Overview

The honors thesis is a long-standing tradition in honors programs and colleges, including the Lee Honors College at Western Michigan University. An honors thesis is defined as an original work of scholarship or creative activity completed by an undergraduate honors student. The honors thesis is required to graduate from the Lee Honors College. The thesis should reflect the academic standards of the field of study, and must be approved by a full-time WMU faculty member who agrees to serve as the honors thesis committee chair, and at least one additional committee member with significant expertise in the area of study or a closely related discipline. Examples of honors theses include senior engineering design projects, creative works of fiction, original documentaries, novel educational curricula, original performances or works of art, and traditional research papers. Visit our online collection in ScholarWorks to view samples of recent theses and a list of titles going back more than 40 years.

The honors thesis experience is intended to provide you with an opportunity to hone pertinent skills and knowledge in your major field of study, or in another area of significant interest to you, under the close guidance of content experts. The written honors thesis should reflect the expertise you have gained through completion of the thesis project. It is intended to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge and skills developed during your undergraduate studies at WMU. Students typically find that completion of an honors thesis is viewed quite favorably by professional and graduate school admission committees, as well as by prospective employers.

Steps and Timeline:

Step one: HNRS 4980: How and Why to Write an Honors Thesis
Honors students must enroll in and complete HNRS 4980: How and Why to Write an Honors Thesis no later than the first semester of the junior year. This online course is designed to assist you in successfully navigating and completing the honors thesis and will provide you with many tools to help facilitate your work. While not required of students entering the honors college prior to fall 2014, it is strongly recommended that those students consider taking this course as well. The credit counts toward your honors course credit hour requirement. Students in Engineering curricula and the BFA curricula in Dance and Theatre have coursework built in to their programs that may substitute for this requirement.

Step two: Select a thesis topic (during the junior year)
It is never too early to begin thinking about a thesis topic! Ideally, the thesis topic should be chosen early in the junior year. Most students find this step to be the most difficult, so do not worry if you are struggling to select a topic. Remember that the thesis topic does not have to be within your major program of study. To find a topic you should reflect on courses, topics in courses, and experiences (e.g., study abroad, field experiences,
internships) that you have found to be especially interesting and engaging. Explore these ideas with some additional reading and conversations with other students, staff, and faculty. Your preliminary research on the topic should include some background reading of textbooks, published papers or other scholarly (peer-reviewed) or artistic materials. You should aim at finding a topic that really appeals to you; your preliminary reading and conversations may suggest some areas that are prime for additional research. Do not worry if your ideas are still a bit nebulous when you proceed to step three. Come to the Honors Thesis Information session presented each semester to learn more, or schedule an appointment to discuss your ideas and questions with an honors college administrator or advisor.

**Step three: Choose your thesis committee chair (in your junior year)**
Once you have settled on a preliminary topic, the next step is to identify a thesis committee chair (also sometimes referred to as the thesis mentor or advisor). Ideally, the thesis chair will have significant expertise not just in your general program of study, but in an area closely related to the topic you have chosen for your honors thesis. **Note that the thesis chair must be a full-time faculty member at WMU.** There are many ways to find a thesis chair. If you choose a topic based on a course you took at WMU, make an appointment with the course instructor to discuss your idea. Even if the instructor is unable to serve as your thesis chair, he or she might be able to suggest a faculty member who is available and who has expertise closely related to your topic. If you do not already know the person the instructor recommends to be your thesis chair, ask your instructor if he or she would be willing to introduce you to that person. Another good idea is to check the web to see if there are faculty at WMU with expertise closely related to your chosen topic. Most faculty identify their specific areas of expertise on their departmental websites. If you find someone with appropriate expertise, you can introduce yourself to them through a “cold” phone call or email or you might ask a faculty member or graduate student you already know to provide an introduction for you.

Another option is to contact the Lee Honors College academic advisors, dean or associate dean to see if they can help you find an appropriate honors thesis chair or introduce you to a faculty member you found by searching on the web. **Hint:** Faculty will be the most receptive to students who are professional and well prepared.

Make sure that your first contact, whether by email, phone or an in-person appointment, leaves a good impression. Of course, you must be on time for your appointment, and if you must reschedule, do so early. **Do not be a no-show!** You should demonstrate that you have done a little preliminary research on your topic, by reading some textbooks, journal articles or other scholarly or artistic materials. You should be able to articulate what interests you about this area of scholarship and why you would like to pursue an honors thesis related to it. The more prepared you are, and enthusiastic about your potential project, the more likely it is that a busy faculty member will want to take the time to become your thesis chair!

