

The Honors Thesis in Psychology

The following are guidelines for conducting Honors Projects in psychology that were adopted by the faculty of the Department of Psychology on October 14, 2009. They provide additional guidance to Psychology Majors who are completing an Honors Thesis beyond the guidelines provided by the JMU Honors Program (see <http://www.jmu.edu/honorsprog/shp-info.shtml>). Note that the Department of Psychology has expectations for Honors Thesis Projects that, in some cases, are more specific than the general university guidelines. Our guidelines are necessary because Psychology Majors complete research-based thesis projects, while the university guidelines are written in a general way to accommodate the types of Honors Projects completed by students for all majors. Successful completion of honors projects in psychology not only fulfills requirements of the Honors Program, it also fulfills the capstone requirement for the Psychology Major. The additional structure for psychology honors projects ensures that capstone objectives are met.

Who should complete an Honors Thesis?

The Psychology Honors Thesis is not for everyone. Generally, this experience is for students who have some experience working with faculty on research and who are ready to take a project to the next level, by conducting research of their own design. We recommend that Psychology Majors have a research experience, but if you are looking for a first experience, choose Psyc 290 (Directed Studies) or Psyc 402 (Independent Study). Only 10% of Psychology Majors complete an Honors Thesis, while over 60% attend graduate school within 5 years of graduation, so completing an Honors Thesis is not necessary for admission to graduate school.

The number of honors projects that can be supervised in Psychology are limited, and we cannot guarantee that all students will be able to find an project advisor. To increase your chances of finding an honors project advisor, (1) work with faculty before it is time to begin your thesis and (2) develop thesis ideas that are within the range of the expertise and resources available to faculty.

Recommended Academic Program for Students Completing a Thesis

The Honors Thesis is an individualized experience that is developed by each student under the supervision of a faculty member (the honors project advisor). Each student works out their own timeline with their honors project advisor. All students who would like to complete a thesis should start the process as soon as possible, identifying and seeking help from their honors project advisor as soon as that person is identified. Some alternatives to this timeline that students might discuss with their honors project advisor are described in the section titled Alternatives to the Recommended Thesis Process, below.

Freshman Year

Complete Gpsyc 101 and a mathematics course (statistics or calculus) that is necessary for admission to the Psychology Major. Apply for admission to the Psychology Major. Begin your methodology courses if possible. (Psychology Learning Community students complete their methods courses during Freshman year.)

Sophomore Year

Complete the required statistics and research methods courses in psychology (Psyc 210 & 211 or Psyc 212 & 213). Complete as many Content Area courses as possible (Psyc 330-395). If possible, begin working with a faculty member who conducts research in the domain of psychology you think you want to pursue for your thesis project (Psyc 290 or 402).

First Semester Junior Year

Engage in a research project with a faculty member (Psyc 290 or 402). Work with a faculty member who conducts research in the domain of psychology you think you want to pursue for your thesis project. During this semester, talk with your research supervisor about ideas for your Honors Thesis. By the end of this semester you will need to establish who will serve as your honors project advisor so that you can enroll in Psyc 499A during the next semester.

Your honors project advisor will serve as the chair of your thesis committee. You also will need to identify, in consultation with your project advisor, two additional faculty members to serve as readers. Your advisor and readers will make up your thesis committee. See the section below on Thesis Committee Membership for more information about committee members.

If you have progressed to the point of identifying a research idea and identifying thesis committee members, you should submit an Application to Conduct a Senior Honors Project (available on the Honors Program web site at <http://www.jmu.edu/honorsprog/forms.shtml>) before registering for the first semester of Psyc 499A, Honors. If you have not progressed this far during this semester, then you can submit this application by the Honors Program deadline near the end of the following semester.

Second Semester of Junior Year

Register for Psyc 499A (2 credits). This first thesis course can be taken as a semester-long experience or as a block class at the discretion of the honors project advisor. Students are more likely to successfully complete an honors thesis when they start their project earlier and work steadily, so many honors project advisors will want students to register for Psyc 499A as a full-semester experience. However, under some circumstances, a student may not be ready to begin thesis until the final block of Junior year. A thesis advisor may feel a particular student is sufficiently prepared and motivated to register for Psyc 499A as a block course. Identify your thesis advisor as soon as possible and seek advice about your thesis timeline.

