

Senior Honors Thesis Best Practices, Tips, and Suggestions ****

What is a Senior Honors Thesis at Tufts? ****

The senior honors thesis represents an opportunity to conduct original research and constitutes an advanced work that demonstrates a higher standard of learning. For interdisciplinary programs such as International Relations, the senior honors thesis brings to bear many of the disciplinary perspectives that students learn through the program's major requirements.

The Senior Honors Thesis at Tufts is a year-long, two-credit project culminating in a report, essay, or performance that demonstrates exceptional undergraduate achievement. The Senior Honors Thesis also requires a three-person committee representing at least two disciplines and a defense. In addition to receiving a letter grade for of the two credits of their project, seniors who undertake an Honors Thesis are also considered for thesis honors. They may be awarded no honors, Honors in Thesis, High Honors in Thesis, and Highest Honors in Thesis. These honors are announced at graduation, listed on the graduation program and the student's transcript, but are not related to the Latin honors based on GPA.

Tufts' Thesis Honors Program for Liberal Arts is spelled out in the Tufts Bulletin (2003-2004, pp. 39-40) and the Senior Honors thesis criteria for International Relations is detailed in the IR Academic Planning Guide, the IR web page (ase.tufts.edu/ir), and the online International Research Network (IRN) (<http://jupiter.tccs.tufts.edu/ir>) along with other resources to help you through the senior honors thesis process.

Included in this tutorial are best practices, tips, and suggestions to help you get started on, and think about, writing a senior honors thesis. As you read through the tutorial, you will quickly learn that the title of the endeavor is a bit of a misnomer. While you most likely will begin writing the honors thesis in the senior year, the most successful (and less stressed) students are those who begin the process much earlier in their academic careers.

Topics covered in this tutorial:

1. Preparing a Research Plan
2. Identifying a Thesis Director and Thesis Readers
3. Contacting Potential Thesis Directors and Thesis Readers
4. Emailing Faculty (Especially If You Are Abroad!)
5. Writing a Senior Thesis Prospectus
6. Registering for a Senior Honors Thesis
7. Deadlines
8. The History/IR Thesis Exchange
9. Senior Thesis Timetable
10. Common Pitfalls and Challenges
11. Advice from Past Senior Thesis Writers
12. Contact Information and Additional Resources for Support

Tips for Preparing a Research Plan

As you begin laying a foundation for a senior thesis, you will need to write a research plan to explain what you are going to research and how. Before you begin to conduct research, you will need a plan clearly outlining how you propose to do it.

The following tips will help prepare your plan:

1. Plan your coursework.
 - a. Look at the courses available at Tufts and abroad and think about how they can help you develop a research plan that you can use further along in your academic career.
2. Plan your study abroad experience.
 - a. Is research a part of the experience?
 - b. What contacts exist abroad that can help you with your research?
 - c. What faculty at Tufts can help you by linking you to contacts abroad?
 - d. What coursework can you take abroad to help you prepare to research your topic?
3. Craft a plan for your research.
 - a. Develop a question. Make a decision on your research question(s). Though often one of the most difficult steps in the research process, you will need to make a decision in advance or else you will wander and lose valuable time.
 - b. Decide the best way to answer the question. Think in advance. Where is the information? Who are the faculty that can help you answer the question?
4. Explore the variety of contacts available at Tufts and abroad.
 - a. Plan immediately to use those contacts – say to yourself: “If I do this, who is going to mentor me?”
 - b. Establish face-to-face contact with this person before going abroad.
 - c. Go to office hours of your professors (See “Contacting Potential Thesis Directors and Readers”)
 - d. Get to know your advisor – more so than just having her/him sign forms. Your advisor can help facilitate contacting other faculty for you.
 - e. Plan in advance – do not assume that an email from abroad will suffice.

Identifying a Thesis Director and Thesis Readers

The key to every senior honors thesis is the relationship between the student thesis-writer and the thesis director and readers. This is one of the most important steps in the senior thesis process! However, there probably is not any single "best practice" for identifying a senior honors thesis director. Approaching a faculty member in your general area of interest and developing a dialogue around mutual interests can prove beneficial for you.

