

THE PHILOSOPHY HONORS THESIS
A Guide

1. Introduction

According to the Philosophy department website:

Students may complete an Honors thesis in their senior year. The thesis is an original piece of philosophical writing, the product of student research and reflection, written under the guidance of a member of the department acting as advisor. Usually, students work on the thesis for two semesters senior year, enrolling in Independent Research (PHIL 550) each semester. Honors are awarded upon successful oral defense of the completed thesis.

Here are a few things especially worth noting. First, writing an Honors thesis is optional, and not required for the major. Generally speaking, you should only consider pursuing the Honors thesis if you either (a) intend to pursue graduate studies in philosophy, or (b) have some other reason for thinking it a good idea to spend an entire year immersed in research on a single topic—e.g., perhaps it's a topic closely related to whatever sort of career you intend to pursue. (Remember, you also have the option of doing a single-semester Independent Study; so your reason(s) for choosing to write an Honors thesis should be good enough to justify *not* doing an Independent Study *instead*.) If you have any questions about this, please meet and discuss the matter with your academic advisor.

The main advantage of doing an Honors thesis – as with any research project in philosophy – is that you'll come out of the experience a better philosopher. On reflection, students often report having learned more about the actual practice of philosophy during their thesis project than they did in all of their other coursework combined. More to the point, though, the thesis project is also good practice for anyone considering graduate school (even if not in philosophy), since it will be supervised and evaluated in much the same way as most M.A. thesis projects. And finally, of course, the immediate advantage of doing an Honors thesis is that, if successful, you graduate with Honors.

Second, your work on the Honors thesis is to be done “under the guidance of a member of the department,” but that does not have to be your academic advisor. Indeed, in many cases, it will make much more sense for your research to be supervised by someone else. Ideally, your thesis advisor would be someone with expertise in the particular field in which you are conducting your research.

And finally, receiving Honors is not automatic. You should not assume, simply because you registered for PHIL 550 and have begun your research, that you are guaranteed Honors. At any point throughout the process, if and when your thesis advisor senses that the project is not going to be successful (for whatever reason), she or he may decide to discontinue your pursuit of Honors. In most cases, at that point, the project will cease being one of Independent Research (PHIL 550) for an Honors thesis, and will instead be considered an Independent Study (PHIL 500). If you would like to avoid this uncomfortable situation, please read the rest of this guide very carefully.

2. The basic idea

There's a pretty common trajectory that students follow during their undergraduate career as philosophical writers. Even the best philosophy students often begin as "serial summarizers," i.e., writers who are really adept at *describing* a particular debate, or *surveying* a particular philosophical landscape, rather than actually taking and defending positions of their own in these debates. And indeed, the ability to clearly and accurately summarize other philosophers' ideas is essential to being a good writer of philosophy. However, by your senior year in the major, the expectation is that you have now developed your own philosophical voice, and are able to use that voice to make some sort of original contribution to the literature. In other words, we expect that you now have *your own* ideas to share, in addition to having the skills required to share them *well* and in ways that interact with the ideas other philosophers. The Honors thesis is an opportunity for you to put these skills on display, in the service of making some original contribution to a field, or debate, or issue of your choosing.

Think of the differences between a music journalist, a music historian, and a musician. Of course, in order to be a good journalist or historian of music, you ought to know a thing or two about how music is made, what sorts of qualities make for good music, etc. But at the end of the day, journalists and historians are not in the business of *making music*; rather, they are in the business of *telling us something about music*. Likewise, there is a difference between *doing philosophy* and *telling us something about philosophy*, even if that difference is not always as clear as it is in the case of music. Consider the following:

- Thesis A:** The author raises some very interesting philosophical question, such as "What is a person?" or "What is injustice?" or "What is beauty?" etc., and then explains very clearly two or more opposing responses from philosophers to that question, comparing and contrasting along the way.
- Thesis B:** The author raises the same sort of interesting philosophical question, nicely describes a few extant philosophical responses to the question, and then either (a) defends one of those responses against its competitors (or against some particularly noteworthy objection), in some original sort of way, or (b) proposes and defends an original response to the question, noting not only how it is different from the other responses, but also why it is better.

It may not seem like much, but the difference between Thesis A and Thesis B is very big and very important. After all, in a strict sense, Thesis A *adds nothing* to the philosophical literature. Readers will get little-if-anything of philosophical significance from Thesis A that they couldn't already get by just reading whatever philosophical work is surveyed in the thesis. Of course, it may be that the author of Thesis A has a special gift for clarifying what other philosophers have said, but unless there's something of philosophical significance at stake in the clarification (e.g., "Everyone interprets this one philosopher in

this one way, but my interpretation is importantly different”), this is still not *adding anything* to what is already there in the literature.

