

*Guide to
The Honors Program in
English at Cornell*

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***Opportunities for Independent Critical
and Scholarly Work***

Completing the English major with Honors allows students to do independent study on a topic they choose, to work closely with a faculty adviser, and to write a researched critical paper of about 50 pages. Students almost always find the Honors Essay an incalculably satisfying project and a memorable achievement. Here and elsewhere, many graduate school applicants submit part of their Honors thesis as a sample of their critical, scholarly work and of their future promise as scholars. Students preparing for other career paths also write theses in their senior year.

When combined with the opportunity to study one-on-one with a scholar in a field of particular interest, to get a real taste of the pleasures of advanced work, to discuss work with other Honors students, work on the Honors Essay places students in an intellectual community, the memories of which they may well carry into future work and into other intellectual and professional endeavors.

Successfully completing an Honors Essay will require sustained interest, ability, diligence, and enthusiasm—all qualities in large supply among Cornell English Majors.

Requirements and Courses

- To qualify for the Honors Program, students should have an average of 3.5 in courses that count toward the English major.
- The Honors Program is, in essence, a three-course commitment in which Honors students enroll:

one Honors Seminar: either English 4910 (Fall) or English 4920 (Spring). Two sections are offered each semester, each on a different topic. Most Honors candidates enroll in the Honors Seminar during fall or spring of the *junior year*.

two semesters of the Honors Essay Tutorial: English 4930 (Fall) and English 4940 (Spring). These semesters must be *consecutive during the senior year*. The Honors Essay Tutorial is a full-year independent study course "taken for a letter grade" in which students work one-on-one with their Honors adviser, meeting regularly on a mutually agreed upon schedule between the professor and the student.

Stages of the Program

The year-by-year and semester-by-semester schedule sketched in here should give those interested in the Honors Program an idea of the usual way students move through the Program. Other patterns are possible, though. Some students know at the time they declare the English major that they wish to pursue Honors, while others may discover later in their English studies a riveting interest they desire to pursue in depth, and only then consider writing an Honors thesis.

Early planning usually makes it easier to fulfill the Program's three-course commitment (Honors Seminar, Honors Essay Tutorial I, Honors Essay Tutorial II). But any English major with a strong record in literary studies and curiosity about a topic is welcome to talk to the Director of Honors, at any stage, about the possibility of becoming a candidate for Honors.

Sophomore year

— If you have a strong record, apply to the Honors Program spring semester. A minimum grade point average of 3.5 in courses that count toward the English major is required.

Occasionally, students with especially strong motivation or a defined thesis plan but whose major GPA is somewhat lower will apply for the Honors program. The Director of Honors will then review their junior year English grades to assess their eligibility to continue in the program. You may download and print the Honors Application form from the Undergraduate page on the English Department website. Hard copies of the application are available in the English Department office, in 250 Goldwin Smith Hall.

— Confer with the Director of Honors and receive preliminary acceptance to the Honors Program.

— Pre-enroll for English 4910 or plan to take English 4920 in the spring of the junior year. If you plan to study abroad one semester of the junior year, you should take 4910 or 4920 in the semester you are studying at Cornell. If you are spending the academic year abroad, you will need to take English 4910 in the first semester of your senior year, keeping in mind that you will also be enrolled in English 4930.

With permission of the professor you may take the honors seminar as a sophomore.

Junior year

— Take English 4910 or 4920, the Honors Seminar. The purpose of the Honors Seminar is to acquaint students with methods of study and research to help them write their senior

Honors Essay. The seminar will require a substantial essay that incorporates evidence and critical material effectively, quotes and develops an argument. Students need not take an Honors Seminar that applies directly to the subject of their Honors Essay work.

— Look over the papers you have written in your English courses; identify your interests; think about work you have done well in the past and about what work you would enjoy pursuing for two semesters. These suggestions should help you identify your topic for the Honors essay and should help you think about the adviser with whom you would enjoy working. Some of the most successful Honors essays have come out of course work—including the Honors Seminars.

