

## **The Honors Thesis Workshop**

Honors 311

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### **Course Overview**

Welcome to Honors 311: the development and planning of your Honors Thesis. Across the United States, students in graduate programs from every conceivable discipline suffer from something called the “All But Dissertation (ABD)” phenomenon. They progress well through their master’s and doctoral course work but flounder when the time comes to carry out the independent work of the thesis or dissertation. It is commonly stated that over half of all graduate students never complete these projects. Regular course work provides both structure and a detailed focus; thus, students have very little experience with self-directed study, research and writing. Students also misconstrue the work of the dissertation or thesis as a product or an event that they can cram into a short period of time, as they have done (often successfully) with their course papers and assignments. The goal of this workshop is to focus on the thesis as a process, as a major series of developmental stepping stones on the way to the product: a thoroughly researched and thoughtfully revised thesis proposal. This document will function as a map or plan of action to then carry out the thesis itself in Honors 312. The workshop is a sort of compass to keep bringing you back to this path and to this goal.

### **The Process**

There are three primary tools that you will need to activate in order to develop your thesis. First, you need to keep a journal or “Project Log,” which can take many forms. Usually it is a bound notebook. Entry by entry, like a diary, it will evolve across the semester. It’s an organizing structure. It’s a place to gather and document information, pose questions, and explore and dissect ideas.

Second, you will be engaging in “Socratic Dialogue” with faculty from across the university about your evolving project. These conversations are crucial. They mark the beginning of a shift in your identity from “student” to “researcher.” You will be asked to have at least six of these conversations across the semester. To carry out the actual work of your thesis, you will need to organize a thesis committee of three faculty advisors. Most likely, out of these conversations your thesis committee will emerge.

Third, you will be asked to investigate and expand your evolving project focus by reading and research. You will need to read a minimum of ten journal articles or book chapters by the end of the semester. To facilitate this process, the class will meet as a group in the library twice throughout the semester and work closely with one of the reference librarians there. It is important to emphasize, however, that gathering this material is only one step in the process. It needs to be studied, analyzed and summarized with your project in mind. Some of this reading material will be then organized into the final section of your thesis proposal, the “Annotated Bibliography.”

### **The Workshop as a Writing Course**

The workshop is a writing intensive course. You will be asked to engage and produce an array of discursive practices. In your “Project Log” you will articulate and explore your thinking in writing along the way. This practice foregrounds Lev Vygotsky’s clarifying and insightful principle that thought and language are inseparable. Thought does not emerge fully formed—like Athena from the head of Zeus. Rather, thought is born through the process of articulation in language. In addition, most class sessions will include time for thinking and writing.

The writing assignments in the workshop have been organized into a progressive sequence. The “Preliminary Idea Paper” is the first step. Utilizing a more visual approach, the “Project Diagram” will explore a more complex flow of ideas and examine the inter-relationships among the various sub-areas of your project. The “Working Proposal Draft” will expand on both of these. It will be sent out to at least one other member of the Honors Faculty for review. You will then be asked to carry out a substantive revision of your project. This feedback will be synthesized and your drafts reworked into a “Final Proposal.” One of the important goals of the workshop is carrying out this in depth revision over a six week period and improving the quality of your written work through this process of drafting, receiving feedback from multiple sources, returning to the research literature, then reconceptualizing and rewriting accordingly.

The content of this Final Proposal will be reworked into written products for other audiences and to accomplish other goals. These goals will vary from project to project but include the following: grant proposals; applications to USM’s Office of Research Compliance for those students who will be using human subjects as a data source in their research; and abstracts for poster sessions at various conferences.

### **Thesis Research is about Creating Meaning**

Frank Smith in his book “To Think” suggests that the generally accepted divide in universities between creative and analytical or critical thinking is problematic. Instead he argues that there is a higher and more encompassing principle out of which both of these emerge. He terms this principle “the constantly driving imagination.” In order to complete a thesis you will

need to activate this principle. The thesis is a process, not an event. And in carrying out this process you will need both analysis and creativity; you will need to both gather information and articulate and explore your own insights and questions, “authoring” the material you gather. At first glance the workshop functions as a temporary community organized around research. While this is accurate, the process depends on just what we mean by research. Research is an organized, intentional study of a subject using a wide range of resources and methods. It’s a progressive accumulation of information. But more than that, research is about entering the unknown and creating knowledge. And the demands of thesis research even fold in a more complex dimension. The word “thesis” is derived from the Greek word tithemi, meaning “I put, place or establish,” so a thesis is a place where you take your stand. However, tithemi is a verb, not a noun, and specifically a verb constructed in the first person. It’s not uncommon for beginning researchers to get overwhelmed with the abundance of information connected to their emerging topics. And it’s easy to incorrectly focus the bulk of their energy on accumulating it. But thesis research isn’t about gathering this material. It’s about creating meaning. It’s about being the author of your project. It’s a back and forth process between author and material. The material per se isn’t really what is important; what’s important is the process of establishing your stand within it.

