doing nothing.

Research for a thesis project consists in devising some kind of end goal--some answer to a question, some theme made clear, some set of data made understandable--and then figuring out what steps need to be taken to reach that end. Each step required turns out to be a chapter. Granted, this is the simple way of putting it but it's true. Figure out the steps needed to reach the end goal and learn about them.

Production is the stage where you make stuff. It's where the notes on the books and articles you've read become chapters or the data is analyzed and written about. It's where the project is actually made, constructed, recorded, filmed, edited, etc. This is the easiest to explain and arguably the hardest to do because you just don't want to do it. It takes time and dedication to produce the project but I assure you it's worth it.

Finally, there is the defense. After you've researched and produced your thesis, you have to defend your ideas to your committee. This is a very old academic exercise going back to the philosophical schools of the ancient Greeks. You will be asked questions, you will answer questions, you will explain what it is that you did. Simple as that. A thesis is a scary thing to undertake but it doesn't have to be. You will learn so much about yourself and your interests if you are willing to be disciplined, focused, and work hard. It's the place where you can fully embrace the scholar part of being a McAllaster Scholar.

## 02. Choosing a Topic

Choosing a topic for doing a large research project is not the easiest thing in the world. Sometimes you luck out and get your academic advisor to pick one for you. Sometimes you do a summer internship in which your research can be used for the thesis. However, most times, it's hard to come up with a topic. Oftentimes, there are too many topics to think of, too many interests, too many questions to narrow down something you want to spend a year working on. Other times, the very idea of a year-long (or more!) project is paralyzing.

However, neither paralysis nor the problem of too many choices need be your destiny. It's usually the case that you've not done enough processing of a project topic to be able to come up with a good one. This section of the packet is designed to help you choose a good topic by providing you with some steps to work through when picking a topic.

The method I'm going to describe to you is one that was articulated by one of the directors of the Scholarship and Christianity in Oxford programme (see, I made it British) put on by Best Semester. It's relatively straightforward but quite helpful for picking a topic.

### *Step 1: Get Some Stuff Together Before You Knock on Your Prof's Door*

We all ask questions. The difficulty when it comes to a thesis project, is asking a question appropriate for the kind of research project you are undertaking. If you have the answer to your question before you pose it in your research, then you don't have a good question. In fact, what you have is a logical fallacy called "begging the question." The best way to avoid this is to ask a question that you don't know the answer to--one that will require you to learn something. Arriving at such a question can be difficult but that's why you need specialist help.

All of your professors had to, at some point, produce some work of scholarship that required them to do at least a modicum of research. Therefore, they are the specialists with whom you should converse. Now, this doesn't mean that you knock on their office door without a single

idea; rather, it means that you don't have to have everything figured out before you meet with someone you want to be your project advisor or even just on your committee.

How do you get to the knocking on the door of a specialist phase? You might begin by going through the papers you've done for your classes thus far and thinking about which one(s) you most enjoyed. You might begin by thinking about a book you read that really fired up your thoughts and about which you might want to do a lot of work. You might have a topic area you want to work on but don't have a specific question about. All of these are acceptable starting places. I'd suggest at least having one or two questions you want to ask your chosen specialist before you enter their office.

A few questions you might ask yourself when devising the project topic:

- Is it a question or is it just a woolly title?
- Is it worthwhile?
- Is it answerable?
- Is it original? (Something you don't know the answer to when you start.)

After you can confidently respond to these questions, you are free to knock on your professors' doors.

### *Step 2: Pose the Question (w/ Specialist Help)*

Once you've completed step one, meet with a professor who you think will be knowledgeable in the area you show interest in studying. They will most likely name drop, talk about various 'isms' and theories that you've never heard of while trying to contextualize what you're thinking of researching.

Pro-Tip: COPY DOWN EVERY NAME AND 'ISM' THEY MENTION. (This will help you so much later on, trust me.)

You'll get a lot of help in this stage but it will also require you to do more work. You need to be prepared to have ideas you've come up with shot down for being wrong-headed, too big, too small, un-doable for the resources that GU has to offer at the time. It's okay to fail at posing a good research question right away. This is all part of the process. As former GU president W. Richard Stephens used to say, "The best place for a bad idea is out in the open." In other words, the more you work through the half-baked thoughts or untenable projects, the better the end result will be. And who knows, maybe some of those ideas will get revisited further on in the research process.

### *Step 3: Come up with a preliminary outline of how you propose to answer your question.*

Even though you might not know everything about how to answer the question you're posing, that doesn't mean that you are without recourse to develop a "first draft" of an outline for answering it. During this step, consider the following questions:

- What method will I use to research this topic?
- What is the context of the question? (Is it political, historical, ethical, artistic, economic, literary, theoretical, etc.)
- Are there major authors/papers/books that I need to address?
- Have I asked my advisor and/or committee for a reading list?** This is a very helpful question to ask your specialist friends. They are nerds who read all the things and love imposing their knowledge on you against your will.
- Do you have an angle or original take on the problem?
- Can you answer the question "What's at stake?"

After you've gone through these three steps, you are essentially at the starting point for your project. You will know not only what you're doing but also have help in the form of specialist friends (otherwise known as your advisor and committee) who will guide you through the process.

One last Pro-Tip: BE PREPARED TO HAVE YOUR TOPIC CHANGE AS YOU RESEARCH. It happens in life all the time. Being changed by your research is usually a good thing when answering questions you don't already know the answer to.

## 03. How to do QUALITATIVE Research

Doing qualitative research might sound strange if you are used to research being confined to labs where things go boom or change colors or whatever happens in science labs. In truth, qualitative research is an extremely beneficial way of conducting research. It usually involves talking about the structures, experience, historical development, and meaning of various things. It can be anything from an in-depth analysis of a single text to tracing a theme throughout various historical periods. The key is that it is focused not on the amount of data one collects but on the kind of data one finds.

I'll try to give a general overview of the kind of research you can do when you are working in various humanities fields. Granted, some fields will be left out but that's what asking your professors is for.

*In Philosophy...*the focus is on argument. Thus, a philosophy honors thesis tends to take up a particular position with regard to some topic and explores it as fully and coherently as possible. This is accomplished in several ways:

- First, one might pick a particular philosopher and tease out a theme in their work as it relates to another thinker.
- Second, one might use a particular philosophical method (Ordinary Language Philosophy, Phenomenology, Marxist Critical Theory, etc.) to examine a particular theme.
- Finally, one might examine a set of popular arguments related to a particular issue (gun control, abortion, human trafficking, etc.) and examine their validity before offering up one's own argument for or against these popular ones.

Doing this kind of research requires doing lots of reading. Primarily, it requires learning the relevant schools or positions in a given subfield and finding a place for your project. It also requires getting familiar with reading a ton of journal articles. Take good notes, read as much as you can, and save the organization of the argument for later.