During this course, meet with your thesis advisor on a regular basis to work towards refining your research topic. If you have not already done so, you must submit an Application to Conduct a Senior Honors Project by the deadline specified for this semester (check the Honors Program web site at <http://www.jmu.edu/honorsprog/forms.shtml>). During Psyc 499B you will be expected to complete a thesis proposal (see page2) and your thesis advisor will probably ask you to begin working on this document during Psyc 499A.

Discontinuation. If you decide to discontinue work on your honors thesis while enrolled in Psyc 499A, you should inform your advisor immediately. If you make the decision before the last day to withdraw from a class during the semester in question, you must withdraw from Psyc 499A. If you make the decision after the last day to withdraw from a class, you should discuss with your advisor how a grade will be assigned for the work that you completed. If you have already been accepted into the Honors Program, you must inform the honors program that you are leaving by completing the online form (<http://www.jmu.edu/honorsprog/dismiss.shtml>). For all other students, successful completion of Psyc 499A requires that you submit an Application to conduct a Senior Honors Project by the JMU Honors Program deadline for that semester (if not completed previously) and that you make satisfactory progress on the development of your research plan. If a student does not complete Psyc 499B by the time grades are due, the thesis advisor will assign a grade of "I." When the necessary work is completed, the "I" grade will be changed to a letter grade.

Summer between Junior and Senior Years

Even though no credit is awarded for work completed during this timeframe, experience shows that students who continue to make progress on their thesis during the summer have a much more successful thesis process. Before the summer begins, work with your thesis advisor to identify some things you can do during the summer to continue to make progress on your project.

Fall Semester of Senior Year

Register for Psyc 499B (2 credits). During this semester you should again meet regularly with your thesis advisor to identify or develop all

materials needed for the study and to complete your thesis proposal document as described above. Remember that high quality thesis proposals result from an iterative process where the honors project advisor reviews and edits multiple drafts of the document, so you should plan to complete several drafts of the thesis proposal as part of this process. Your goal is to prepare a high-quality document that will be presented to your thesis committee members for approval. All materials needed for the study should be identified or developed during this semester.

When your thesis chair feels that the proposal is ready for full committee review, make copies of the proposal and distribute them to members of the committee. *Do not further revise the document after you have distributed it to the committee members.* Schedule a meeting of the entire committee to discuss the thesis proposal and seek approval of the committee to continue the project.

Expect to discuss every aspect of your thesis plan with your committee at the meeting. Committee members often will want you to explain or elaborate on such questions as:

- What are the main issues being addressed?
- Why did you select these topics for investigation?
- What are your specific hypotheses/research questions?
- How are these hypotheses/research questions being addressed with your research design?
- How will your data be analyzed?
- What do you expect to find?
- What are the implications of your findings for our understanding of this topic area?

Thesis Proposal Document

During Psyc 499B you will be expected to complete a thesis proposal and your thesis advisor will probably ask you to begin working on this document during Psyc 499A. This **thesis proposal** is much longer and more detailed than the brief *project proposal* that you submit with your Application to Complete and Honors Project. While the *project proposal* is a simple summary of your thesis project plan, the **thesis proposal** required by the Psychology Department is more extensive and should contain the following sections:

- Introduction. This includes an introduction to your research area, the full literature review that will ultimately appear in the final thesis document, and a statement of your research question.
- Method. This is the full method section that ultimately will be included in the final thesis document, although it is written in future tense in the proposal and past tense in the final document.
- Data Analysis. This is a brief statement describing how you will analyze.
- Expected Results. Describe what you expect to find.
- Potential Implications. This is a brief statement of how the findings can be interpreted with respect to the literature reviewed earlier in the proposal, and how this information can be useful to others.
- References. This is a complete reference list for all literature cited in the proposal.
- Appendices. This section includes any materials that have been developed for the project (surveys, stimuli, etc.) or descriptions of materials to be used (such as transcripts or descriptions of the content of audio or videotapes). A copy of the "informed consent document" to be used for human studies should also be included.
- IRB/IACUC Protocol. Include the text of the protocol you will be submitting to the IRB or IACUC.

