

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

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

What is an Honors Essay?

The honors essay provides opportunities for extensive study and writing on a topic of recognized worth and of personal interest. It is a focused investigation of a definite body of material that requires substantial research, analysis, and interpretation – a year-long project, researched and written with the guidance of a faculty tutor. It is an essay – neither a monograph nor a dissertation – and it should normally be 50-80 double-spaced typed pages (approx. 12,000-20,000 words).

What is an Appropriate Topic for a Humanities Honors Essay?

The topic should be

- grounded in the humanities
- interdisciplinary in the kinds of questions it pursues and in its method of inquiry
- of special and lasting interest to the student
- potentially of interest to a wider audience of specialists and/or general educated public

When to Begin and How is the Topic Approved?

You must begin serious thinking and planning early in your junior year (see **The Timetable and Checklist** below). Your proposed topic should be presented to the Committee in Charge before the end of the winter quarter of your junior year. The process of researching and writing a proposal begins in the **Autumn Quarter of your junior year**, and continues

over the next two quarters. You will earn 2 units (S/NC) in Humanities 200A for developing and writing your honors essay proposal: 1 unit in winter for a draft of the proposal, and 1 unit in spring when the proposal is approved.

Remember that each unit represents approximately 30 hours of work (60 hours over the two quarters) in developing the thesis proposal – hours devoted to research, faculty consultation, and writing the proposal.

What is the Committee's Role?

The purpose of dialogue with the Committee regarding the proposal is to assure that each student has developed a topic that is appropriate to the scope of an honors essay, draws upon the interdisciplinary nature of the Program, and is textually based in the humanities. (The term "text" signifies various media and symbolic objects; many essays have focused on music, art, film, architecture, popular culture, etc.) The Committee's charge is to help you define an appropriate topic which meets your interests and is realistic, given the time and other constraints.

Time-Line for Developing a Proposed Topic in the Junior Year

AUTUMN QUARTER:

- **Checking in with the Director**

All juniors who wish to write senior honors essays must check in with the Director or Associate Director in Autumn Quarter. Each

student will be notified about possible meeting times. **Students who are not on campus in Autumn must check in by e-mail (monica.moore@stanford.edu).**

WINTER QUARTER:

- **The Junior Meeting**

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

This material may also be found on-line: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/HSP/GPH/index.html>

Students who are overseas will receive this information by mail and thus should be sure to leave an accurate email address with the office.

FIRST STEPS

- **Initial Consultation With The Faculty and the Program Director**

Your first step in developing your ideas, after discussing it with your peers and friends, is to discuss it a faculty member whose course you are taking or have taken and the Director of ISH. This should help you to focus your ideas and consider the options in approaching your general topic.

- **Honors Consultant**

Your next step is with Hilton Obenzinger (VPUE), who is the designated honors consultant and who will be available for individual meetings to discuss each student's proposed topic, articles and books to read in preparation for thesis writing, and various options in selecting relevant faculty for tutoring, mentoring, or consultations. He will also be available for e-mail consultation with students who are overseas or otherwise not on campus.

Each student on is expected to contact Hilton Obenzinger (obenzinger@stanford.edu).

- **Preliminary Proposal**

After your initial consultations (above), you will prepare a two- or three-page preliminary proposal. It should be a concise description of a detailed topic, explaining how the topic will be investigated. *Although this proposal is preliminary, in the sense that you will have an opportunity to make improvements, it should be complete and as defined as possible.* You are encouraged to discuss your draft with a faculty member, who may potentially be your tutor or a consultant. This preliminary proposal is due on **February 8, 2008 at noon-- extensions will only be granted in unusual circumstances and must be requested in writing.**

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

You should make sure that the faculty you wish to be your tutor will be available for frequent consultations during your senior year. Communication is often complicated with the faculty who are on leave and off-campus, and students are strongly advised to seek out the faculty tutors who are planning to be in residence during their senior year.

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

SPRING QUARTER:

• Submit Final Essay Proposal

Each draft proposal will be carefully read by the Committee in Charge and will be returned to you by the end of April with suggestions for revision and possible reformulation. You will be asked to consult one of the Committee members about these suggestions and comments. **All revisions are due by May 7, 2008 – without exception.** This second version should be a thoughtful and careful statement of your topic that incorporates or addresses suggestions made by the Committee.