*(In Literature...In History...you will have to ask your thesis director or other professors what research method they might suggest. Bear in mind that some research methods might not be doable in the timeframe you have to complete the thesis or given the resources that you and the institution might have access to. For example, doing archival research where you have to travel to the Library of Congress to look at stuff might be possible for you as an individual but you are more than likely not going to be able to secure funding from the institution for such a trip.)*

## 04. How to do QUANTITATIVE Research

“Honestly my best tip is that they shouldn't do a quantitative study. At this level none of them are prepared and they will just do it poorly. Sorry! Pretty sure that isn't what you were looking for, but an undergraduate level (even with a quant class or two- in fact those guys are the most dangerous) they will only make inappropriate assumptions, particularly with the timeline they are given...The only exception to this might be if they are going to be a co-author on a study with a professor.”

-Dr. Lisa Amundson, School of Education

In other words, you need to be very careful if you want to do quantitative research at the undergraduate level. Many students in the social sciences and natural sciences have completed an honors thesis not by constructing a new experiment and then running it many, many times to gather good data. Instead, they've done theses based on existing research studies, conducting a review of the various studies and experiments that have already been conducted in an area relative to their own discipline and topic. Many interested in medicine, for example, have not

conducted surveys or done medical research on patients but have looked at areas that are related to medicine. One thesis focused on intercultural competence for doctors from the U.S. working overseas or in different cultural and linguistic contexts. Another thesis examined the private healthcare industry. Both students were pre-med.

Also, just as is the case with qualitative research, you need to keep the timeframe and resource constraints of both yourself and the university in mind. It would be awesome if we had a particle accelerator lying around that you could keep in your dorm room for experiments like trying to turn yourself into a superhero. Alas, we lack such resources. But we do have a fantastic library and research library staff...

## 05. Organizing Your Project

### INTRODUCTION

Here's a brief set of tips on how to write your introduction from the blog [Explorations of Style: A Blog About Academic Writing](#) (yes, such things do exist.):

#### **“Structuring a Thesis Introduction”**

A few weeks ago, I had a post on writing [introductions](#), in which I discussed the standard three moves of an introduction. This model works very naturally in a short space such as a research proposal or article but can be harder to realize on the bigger canvas of a thesis introduction. Many thesis writers struggle with the need to provide adequate contextualizing detail before being able to give a satisfying account of their problem. Truth be told, this inclination—the feeling that our problem is so complex that any explanation will require extensive background—can be a bit of a graduate student weakness. Understanding that your thesis *can* be explained in a compressed fashion is often a step forward, if for no other reason than it can give you the wherewithal to answer the inevitable questions about your thesis topic without the stammering and the false starts and the over-reliance on the word ‘complicated’. I suggest that thesis writers take every possible opportunity to articulate their topic under severe space or time constraints.

When I approach a thesis introduction, I start from the assumption that the reader shouldn't have to wait to hear your guiding problem until they have the full context to that problem. You have to find a way of giving them the big picture before the deep context. Let's take an imaginary example. You are writing your thesis on the reappearance of thestrals in the 1980s in Mirkwood Forest in the remote country of Archenland after a devastating forest fire caused by mineral extraction in the 1950s.\* How are you going to structure an introduction in such a way that your reader doesn't have to read 10 pages of bewildering and seemingly

unconnected background? When a thesis writer attempts to give the full context before elaborating the problem, two things will happen. First, the reader will labour to see the significance of all that they are being told. Second, the reader will, in all likelihood, struggle to find connections between the various aspects of the context. Once you have explained what we need to know about thestrals, you will need to discuss the topography of Mirkwood, the endangered species policy framework in Archenland, the mineral extraction practices commonly used in the 1950s, and the way forest fires affect animal populations. If you haven't started with your problem—the thing that brings these disparate areas into a meaningful conversation with each other—your introduction will begin with a baffling array of potentially disconnected bits of information.

The simplest solution to this problem is to provide a quick trip through the whole project in the first few paragraphs, before beginning to contextualize in earnest. I am picturing a thesis introduction that looks something like this:

1. **Introduction to the introduction:** The first step will be a short version of the three moves, often in as little as three paragraphs, ending with some sort of transition to the next section where the full context will be provided.
2. **Context:** Here the writer can give the full context in a way that flows from what has been said in the opening. The extent of the context given here will depend on what follows the introduction; if there will be a full lit review or a full context chapter to come, the detail provided here will, of course, be less extensive. If, on the other hand, the next step after the introduction will be a discussion of method, the work of contextualizing will have to be completed in its entirety here.
3. **Restatement of the problem:** With this more fulsome treatment of context in mind, the reader is ready to hear a restatement of the problem and significance; this statement will echo what was said in the opening, but will have much more resonance for the reader who now has a deeper understanding of the research context.
4. **Restatement of the response:** Similarly, the response can be restated in more meaningful detail for the reader who now has a better understanding of the problem.
5. **Roadmap:** Brief indication of how the thesis will proceed.

What do you think about this as a possible structure for a thesis introduction? While I realize that it may sound a little rigid, I think such an approach is warranted here. Using this type of structure can give thesis writers an opportunity to come to a much better understanding of what they are trying to say. In other words, in my experience, thesis writers tend to feel better after reconstructing their introductions along these lines. For some, it may prove a useful way



to present their introduction in their final draft; for other, it may just be a useful scaffold, something that they can improve upon once everything is on a surer footing.

Using this structure can help the writer craft an introduction that responds to the [needs of the reader](#), rather than the demands of the material. Typically, the thesis introductions that I see provide an introduction to the topic but not necessarily to the piece of writing.

Writers—especially writers in the throes of trying to conceptualize a book length research project—often forget that the audience’s ability to engage with the topic is mediated by the text. Introducing your introduction is one way to meet your key [responsibility to guide the reader through the text](#). The thesis reader’s journey is a long one—why not do what you can to ensure that your reader sets off with the maximal understanding of their destination?

## *REVIEW OF LITERATURE*

Here is a guide for doing a review of literature brought to you by the fine folks at the [University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Writing Center](#).

### **INTRODUCTION**

OK. You’ve got to write a literature review. You dust off a novel and a book of poetry, settle down in your chair, and get ready to issue a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” as you leaf through the pages. “Literature review” done. Right?

Wrong! The “literature” of a literature review refers to any collection of materials on a topic, not necessarily the great literary texts of the world. “Literature” could be anything from a set of government pamphlets on British colonial methods in Africa to scholarly articles on the treatment of a torn ACL. And a review does not necessarily mean that your reader wants you to give your personal opinion on whether or not you liked these sources.

#### **What is a literature review, then?**

A literature review discusses published information in a particular subject area, and sometimes information in a particular subject area within a certain time period.

A literature review can be just a simple summary of the sources, but it usually has an organizational pattern and combines both summary and synthesis. A summary is a recap of the important information of the source, but a synthesis is a re-organization, or a reshuffling, of that information. It might give a new interpretation of old material or combine new with old interpretations. Or it might trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major

debates. And depending on the situation, the literature review may evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant.

### **But how is a literature review different from an academic research paper?**

The main focus of an academic research paper is to develop a new argument, and a research paper will contain a literature review as one of its parts. In a research paper, you use the literature as a foundation and as support for a new insight that you contribute. The focus of a literature review, however, is to summarize and synthesize the arguments and ideas of others without adding new contributions.

