



Ten Helpful Hints in Preparing Your Undergraduate Thesis

The following is a list of suggestions to aid you in preparing your thesis project. Please consult with your major/minor advisor for clarification of any policies or procedures specific to your department. Students submitting a thesis in partial fulfillment of College Honors Program requirements should also consult with the director of the Program for specific guidelines.

Identify a topic for research within your area of interest.

Establishing a topic for research is the first major step in writing your thesis. For example, if you enjoy studying African American literature, then your particular area of interest may be twentieth-century African American women novelists. To identify a topic for research within this area of interest, you may ask: What themes do African American women novelists engage in their work? Are their approaches to given themes similar or different? Which women writers best explore certain themes of interest to you? Which of their novels work well for a comparative study? Generating *specific* questions about an area of interest will help direct your research. You can use your answers to these questions as the basis for your project.

Select an advisor.

Some major/minor departments will assign you to a thesis advisor. If you have the option of choosing your advisor, select a professor who can best guide your research. Choose an advisor with whom you believe you have (or can have) a productive working relationship. Your advisor should be knowledgeable in your area of interest. In fact, your experience while in the professor's class or your familiarity with his or her work may inspire your own research interests. These factors should help you decide whether he or she will best be of assistance. For example, if you are interested in studying freedom schools that were established throughout the South, then you should select an advisor who specializes in twentieth-century American history or who studies the Civil Rights Movement. A good advisor may give you suggestions on how you can better specify or broaden your topic. Together, you and your advisor should establish: a schedule for advising meetings, a reading list with sources that will be essential to your research, and a timeline for completion.

Clarify all departmental requirements for thesis formatting and submission.

Requirements for thesis formatting and submission vary by department. Please check with your thesis advisor or departmental chair *before* you submit the final document for approval.

Set realistic goals/objectives each semester.

A thesis project generally will take one to two semesters to complete. Some departments may require that you begin the thesis in your junior year and submit the document for review in your final semester. Regardless of the established timetable, be sure to set realistic goals. Ideally, with a two-semester timetable (and depending on the nature of your research), you may spend the first semester reading primary and secondary materials, gathering data, and drafting a preliminary analysis. Your second semester will be spent synthesizing collected data, submitting drafts to your advisor, checking your work for grammatical and contextual precision, and preparing the document for final review. At the beginning and end of each semester, sit down with your advisor to evaluate your progress in completing established goals. If certain goals need to be modified, then adjust accordingly.

Designate a time in your weekly schedule to work on your thesis project.

For many students, writing a thesis is their first experience with independent research. With independence comes great responsibility! Students who are not required to enroll for a thesis course will find that completing the project involves a significant amount of discipline and dedication. Use your time wisely. When planning your weekly schedule, be sure to allocate time to thesis writing and research.

Write, Write, and Rewrite!

It is impossible to escape revision when writing a document that requires the length and level of detail of a thesis. Your advisor may require that you write (and rewrite) one or more sections of the paper. As time-consuming as revisions may be, they are necessary to your development as a researcher. Revisions can help you clarify your argument, identify more relevant research to support your claims, and engage observations made by another reader to improve the document in its entirety. Revisions are re-revisions: they give you the opportunity to see the thesis anew.

Purchase a documentation guide specific to your discipline.

By the time you begin writing your thesis (if not before), you should *own* a copy of the documentation guide for your discipline. The style recommended by the Modern Language Association (MLA) is used most widely by students in the humanities. Most students in the social sciences (and some natural sciences) use the reference style of the American Psychological Association (APA). Chicago-style documentation is used in both the humanities and the social sciences. Consult with your thesis advisor to find the style preferred by your department.

Maintain a bibliography of all sources.

Be sure to record every source cited in or referenced for your thesis. Keeping this list not only is required but also is helpful as you move beyond your undergraduate career. If you decide to pursue graduate study, you will find the bibliography collected for your thesis to be an invaluable tool.

Think of your thesis as a writing sample for graduate school.

Most graduate programs require that you submit a writing sample that reflects your preparation for advanced study. A thesis does just that! You demonstrate your ability to contribute to the understanding of a given topic through research and critical analysis. With an impressive thesis project, you are well on your way to graduate school acceptance!

Congratulate yourself!

Writing a thesis is no easy feat. It requires a great level of time, diligence, and concentration that many students try to avoid. You have made it this far in your academic journey; take time to celebrate your achievement.

References

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003.

Lipson, Charles. *How to Write a BA Thesis: A Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.