Expectations for the Honors Thesis

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The honors thesis is an extended essay making a scholarly argument about some aspect of literature in English. A successful thesis requires:

1. a well-defined, appropriate topic;
2. substantial independent reading and research;
3. thorough use of evidence to support your claims;
4. meaningful engagement with scholarship on the topic;
5. a clearly articulated, organized argument;
6. carefully revised, thoroughly proofread formal prose.

This handout gives some general guidelines about how to meet these expectations. You are not on your own: we are working together to help you write the best possible thesis, and you will get plenty of feedback from me as you go along. Please do not hesitate to ask me any questions at any stage.

TOPICS

A good topic fits the scale of the thesis. Even though the thesis may be the longest essay you have yet written, a good thesis topic is not in fact much broader than a good final-paper topic in an advanced English course. Most theses focus on writings by one, two, or three authors, and usually the main evidence comes from a fairly small selection of primary texts: three novels, or a half-dozen short stories, or six to ten short poems. (I do not advise theses on performance or filmed media.) Many thesis writers begin with the ambition to write about something much bigger: all of modernist poetry, or all of science fiction, or all of Shakespeare. But the art of designing a good topic is to define a *domain of evidence* that you can give a thorough account of while still speaking to significant general questions. (What counts as a significant question is a matter of *motive*, discussed further below.)

Your whole English major has been training you to notice good topics. The big themes of your past courses are models for good thesis topics: think about the ways your professors have connected the readings in their courses together. The work you have done in your best papers is a personal model for you—for the kinds of materials that interest you most and that you write most convincingly about. There is no rule that says an honors thesis must be totally distinct from everything you have ever done in English courses: in fact, successful theses tend to build on students' long-standing academic interests.

Finally, a word on popular-culture topics. Because I teach and do research on genre fiction, I am often approached by students interested in popular culture in various forms and media. It is certainly possible to write a successful English thesis on popular culture, but it may well be harder than writing a thesis on consecrated literature. The reason has nothing to do with the aesthetic quality of popular-culture texts. Rather, most English majors receive little training in effectively analyzing material of this kind. If you propose a thesis topic on a subject completely unlike anything you have taken a course in, you are creating many additional challenges for yourself. Very often, the popular-culture topics that students propose arise for them not *as students* but *as fans*. It is wonderful to write a thesis about something you love, but a thesis must be written in the analytical mode of scholarship, not the mode of fan appreciation. If you are not clear on what this distinction means, you are not ready to do scholarship on popular culture.

RESEARCH

We can distinguish two kinds of sources: primary and secondary. *Primary* sources supply the *evidence* you analyze to support your argument. In a thesis about Shakespeare's tragedies, the primary sources might be the texts of *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. In a thesis about Ursula K. Le Guin, the primary sources might include a selection of her novels and stories, but also her own essays and interviews. The latter are "primary" because they are objects of analysis.

I expect that you will complete a significant part of your primary-source reading by October and the rest by December. You cannot begin writing in earnest until you have carefully read (or re-read) the major texts you are writing about. In general students write about a combination of texts they have studied in the past and texts they are reading for the first time, and part of the initial challenge of a thesis is identifying *what to read*. This is what an advisor and second reader are for. It is important to remember that not every primary source you read can become a big part of the thesis, and indeed it is best if your thesis has an iceberg-like relation to its sources, where the explicit references emerge from considerably wider reading.

Secondary sources supply the *scholarly arguments* your own claims are in conversation with. In many English theses, the main research task is to become familiar with a range of secondary sources on the topic. Your own argument *does not turn to secondary sources for support*. It turns to them in order to *engage* with them by building on their claims or critiquing them. A major challenge to research in secondary sources is locating appropriate ones, and I am here to advise you on this matter. The best starting point for searching the scholarly literature is the MLA International Bibliography (a digital database available via the library). Your initial search should be biased toward recent work in good journals or published by good presses; I will help you figure out what those are. Your subsequent

search should pursue the kinds of scholars other scholars cite; in other words, check the bibliographies of your initial finds and pursue the references to sources that sound relevant to your questions. You should make an early trip to browse the shelves in Alexander library with material on your author or authors of interest.

The primary-secondary distinction leaves out an important middle ground, which is biography (and other kinds of "background"). Biography is secondary in the sense that it is someone else's interpretation of evidence. But it is primary in the sense that biographical information can be analyzed as part of an argument about literature. Incorporating biography into an analysis is a challenging task in which English majors are rarely trained, but it can be essential. As with the other kinds of sources, we will talk together over whether biographical or historical background sources are worth spending your research time on.

EVIDENCE

Most English theses' primary evidence consists of quoted passages from printed texts, analyzed in detail. This is the form of analysis you have been practicing in your English classes. As in your shorter English papers, so in the thesis: the major task is to give a thorough account of *the way texts produce meanings*. This account attends very carefully to details of language, to the conventions of literary form, and to the patterns that organize a text. It favors complexity and nuance over simplification, and it is constantly aware that texts are artifacts. Unconvincing treatments of evidence are limited to paraphrase, summary, or speculations about the psychology of characters or authors. Effective treatments of evidence reveal *how the language works*.