High quality thesis proposals result from an iterative process where the honors project advisor reviews and edits multiple drafts of the document, so you should plan to complete several drafts of the thesis proposal as part of this process. Your goal is to prepare a high-quality document that will be presented to your thesis committee members for approval. Ideally, much of the text of the thesis proposal can be used when you write your final thesis during your final semester of the project. During this process, your honors project advisor will help you to decide whether your committee members should be consulted during the document development process and when your document is ready for their review. This review is usually completed near the start of the Psyc 499B semester.

Do not submit an IRB/IACUC protocol or begin collecting data until after your thesis proposal document is approved by your committee, unless approval to do so is granted by **all** members of your thesis committee.

Expect your thesis committee to recommend revisions of your thesis plan. They may ask you to work with your thesis advisor as you implement these revisions or they may ask you to meet with them again. Your goal is to develop the shared understanding among committee members and yourself that if you conduct the thesis as planned, and write a high-quality thesis document that describes your good work, your thesis committee will agree that you have successfully completed an honors thesis.

Apply to present your research at spring conferences. For example, NCUR, the National Conference for Undergraduate Research, and CAA, the Colonial Athletic Association, hold national conferences during the spring. Applications to make a presentation at these conferences are due early during the fall semester. JMU selects students to attend NCUR and CAA. JMU pays the transportation, housing and conference expenses. Honors Thesis students are strongly encouraged to apply to attend these conferences. Past participants report that they have been excellent experiences. Many state, regional and national professional conferences are held in the spring and require applications for presentations to be submitted during the fall. Examples include VPA, EPA and SEPA. Consult with your faculty advisor, identify appropriate venues for your research, and apply to make a presentation.

Discontinuation. If you decide to leave the Honors Program while enrolled in Psyc 499B, inform your advisor immediately. You must inform the honors program by completing the online form (<http://www.jmu.edu/honorsprog/dismiss.shtml>). If you make the decision before the last day to withdraw from a class during the semester in question, you must withdraw from Psyc 499B. If you make the decision after the last day to withdraw from a class, you should discuss with your advisor how a grade will be assigned for the work that you completed. For all other students, successful completion of Psyc 499B requires that your thesis committee approve your thesis proposal document described under Psyc 499A above. If a student does not complete Psyc 499B by the time grades are due, the thesis advisor will assign a grade of "I." When the necessary work is completed, the "I" grade will be changed to a letter grade.

After you receive approval from your thesis committee, submit a protocol for review to the appropriate review body ([Institutional Review Board \(IRB\) on the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) or [Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee \(IACUC\)](#)) for approval. Your protocol must be approved by the appropriate review body before data may be collected.

While waiting for approval from the appropriate review body, you can finalize development of materials needed for the study, practice techniques to be used in the study, and conduct planning activities. Once approval is received, you may begin collecting data.

Spring Semester of Senior Year

Register for Psyc 499C (2 credits). If you have not already done so, after receiving institutional approval, start to collect data for your project as early during this semester as possible. Meet with your thesis chair as necessary. Ideally, data collection should be complete by mid-semester. As soon as the data are available, complete your data analysis. Review your findings with your thesis chair and discuss the information to be included in the Results and Discussion sections of your thesis (which will replace the Expected Results and Implications sections that were included in your proposal). You also will need to make any required changes to the Introduction and Method sections (such as changing the method section to past tense), and you will need to add an abstract and other items specified in the *Senior Honors Project Handbook* available on the Honors Program web site (<http://www.jmu.edu/honorsprog/shp.shtml>). Note that MANY of the formatting requirements are NOT consistent with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) and you will

need to adhere to the guidelines specified in the Honors Project Handbook. For all elements of the document not specifically addressed in the *Senior Honors Project Handbook*, you should use the most current version of the *APA Publication Manual*.

As is the case with thesis proposals, high-quality theses result from an iterative process where the advisor reviews and edits multiple draft documents, so you again should plan to complete several drafts of the document as part of this process. Consult with other members of your committee as recommended by your thesis chair, but do not submit drafts of your thesis to these other faculty until you are directed to do so by your thesis chair.