### **Why do we write literature reviews?**

Literature reviews provide you with a handy guide to a particular topic. If you have limited time to conduct research, literature reviews can give you an overview or act as a stepping stone. For professionals, they are useful reports that keep them up to date with what is current in the field. For scholars, the depth and breadth of the literature review emphasizes the credibility of the writer in his or her field. Literature reviews also provide a solid background for a research paper's investigation. Comprehensive knowledge of the literature of the field is essential to most research papers.

### **Who writes these things, anyway?**

Literature reviews are written occasionally in the humanities, but mostly in the sciences and social sciences; in experiment and lab reports, they constitute a section of the paper. Sometimes a literature review is written as a paper in itself.

## **LET'S GET TO IT! WHAT SHOULD I DO BEFORE WRITING THE LITERATURE REVIEW?**

### **Clarify**

If your assignment is not very specific, seek clarification from your instructor:

Roughly how many sources should you include?

What types of sources (books, journal articles, websites)?

Should you summarize, synthesize, or critique your sources by discussing a common theme or issue?

Should you evaluate your sources?

Should you provide subheadings and other background information, such as definitions and/or a history?

### **Find models**

Look for other literature reviews in your area of interest or in the discipline and read them to get a sense of the types of themes you might want to look for in your own research or ways to organize your final review. You can simply put the word "review" in your search engine along with your other topic terms to find articles of this type on the Internet or in an electronic

database. The bibliography or reference section of sources you've already read are also excellent entry points into your own research.

### **Narrow your topic**

There are hundreds or even thousands of articles and books on most areas of study. The narrower your topic, the easier it will be to limit the number of sources you need to read in order to get a good survey of the material. Your instructor will probably not expect you to read everything that's out there on the topic, but you'll make your job easier if you first limit your scope.

And don't forget to tap into your professor's (or other professors') knowledge in the field. Ask your professor questions such as: "If you had to read only one book from the 70's on topic X, what would it be?" Questions such as this help you to find and determine quickly the most seminal pieces in the field.

### **Consider whether your sources are current**

Some disciplines require that you use information that is as current as possible. In the sciences, for instance, treatments for medical problems are constantly changing according to the latest studies. Information even two years old could be obsolete. However, if you are writing a review in the humanities, history, or social sciences, a survey of the history of the literature may be what is needed, because what is important is how perspectives have changed through the years or within a certain time period. Try sorting through some other current bibliographies or literature reviews in the field to get a sense of what your discipline expects. You can also use this method to consider what is currently of interest to scholars in this field and what is not.

## **STRATEGIES FOR WRITING THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Find a focus**

A literature review, like a term paper, is usually organized around ideas, not the sources themselves as an annotated bibliography would be organized. This means that you will not just simply list your sources and go into detail about each one of them, one at a time. No. As you read widely but selectively in your topic area, consider instead what themes or issues connect your sources together. Do they present one or different solutions? Is there an aspect of the field that is missing? How well do they present the material and do they portray it according to an appropriate theory? Do they reveal a trend in the field? A raging debate? Pick one of these themes to focus the organization of your review.

### **Construct a working thesis statement**

Then use the focus you've found to construct a thesis statement. Yes! Literature reviews have thesis statements as well! However, your thesis statement will not necessarily argue for a

position or an opinion; rather it will argue for a particular perspective on the material. Some sample thesis statements for literature reviews are as follows:

*The current trend in treatment for congestive heart failure combines surgery and medicine.*

*More and more cultural studies scholars are accepting popular media as a subject worthy of academic consideration.*

See our handout for more information on how to construct thesis statements.

### **Consider organization**

You've got a focus, and you've narrowed it down to a thesis statement. Now what is the most effective way of presenting the information? What are the most important topics, subtopics, etc., that your review needs to include? And in what order should you present them? Develop an organization for your review at both a global and local level:

#### **First, cover the basic categories**

Just like most academic papers, literature reviews also must contain at least three basic elements: an introduction or background information section; the body of the review containing the discussion of sources; and, finally, a conclusion and/or recommendations section to end the paper.

*Introduction:* Gives a quick idea of the topic of the literature review, such as the central theme or organizational pattern.

*Body:* Contains your discussion of sources and is organized either chronologically, thematically, or methodologically (see below for more information on each).

*Conclusions/Recommendations:* Discuss what you have drawn from reviewing literature so far. Where might the discussion proceed?

### **Organizing the body**

Once you have the basic categories in place, then you must consider how you will present the sources themselves within the body of your paper. Create an organizational method to focus this section even further.

To help you come up with an overall organizational framework for your review, consider the following scenario and then three typical ways of organizing the sources into a review:

You've decided to focus your literature review on materials dealing with sperm whales. This is because you've just finished reading *Moby Dick*, and you wonder if

that whale's portrayal is really real. You start with some articles about the physiology of sperm whales in biology journals written in the 1980's. But these articles refer to some British biological studies performed on whales in the early 18th century. So you check those out. Then you look up a book written in 1968 with information on how sperm whales have been portrayed in other forms of art, such as in Alaskan poetry, in French painting, or on whale bone, as the whale hunters in the late 19th century used to do. This makes you wonder about American whaling methods during the time portrayed in *Moby Dick*, so you find some academic articles published in the last five years on how accurately Herman Melville portrayed the whaling scene in his novel.

#### *Chronological*

If your review follows the chronological method, you could write about the materials above according to when they were published. For instance, first you would talk about the British biological studies of the 18th century, then about *Moby Dick*, published in 1851, then the book on sperm whales in other art (1968), and finally the biology articles (1980s) and the recent articles on American whaling of the 19th century. But there is relatively no continuity among subjects here. And notice that even though the sources on sperm whales in other art and on American whaling are written recently, they are about other subjects/objects that were created much earlier. Thus, the review loses its chronological focus.

#### *By publication*

Order your sources by publication chronology, then, only if the order demonstrates a more important trend. For instance, you could order a review of literature on biological studies of sperm whales if the progression revealed a change in dissection practices of the researchers who wrote and/or conducted the studies.

#### *By trend*

A better way to organize the above sources chronologically is to examine the sources under another trend, such as the history of whaling. Then your review would have subsections according to eras within this period. For instance, the review might examine whaling from pre-1600-1699, 1700-1799, and 1800-1899. Under this method, you would combine the recent studies on American whaling in the 19th century with *Moby Dick* itself in the 1800-1899 category, even though the authors wrote a century apart.

#### *Thematic*

Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue, rather than the progression of time. However, progression of time may still be an important factor in a thematic review. For instance, the sperm whale review could focus on the development of the harpoon for whale hunting. While the study focuses on one topic, harpoon technology, it will still be organized chronologically. The only difference here

between a “chronological” and a “thematic” approach is what is emphasized the most: the development of the harpoon or the harpoon technology. But more authentic thematic reviews tend to break away from chronological order. For instance, a thematic review of material on sperm whales might examine how they are portrayed as “evil” in cultural documents. The subsections might include how they are personified, how their proportions are exaggerated, and their behaviors misunderstood. A review organized in this manner would shift between time periods within each section according to the point made.