The cover sheet should be signed by your prospective faculty tutor—or, alternatively, you may have your prospective tutor send an email confirming his/her approval of your topic. You will receive feedback on this proposal and given the opportunity to make further revision, if needed.

URP Grants for Undergraduate Research

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

See more information at http://ual.stanford.edu/OO/research_opps/Grants.html

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



Timetable and Checklist

AUTUMN:

- Check in with Director or Associate Director; begin considering possible topics; take appropriate courses

WINTER:

- Junior Meeting;
- Take appropriate courses;
- Meet with honors consultant, Hilton Obenzinger (VPUE);
- Consult faculty;
- Write preliminary proposal;
- Sign up for one unit of 200A*

- Feb. 8, 2008 at noon:** Preliminary proposal due
By March 15: Committee feedback

SPRING:

- Consult with designated faculty;
- Arrange for a faculty tutor;
- Sign up for one unit of 200A*
- May 7, 2008: Submit revised proposal**
By June 7: Receive committee response

Developing Your Essay Proposal

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

The most common mistakes students make when developing their proposals are

- trying to include too much in the proposed study
- concentrating on theory without focusing on specific texts and specific issues
- failing to explain how the scholarly investigation will be conducted
- failing to specify, for a comparative study, why particular texts were chosen ie., what

do you hope to discover by comparing A to B rather than to other possible texts.

- not defining specialized theoretical terminology in relation to the project

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

- **Write about texts that are on record, not life in progress**

In the past many Senior Honors Proposals have proved unworkable because they proposed to solve broad, abstract questions. Successful essays, by way of contrast, always pose an interpretive problem and involves some comparison(although the texts in question need not be literary, and, indeed, might even include such artifacts as a work of film/performance, visual art, or music). To give an example, you cannot write a Senior Essay on whether Emile Zola's portrayal of French mining towns in his novel *Germinal* is historically accurate; to do so you would have to go to France and spend years burrowing about in the archives to document such an assertion one way or another. But, based on your knowledge of other contemporary works, you can write about the philosophical, historical, psychological, and aesthetic assumptions that inform Zola's portrayal, and determine to what extent Zola was in dialogue with these other works and what was new or conventional about his grasp of contemporary reality.

Your essay, in other words, must ultimately serve to illuminate a text or a group of texts—in context—not the cosmos, or history, culture, or society in general. The actual document or documents that you pore over as you write your essay will be a group of writings (or paintings or works of music, etc.), not the world, the past, the state, or various metaphysical essences.

- **Framing your topic**

You need to frame your topic in a way that makes clear the approach you are proposing to use to investigate the question(s) you are

asking. (You may sometimes hear this step in the development of your topic referred to as the “methodology.”) This might be something as familiar as a close reading of a text, or it may mean a more complicated historical or theoretical approach. **It is important that you can summarize the approach you will be using.**

- **Take courses on your subject**

The three courses required for the Honors Program are not sufficient preparation in themselves. One of the most frequent sources of students' inability to come up with a workable proposal is a failure to have taken advantage of the courses that might have prepared them to do so. You should look for courses that provide preparation in basic theoretical principles of the disciplines that apply to your fields of interest as well as courses that provide relevant context. Members of the Committee will be happy to give advice about appropriate courses.

To pursue the example given above, this does not necessarily mean taking a course on Zola, but courses on the novel, on modern French literature and history, history of European industrialization and modernization, including the conditions of the working class, social theory, and economic history. Such courses will provide you with much needed contextual information for your essay, suggest the sorts of questions one can pose and the strategies one can adopt in attempting to answer those questions, and also provide you with the rudiments of a vocabulary for addressing your topic. If you fail to take courses that situate your subject in a relevant context, you are often in the situation of having to reinvent the wheel, and you will end up revising your essay proposal several times before it can be hammered into shape.

You will note that the cover-sheet for your proposal asks you to identify coursework that provides you with the requisite tools for the study you propose to undertake. The

Committee wants to be sure that you have the necessary preparation before you dive into your research. Therefore, make sure to consult with your tutor and other faculty knowledgeable in the general area of your topic.

