

Practical Advice For Students Undertaking Honors Work In Classics

Who should do honors?

It is the expectation of the department that students undertaking honors work will:

- have a B+ average in the relevant discipline (e.g. in Greek courses for a project which involves reading Greek)
- have at least a 3.3 average in Classics courses and an overall GPA of 3.0 or better
- have demonstrated their capacity to do independent work in their previous writing and/or research
- have some basic command of the requisite skills and/or methodologies

Not everyone should undertake honors work. Double majors and those completing pre-med requirements will need to be especially careful about their time commitments in the Senior year. Also, some very good students simply want to take more courses rather than working individually on a big project.

Still, if you meet the above criteria, you should at least give serious thought to entering the honors program. This may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pursue a topic in Classics that truly interests you as an individual and to develop your views about it into a significant piece of original scholarship. Graduating “with honors” or “with high honors” in your discipline is a real achievement and will go on your resume along with your thesis title.

Where do I start?

Select a topic from an area where you already have some knowledge. Think about courses you have taken that were particularly interesting to you, or perhaps a book you have read that raised exciting questions about the ancient world. One good way to start is to try to define a question to which you would like to know the answer, and then try to make that question specific enough so that you can make it into a focused topic.

Also, consider what your individual abilities are. Honors work should build on your strengths in such a way you can work at a relatively advanced level in some sub-discipline of Classics. For instance, if you already have good translation skills in Greek, you would be a good person to do a thesis involving further reading in Greek literature.

Once you have a topic in mind, you are ready to look for a faculty adviser. This may involve a series of conversations with department members. Ideally, you would work with the faculty member whose expertise own research has the most connection with the topic you propose: find out who that is. If that person is unable or unwilling to advise your project, he or she may suggest an alternative advisor. Keep in mind that by making the time commitment to work with you, your advisor is giving a vote of confidence that you can be expected to do quality work, which is likely (though of course not guaranteed) to earn honors. If you are approaching an advisor who is not familiar with your previous work in Classics, be ready to provide samples, e.g. a paper you wrote for a course or some other specimen of your achievements.

How do I put a proposal together?

Tell us in your own words what it is you want to do, why it is worth doing, and what the limits of your topic are which will make it possible for you to investigate it in two terms.

Before submitting your proposal, verify that it:

- Defines parameters of the topic to be investigated (period/author/location/other)
- Gives a clear statement of purpose
- If there are several parts to the project, shows how all are relevant to the stated purpose

- If the proposal is for a set of readings and an examination, indicates what principle governs the selection of readings
- If a paper will form part of the project, the proposal indicates an approximate page range
- Identifies at least one or two secondary sources that are clearly relevant and as current as possible.
- Names a principal adviser who has agreed to serve in that capacity.
- Suggests a reasonable timetable to be followed

It is not necessary to...

- name a second reader; your second reader will be assigned by the department.
- write an actual essay arguing for anticipated conclusions. Your job right now is simply to convince the department that what you want to do is both worthwhile and manageable.
- provide an extensive bibliography. A few recent, very relevant titles will usually suffice.
- give exact page numbers or line numbers to be covered in each week of the work. These details can be settled upon in agreement with the adviser at the beginning of the Fall Term.

What happens to my proposal after I submit it?

The Classics faculty as a whole will decide whether your proposal seems worthwhile and manageable. Occasionally, the faculty will ask a student to rewrite a proposal or to consider a change in principal adviser. Sometimes also, the department will suggest converting a project to a different track, for instance a set of exams rather than an essay. Being asked to rewrite does not mean your proposal has been rejected. It is just a request for you to clarify your ideas further before committing yourself to a big project.

It is also not uncommon for the faculty to suggest modifications of various kinds. If your proposal is accepted with suggested modifications, you do not need to resubmit it as long as you agree to the suggestions.

Students should be aware the department's acceptance of a proposal is no guarantee the completed project will earn honors.

What if I change my mind?

There is no requirement to continue with a project after the first term. A student who has second thoughts about continuing can simply ask the adviser to submit a grade for the Fall Term only. The student should then register for GRS 80, the senior seminar, in the spring term.

How will my work be evaluated?

Criteria depend to some extent on the nature of the project and the specific goals that have been set by the student and adviser. However, the following list will give you some idea of the kinds of criteria that some department members have used in the past.

During the preparatory term:

- Did the student adhere to the work schedule as originally proposed (or as modified in consultation with adviser)?
- Did the student follow through on suggestions from adviser?
- Did the student work well independently? Demonstrate some initiative in shaping the project? Continue to grow intellectually in the course of research?

Does the thesis:

- demonstrate some proficiency in the tools and techniques of research in the relevant discipline(s) (e.g. language skills, basic analytical methods, and basic bibliographical tools)?
- present a significant body of accurate information?

- engage fruitfully with current scholarship on the topic?
- make appropriate use of guidance from the faculty adviser?
- present a distinct point of view that is the result of the student's own reasoning process?
- argue persuasively for that view, making clear which facts and/or arguments support the thesis and which (if any) do not?
- present the material in an orderly, clear, and engaging form?

For the most part, grades for the Fall Term are not assigned until the entire thesis is submitted. Some types of project lend themselves to a formal grade in December, but many do not. Instead, your adviser may suggest a meeting to discuss your progress in person, or give you some evaluation in another way such as comments on a notebook or exam (if that is part of your proposal). Most advisers will also be more than happy to help you evaluate your work at any point in the term if you think such evaluation is needed.

When does all this happen?

Fall and winter are the suggested terms for honors work in the Senior year. Winter/spring projects may be undertaken only in special circumstances.

JUNIOR YEAR:

Fall term (or before): begin thinking about whether you want to do an honors project and what might be the nature of it. At the same time, find out what will be the topic of next year's senior seminar.

Winter Term: talk with potential faculty advisers and sort out possible topics.

Spring Term: for a formal application, you need to write up your specific proposal and submit it to the department by May 1st.

Summer between Junior and Senior year: do some background reading; brush up on skills needed for your research (e.g. language skills). Begin research if faculty adviser suggests this.

SENIOR YEAR:

First week of classes, fall term: meet with adviser to firm up planned timetable

Fall Term: exploration of your topic, following specific timetable agreed upon with adviser. Begin writing if advisor suggests this.

Winter Term, Senior year: writing of thesis or essay, preparation for examination. Meet with Senior seminar participants if invited to do so by the seminar instructor.

Last day of exams, winter term: submit draft of entire thesis to adviser

April 15 of spring term: submit final version of thesis to adviser and second reader

May 15: resubmit thesis to department incorporating any last-minute changes suggested by adviser or second reader

During latter part of May: present conclusions orally to department and guests

Last day of final exams: turn in two bound copies of the thesis to the department chair

What if I'm away Junior spring?

If at all possible, you should go ahead and turn in your proposal anyway, using e-mail or U.S. Mail to your adviser. (This makes it especially important to have talked with potential advisers during the Junior *winter*.)

If it's not possible to submit the proposal from where you are (for instance, if you're on our Greek FSP and have no computer), you should arrange for an extension. Discuss the matter with your adviser *before* May 15, and be sure the department chair knows about your situation.

What if I'm on a fall-term FSP Senior year?

Ideally you would do the necessary on-campus research *before* going away, so as to be able to work on your project while on the FSP. For some projects, it may be advisable to consider an one-term project in the winter, or possibly a winter-spring project.