Directing a student senior thesis is an important responsibility for any faculty member. Many faculty will only agree to direct theses for topics on which they have a real depth of expertise, and will only agree to direct theses for students who have taken courses with them.

Students can NOT write a senior honors thesis on any topic they choose. They must choose a topic within the range of faculty expertise at Tufts. Tufts has an extraordinary range of expertise, and we can link students to experts in the greater Boston area with whom they can consult and who may serve as guest readers. ONLY Tufts faculty who will be at Tufts both semesters during the students' thesis year can direct senior honors theses.

You NEED to develop your research topics in dialogue with Tufts faculty if you hope to move that research into a senior thesis. Presenting a faculty member with a topic you have already decided upon invites an up and down answer without leaving room for modification. Therefore, the sooner you begin thinking about a range of topics, considering the possibilities with faculty members, shaping the topic into an area of mutual interest and expertise, the better the changes that the faculty will commit to it. We want to make this plain from the outset because we do not want students to be disappointed when they can not find a Tufts faculty member willing to commit to direct their topic as a senior thesis.

The student is required to identify and secure the participation of her/his thesis committee. In practice, the thesis director often collaborates in that process. The thesis director and all thesis readers must agree and sign off on the student's preliminary title, thesis statement, and preliminary bibliography before the student's application to the departmental Thesis Honors Program is accepted by the department/program and Dean of Undergraduate Education.

Contacting Potential Thesis Directors and Readers

The earlier you begin developing relationships with faculty, the better off you will be when it comes times for a recommendation, a Fulbright proposal, seeking grant opportunities, and writing a senior thesis.

If you are planning on going abroad, it is best to find a faculty member before you go because while you are abroad, and when you get back, you will need a core “mentor/advisor” to help you with your research.

If you are currently abroad, visit the IRN: (<http://jupiter.tccs.tufts.edu/ir>) to learn more about faculty and how to get started with research and/or a senior honors thesis. Contact faculty you do have a relationship with and seek advice on potential mentors/advisors. (See “Emailing Faculty” below).

If you have already returned from abroad and do not yet have a “mentor/advisor,” now is the time to get to know faculty outside of classes.

Make a personal contact with a faculty member – **do not email the person without having a face-to-face meeting.**

1. Be prepared for your meetings with faculty!!
 - a. Formulate your research question(s) or 2-3 sentences on your senior thesis topic so that you can describe it to faculty quickly and clearly.
 - b. Prepare a one-page prospectus, along with a preliminary bibliography, to give to faculty that outlines the thesis you plan to undertake. (See “Writing a Senior Thesis Prospectus” below)
2. Go to office hours
 - a. Talk about your research interests.
 - b. Talk about your research and study abroad plans (or past experiences) – Are you studying abroad? Do you plan on conducting research while abroad? Did you already study abroad? What coursework have you taken to help you with the thesis?
 - c. Ask for advice on your proposed research question, prospectus, methodology.
 - d. If you feel the faculty member is a good fit for you, ask the person to be the director or reader for your senior thesis. As noted above, the readers on your committee, particularly the thesis director, should have a depth of expertise in your proposed thesis question.
3. Ask faculty you know to facilitate the first meeting.

Emailing Faculty (Especially If You Are Abroad!)

As mentioned, the first meeting with a faculty member should be face-to-face. However, sometimes that is not possible, especially if you are studying abroad. If you must contact a professor via email, following these tips:

1. Always put an appropriate short title in the subject line of your e-mail.
2. Always have an email tag that carries your full name as your identity (not a nickname or slang) so that it is clear who is sending the e-mail.
3. In the e-mail, convey succinctly: who you are; where you are; and what you want from the faculty member. Explain your topic and governing question, your preparation (language proficiency, courses taken, previous papers or experience with the topic), and other relevant information, very briefly. Another professor can contact other faculty to help you get connected.
4. Avoid sending attachments to faculty unless you have previously notified the recipient he or she should expect one. Faculty may delete messages with attachments in order to avoid picking up viruses.