- **Consult with Stanford scholars**

Don't try to write your essay proposal simply on your own. Not only are you paying a handsome tuition and have a right to seek advice from the faculty, but the faculty in most cases are eager to offer their advice and discuss your proposed thesis. Find out who the (relative) experts on your proposed topic are, and seek them out in their office hours or make appointments with them. It is wise to bring along some outline of your ideas for your proposal so that you can check off the promising ones and those that may lead to a blind alley. Those of us in the Humanities Honors Program are happy to offer advice ourselves and to suggest other people on the faculty with whom you might usefully talk. It is also wise to consult several different members of the faculty to discuss your proposed project before you settle on whom you would like the Committee to invite to act as your tutor.

The following faculty have worked with students in the Program or are suggested as consultants for students developing their honors essay topics. This is not an all-inclusive list. It is merely provided to help you find possible advisers if you are not yet certain with whom you might consult. By checking their departmental web pages, or perusing the *Stanford Bulletin*, you will be able to determine their main areas of scholarly interest.

Art: Scott Bukatman, Pamela Lee, Pavle Levi, Melinda Takeuchi

Asian Languages: Haun Saussy, Yquin Zhou

Anthropology: Matthew Kohrman

Classics: Andrea Nightingale, Rush Rehm,

Comparative Literature: Margaret Cohen, Russell Berman, Amir Eshel, Monika Greenleaf, H.U. Gumbrecht, David Palumbo-Liu

Drama: Harry Elam, Ehren Fordyce, Branislav Jakovljevic, Alice Rayner, Rush Rehm, Janice Ross

English: Helen Brooks*, Shelley Fishkin, Ursula Heise, Denise Gigante, Nicholas Jenkins, Andrea Lunsford,

Paula Moya, Robert Polhemus, David Riggs, Ramón Saldívar, Carol Shloss, Alex Woloch

French and Italian: J-M Apostolidès, Robert Harrison, Joshua Landy, Jeffrey Schnapp, Dan Edelstein, Laura Wittman

German Studies: Russell Berman, Márton Dornbach, Amir Eshel, Charitini Duvaldzi

History: Keith Baker, J.P. Daughton, Estelle Freedman, Mark Mancall, Jessica Riskin, Paul Robinson*

Humanities: Gregory Freidin

Music: Mark Applebaum, Thomas Grey, Tobias Plebuch, Heather Hadlock

Philosophy: Lanier Anderson, David Hills, Nadeem Hussain, Allen Wood, Rega Wood

Religious Studies: Carl Bielefeldt, Charlotte Fonrobert, Hester Gelber, Thomas Sheehan, Brent Sockness, Lee Yearley

Slavic Lang/Lit: Lazar Fleishman, Gregory Freidin, Monika Greenleaf, Gabriella Safran

Spanish and Portuguese: Joan Ramon Resina, Vincent Barletta, Jorge Ruffinelli, Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano

STS: Henry Lowood

- **In Writing, Less is More**

In preparing their essay proposals, juniors in the program are almost invariably excessively ambitious. They propose topics that are too large to manage in a fifty-eighty page essay. They do so because they genuinely want to take on a "big" question and because they can't imagine being able to fill up even fifty pages with sentences if they define their topic (in their view) too narrowly.

You can be assured that these assumptions are misguided. In practice, the problem you face will be to get your subject cut down to manageable dimensions. If you don't, you will end up with a topic that is too vast to be treated effectively.

Right from the start, then, think about how to reduce and delimit the topic. Don't take on a whole writer; take on a particular aspect of his or her work. Don't compare one writer to another, compare a book by one writer with a book by another writer, or a theme in one writer with a theme in another writer. Don't take on an entire epic, take on certain episodes or concerns.

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- **Do it now**

Seriously launch the process of developing an Honors Essay Proposal immediately. Procrastination may result in your having to abandon your project altogether. Carpe diem! Now is the hour!

Human Subjects

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

See <http://humansubjects.stanford.edu>
Information is also available at the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Office in Sweet Hall.

Overseas Studies

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

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