### *Methodological*

A methodological approach differs from the two above in that the focusing factor usually does not have to do with the content of the material. Instead, it focuses on the “methods” of the researcher or writer. For the sperm whale project, one methodological approach would be to look at cultural differences between the portrayal of whales in American, British, and French art work. Or the review might focus on the economic impact of whaling on a community. A methodological scope will influence either the types of documents in the review or the way in which these documents are discussed.

Once you’ve decided on the organizational method for the body of the review, the sections you need to include in the paper should be easy to figure out. They should arise out of your organizational strategy. In other words, a chronological review would have subsections for each vital time period. A thematic review would have subtopics based upon factors that relate to the theme or issue.

Sometimes, though, you might need to add additional sections that are necessary for your study, but do not fit in the organizational strategy of the body. What other sections you include in the body is up to you. Put in only what is necessary. Here are a few other sections you might want to consider:

*Current Situation:* Information necessary to understand the topic or focus of the literature review.

*History:* The chronological progression of the field, the literature, or an idea that is necessary to understand the literature review, if the body of the literature review is not already a chronology.

*Methods and/or Standards:* The criteria you used to select the sources in your literature review or the way in which you present your information. For instance, you might explain that your review includes only peer-reviewed articles and journals.

*Questions for Further Research:* What questions about the field has the review sparked? How will you further your research as a result of the review?

## **BEGIN COMPOSING**

Once you've settled on a general pattern of organization, you're ready to write each section. There are a few guidelines you should follow during the writing stage as well. Here is a sample paragraph from a literature review about sexism and language to illuminate the following discussion:

However, other studies have shown that even gender-neutral antecedents are more likely to produce masculine images than feminine ones (Gastil, 1990). Hamilton (1988) asked students to complete sentences that required them to fill in pronouns that agreed with gender-neutral antecedents such as "writer," "pedestrian," and "persons." The students were asked to describe any image they had when writing the sentence. Hamilton found that people imagined 3.3 men to each woman in the masculine "generic" condition and 1.5 men per woman in the unbiased condition. Thus, while ambient sexism accounted for some of the masculine bias, sexist language amplified the effect. (Source: Erika Falk and Jordan Mills, "Why Sexist Language Affects Persuasion: The Role of Homophily, Intended Audience, and Offense," *Women and Language* 19:2.

### **Use evidence**

In the example above, the writers refer to several other sources when making their point. A literature review in this sense is just like any other academic research paper. Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed up with evidence to show that what you are saying is valid.

### **Be selective**

Select only the most important points in each source to highlight in the review. The type of information you choose to mention should relate directly to the review's focus, whether it is thematic, methodological, or chronological.

### **Use quotes sparingly**

Falk and Mills do not use any direct quotes. That is because the survey nature of the literature review does not allow for in-depth discussion or detailed quotes from the text. Some short quotes here and there are okay, though, if you want to emphasize a point, or if what the author said just cannot be rewritten in your own words. Notice that Falk and Mills do quote certain terms that were coined by the author, not common knowledge, or taken directly from the study. But if you find yourself wanting to put in more quotes, check with your instructor.

### **Summarize and synthesize**

Remember to summarize and synthesize your sources within each paragraph as well as throughout the review. The authors here recapitulate important features of Hamilton's study, but then synthesize it by rephrasing the study's significance and relating it to their own work.

### **Keep your own voice**

While the literature review presents others' ideas, your voice (the writer's) should remain front and center. Notice that Falk and Mills weave references to other sources into their own text, but they still maintain their own voice by starting and ending the paragraph with their own ideas and their own words. The sources support what Falk and Mills are saying.

### **Use caution when paraphrasing**

When paraphrasing a source that is not your own, be sure to represent the author's information or opinions accurately and in your own words. In the preceding example, Falk and Mills either directly refer in the text to the author of their source, such as Hamilton, or they provide ample notation in the text when the ideas they are mentioning are not their own, for example, Gastil's. For more information, please see our handout on plagiarism.

### **REVISE, REVISE, REVISE**

Draft in hand? Now you're ready to revise. Spending a lot of time revising is a wise idea, because your main objective is to present the material, not the argument. So check over your review again to make sure it follows the assignment and/or your outline. Then, just as you would for most other academic forms of writing, rewrite or rework the language of your review so that you've presented your information in the most concise manner possible. Be sure to use terminology familiar to your audience; get rid of unnecessary jargon or slang. Finally, double check that you've documented your sources and formatted the review appropriately for your discipline. For tips on the revising and editing process, see our handout on revising drafts.

### **WORKS CONSULTED**

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Anson, Chris M. and Robert A. Schwegler. *The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers*. Second edition. New York: Longman, 2000.

Jones, Robert, Patrick Bizzaro, and Cynthia Selfe. *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Writing in the Disciplines*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997.

Lamb, Sandra E. *How to Write It: A Complete Guide to Everything You'll Ever Write*. Berkeley, Calif.: Ten Speed Press, 1998.

Rosen, Leonard J. and Laurence Behrens. *The Allyn and Bacon Handbook*. Fourth edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Troyka, Lynn Quitman. *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002.

## **MAIN CHAPTERS**

I don't really have much to contribute here regarding how you write your main chapters. The number and organization of them is dependent upon the kind of project you are doing. If you are doing something in the sciences, then ask your director how to organize this section.



They might want charts and data and things of that sort rather than a long description of the Doppler effect or a treatise on the history of social deviance. Perhaps the most important thing to note is that the main chapters ought to follow what you outlined in your introduction. If they don't, then you need to change the intro or the chapter order. The whole project should work as a coherent piece.

## *REFERENCES + BACKMATTER*

See what your director wants in terms of how you organize the references for your research in your paper. Do they want footnotes and then a bibliography? Do they want endnotes because they're a crazy person? Do they want a works cited and a bibliography and tons of other stuff because they're still a crazy person? In many cases, how you format your backmatter is dependent upon the formatting style sheet your discipline typically uses. For English, it's MLA. For History and Philosophy, it's usually Chicago. For the social sciences like Psychology and Anthropology, it's APA. Ask your director which style sheet and which format is right for you.

## *APPENDICES*

From [Purdue University's Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](#):

### **Appendices: When appendices might be necessary**

Appendices allow you to include detailed information in your paper that would be distracting in the main body of the paper. Examples of items you might have in an appendix include mathematical proofs, lists of words, the questionnaire used in the research, a detailed description of an apparatus used in the research, etc.

### **Format of appendices**

Your paper may have more than one appendix. Usually, each distinct item has its own appendix. If your paper only has one appendix, label it "Appendix" (without quotes.) If there is more than one appendix, label them "Appendix A," "Appendix B," etc. (without quotes) in the order that each item appears in the paper. In the main text, you should refer to the Appendices by their labels.

The actual format of the appendix will vary depending on the content; therefore, there is no single format. In general, the content of an appendix should conform to the appropriate APA style rules for formatting text.

## 06. Tips for Writing/Making Your Project

**A Few Mantras to help you when you gotta push through and get the reading and/or writing done:**

Perfect is often the enemy of good.