Now, to be clear, this is not to say that all Honors theses should look like Thesis B. For instance, theses written on major works or figures in the history of philosophy will have to include a fair amount of careful, first-hand exegesis and exposition of the relevant primary texts. Theses written on broadly empirical topics will have to include careful reviews of the relevant experimental studies. Theses written on topics in logic are often much shorter, and sometimes include pages taken up by nothing but proofs. But even in these cases, you are still expected to (a) take and defend a position on some matter of philosophical significance, and (b) explain very clearly how your position compares and contrasts with the positions taken by other philosophers.

The main point of contrasting Thesis A and Thesis B is to highlight the difference between a thesis that *makes some original contribution to philosophy* and a thesis that merely *tells us something about* the contributions made by others. There are other ways of making original contributions to philosophy that would not fit the description of Thesis B. (This is something to be worked out between you and your thesis advisor.)

Most thesis projects begin with a student saying something like, “I’d really like to write something about gender,” or, “I’ve always been fascinated by discussions of causation,” or, “I want to write something about Aristotle.” This is fine. After all, the project has to begin *somewhere*. But there is a difference between having a *topic* and having a *thesis*. If you’re writing about causation, then causation is the general *topic* of your thesis. But until you’ve got something philosophically significant to say about causation, some original contribution to make to some debate about causation—i.e., in the form of a *thesis statement*—you don’t yet have a *thesis*. You might have an interesting *report* about causation. But the goal is to write a thesis, not a report. As a thesis advisor, I’d rather you write a thesis in which you defend a view that I believe is hopeless than for you to write a thesis that is not really a *thesis* at all.

2.1. Tips, pointers, etc.

Finding a topic:

- To be perfectly honest, if you’re struggling to even come up with a general topic for your thesis, then writing an Honors thesis probably is not a good idea for you. This should be the easiest part of the process.
- I once had a professor say to me, “If there’s an issue keeping you up at night, that’s a good sign that you should work on it.” Maybe there’s nothing keeping you up at night. But generally speaking, long and intensive research projects like the Honors thesis should be pursued only by people who are so intrigued by some issue that they’re likely to have the kind of interest required to sustain a year’s worth of reading and writing.

Moving from topic to thesis:

- As soon as you identify a topic (e.g., Hume on causation, philosophical conceptions of personhood, hedonism about well-being), you should begin by surveying some of the relevant literature in order to identify the primary views on that topic. For example:
 - What are the competing interpretations of Hume on causation?
 - What are the dominant philosophical conceptions of personhood?
 - What has been said for and against hedonism about well-being?
- Then you should *take a side* on the matter. For example:
 - Do you disagree with someone's interpretation of Hume on causation?
 - Do you have an objection to, or novel defense of, some particular philosophical conception of personhood?
 - What, in particular, would you like to say about hedonism about well-being?
- Find a "villain." One clear sign that you've actually *taken a side* on a matter of some philosophical significance is that there's an identifiable *other side*. Well, who's on the other side of this particular issue, saying things with which you disagree? If you can answer this question, you're already in the neighborhood of a thesis statement.
- In general, it is bad for philosophical thesis statements to include words like "explore," "discuss," or "investigate," and much better for them to include words like "argue," "defend," or "critique." If your thesis statement includes any of the former, and none of the latter, that's a good sign that you're not actually writing a *thesis*, but are instead writing a *report*. Please don't do that.
- Your thesis will likely *evolve* over the course of the project, and that's okay. You might be surprised by how common it is for philosophers to *end up* saying something different from what they *set out* to say. Also, you should expect to discover at least another philosopher or two who have already said what you're trying to say in your thesis. If this happens, do not panic. But you may need to refine your thesis a bit, or else your contribution to the literature will no longer seem original.

3. A rough timeline

Below is a tentative timeline for the project. Exact details and deadlines will need to be worked out between you and your thesis advisor. But in order to keep the project on track for an oral defense in early May, it is highly recommended that you stick as closely as possible to the following schedule.

For the record, Honors theses typically end up somewhere in the neighborhood of 30-50 pages (double-spaced, 12pt font, 1" margins, etc.). After a brief Introduction (1-2 pages), the rest of the thesis is usually divided into 3-5 sections—or, in some cases, chapters with their own sections. The early sections are typically spent critically reviewing the relevant

philosophical literature (commonly referred to as “lit review”); and the later sections are spent developing and defending your argument.