Writing a Senior Thesis Prospectus

A prospectus outlining your plan for a senior thesis is not unlike a research prospectus for any other capstone research project – a Fulbright proposal, a scholarship or grant proposal, a senior seminar paper, etc. If you haven't written a research prospectus before, follow the tips below. Keep in mind that a research prospectus is not a contract. After consultation with faculty and your advisors/mentors, as well as further research, your research question will most likely change and/or evolve. Developing an initial prospectus will help faculty understand where you are in the process, and help you bring focus to your research throughout the experience.

No matter what type of application you write – for a small grant, a Fulbright or a senior thesis proposal, the receiving party will want to know...

1. What is your research question?
2. What specifically do you want to investigate?
 - a. You need a specific research question to propose, and you need to explain why it is an interesting, puzzling, or worthwhile question.
3. Have you done the coursework to prepare for this project?
 - a. Carefully plan your coursework. A senior thesis is based on building blocks and previous experience and preparation. Faculty members are likely to decline to supervise your thesis if you have inadequate coursework preparation.
4. Have you evaluated the scholarly literature?
 - a. Can you briefly mention the major works that address your research question?
5. What difference will your research make to the field?
 - a. Suggest how your efforts will contribute to the debate and advance the state of knowledge on the subject.
6. What methodology do you propose to employ?
 - a. Exactly how are you going to study this research question? Examples: collect statistics, conduct interviews
 - b. Provide an initial list of bibliographic references that you plan to consult for your thesis.
7. What advanced planning have you done to start a senior honors thesis?
 - a. Have you made contacts with scholars/institutes?

Expect to spend almost as much time defining your topic and deciding how to handle it as you spend in research and writing it! So, begin working on your prospectus as early as possible.

Registering for a Senior Honors Thesis in International Relations

Students may enroll for a two-semester honors thesis (INTR 197 and INTR 198) to be completed under the direction of a member of the International Relations Core Faculty (see "Identifying Potential Thesis Directors and Readers"). Procedures governing approval of honors thesis projects are described in the Tufts University Bulletin. Eligible students must find three faculty thesis advisors, get approval from the IR program, and enroll with the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Education (Ballou Hall, 7th floor) during the spring semester of their junior year.

Because theses represent a higher standard of learning, students are not only required to enroll by Spring semester but are strongly advised to use the summer before their senior year to familiarize themselves with the primary and secondary source material they will be using. Faculty are under no obligation to accept new requests to serve as thesis advisors once fall semester begins, so students should prepare accordingly.

Students wishing to receive IR Seminar credit for IR Thesis Honors will only be able to do so by carefully completing the following registration procedures and adhering to the following guidelines:

Registration Procedures for a Senior Honors Thesis in IR

Majors interested in pursuing IR Thesis Honors must enroll for the program through high demand pre-registration in the IR Program office in Cabot 605. To qualify for high-demand pre-registration, a student must provide the following:

- A one-page thesis prospectus, which briefly summarizes the thesis project design, including a) the major research question or questions to be pursued in the thesis, including a brief summary of existing research; and b) an indication of the potential resources (library, bibliographic, data collection) that will be consulted for research (See "Writing a Senior Thesis Prospectus");
- A letter from an IR Core Faculty member stating an intent to serve as primary advisor for the thesis;
- The Thesis Honors form to be submitted to the Dean of Undergraduate Education containing the signatures of the IR Core Faculty member serving as primary thesis advisor and the two other faculty advisors (at least one of whom must be an IR Core Faculty member). The IR Director signs off on the form before submitting it to the Dean of Undergraduate Education.

The IR Program will not allow a student to high-demand pre-register for IR Thesis Honors without the above items.

Deadline for Application

IR majors, including students spending their junior year abroad, are strongly encouraged to follow university and IR thesis guidelines, enrolling for thesis honors by the **end of their junior year**. The last permitted date for enrolling in IR Thesis Honors will be the end of the second week of fall semester (normally around September 15th) when the IR Program submits the high-demand registration list to the Registrar. However, students who wait until September to register run the strong risk of not finding faculty members prepared to support their thesis. Thus, students – including those studying abroad – are strongly advised to at least formulate a research question and secure the support of their main thesis advisor in spring of their junior year, if not in person, then through e-mail.