“How do you write? Butt in chair. Sentence by sentence. Shitty first drafts.”

--*Anne Lamott*

It doesn't have to be brilliant, it just has to be done.

--*Dr. Christina Smerick*

The best thesis is a finished thesis.

--*Dr. Edwin Estevez*

### **Some Writerly Advice From Famous Writerly People:**

“Three things are in your head: First, everything you have experienced from the day of your birth until right now. Every single second, every single hour, every single day. Then, how you reacted to those events in the minute of their happening, whether they were disastrous or joyful. Those are two things you have in your mind to give you material. Then, separate from the living experiences are all the art experiences you've had, the things you've learned from other writers, artists, poets, film directors, and composers. So all of this is in your mind as a fabulous mulch and you have to bring it out. How do you do that? I did it by making lists of nouns and then asking, What does each noun mean? You can go and make up your own list right now and it would be different than mine. The night. The crickets. The train whistle. The basement. The attic. The tennis shoes. The fireworks. All these things are very personal. Then, when you get the list down, you begin to word-associate around it. You ask, Why did I put this word down? What does it mean to me? Why did I put this noun down and not some other word? Do this and you're on your way to being a good writer. You can't write for other people. You can't write for the left or the right, this religion or that religion, or this belief or that belief. You have to write the way you see things. I tell people, Make a list of ten things you

hate and tear them down in a short story or poem. Make a list of ten things you love and celebrate them. When I wrote Fahrenheit 451 I hated book burners and I loved libraries. So there you are.”

--Ray Bradbury

“Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.”

“Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. [...] Perfectionism is a mean, frozen form of idealism, while messes are the artist’s true friend. What people somehow (inadvertently, I’m sure) forgot to mention when we were children was that we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here — and, by extension, what we’re supposed to be writing.”

--Anne Lamott

### [30 Writing Tips \(from Inside Higher Ed\) Submitted by Curtis J. Bonk on April 2, 2010 - 3:00am](#)

(I’ve amended them to 19 tips because some are simply not relevant to the writing of an honors thesis and some of them are good to look at if you are interested in graduate work but you don’t need to be to benefit from this writing advice.)

A friend just sent me an e-mail asking for writing tips. Her question is a common one -- I get this question every month from one of my doctoral students, one of my former students, or someone outside of the university where I teach. As a result, I thought that I might summarize some of the 10 suggestions I gave my friend, as well as 10 additional ones that I thought of while writing this up -- and then 10 more later on. It is now 30 ideas! Perhaps more people can benefit from the list or add to these ideas.

1. **Edit your papers a lot (but, in truth, better to be a Combiner than a Mozartian or Beethovenian):** A well-written paper is half the battle. If you are not sure about your

writing (grammar, style, content, etc.), have someone read through it. Perhaps two people (I come back to this issue in the next point). But edit and edit and edit some more. Sculpt a finely crafted work! I feel fortunate that I have become a pretty good editor -- perhaps as a result of editing two huge book projects, including my recent *Handbook of Blended Learning*. Six to 10 edits is not unusual for me. My most recent paper that was accepted for publication went through 17 rounds of edits over a two-year span, and one that a colleague and I submitted yesterday had about 9-10 revisions (so you might label me a Beethovenian; see below). If the paper reads well, then you have tackled a major hurdle.

2. Writing research in the area of keystroke mapping (which allows you to play back papers long after they are completed), which was published about 20 years ago by Lillian Bridwell and her colleagues at the University of Minnesota, indicates that there are two types of writers. Mozartian writers plan their writing in advance and can write, in just one or two sittings, very elegant text. They can compose complete sentences, paragraphs, and entire papers in their heads. And then there are Beethovenian writers, who tinker at the point of utterance. Beethovenians obsess over every little word or phrase and edit and edit and edit some more. Combiners do both. Some of you are more like a Mozartian, and pace back and forth before writing and then let it all go with your coherent plans and organizational schemes to create a lovely melody. And others (like me) are more like Beethovenian, and continue to edit and polish the text for long time. But, as a young scholar, it is best to be a combiner and do some of both: plan out your papers and write as much as you can at that first sitting, and then, as the points below indicate, you can share it and tinker with it. Still, at some point you must send it in for review. You will not get tenure with many nearly-completed papers. I can testify to that!
3. **Get feedback:** Sometimes you can get feedback from colleagues and experts on a topic -- as well as new graduate students and other people -- before sending it in. This helps to sharpen the focus of the paper. It is a test of the coherence and creativity of the ideas in the paper.
4. **Stay current:** For instance, read current news related to your field and save it. You never know where you might be able to use it. I get a weekly list of current issues in e-learning, educational technology, technology, and simulations and gaming from Judy Brown at the Academic ADL (Advanced Distributed Learning) Lab at the University of Wisconsin. This gives me tons of new ideas for keynote talks, workshops, and papers. But it is a struggle trying to read through it all the time. I also get many articles from *USA Today* and from papers in foreign countries when I travel. I have an online PowerPoint file that I expand each week wherein I scan headlines and cool pictures and findings in hopes that those visuals might be used later in the year. Last year I

accumulated over 500 slides of current topics. It helped with writing a book that I did in the fall.

5. **Be part explorer:** Explore new journals and resources when you can. Part of this keeping current is to occasionally walk through the current journal issues in your library and see what is being published. Also, take time to explore an educational Web site that you read about in an article or that someone sends to you. We are all explorers when we write. Personally, I am forced to read more when I write than before I write (see points on being a reader below). If you are not an explorer, you will not likely be a good academic writer, or at least not one whom I would like to read.
6. Roger von Oech, a creativity consultant, in his books, *A Whack in the Side of the Head* and *A Kick in the Seats of the Pants*, indicates that this explorer stage is perhaps the most vital one in the creative process, and the one many of us too often disregard; especially since we are so-called "too busy." Please do not be "busy" -- instead, make a contribution to life. Kindergarten kids are busy; you are not. Now go off and explore a bit.
7. **Be part bumblebee in gathering ideas from different places (and later part butterfly, moth, or bird):** In addition to an explorer, you might also be a bumblebee and get ideas from different sources. For instance, at conferences, you might walk from room to room (stand in the back) and see what other researchers are talking about. This assumes that you can do this without being disruptive to the speaker (e.g., when it is standing room only and you are standing in the back of the room with the door open or in a large keynote session in the back). Normally, most speakers at conferences are boring. But if you listen to someone for five to eight minutes, you can get some useful things in terms of what is current and what might be publishable down the road. In one hour, you might visit four to five different sessions. Take notes and compare them. Be courteous if you are to try to be a bumblebee. Bumblebees can also serve a purpose in cross-pollinating ideas, and move from room to room. Being a bumblebee also helps your social networks and gives you freedom to explore. Those looking for depth in a topic or discipline might shy away from being a bumblebee and sit in the entire session.
8. **Be a voracious reader (and ponderer):** Reading is the most important aspect of an academic writing plan. Alvin Toffler, who wrote the books *Future Shock* (1970), *The Third Wave* (1980), *Power Shift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence At the Edge of the 21st Century* (1990), and *Revolutionary Wealth* (2006), says he simultaneously reads seven books and compares them to get novel writing ideas. You can do the same thing -- read different articles from multiple journals. See what new connections you make.