Also, be open-minded in your discussions. It may be that your topic will be difficult to research, or that there is already a great deal of work that has been done in that area. A potential thesis chair might suggest some other ideas for a thesis topic – listen to these and
consider them carefully, but do make sure that you settle on a topic that is interesting to you, as well as to your thesis chair.

**Step four: Submit your thesis declaration form (in your junior year)**

Ideally, you should submit this form at least three semesters before you intend to graduate. You can find it here: [wmich.edu/honors/advising/forms](http://wmich.edu/honors/advising/forms)

You will need to fill in your proposed thesis topic, attach a one-page general description of the work to be done, and have your thesis chair sign the form. If you decide to change topic, thesis mentor, or date of graduation, you can simply complete a new form. Your thesis declaration form either will be approved or recommended for amendment by the honors college dean or associate dean; this decision will be communicated to you and your thesis chair via WMU email.

Recommendation for amendment usually occurs for one of three reasons: (1) an incomplete form, (2) the proposed thesis chair is not a full-time WMU faculty member, or (3) the thesis topic is not sufficiently scholarly. You will be informed what the problems are that must be addressed before the proposal can be reconsidered and are encouraged to make an appointment to come in to the honors college if you need more information.

Note that if people are the subject of your research, you must contact the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) at (269) 387-8293. This includes the use of surveys, even if they are completely anonymous. Also see the information for honors students at: [wmich.edu/research/students/protocol](http://wmich.edu/research/students/protocol); this is vital to the approval of your thesis. If you write a thesis that needs HSIRB approval, and you have not received it before you begin your research, the study is invalid and the thesis must be destroyed. This is also a research ethics violation which may subject you to discipline by The Office of Student Conduct. This is a federal, not a University or honors college regulation. Only the HSIRB can determine whether approval is required, and only the HSIRB can grant approval for research that involves people. If there is any question that your proposed research might need HSIRB approval, you should check with your thesis chair, the honors college associate dean or directly contact the HSIRB before you proceed with your work.

If your project involves animals, you must contact the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) at (269) 387-4484. Only the IACUC can grant approval for research that involves animals. Further information on conducting research with animals is available at: [wmich.edu/research/compliance/animals](http://wmich.edu/research/compliance/animals).

**Step five: Choose your thesis committee (in your junior year)**

In addition to the honors thesis chair, you must select at least one other expert to serve on your committee. It is highly recommended that you select at least two committee members in addition to your thesis chair. The committee members need not be WMU faculty, but should have expertise relevant to your topic of study. The committee could include faculty from the same or another department or college at WMU, faculty from another institution, graduate students, WMU staff, or members of the broader community. Note that your committee may NOT be comprised of only a faculty member and a graduate student who is advised or supervised by that faculty member. If you wish to include a graduate student
advised or supervised by your thesis chair, you may do so, but you must then select an additional committee member who does not work in the research group of your thesis chair.

You should consult with your thesis chair regarding possible members of your committee soon after you choose a topic. Ideally, your committee members will meet with you before you begin work on the thesis so that they may give you advice and ideas regarding your proposed work. It is a good idea to arrange an initial meeting with your chair and committee in which you present a brief thesis proposal. This need not be formal, although your committee will likely appreciate it if you provide them with a one- or two-page summary of your proposed work a few days before the meeting. This will allow them time to consider your proposal and offer you valuable guidance. Use your initial committee meeting to get feedback about your topic, and to put together a preliminary timeline for your work. This will help you get started on your project, and gain insight into what constitutes an appropriate timeline for the proposed work. Once you begin your project, you should send periodic updates on your progress to your full committee and should also consider scheduling regular meetings with them. You should definitely have regularly scheduled meetings with your thesis chair.

Step six: Register for HNRS 4990: Honors Thesis credit (no later than the semester you plan to defend your thesis)
Honors students must enroll in and complete at least one credit of HNRS 4990: Honors Thesis prior to graduation. This course counts toward the Experiential portion of the honors credit hour requirement. The thesis chair serves as instructor of record for your credit(s), which means that the thesis chair will be responsible for assigning the grade for your work on your honors thesis. While not required of students entering prior to fall 2014, it is strongly recommended that those students consider taking this course as well. Students in some curricula such as engineering, psychology and fine arts may substitute an approved capstone course from their curriculum for this requirement; however capstone courses in the major typically may not count toward the honors credit hour requirement. Questions regarding which courses are approved should be directed to your honors college advisor.