For students graduating in February and doing honors on a Spring/Fall schedule, the deadline for high-demand pre-registration is the end of the second week of spring semester (normally around January 30th). Once the IR Program has submitted the registration list to the Registrar, students will not be allowed to enroll in IR Thesis Honors.

The History/IR Senior Thesis Exchange

The History/IR Senior Thesis Exchange brings students and faculty working on senior theses together throughout the year to discuss the process and challenges of thesis writing over wine, cider, cheese, and crackers. By sharing information and providing mutual support and inspiration, the Thesis Exchange enhances a sense of social community among thesis writers and broadens contact among faculty advisors and thesis students in History and International Relations. Additionally, it enhances the intellectual community by enabling writers to share their ideas with a broader group of students and faculty, often making thesis writing a less lonely endeavor.

Students and faculty participating in the Thesis Exchange meet three times each semester around a particular topic or step in the writing process. At the last gathering, all History and IR faculty and sophomores and juniors who are considering writing a senior honors thesis are invited to attend. Seniors who have recently defended their thesis present their thesis and discuss what they gained from the experience. Sophomores and juniors have the opportunity to ask questions of seniors and faculty and collect information on the process. This forum gives sophomores and juniors who are considering writing a thesis a much better sense of the process and its meaning for thesis writers. It also gives seniors a chance to celebrate their accomplishments and share their hard work with their peers and advisors.

Once students register for a senior honors thesis in either IR or History they are included in a "Senior Thesis Group" on the International Research Network (IRN) and are kept up-to-date on meeting dates, deadlines, and announcements.

Recommended Senior Thesis Timetableⁱ

Before the end of your junior year, you should:

- Finalize your decision to write an honors thesis.
- Propose your topic and research approach in a thesis prospectus.
- Conduct background research to determine viability of topic.
- Confirm primary advisor and secondary readers.
- Submit your prospectus, "Thesis Honors Candidate Form," and letter from your thesis director to the IR Program Office.
- Apply for scholarships (IR Research Scholars Program, Tufts Summer Scholars Program) to conduct research for the senior thesis over the summer.
- Attend informational meetings and understand all requirements.
- Create your own project timeline and goals with assistance from your thesis director.

During the summer before your senior year you should:

- Conduct preliminary research on your topic.
- Review your research question(s) and make the necessary changes as you delve further into your research.
- Contact your thesis committee to review changes, seek advice, and chart progress.
- Think about length, breadth, and size of the finished Thesis; consider chapter breakdowns or other forms of presenting the finished product.
- Use the online IRN to access resources, communicate with faculty, and store your works in progress while away from Tufts.

In September of your senior year you should:

- Finalize your thesis question(s) and revise your prospectus, as necessary.
- Attend informational meetings and understand all requirements, deadlines, and procedures.
- Set up a schedule of meetings, milestones, due dates, and goals with your thesis director for the semester and for the year.
- Apply for the **Dean's Undergraduate Research Fund** to support any activity that facilitates gathering evidence or data for the thesis. Grants range from \$200-\$400. Eligibility and application guidelines are available online <http://ase.tufts.edu/deanroll/> and through Ms. Joanne McPherson in the office of the Dean of Undergraduate Education (Dowling Hall, 7th Floor, x7-4239).
- Conduct research on your thesis question(s).
- Meet with librarians for guidance on conducting advanced library/web research.
- Gather, record, and categorize information as you find it; keep accurate bibliographic notes and organized files.
- Keep a journal or notebook to record your ideas related to thesis topic and research discoveries.
- Email weekly progress reports to advisors (or use the IRN to post progress reports).

ⁱ The recommended senior thesis timetable is an adaptation of Carmen Lowe's suggested senior thesis timetable. IR thanks Ms. Lowe, the Academic Resource Center, and the Writing Center for their collaboration.

October and November of your senior year:

Conduct research in library and online; conduct lab research and/or field research (some may have already conducted field research over summer).

(Repeating September items)

Establish a regular meeting time with primary advisor and committee members.