There are other kinds of evidence and other ways to analyze it. Media other than print involve distinctive challenges. So do studies of evidence where the integrity of "text" is in question: if, for example, it is important that a text has been revised or circulated in many different editions. In my own research I have often been interested in the reception history of texts (what audiences do with them); my evidence has come less from texts themselves than from other people's accounts of what they did with them.

MOTIVE

Every senior thesis has to explain why its analysis is *relevant to a scholarly conversation*. The answer to the question of relevance is what I call the *motive*. Another term for the same thing might be *significance*, but only in the specific sense of *significance for the academic study of the subject*. To have a good motive, a thesis must demonstrate something that would not be straightforwardly evident to any reader of the primary source material; at the same time, it must demonstrate something that matters to the questions scholars raise about material of the kind you are studying.

A thesis, unlike a Ph.D. dissertation, is not required to be an original contribution to scholarship: that is, I do not expect you either to comprehensively review existing scholarship or to produce something that could be published. Nonetheless, I expect you to make a serious effort to distinguish what you have to say from what other scholars have said. That doesn't mean denouncing every secondary source you read as totally mistaken; more often, it means showing that you have a new emphasis, or that you put the evidence together in a new way, or that you are applying a novel conceptual framework. But sometimes it does mean arguing against what someone else has claimed.

ARGUMENT

Every senior thesis has to *make an argument*. If the motive explains why your questions are interesting and worthwhile, your argument is your best answer to your questions. Strong arguments are recognizable because they require considerable evidence to justify them and because there are imaginable counter-arguments that you have to answer. (Weak arguments construct straw-man counter-arguments that no one actually makes.)

My style of responding to your work particularly emphasizes argument. A good argument requires special attention to *key terms and concepts*, which have to be defined clearly and used consistently. Then it demands a systematic development: your reader has to be able to follow the steps of your reasoning, without gaps, from start to end. Each claim needs to be convincingly supported by your evidence.

Effective arguments often grow *from* evidence in the course of writing. I do not expect that you will know what you are arguing in October. On the contrary, you should continually revise and adjust your claims as you study your evidence more closely and as you learn how others have made related arguments. This is one reason why it often does not make sense to spend much time in the early months on drafting an introduction. Reviewing the literature and constructing a framework are useful exercises, and an important focus of the proseminar, but I will urge you to move as quickly as possible to working on analyzing your primary texts. Gradually make your argument more precise, as we figure out together what you are discovering.

MECHANICS

I consider work on "style" to be completely subsidiary to work on evidence, motive, and argument. Still: as the culmination of your work as an English major, your thesis should demonstrate your mastery of academic writing. A clean typescript, without spelling errors or unintentional deviations from Written Standard American English, is important. So is careful attention to clarity at the sentence level. And careful documentation of all sources in footnotes or in in-text citations, together with a bibliography, is indispensable.

These matters are your responsibility, not mine. I am happy to answer any questions you have about writing mechanics, but I will not give detailed corrections on style or on bibliographic citations (N.B. computer-generated bibliographies are invariably wrong). I expect you to send writing to me only once you have spent time carefully revising it for clarity.

Here are some basic references on these matters. For word meanings, refer to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (oed.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu). For word-usage questions, refer to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage*, which you can also buy in a concise edition. For citations and other formatting matters, use either the *MLA Handbook* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*, both of which are compactly summarized on the Purdue OWL website (owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2). As for writing style, Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup's *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 12th ed. (Chicago, 2016) is pretty good; Strunk and White's famous *Elements of Style* is worthless.

A PERSONAL IDIOSYNCRACY

I strongly prefer to receive writing formatted as follows:

1. 1.25- to 1.5-inch margins on all sides (wider than the default);
2. 12-point serif font (e.g., Garamond, Hoefler Text, Palatino, Baskerville);
3. numbered pages;
4. a PDF file, not a Word document (use "Save As..." in Word).

This format will make it easier for me to read and comment on your work. The required page count for the thesis is based on the widespread (yet aesthetically displeasing) norm of double-spaced type in Times New Roman with one-inch margins. In that format, a page is usually about 250–300 words, so 35–40 pages of that corresponds to about 10000–12000 words. That is your target word count, regardless of page count. By the same calculation, the chunk of writing due in December should be at least 3500 words.

ENVOI

I know that seeing all these requirements at the start of the process might be stressful; take heart! Unlike almost every assignment you have had in college, you have *time* to sort this all out. Instead of having to write a paper in a week or two at the end of term, you get to spend nine months gestating your thesis. You can go back to rewrite things you are unhappy with; you can change course halfway through and add a new section; you can throw out one theoretical concept and pick up another. We will work on all these things together, so that the final result is something you can be truly proud of.