9. People make discoveries at the intersections of different disciplines. For example, a recent article I submitted with Hee-Young Kim from SUNY Cortland incorporates a model from another field that we use to help explain instructional immediacy. Hee-Young found this article and made the creative link. And one of my research teams presented a comparison chart of Randy Garrison's Cognitive Presence/Critical Thinking in Collaborative Critical Inquiry model and a scaffolding model from the Creative Waves project at the University of New South Wales, which we were researching. They explored online discussion using each model as a step of the creative process. It was just what we needed to start on the road to publication. If they had not read Garrison's work as well as the work on creative thinking, they would not have made the connection. Read! And also reflect or ponder and take notes on what you have.
10. **Persist like an ant:** Did you ever watch an ant at work as a kid -- or as an adult? It is fascinating to watch ants navigate around things in their pathways and still get their job completed. When I was around 6 or 7, I used to make it difficult for those ants by putting up water barriers, rocks, and mud in their way, and, I hate to admit it, but I smashed a few with my basketball as well. I have some bad karma to repay yet. Anyway, they still completed their task. They were task-focused. Now, as a young scholar trying to publish, so must you be. There will be many things standing in your way to make it difficult for you. Higher education is replete with hoops and hurdles. Somebody above likes to make it difficult for us (i.e., the dean and academic provost and your colleagues and so on with all their forms and criteria, but they also want you to succeed or they would not have hired you or admitted you into graduate school and invested in you).
11. So what can you do to persist? First of all, when you get feedback on a manuscript, make the changes recommended and send it back in -- even if it looks doubtful. And send a list of what you have changed. Heck, get to know the editor personally a bit and build rapport with him or her. Rich Lehrer, a former mentor at Wisconsin who is now at Vanderbilt, once told me that every paper he worked on and addressed the reviewer comments was accepted for publication. My first years after graduate school, I did not do this. Instead, I used to run from conference to conference and never really complete the conference paper in a format accepted for a journal. This tactic nearly cost me tenure. Watch out -- do not go to too many conferences as a new person in a field, unless you turn most of them into journal articles, book chapters, and perhaps even books. It is rare for me now not to have a paper get published, but 10 years ago, that definitely was NOT the case. Persist! Be optimistic. And address those reviewer comments! Abide by most, if not all, of the journal guidelines (sometimes a paper can be longer than they state in the guidelines). And get things back fairly promptly. If your paper is close to being accepted, the editor may already be thinking about the issue in which he or she will publish it once you get it back. So get it back!

12. **Be creative in your figures, models, frameworks, charts, and graphs!** This was not in my original list of 10 ideas, but is too important to pass up mentioning (it also links to the story in #6 above). I find that papers that have a unique model, graph, chart, or figure tend to get published much more often than papers without such all-encompassing and creative visuals. Spend some time thinking about what makes your paper or proposal unique. Sit in a closet if you have to and brainstorm all the possible ways. Let's say you want to publish four or five things a year. Well, all you have to do is sit in that closet four or five times a year and think really hard. Or brainstorm with colleagues and students. Conference lunches and dinners are great times for this!
  
13. **Schedule time for writing:** Christmas break and summer are huge times for this. I no longer teach in summers, but when I did, I taught intensive courses so as to have time to write. I also tried to teach in bulk and put both of my graduate classes or both undergraduate on the same day, back to back, to save time for writing. This item (#16) may be the most important thing other than #17. You just have time to write. Do not commit to too many other people and their projects. Do what inspires you. not what inspires someone else. Right?
  
14. **Have a plan or direction for ~~the next few years and beyond~~ -- goals are critical:** What are you going to accomplish this year, next year, and the year after? Write it down. Have a goal or set of goals. We all need goals! Humans are goal-oriented creatures. If you have a goal and only get to 25 percent of it, it is better than having a goal and getting to none of it. Perhaps see what you have accomplished each year when you do your annual reports and map it out. Compare your personal growth over time. See if you meet your goals each year. Perhaps reward yourself when you do with an ice cream cone or a night out.
  
15. **Read a paper on how to create a writing plan:** My best advice for a writing plan is to see the [home page](#) [2] of my friend from grad school, Cecil Smith from Northern Illinois University, and his AERA article from 3 years ago on creating a writing plan: [Advice for new faculty members: Getting your writing program started](#) [3].
  
16. **Organization:** Cecil mentions things like organization -- that is implied in some of the other points above. But this is a critical point so I must emphasize it -- without organization, you are academically dead in the water and unlikely to get tenure. You must map out your publications by year, have identified stacks of papers and chapters to help with your writing, and put time in your planner to write. Maybe you write best in the morning. Maybe in the afternoon. Maybe at night. You decide what works for you. I just changed from a late-night person to a morning person (somewhat) in order to wake up early with family and see my daughter off to school (she is old enough to drive herself). You might need a power nap during the day. That is O.K. if it helps with

your publication and writing stamina (though I am not a medical doctor). Cecil also mentions things you can do to help write such as writing at home, closing your door at work, forwarding your phone, finding times when you are most alert, trying not to teach every day, and responding to e-mail just at two or three designated times per day.

**17. Use presentations as starter material:** A conference presentation, colloquium, workshop, or class presentation may be a great way to organize your ideas for a future paper. Take advantage of that when you are designing your presentation -- always think about how this might flow in a publishable paper. When you end up doing the same presentation over and over, it is definitely time to think about publishing your ideas. I have a book chapter I am working on today (on Wikibooks), in fact, wherein I am using notes I presented at the University of Oxford a few weeks back. I had to read some new research on Wikipedia for that talk and now I am using the ideas gained from that for my paper. I am also using some of the feedback from the audience to guide my writing. Presentation audience reactions are critical for new areas of research. Use them! Take people to lunch or dinner after your talks and ask for their opinions as to what they liked and what they think is publishable. Heck, they might even join your growing research team.

**18. Write all the time:** You can be writing anywhere you feel you are comfortable and productive as a writer. This includes church, department meetings, Thanksgiving vacations with the relatives, spring break, on a plane to spring break or in the airport while you wait, in a doctor's waiting room, etc. Some of these will not work for you. I find that church (before it starts, not during) is a good place to write notes for an article on a small piece of paper or Kleenex. I always try to have a pen and small piece of paper in my pocket. Find an approach that works for you. I find airports and airplanes to be good places to write, as well as in the car while I let my son, Alex, drive somewhere (e.g., soccer games, my mom's, etc.). Imagine how much you can write in one to two hours while you let someone else drive. Recently I started taking a limo to the airport for some trips so I can either get some sleep or write. You have limited time -- find ways to free some time up to write. Also, get a laptop with a lot of battery life. This frees you up to write outside, in a car, or on a plane!