Email weekly progress reports to advisors.

November 22 DEADLINE: Submit signed "**Thesis Honors Candidate**" Form to Dowling Hall Student Services Desk. All three members of committee and department chair must sign this form. (This should be completed well before the November 22 deadline. Note that differing departmental and program deadlines often fall before the University deadline.)

Consider preparing a shorter version of your work for submission to *Hemispheres*, Tufts' undergraduate journal for international affairs. Research articles are normally due in the *Hemispheres* office by early February.

December:

Reassess chapter breakdowns; work on outline of Thesis as whole. Begin to draft a chapter (not necessarily the first chapter.)

Mid-year assessment: You and your advisor should assess your progress so far to determine if you should continue to pursue the Honors Thesis in the spring or switch to a senior project or independent study. If you decide to continue with the Honors Thesis, you will receive a Y (for year-long) instead of a grade on your report card in January.

Plan detailed research and writing agenda for Winter Break. If you are doing a traditional thesis, you should **begin writing over Break!**

Spring Semester Senior Year

January:

Submit draft of first chapter or section of thesis to advisor when you return from Break.

Schedule a meeting with advisor(s) to discuss your work over Break.

Plan a new timeline for spring. Plan to have the Thesis substantially written BEFORE Spring Break.

Continue to send regular email progress reports to your committee.

Consider registering to present in the Tufts Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Symposium (<http://ase.tufts.edu/symposium/>) in March

February and March:

Write thesis section by section and submit drafts to primary advisor for revision comments.

Be very careful to cite sources correctly and incorporate them into your writing so as to avoid accidental plagiarism.

Spring Break: Use this time for major writing and rewriting. You should have a substantially-complete draft done by end of spring break.

April:

You should begin rewriting and revising by April. Now is the time to pay attention to clarity of expression and prose style; you may need to work on major structural changes to your outline or clarify your logic.

Schedule a meeting with the entire committee so there will be no unpleasant surprises during the Defense. A completed draft of the thesis should be provided to your committee at least one week before the defense so they have ample time to read it and prepare feedback.

Rewrite and revise according to your advisors' recommendations. Be sure the committee is in agreement on what they expect from you during the revision process.

Mid-Late April: DEFENSE must be scheduled by this time in order to graduate in May. A mid-April defense allows you time to incorporate faculty feedback into the final version of the thesis.

May:

May 1: DEADLINE for "**Recommendation for Thesis Honors**" form to be submitted by Honors Thesis principal advisor to Carol Downing in Dowling Hall.

Some rewriting may be done after the defense if your committee deems it necessary.

Prepare final document for archives by **May 16th**. See online guide for instructions and specifications.

(<http://nils.lib.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A4000.06.0009>)

Enjoy **Senior Week!** You've earned it!

Common Pitfalls in Writing a Senior Honors Thesisⁱⁱ

1. Poor time management skills—Your advisor should help you create (and follow) a year-long project timeline with firm deadlines for bibliographies, notes, drafts, and revisions. (See “Recommended Senior Thesis Timetable”)
2. Lack of proper focus—Seek advice and expertise from your advisor, professors, and thesis directors and readers in finding and finalizing a feasible, manageable, focused, interesting, and relevant topic.
3. Poor research skills—For many seniors, the senior thesis represents the first endeavors in conducting extensive research. Plan ahead with your coursework to gain research methods skills before beginning the senior thesis process. INTR 91 and INTR 92, offered for sophomores and juniors respectively, is a great place to start. Foundational seminars in History, Sophomore Seminars and methodologically-focused courses in Political Science, and research methods courses in Sociology and Anthropology can offer you a foundation in conducting research and writing research papers. Also, seek the insight and advice of your thesis director, as well as the expertise of reference librarians.
4. Difficulty working interdisciplinarily— Seek the expertise of your thesis committee to help understand how to integrate and shift among the various disciplinary conventions and approaches the thesis will entail.
5. Limited knowledge of writerly conventions in a discipline—Because the Honors Thesis is interdisciplinary, you may need help in understanding how to write in each discipline, or in finding a writerly voice and language that can encompass the different disciplines.
6. Unintentional plagiarism—Keep meticulous notes and make sure to distinguish your own language and ideas from those of your sources. Seek assistance from your thesis director or the Writing Center if you need help integrating quotes and paraphrases properly.
7. Poor revision skills—Students frequently do not know how to interpret their advisor's suggestions for revision, or they don't know how to make extensive revisions. Seek assistance from your thesis director or a Writing Consultant in the Writing Center to help you prioritize the revision issues in a one-on-one meeting.
8. Choppy prose and poor grammar— Students with writing difficulties should visit a Writing Consultant at the Writing Center. The senior thesis director cannot be expected to work on grammar issues or edit every word. Writing Consultants will not proofread or edit, but they will get to the root of various writing problems and help you improve prose style, grammar, diction, tone, paragraph development, or myriad other issues. Ideally,
a senior should work with the same Writing Consultant throughout the year.