— In April or early May, speak to faculty members who would be suitable advisers for your project, keeping in mind that your Honors Essay adviser should be in residence both semesters. Ask for some suggestions for preparatory reading. Remember that when you pre-enroll for your Honors Essay adviser's section of English 4930/4940, you must have your adviser's approval and the approval of the Director of Honors. English 4930/4940 is a year-long, 8-credit course, for which you will receive letter grades each semester. S/U grades are not an option for Honors Tutorials I and II.

— Feel free to consult the Director of Honors about appropriate advisers.

— Spend some time in the summer months reading primary texts and thinking about your topic, approach, and argument. If possible, be in occasional email contact with your adviser over the summer.

Senior year

— As soon as you return, consult with your Honors Essay adviser about your topic, discuss requirements and procedures, and set up a schedule for regular meetings. If you have not yet pre-enrolled for English 4930 you will need to do so with the approval of your Honors Essay adviser and the Director of Honors.

— Set up and follow a schedule for your Honors essay work. Depending, of course, on what you and your adviser agree to, it would be reasonable in the first semester (English 4930) to complete:

- a short prospectus or essay proposal
- a bibliography of available and relevant secondary or conceptual work on your topic
- an annotated bibliography of the work you wish to use, critique, and apply to your research
- about 20-30 pages of writing

— If you have not already done so, peruse some of the past Honors essays available in the English office.

— In the second term, while registered for English 4940 (Honors Essay Tutorial II), you will write the final draft. Your essay should be about 50 pages in length. Your adviser should read a few drafts of the final version, drafts which you should be submitting and revising under your adviser's engaged supervision.

— Allow yourself the last two weeks to edit and proofread your Honors Essay. Please take care that it follows a style guide—either the MLA guide or the Chicago Manual of Style—in quotation, internal citation, footnotes or endnotes, bibliographical entries, etc. Above all, do not sabotage your own project by

trying to do too much at the last minute and by not allowing time for refinement of ideas and execution.

— Have the Honors Essay bound and submit it by the deadline in mid-April (or early November for those graduating in January).

— In level of Honors awarded with your degree, the Honors committee considers your GPA in the major as well as the two grades you receive from the readers of your senior Honors Essay, one of whom will be your Honors Essay adviser. The committee also considers your grades in other courses, especially in those related to your major. While applying to the Honors program and writing an Honors Essay is not a guarantee that you will be awarded Honors in English, most of our students completing an Honors Essay have been successful candidates for Honors.

Enjoy the remainder of your final semester and graduate with Honors!

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I write an honors thesis if I also plan to study abroad?

English majors who want to write honors theses as seniors may study abroad as uniors, whether for one or two semesters. To make this process as easy as possible, we encourage you to discuss your plans with the Director of Honors as soon as possible. Those who want to study abroad for an entire year take an Honors Seminar in the fall semester (4910) of their senior year. In some cases it is possible to take the Honors Seminar in the

spring semester of the sophomore year.

When do I decide on my topic?

Many of the most successful theses have come out of past course work that sparked curiosity, that made a student want to go further, and to revisit and revise previous work. Students should review their past course work, brainstorm freely, dream, and identify their intellectual interests and passions. *Ask yourself, during the junior year: What project will nurture and sustain my interest for two semesters of independent study.*

How do I find a thesis adviser?

Once you have determined where your interests lie, consult with the Director of Honors for help in identifying faculty members who match or support your interests. Speak to them about becoming your thesis adviser.

Can I switch my thesis adviser once I've started work in the Honors Essay Tutorial?

Most working relationships between Honors candidates and their thesis advisers go well, and the learning is genial, exciting, and mutual. Many Honors students recall their tutorial as a highlight of their Cornell experience, and professors, too, typically enjoy working with intellectually engaged students on a developing thesis. However, if you realize that the shape your topic is taking calls on a different kind of expertise from the one represented by your Honors Essay adviser, it is possible to change adviser. Consult the Director of Honors for advice.

What are the guidelines for the format of my Honors Thesis?