**19. You are just a grasshopper, so get a mentor and use him/her:** Last point -- so read carefully! As in the 1970s TV show (about life in the 1870s), Kung Fu, featuring David Carradine as Kwai Chang Caine or just "Caine," you are just a grasshopper, hopping from one research project and idea to the next. Hop, hop, hop, hop and off you go. As I pointed out earlier, you need to focus some of that hopping behavior. Don't get me wrong, it is better to be an inquisitive hopper young grasshopper than to be perpetually dormant like an old volcano or spending an exorbitant amount of time hibernating like a bear in winter. However, sometime the little hopper must also listen. So, my final piece of writing advice is to get a mentor to help with all the points mentioned of the



above! A mentor can keep you on track and focused on your writing and publishing goals. A mentor is a great one to run ideas by. A mentor can lighten up conversations and make your problems with teaching, research, writing, etc., seem less severe. A mentor can also contribute to your research in a minor or major way. And that mentor can help you out at promotion and tenure time and when looking for a new job.

**Author Bio:**

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## 07. What to do if... (Troubleshooting/FAQ)

Do I have to do a thesis?

**Yes**

What happens if I don't do one?

**You are no longer a Mac Scholar. You will not graduate as a McAllaster Scholar. You will not get the fancy medal at graduation. You will also lose your McAllaster Scholarship and be dropped down to the President's Scholarship. You cannot graduate Summa Cum Laude. You cannot be awarded the President's Citation, GU's highest honor.**

**So, if you care about honors and/or getting Summa, you should plan for the thesis. This is why I suggest juniors do the research in the Spring and write in the Fall of their Senior year. It gives you the most time to work on things.**

**As with all things, you need to consider what will be best for you. Will you grow from the thesis project? Almost certainly. But it can also be mentally taxing, very stressful, and for some, can produce a good deal of anxiety. If you are concerned about having the time to get it done while also being a human, please make sure to talk to your professors or the honors director about it. There might be ways to get it done without being too stressful but it also might be the best decision to not do a thesis. Your health and well-being are more important than a fancy medal.**

What do I do if I don't have time to finish the Thesis project by the time I graduate?

**While this will be decided primarily by your thesis director and your committee, more than likely you will have to take an incomplete and complete it over the summer. If you don't complete it, you probably won't graduate.**

How do I make sure that I am able to complete my Thesis Project in time to graduate?

**Proper planning, discipline, and a fair amount of courage will make sure you get your thesis project done in time. If you are a junior, think about beginning your project over Spring semester. If you can't do that, at least meet with one of your professors about organizing potential projects. The more research and organizing you can do early on, the less painful the timeframe will be for you. If you are a senior, make sure you are in constant contact with your director so that they know where you are in the process and they are able to help you out. If you are a second semester senior...you might need to get really Bon Iver about it--lock yourself in a cabin in the woods and write for like 3 weeks. You can get it done, it will just take a lot of work.**

How do I prepare for my Thesis Defense?

**Drink lots of coffee. Watch lightsaber battles. Listen to inspirational music. Realize that you are the expert on the subject you wrote about and that you are not defending something you're unprepared to talk about. Rather, you are having a conversation about a project that you spent a year (or more) working on.**

## **08. Compendium of Advice from Survivors**

“As a religion/English/history triple major I tried to pick a thesis topic that would somehow connect all three. I landed on Jewish-American literature. When choosing a thesis topic it is important to identify what topic interests you enough that you are willing to spend a lot (and I mean A LOT) of time with it. I had recently read *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer and was completely obsessed with it. I wanted to consume the novel again, to re-read with a fine tooth comb, and to spend time spelling out my love for the narrative, the style, the thematic elements, and the language. So that novel became my contemporary example of Jewish-American literature, and I compared it to a mid-century collection of short stories, and a novella from the 1930s. Another important aspect is to select a topic that has a lot of buried

treasure - little tidbits and pockets of goodness that can be unearthed and re-arranged and dissected. Also, don't hold back - jump feet first into whatever outlandish topic you want! You need to narrow your focus enough that you can fit your argument into an honors thesis, but don't be afraid to tackle the tough stuff. Jewish-American literature is a fairly endless topic and is heavily influenced (of course) by religion, as well as the historical context of the immigrant and first-generation American writers. It was an unwieldy subject, so I narrowed my topic down further by examining the role of memory in the three texts - both the religious memory of Jewish writers and the way memories were used to create identity for the characters in the texts.

My honors thesis was the longest thing I'd ever written before then (60 pages!). It was a lot of late nights hunkered over my desk while my roommates and friends watched movies and hung out across the room. But I learned a lot about myself - that I could tackle such a daunting project and win, that I had real thoughts and opinions to express, and that if I slowed down and thought carefully I could produce some pretty quality writing. My thesis was by no means perfect (my dad actually found a bunch of typos when he read it after I'd graduated...oops!), but it gave me a lot of confidence about my own work ethic and abilities. Also, it taught me how to become friends with a text. To spend time with someone else's words and to form a reciprocal relationship where the text feeds you with knowledge and emotions and in return you build an argument and craft connections using those ideas. It's a pretty nerdy - but pretty amazing - feeling. Good luck with your honor's theses! It's going to be fun!"

(Dr. Kate Netzler-Burch, '06, Higher Education Researcher)

"I wrote my dissertation on "Church-State Relations: An Examination of the Effects of the Ottoman Empire upon the Ecumenical Patriarchate from 1453-1750."

I knew I wanted to write a thesis because I wanted to be able to say that I graduated with honors. I was a double major between political science and religion/philosophy so I was looking for a topic that could both marry those two topics and also be relevant to our current world understanding. We were in a war with both Afghanistan and Iraq at the time and I realized that in all my history classes hadn't really studied in depth the Ottoman empire that ruled the middle east for over 500 years. Once I knew I wanted to study the Ottomans including my interest in Orthodox Christianity kinda flowed out of it. I kept narrowing down and doing some preliminary research with my advisor (Scott Neumann) and landed on the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

I learned quickly during the process how important it was to be able to access the source materials. There was very limited works on the Ottomans that was available in English that was written during the time period I was researching. I also learned quickly how helpful having the right people on your thesis committee it was. One of my advisors didn't really even look at the work until it was done and I am not sure he ever read it.

As you undertake the experience make sure to block out the significant time it is going to take and really explore your advisors and make sure that they know they can say no. Make expectations clear at the beginning of what both of you want out of the process and whether either of you have the time for it.”

(Ian M. Kitterman, J.D., '06, U.S. Department of State)

“I wish there was something really exciting or deep to say about writing a thesis, but it’s mostly about sitting down and just writing. I always find it helpful to just barf out words and ideas on the page and then go back later to see if you should keep any of it. Take nice long breaks from writing where you do something life affirming and active: go for a walk, get some coffee, make out with your gf/bf, pet an animal, etc.

Also, don’t forget that your advisor is not just the person who is evaluating you, but should be more of a mentor. If your advisor isn’t willing to give you helpful guidance or feedback, then you ought to find a new advisor. You need feedback and you need criticism. Learn to love challenges and interventions to your work. Get anyone at all to give you feedback. Post a summary of an idea on an internet forum, show a chapter or section to a friend, let your mom read it, whatever. Get all the feedback you can.