In order to be registered for HNRS 4990, you must complete and submit a signed HNRS 4990 registration form at least one month prior to the semester in which you wish to enroll in the course. The form is available here: wmich.edu/honors/advising/forms.

Step seven: Submit your thesis defense certificate request form (at least one month before thesis defense)
Once you have decided on a thesis defense date, you should submit your thesis defense certificate request form, which you can find here: wmich.edu/honors/advising/forms. This form must be filed at least 30 days before your thesis defense, but turning it in sooner is highly recommended. This form should include your final thesis title as you would like it to appear on graduation materials, your intended date of graduation, the date you will defend your thesis and names of your committee members. We strongly encourage all students to defend during Thesis Celebration Days, which are held in the honors college at the end of each fall and spring semester. Theses defended during these days in the Lee Honors College (and only during
these days) are eligible for a “Best Thesis Presentation” award as judged by WMU faculty and staff in attendance. The defense request form will be used by the honors college staff to record your thesis title for graduation, to advertise your thesis defense and to generate a packet of materials for your thesis committee. You will be notified via email when your defense packet is ready and should pick it up at the honors college before the defense, bring it to your thesis defense, have your committee members complete all required paperwork, and then turn in that paperwork at the honors college.

**Step eight: Defend your thesis (before you graduate)**

You have completed your project and have written up your findings. Well done - you are almost finished! We recommend that you defend your thesis at least one semester before you intend to graduate to ensure your honors thesis does not get buried or end up unfinished in the flurry of activities and requirements that are part of your final semester. You **MUST** complete your defense before you graduate, or you will not graduate from the Lee Honors College.

You should make sure that your whole committee has a final version of your written thesis at least a week (preferably two) before your defense so that they have plenty of time to review it. You should plan for your defense to take 1-2 hours. Most are completed within one hour, but some committees prefer to have a longer time – check with your thesis committee in advance. Rooms are only reserved for one hour for the Thesis Celebration Days at the honors college. If your committee anticipates that more than one hour will be needed for your defense, please make certain that your room is available or make plans to continue your closed-door defense in another location.

The defense consists of three parts:

- An oral presentation of your work, open to the public;
- A public question and answer session;
- A closed-door oral examination with your thesis committee.

The oral presentation typically consists of a 15-20 minute overview of your thesis work. In the sciences, social sciences, business and education, this is generally a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation including a description of the motivation for your work, a summary of related work, the approach you used, the results obtained, your conclusions and their significance. In the humanities, this might include a reading from your original paper. Engineering and the fine arts defenses are typically handled a little differently (see below).

After you complete your presentation, allow 5-15 minutes for questions from the public audience. Following this period, your committee (at a minimum, your thesis chair and one committee member must be present for the exam) will conduct a closed-door oral examination. Many students are very worried about the oral exam – don’t be! For most students, this is an opportunity to have an in-depth discussion with your committee about the work you have completed. View it as a chance to show off your knowledge, discuss what you might have done differently in retrospect and what you would do if you were to continue this project, for example, as a graduate student. Most students actually report that

Last updated July, 2017
they enjoyed the oral exam and the chance to discuss their project and findings in detail with their committee.

Engineering Students: College of Engineering and Applied Sciences students typically use their senior design project as the honors thesis. In this case, the presentation given at the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences Senior Design Day will serve as a substitute for the oral defense of the thesis described above. Engineering students may also choose to present their work during the Thesis Celebration Days to compete for best thesis presentation prizes. In this case, the committee does not need to be present and no oral examination follows the presentation.

Fine Arts Students: BFA students in curricula in the College of Fine Arts typically review their creative work and artifacts such as portfolios and/or recordings with their committee during their oral defense because their public portion is typically a recital, performance or exhibit that occurs at a separate time.

**Step nine: Submit your final approved thesis**

After your successful thesis defense, your committee may recommend some further revisions to your written thesis. You have 30 days after you graduate to turn in your final, revised and approved thesis. The thesis and the abstract should be submitted electronically as a PDF or MP3, MP4 or WAV file, together with a signed copy of each of the documents in the thesis packet you received after turning in your defense certificate request form (completed and signed ScholarWorks agreement and signed defense certificate). For detailed instructions on the submission of your final thesis project, please read carefully the instruction sheet included in your defense packet.