- Approximately 50 pages of text, not including endnotes and bibliography, double-spaced in 12-point type.
- Use either the MLA or Chicago manuals of style for footnotes or endnotes, quotations, internal citations, bibliographical entries, etc. Handbooks are accessible online as well as in printed form which can be purchased or used in libraries.
- Two bound copies of your thesis must be handed in to the English Department on the day the thesis is due. You may, if you wish, hand your thesis in earlier than the deadline.
- Campus Copy in the Statler, Olin library, Gnomon, and FedEx Office can copy and spiral bind your thesis. It is not necessary to have a hardcover binding.
- There are no predetermined formats for the title page, dedication page, or table of contents. The English office has a number of theses written by former Honors students, which you may review.

How is my final Honors grade determined?

- The thesis writing process is determined in two parts. The entire course (Honors Essay Tutorial I in the Fall and Honors Essay Tutorial II in the Spring) will give you 8 credits. Both your first and second semesters will be graded by your thesis adviser. These may be different grades from that assigned to your thesis by your adviser and second reader.
- The completed Honors Essay is read and assessed by two readers. One reader is the thesis adviser. Both readers write a report and

assign a grade to the Honors Essay. You will receive both of the reports.

How is my final degree of Honors determined?

The Honors Committee, selected by the Chair of the English Department, assists the Director of Honors in determining the level of Honors (*summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, or *cum laude*). They average the major GPA and the two thesis grades for each Honors candidate and rank them. The Honors Committee assesses the theses as a whole. They may also consider the student's performance in the English major and the student's overall transcript.

Recent Honors Essay Topics

Honors students write on a broad range of topics from across the historical span of fields represented by the English Department.

Medieval

Handling Minds: Structures of Power, Actualized Speech, and the Problem of Internality

No Pain, No Gain: The Masochistic Delight of the Lover-Knight

The Art of Imperfection: Alisoun's Rebellion against Conventions in Chaucer's Wife of Bath Narratives

Renaissance

"Canonized Bones": Commemoration, Revision, Allegory, and Irony in English Revenge Tragedy

Sidney's Strangers: Language, Materiality, and

Authenticity in Astrophil and Stella

The Hazards of Fortune: The Enterprise of Reading in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The Canons of Criticism: Warburton, Johnson, and the Invention of Editorial History

The Making of Gender and Genre: Rethinking the Female Gothic as Collaborative Gender Presentation

George Eliot's Narrators: Realism and Sympathy in The Mill on the Floss and Middlemarch

Providence, Independence, and Grace: Religion in Jane Austen's Fiction

Twentieth Century | Modernism

Beyond the Written Word: Virginia Woolf's Rhetoric of Gaps in The Waves

A Fit of Lucid Madness: Irony, Insanity, and Lolita

Modernist Collision: T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and Four Quartets and Indian Philosophy

Discovering Identities: An Existential Perspective on the Works of James Baldwin

Later Twentieth Century and Contemporary

"The First Was a Murder . . .": Violence in the Metafictional Detective Novel

Submersion and Epiphany in Carver, Ford, and Woolf's Dirty Realism

The Story of Ghostwriting: Metafiction in Philip

Roth's Zuckerman Stories

Rereading Children's Literature: Achieving the Utopian through Metaphor and Nostalgia in The Phantom Tollbooth

Interfacing Binary Distinctions to Achieve Connectivity: An Analysis of Technological

Commentary in William Gibson's Neuromancer and Neal Stephenson's Snow Crash

Westernizing the Third World Woman: Hybridization and the Bildungsroman in Immigrant Fiction

Jajaja: The Power of Laughter in the Latino Community

Redefining Postcolonial Rewritings: The Creation of the Future and the Recuperation of the Past in Maryse Conde's Windward Heights and Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea

Que Sé Yo: Love and Fukú in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and Film

Portrait of the Artist in the New Millennium: A Postmodern Reading of Spike Lee's Bamboozled

Consuming Women in Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives

From Bigger to Obama: Black Protest and the Reshaping of the American Dream

"I Try to be like a man": Working Woman Novels as a Site of Gender-Based Conflict.