3.1. The Fall semester

<p>Beginning of Fall semester</p>	<p>The break between your junior and senior years is a good time to settle on a topic for your thesis. You should take advantage of this time to get a jump-start on reading. (If you’re interested in working on a topic from one of your classes, you might start by re-reading whatever the professor assigned on that topic). Ideally, you’d arrive on campus with a relatively clear idea of what you’d like your thesis to be <i>about</i>. The clearer and more precise you are about this, the easier it will be for your thesis advisor to select things for you to read.</p>
<p>End of September</p>	<p>By this point, you should have gone beyond merely having a <i>topic</i> to having an actual <i>thesis statement</i> (see above for a description of the difference, as well as tips and pointers for moving from topic to thesis). This will help to narrow the selection of readings.</p>
<p>September thru December</p>	<p>Weekly meetings with your thesis advisor to discuss whatever readings were assigned. Occasionally, your advisor may ask you to write brief responses to, or summaries of, something you read. But for the most part, your Fall semester will be spent doing lots and lots of reading, and you should take notes on everything you read. (Tip: Be sure to include bibliographical information and page numbers in your notes, since you’ll likely want to go back and reference certain things later in the process.)</p>
<p>End of Fall semester</p>	<p>This will likely depend upon the project and advisor, but it’s pretty typical for students to have to submit an annotated bibliography of the semester’s readings, and a rough draft of a substantive section of the thesis (i.e., not an Introduction). The grade you receive for the Fall semester will depend upon (a) your participation in weekly meetings, and (b) these documents that you submit at the end of the semester.</p>
<p>Winter break</p>	<p>To do over the break: (1) whatever readings your advisor assigns/recommends; (2) revise the section draft you submitted; (3) think about an outline for the whole thesis.</p>

3.2. The Spring semester

End of January	At the start of the semester, you and your advisor should plan about a month-and-a-half's worth of readings, with an eye toward tying up loose ends—e.g., "I still don't really understand Theory X, and the more I think about it, it seems really important to my thesis. So could we read a little more about that?" By the end of the month, you should submit a revised draft of the section you submitted in December , and a tentative outline for the thesis (to then discuss closely with your advisor).
End of February	Around this time (i.e., late February or early March), reading assignments will taper off, and attention will turn to your own writing. You may be asked to submit rough drafts of the other substantive sections of the thesis .
End of March	You should plan to submit a draft of the <i>entire</i> thesis (i.e., Introduction, Conclusion, and all substantive sections) to your advisor by the end of March. Of course, some of these sections will be more or less polished than others, and that's okay. The point is just to have the whole thing out on paper. You should prepare for some pretty intense nit-picking from your advisor at this stage. Ideally, the main arguments are all in place, and looking pretty good at this point. But there are still many stages of revision between this and a polished final draft. This is often the part of the process that is most frustrating for writers. When all is said and done, it will feel like you did more work in the month of April than you did from September to March.
Third week of April	Send a polished draft of the entire thesis to your advisor . This gives your advisor one last chance to look it over before you send copies to the other members of the department faculty.
Last week of April	Send a polished final draft of your thesis to all members of the Philosophy department faculty (or, whichever members will be attending your oral defense).
Finals week	Oral defense of thesis

4. The oral defense

These things usually last for about 60-90 minutes, and here's how they normally go:

- **5-10 min: Student opens by “talking through” the thesis.** This often involves:
 - A very brief explanation of how/why you got interested in this topic
 - An explanation of your view, and how you defend it
 - Some note about the upshot of the thesis (e.g., “If I’m right, then ...”)

- **40-60 min: Student fields questions from professors about the thesis.**
 - Though your thesis advisor *may* jump in to help you answer some questions, you should not count on this. So it may be worth having a kind of “pre-defense” meeting with your advisor, during which he or she can try to prepare you for certain lines of questioning (or at least forewarn you of them).

- **10-20 min: Student leaves room while professors confer about Honors.**
 - Feel free to use the bathroom, have a snack, or whatever; but don’t go far. Whenever the members of the faculty are done conferring, your advisor will call you back into the room and let you know of our decision.
 - In most cases, one of the following three outcomes awaits the student:
 - The faculty voted to give you Honors, and asks that you make very few and relatively minor changes to the thesis before submitting.
 - The faculty voted to give you Honors, but only on the condition that you make some relatively substantive changes to the thesis before submitting.
 - The faculty voted against giving you Honors, but may reconsider if significant changes are made to the thesis. Thankfully, this is very rare; and if the thesis is bad enough to fail to receive Honors, your advisor likely should have terminated the project at some point prior to the defense.

For the record, it is the student’s responsibility to schedule the oral defense, finding a day and time at which all professors are available. (Hint: The defenses usually take place on “reading days” during finals week.)

5. Submission

The Archives and Special Collections Department of the Dickinson College library will print and bind your Honors thesis (see examples of previous Honors theses on the bookshelf in the Philosophy department), but you have to format the document according to their specifications. These specifications can be found online.