Note: For some students (especially in the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences and occasionally in the sciences and the College of Health and Human Services), research conducted for the honors thesis contains proprietary information that cannot be released to the general public. In that case, the final thesis should be submitted to the dean of the honors college for approval, and a short abstract should be included for general dissemination. Likewise, College of Fine Arts students who complete performances that cannot be recorded or reproduced due to copyright restrictions must consult with the associate dean of the honors college regarding alternate documentation. All College of Fine Arts BFA students submit a written document detailing their experience, the context or history of their performance (e.g., liner or program notes) or other relevant information such as a portfolio in lieu of the recorded performance. The thesis declaration approval email from the dean or associate dean outlines exactly what must be submitted to document BFA theses.

**A cautionary note!** Students are urged to use caution if they are approached by publishers offering to publish their theses. It is strongly recommended that students consult with their faculty mentor regarding reputable journals in their disciplines. Predatory publishers send unsolicited requests for articles, may send false information about their journals and typically charge large fees to authors. Likewise, sham conference organizers will send...
targeted emails asking for abstract or article contributions with substantial submission fees. Before responding to such requests, please discuss them with your faculty mentor.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Why should I do an honors thesis?
The honors thesis is intended to give you an opportunity to complete your own authentic scholarly or creative work. This is different from a typical “school assignment” because you choose the topic, design and carry out the project and make all decisions regarding the work. Your thesis chair serves as an advisor and consultant, rather than dictating the work to be done. Although this may seem daunting, it is an excellent opportunity for you to develop and improve skills related to your intended profession, or in an area of significant interest to you, with the close guidance of a dedicated team of experts - your thesis chair and committee. This experience should help you to get into professional or graduate school, find a job and excel in your chosen profession. Many employers and admissions committees hold the honors thesis in high regard. It is also a tangible example you can offer to demonstrate your skills and talents. Some students even use the honors thesis as the basis for work they will continue in graduate school, business or future employment.

How long will it take to complete my thesis?
This depends entirely on you and your committee. In general, it will take at least a semester of dedicated work to complete your thesis. However, many students work on the thesis over a longer period, sometimes a year or more. For this reason, we strongly recommend that you begin working on the thesis in your junior year.

I’m afraid to get started and as a result have been procrastinating. What should I do?
For most students, getting started is the hardest part of doing an honors thesis! See the steps above and concentrate on completing them one at a time, rather than allowing yourself to get bogged down worrying about all the steps at once. If you are really stuck, come in to the honors college and discuss your concerns with an advisor or the dean or associate dean. Many students find it helpful to write out a tentative timeline for completing each step.

I heard that the thesis is supposed to be at least 50 pages (or 100 pages or 200 pages …) long. Is this true?
No! There are no requirements regarding the length of your thesis. The thesis length is dictated by the professional norms of your particular field of study. Ask your thesis committee what they think is reasonable. In most cases, the written thesis is 20-40 pages long. Don’t worry about trying to reach a particular length, however. Quality, not quantity, is what matters in an honors thesis.

Does the thesis need to be completed in my major program of study?
No, you may complete a thesis in any area of interest to you, as long as the thesis meets the scholarly standards of that field of study.

What can I expect from my thesis chair?
Your thesis chair should be willing to meet with you, should help you to refine ideas for your project and should give you substantive feedback on your progress in a timely manner.
The chair should treat you as an advisee or a collaborator, not as an employee or a student completing a specific class assignment. Your thesis chair should help you to identify clear milestones and deadlines for your project.

**What can I do to make sure I have a productive relationship with my thesis chair?**

You should plan to meet with your thesis chair often. We recommend setting up regularly scheduled meetings (once a week, bimonthly or at least once a month). Of course, you should show up for these meetings and be prepared for them. You should do your best to meet deadlines that you and your chair set for your project. If you get stuck, you should ask questions and let your chair know that you are having difficulties - this is not the time to cancel meetings and avoid making eye contact with your chair when you run into them at Biggby’s. You should think creatively and be proactive, recognizing that this is not just another class assignment – it’s your thesis! It is up to you to define the project and to be an active participant in the work. You should also take advantage of your whole committee – seek their expert guidance and feedback along the way, not just when it is time to turn in the final thesis.

**What’s the deal with HNRS 4990?**

For students who entered the honors college prior to fall 2014, HNRS 4990 is not required, but may be taken to count toward the honors credit requirement in the Experiential category if desired. It may also be helpful for these students to take HNRS 4990: Honors Thesis to formalize the relationship with the thesis chair, to get additional WMU credit or simply as a way to formally dedicate time in their schedule to devote to the thesis project. For students who entered the honors college in fall 2014 or later, at least one credit of HNRS 4990 is required and is counted in the Experiential category as part of the 18 total required honors credits. To sign up for HNRS 4990, you and your thesis chair should complete the registration form, which can be found here: wmich.edu/honors/academics/forms

Sign the form and turn it in to one of the honors college’s academic advisors, who will enroll you in the course.