When your thesis chair feels that the thesis is ready for full-committee review, make copies of the thesis and distribute it to members of the committee. *Do not further revise the document after you have distributed it to the committee members.* Schedule a meeting of the entire committee (the recommended deadline is about April 1). The purpose of the full-committee meeting ("thesis defense") is to allow the faculty to ask you questions regarding topics such as what you did, why you did it, what you found, and what it means, and to provide you feedback about the thesis project and document.

The "best result" you can expect from a thesis defense meeting is a statement of congratulations and agreement among the faculty that you will successfully complete the thesis project after you complete the final document by making a few changes. This conclusion is not guaranteed. It is not unusual for students to be asked to complete additional work (such as additional data analysis or the addition or substantial modification of the thesis document) and resubmit the thesis, before the committee will agree that the project was successfully completed.

Submitting Your Final Thesis. The Honors Program requires you to submit multiple copies of the thesis document, printed on the appropriate paper according to the JMU guidelines, with ORIGINAL SIGNATURE PAGES, to the Honors Program office by the required deadline. Before printing multiple copies of your thesis, you should take a final version [or near final version] to the office to have your formatting reviewed. You also should provide each member of your thesis committee with a copy of your thesis (these copies can be double-sided, on standard paper, do not require pages with original signatures, and typically are spiral bound).

Psychology Symposium. Psychology Honors students are expected to participate in the Psychology Symposium held in April. This is an opportunity for all Psychology thesis students to share their accomplishments with fellow students and the faculty at large.

Discontinuation. If you decide to leave the Honors Program while enrolled in Psyc 499C, inform your advisor immediately. You must also inform the honors program by completing the online form (<http://www.jmu.edu/honorsprog/dismiss.shtml>). If you make the decision before the last day to withdraw from a class during the semester in question, you must withdraw from Psyc 499C. If you make the decision after the last day to withdraw from a class, you should discuss with your advisor how a grade will be assigned for the work that you completed. For all other students, successful completion of Psyc 499C requires that your thesis committee approve your written thesis and that you submit the final copies to the Honors Program by the scheduled deadline (usually around a month BEFORE graduation). Extensions of the deadline are rarely permitted unless the graduation semester is postponed. If a student does not complete Psyc 499C by the time grades are due, the thesis advisor will assign a grade of "I" and will notify the Honors Program that the thesis is not complete. When the necessary work is completed, and the approved thesis is submitted to the Honors Program, the "I" grade will be changed to a letter grade.

Psyc 499 and Psychology Major Capstone Requirements. Note that a completed honors thesis in Psychology fulfills the Psychology Major Capstone requirement, but incomplete thesis projects do not fulfill this requirement even if the student has earned passing grades in Psyc 499A, 499B, and 499C. You and your academic advisor should consider

Other Concerns

Authorship for Publication or Presentation of Thesis Findings.

Students are encouraged to present their thesis findings at professional meetings, and to publish their findings in professional journals. Authorship for publication or presentation of thesis work must be determined on a case-by-case basis, consistent with the contributions made to the project by the thesis committee members. Students should share authorship on these presentations and publications with their collaborators. If the thesis was developed using these guidelines, authorship will include the committee chair and may also include the other members of the committee, depending upon their degree of involvement in the project. The Department of Psychology adheres to the Ethical Guidelines of the American Psychological Association with respect to authorship of presentations and publications, reprinted below. (From: http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html#8_12)

8.12 Publication Credit.

- (a) Psychologists take responsibility and credit, including authorship credit, only for work they have actually performed or to which they have substantially contributed.
- (b) Principal authorship and other publication credits accurately reflect the relative scientific or professional contributions of the individuals involved, regardless of their relative status. Mere possession of an institutional position, such as department chair, does not justify authorship credit. Minor contributions to the research or to the writing for publications are acknowledged appropriately, such as in footnotes or in an introductory statement.
- (c) Except under exceptional circumstances, a student is listed as principal author on any multiple-authored article that is substantially based on the student's doctoral dissertation. Faculty advisors discuss publication credit with students as early as feasible and throughout the research and publication process as appropriate.

Changes in Thesis Committee Membership. If for any reason the members or chair of an Honors Thesis committee must be changed, students must request that change by resubmitting an application form and updated proposal to the Honors Program Office. The new proposal needs the signatures of the current Committee Chair (honors project advisor), all Faculty Members currently serving on the committee (readers), the Psychology Department Head, and the Dean of CISAT (or Associate Dean) before it is submitted to the Honors Program. This documentation should include a brief statement regarding the reason for the change, and an indication of whether the proposal or just the committee membership is being revised. When a thesis committee is reformulated, a note or e-mail from any faculty member who is no longer on that committee should be sent to the Honors Program Office indicating their agreement to no longer serve on the committee.

Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct

All Honors Thesis Projects in Psychology must conform to the ethical standards of our profession. See <http://www.apa.org/ethics/homepage.html> for our code of ethics.

what you will need to do to ensure graduation if you do not complete an Honors Thesis as planned. If you do not successfully complete your thesis, your diploma will not state that you earned a bachelor's degree "with distinction."

Thesis Committee Membership

Each Honors Thesis must be supervised by a committee of at least three faculty members who are familiar with the issues being investigated by the student, and who agree to serve in this capacity. It is the student's responsibility to discuss his/her thesis ideas with potential faculty committee members and to request their participation on the committee. Each student is encouraged to identify a potential chair for his or her thesis committee as soon as possible. The chair can help the student begin important planning activities prior to enrollment in Psyc 499A.

The thesis committee will be composed of the thesis chair and at least two other faculty members. The chair must be a member of the faculty of the Department of Psychology or Department of Graduate Psychology. Closest supervision of the student's project will come from the honors thesis chair, so the student should try to identify a chair for his or her thesis first, and then seek that person's advice regarding other potential committee members. Usually at least one committee member is chosen from the faculty of the Department of Psychology. The third member of the thesis committee can be any faculty member at JMU, including faculty from other departments.

1. Committee members must have the background and interest necessary to counsel, direct, and evaluate the specific student research project undertaken. Participation as a committee member is voluntary on the part of the faculty member.
2. Under the supervision of the thesis chair, the student primarily designs the thesis. As the thesis is developed, committee members need only be consulted if their expertise is needed. During this phase of the project, the student prepares a written thesis proposal that is discussed with, and edited by the thesis chair.
3. During Psyc 499A, or more typically Psyc 499B, all members of the thesis committee must receive a written thesis proposal and participate in a meeting to discuss the proposal with the student. Members of the committee can reject the proposal, approve it pending revisions, or approve the proposal as written.
4. During Psyc 499C the complete written thesis is distributed to all committee members for review. A meeting is scheduled to discuss the thesis with the student, not less than one week after the thesis is distributed. At this "thesis defense" meeting the thesis committee discusses the project. Committee members can reject the thesis, approve it pending revisions, or approve it as written. For the thesis to be considered complete, all committee members must sign documents certifying successful completion.

Alternatives to the Recommended Thesis Process

Under special circumstances it is possible to complete a Senior Honors Project in Psychology that varies from the guidelines presented above. Exceptions must be approved by the student's Honors Thesis Chair, and in some cases, The Head of the Department of Psychology, the entire thesis committee, and/or the Director of the Honors Program. Some exceptions that may be requested include:

1. Completion of the Honors Thesis in December. These guidelines have been written with the expectation that the student will graduate in May, but with the permission of the student's Honors Thesis Chair, the Head of the Department of Psychology, and the Director of the Honors Program, this timetable may be adjusted for graduation in December.
2. Completion of Psyc 499A, 499B, or 499C during the Summer. Many faculty are unavailable during the summer, so this is only possible with the consent of the Honors Thesis Chair (and committee members if they are needed for the stage of the thesis conducted during the summer). Payment of summer tuition will be required.
3. Completion of Psyc 499A as a block course. Since Psyc 499A is a 2-credit course that requires substantial effort, this will only be permitted in exceptional cases at the discretion of the Honors Thesis Chair.
4. Seeking IRB or IACUC approval or starting to collect data prior to approval of the thesis proposal document. Only submit IRB/IACUC protocol or begin collecting data after all members of your thesis committee have been consulted, and permission to begin is received from **all** members of your thesis committee.

For Psychology Honors Thesis Projects students may not omit: (1) the development of a written thesis proposal, (2) securing approval for the thesis proposal, or (3) conducting a thesis defense meeting. We consider these to be critical steps in a thesis process in Psychology which not only produces an excellent-quality honors project, but also fulfills the capstone experience requirements for the psychology major.