ⁱⁱ Carmen Lowe, Assistant Director of the Writing Center, developed “Common Pitfalls in Writing a Senior Honors Thesis.”

Advice for Senior Thesis Writers

"Don't wait until too late to decide on a topic, to do the research, and to write the actual paper. Start early. And make a timeline for yourself and your committee."

"Plan everything out well—starting in September, with deadlines along the way, not just when the entire thesis will be done. And set that date a week or two ahead of when it really needs to be in, just in case."

"Get it all figured out before you start! I wasted so much time first semester reading books I never used—either pick a subject you are familiar with, or find a faculty member who can guide you well. For the writing stage, free-writes are my best suggestion. While writing an 80-odd page thesis in a foreign language, free-writing in English (for 20 minutes at a time, no more) helped me get my thoughts together."

"Do work all year long rather than waiting for the end or doing too much in the beginning. Also, take advantage of any faculty help you can get . . . it may be your project, but they are a gold mine of information and advice, and every little bit counts."

"Make deadlines for yourself and submit as many drafts as possible to professors, writing tutors."

"Make sure to frequently meet with your advisors because they can help direct you through the process, and because they have the final say."

"Do [a Senior Honors Thesis] only if you have passion for the subject you are writing on. Otherwise, it will not work."

"Start writing earlier. You know all along but it's hard to do. You can't let the thesis take a backseat. The more drafts, revisions, and feedback you have the better your final product will be."

"Always proof-read one last time. And then proof-read once more."

"It's a rewarding experience. You're able to be in contact with academics and scholars. It makes the IR world accessible."

Contact Information and Additional Sources of Support

Though at times you may feel like when working on a senior thesis, you are not alone! Tufts offers many support services and resources to help you through the process:

The Writing Center

The Writing Center can provide students with assistance at many stages of the writing process, including alumni mentors, workshops, social gatherings, and writing consultants. Contact Carmen Lowe (x7-4329

Carmen.Lowe@ase.tufts.edu)

The online International Research Network (IRN)

<http://jupiter.tccs.tufts.edu/ir>

The IRLN, developed by the International Relations Program and Academic Technology, is a Web-based environment that promotes research on international topics by providing a virtual space for faculty and students to communicate, exchange resources, and collaborate on research projects anywhere in the world. Framed within the community of practice model, the IRN incorporates online tools, Web-based instruction, and international research resources, tip sheets, and materials to guide students through the research process and connect them to faculty and other students in a network that transcends distance.

Carol Downing, Administrative Coordinator

Ext. 7-3163 (carol.downing@tufts.edu)

For information on forms to be submitted and administrative deadlines

The International Relations Program

Cabot 605, ext. 7-2776

<http://ase.tufts.edu/ir>

For guidelines, procedures, and deadlines specific to the International Relations Program

Jim Glaser, Dean of Undergraduate Education

Dowling Hall, 7th floor, ext. 7-4239 (Assistant: Joanne Ferguson McPherson)

<http://ase.tufts.edu/deancoll>

For information on the Undergraduate Research Fund, the Tufts Summer Scholars Program, and other scholarship opportunities

Contact the departmental and program offices for detailed information on their policies, procedures, and deadlines for writing a senior honors thesis.