**What if my major has a required capstone course? Can it be substituted for HNRS 4990?**

Students in some curricula such as engineering, psychology and fine arts may substitute an approved capstone course from their curriculum for this requirement. Questions regarding which courses are approved should be directed to your honors college advisor.

**How can I get an extension if I do not complete my thesis before I graduate?**

Thesis extensions are granted only for extenuating circumstances, such as illness of a student or their thesis chair. Procrastination is not considered an extenuating circumstance. If you find that you need an extension, you must ask your thesis chair to provide a written petition for an extension. This petition should clearly describe the nature of the extenuating circumstance and must be submitted prior to your graduation date to the dean of the honors college. Please note also that if granted, the extension period will typically be for 30 days only.

Last updated July, 2017
Lee Honors College Thesis Checklist and Brief Overview

- **HNRS 4980: How and Why to Write an Undergraduate Thesis (in your sophomore year).**
  - This online course is designed to assist you in successfully navigating and completing the honors thesis and will provide you with many tools to help facilitate your work. We also offer a hybrid section if you prefer to meet face to face! We recommended you take this course in the second semester of your sophomore year.

- **Select a thesis topic (during the junior year).**
  - Ideally, the thesis topic should be chosen by the beginning of the junior year. Most students find this step to be the most difficult, so do not worry if you are struggling to select a topic. Completion of HNRS 4980 will help you tremendously in choosing a thesis topic!

- **Choose your thesis committee chair/mentor (in your junior year).**
  - Your thesis chair/mentor must be a full time WMU faculty member. If you’ve completed HNRS 4980, you should have a pretty good idea of how to go about choosing a thesis mentor.

- **Submit your thesis declaration form (in your junior year).**
  - You should submit this form at least three semesters prior to your intended graduation date. Your form must be signed by your thesis mentor and contain a one-page maximum description of your thesis topic.

- **Choose your thesis committee (in your junior year).**
  - Your thesis committee should include “experts” on your thesis topic and must consist of at least two people, preferably three. Not sure whom to include on your committee? Ask your thesis mentor for suggestions.

- **Register for HNRS 4990: Honors Thesis (junior or senior year).**
  - Your thesis chair will serve as your instructor for this course. This course is meant to consist of the actual work on your thesis project. While this course is not pass/fail and you are not graded on your final thesis project, you will be graded on your work in this thesis course.

- **Submit your thesis defense certificate request form (at least one month prior to your thesis defense).**
  - All information on your thesis defense form must be final. Should you need to change anything about your thesis defense after submitting this form, you must submit a new defense request form.
  - Your defense request will result in a “thesis packet” which will contain two copies of your certificate and two copies of the ScholarWorks Access Agreement Form and a detailed instruction sheet, which you should read very carefully. Take this packet to your defense so that it can be completed by you and your committee.

- **Defend your thesis (before you graduate).**
  - You are not required to defend your thesis in the honors college, but if you’d like to do so, please contact Jennifer Townsend at jennifer.townsend@wmich.edu to reserve space in the building. Should you choose to defend elsewhere, please visit the Registrar’s website to reserve a room.
  - Your defense should be a 15 – 20 minute presentation, followed by questions and answers from the public, and concluded with a closed door discussion with your committee. Overall, your defense shouldn’t need to run longer than one hour. Practice your presentation in front of friends!

- **Submit your final approved thesis.**
  - Upon completion of your thesis, you have up to 30 days after commencement to submit all required materials to the honors college. Please read packet directions carefully! Those materials are as follows:
    - One copy of your signed certificate, to be submitted to the honors college front desk.
    - One copy of your completed ScholarWorks form, to be submitted to the honors college front desk.
    - One digital copy of your completed project as specified in the instruction sheet included in your packet which you’ve read very carefully.
    - One digital 300-500 word abstract about your project submitted along with your final thesis project. **Do not upload** your thesis project to ScholarWorks. ALL final thesis projects, supporting documents, and abstract must be submitted either to Jennifer Townsend at jennifer.townsend@wmich.edu OR the thesis email at honors-thesis@wmich.edu.

- **Questions?** Contact the honors college front desk to schedule an appointment with an advisor, associate dean, or dean. Or email Jennifer Townsend at jennifer.townsend@wmich.edu or honors-thesis@wmich.edu.