The best place for bad ideas are out in the open. Be adventurous in your thinking and writing. Don’t write your advisor’s thesis, make sure it’s your own.”

(Dr. Matt Bernico, '10, Kairos Center NYC)

“The first thing I would say about writing a thesis to one who is in the throes of thesis is, it's worth it. At least it was for me. While the thesis that I produced was miles from perfect, I learned a lot from the experience and it was definitely helpful to me later when I was working on my M.A. Secondly, I would say that if you made it this far in the program you have the ability to write a good (or at least acceptable) thesis. Lastly, it is very helpful to have friends around who are going through the same thing that you are. I don't think I would have finished my thesis unless a friend and I had set up a temporary hermitage at Kent's house during spring break. Having other people around who are going through what you are going through is very helpful.”

(David Justice, M.A., '12, current Saint Louis University PhD student in Theology)

“In my experience, the real challenge in writing a thesis is managing the emotional and mental toll. Be braced for that, and be intentional about taking care of yourself. Here’s what I find helps.

Above all, do not compare yourself to others! Writing a thesis will look and feel different for everyone, and trying to divine meaning out of those differences is an exercise in masochism. That does not mean you should isolate yourself from your thesis-writing peers and dissertation-holding mentors. I highly encourage seeking out others with whom you can celebrate, commiserate, and generally verbally process. Surviving is about comradeship, not competition. That's a pretty good rule for life, too.

If you need help, get it. You won't feel like you have time, but nothing will derail your project faster than the fatigue of depression or the paralysis of anxiety. Make sure the voice in your head likes you, is sympathetic and compassionate toward you, and encourages you. If you can't find that voice in your head, find someone else who will be that voice for you.

Realize that for probably most of you, this is totally new territory. I found that my old ways of doing things (researching, organizing notes, writing habits, etc.) didn't work for me anymore. Instead of understanding that I was simply learning a new skill—a process that always involves trial and error—I thought I was a fraud. Imposter syndrome (look it up) runs rampant in academia. It's perfectly fine to feel it. Just try not to believe it, and do not let it influence your decisions. Understand that none of us know what we are doing until we have done it. It might comfort you to know that during my year, at least three people (including myself) decided to quit. Thankfully, we were all talked out of it, and instead of being found out as frauds, we have all gone on to do successful graduate work. (It may also comfort you to know that I have a friend who did quit, and she still went on to do successful, well-funded graduate work.)

Finally, my two pieces of practical advice:

(1) Plan as well as you can (I know Dr. Brittingham is helping you with that, and you can also look through a book like *The Craft of Research* to help with it), but hold those plans loosely. I tried about four different note-taking strategies before I found the right one. The final argument of my thesis and the entire last chapter came out of a theorist that I didn't even discover until the third semester of my project. A successful thesis is, I think, usually a unique mix of careful planning and dexterous improv. Try to embrace both, whatever way you find best.

(2) The note-taking strategy I ended up with was a private personal wiki. There are lots of free sites. It's easier to organize (I found) than Google docs, but it's all still online, which means you don't have to worry about losing your notebooks or suffering hard drive related tragedies. Best of all, when you are trying to remember something you read months ago, CTRL+F is your very dear friend—especially when you can search all of your notes at once. It might not work for you, but it's something to consider.”

(Amanda Griffin, *MDiv*, '12, current Yale PhD student in Theology)

### Recent McAllaster Grads Answer the Question: What Did You Learn From the Thesis?

"I learned to dedicate myself to a project, be disciplined, and find creative solutions to obstacles" --Michelle Birnbaum, '17

"I learned a butt ton about time management and how not to procrastinate. I started research early, and it has been actually a lot of fun writing about something that interests me. I feel like I barely scraped the surface with this topic, and I could have gone on forever about new findings and theories, but I only had a year. It could be something I potentially come back to in the future, but for now I am satisfied knowing I've been extremely challenged, and I walk away knowing I made the absolute best use of my time here at Greenville."

--Jackie *Bleisch*, '17

"While my project mainly consisted of introspective art, I learned the importance of contextualizing what I was learning and composing. Research is important, and so is peer review. For the first time probably ever, I had multiple people check over various things I was doing to make sure it was first of all cool, and secondly to make sure it fit with the goals of my individual project."

--Trey Brockman, '17

"...pick a topic that is really interesting to you and a little out of your comfort zone."

--Emma Canady, M.A. '17

"In terms of my thesis, I found that I enjoy the process of assessing data and making meaning out of numbers. The thesis defense was not as scary as I anticipated. From the process of researching and writing, I learned a lot about my work habits. I found that I put off the project more than I'd like to admit. Even if passion drives a project, it can still get put to the wayside because it is daunting. Even if things make a lot of sense in your head, it is still difficult to effectively put words to those thoughts. As I became an expert on my thesis topic, I learned how to be an effective teacher in writing and presentation of the topic."

--Claire *Sattler*, '17

"Fake it till you make it."

--Liz Johnson, '17

## 09. Checklist

- Thesis Director
- Thesis Committee Chosen
- Topic Chosen
- “Declaration of Intent” Submitted
- Met with Reference Librarian
- Prospectus submitted to Thesis Director
- Proposal submitted to Thesis Director
- Personal Project Timeline Created
- Final Draft submitted to Thesis Director
- Corrections made on Thesis per Director’s comments
- Revised Final Draft submitted to Committee
- Schedule Thesis Defense
- Defend Your Thesis
- Corrections made on Thesis per committee comments
- Final approval of thesis by committee
- Approval page signed by ALL members of the committee
- Format thesis for Library Binding
- Print formatted thesis and submit binding copies to Library Periodicals Office

## IMPORTANT ADDENDUM TO THESIS (2016):

To begin the process, in addition to registering for Departmental Honors Research credit, students should contact me in the Library as soon as possible so that I can give them a "Declaration of Intent" form and the "Instructions for Preparation of Departmental Honors Theses." Once I receive their completed Declaration of Intent, I will include them in all informational correspondence and workshop invitations related to the project throughout the year.

Traditionally the Departmental Honors project has focused on researching and producing a written thesis. This past May ISAAC passed the following broadened definition for the project:

“The Departmental Honors Thesis may also consist of a creative project, involving creative writing, art piece(s), music, video, digital media, etc. If so, the creative product would be accompanied by a traditional research paper on a related topic, or a written reflection paper discussing the process of the artistic creation, how the person’s work fits into its genre and related works, and what was learned during the process, including a bibliography. Copies of the project or photographs, recordings, etc., of it would be stored in the Archives with the written reflection paper or research paper. The student would work with his/her Committee Chair to plan the work schedule for the 2 or 3 semester span of the project, and to decide what criteria would be used for grading.

Please note that the Departmental Honors Thesis Project must be separate from a typical senior project, although it may use the senior project as a springboard.

The length, format, and grading will be determined with the faculty Committee Chair and presented in writing within one month of the beginning of the first semester in which the student is enrolled in their first honors thesis course.” (ISAAC Minutes of May 3, 2016)