### **Class Meetings and Assignment Schedule**

September 3: Setting up a Research Community/Focus on Writing

Discuss: Vygotsky: “Interaction between Learning and Development: the Zone of Proximal Development” from Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes

Introduce: Tripartite Process

Assignment: Deconstructing a Thesis in terms of its Disciplinary Components

\*Read and be prepared to discuss the Ted Ames piece for the next two classes\*

September 10: Introduction to an Autoethnographic Approach

Discuss: S. Wall: “An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography” from *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*

Students need to provide a rationale for their approach, to become familiar with the research literature on the method(s) chosen, to develop expertise within those methods, as well as be able to articulate the disciplinary affiliations of their chosen method(s).

Report on thesis readings.

September 17: Understanding Interdisciplinarity/ What is a Thesis? Who is Audience?

Discuss: R. Waldrep: “Alarms and Excursions” from The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy

Discuss: Wilkinson, “The Lobsterman: How Ted Ames turned oral history into science”

Every student should eventually be able to explain what disciplines they are drawing on in their thesis.

“Preliminary Idea Paper” due - Please bring three copies

September 24: Research Component A, class meets in the library

October 1: Introduction to Diagrammatic Literacy

Reading summary #1 due

October 8: Project Diagram Presentation 1 – 1<sup>st</sup> group

Reading summary #2 due

October 15: Project Diagram Presentation I – 2<sup>nd</sup> group

Reading summary #3 due

October 22: Writing Workshop

Reading summary #4 due

October 29: “Working Proposal Draft” due – please bring 4 copies

\*No exceptions\*

November 5: Problem Solving

Reading summary #5 due

November 12: Research Component B: library

November 19: Project Diagram Presentation 2 – 1<sup>st</sup> group

Reading summary #6 due

Writing workshop

November 26: Thanksgiving Vacation

December 3: Project Diagram Presentation 2 – 2<sup>nd</sup> group

Reading summary #7 due

Writing workshop

December 10: Final Proposals due; Thesis Committee members signed on;

IRB Applications completed

December 17: Celebratory gathering

## **Assignment Specifics**

### **The Project Log**

Your Honors Thesis Project Log is a thinking and organizing tool. It's a place to gather ideas together, to document important findings and insights as well as to explore your thinking.

In order to understand the purpose of keeping a project log, think ahead to the end of the semester. At that time you should be able to look back through this log and see how your project shifted and changed, how your project developed and evolved over this four-month period. You should be able to recreate the process you went through. It represents the history of the evolution of your project. In fact with certain kinds of projects, you might even end up using some of this process material in the thesis itself. Also, keep in mind that in research literature across disciplines there is a vibrant discussion about methodological practices. You never know how you might use, or what you can learn from studying, your own process.

#### **Some particulars:**

Choose a structure that works for you and stick with it.

Date each entry.

Use it **often** and carry it with you.

### **The Preliminary Idea Paper:** September 17

- This is a brainstorming paper. One of the best ways to get going with a project is to put your initial ideas in writing.
- The content should include the following (and could be organized into sections):
  1. In specific and detailed terms the project you now have in mind.
  2. Your “hook” or stand on this topic. Give it a shot. This can take the form of a thesis statement or a question that you want to explore.
  3. A breakdown of the topic into the sub-areas to be investigated.

4. How you might go about discovering or defending or proving the above. This part of your paper begins to open up the question of “methodology.”

#### Details:

- Give your paper a “working title.”
- Double space
- 3-5 pages
- grammar needs to be attended to

**nota bene:** Be prepared to read your paper out loud. We will be using a graduate seminar, research community format in responding to each in class. Once a paper has been read, we will then take five minutes in silence to write a response, then go around and present our most important point. These response papers will then be given to the presenting student.

#### **The Project Diagram:** October 15

A thesis diagram is an exploratory outline of your project in a visual format.

#### How to do a Diagram

- Use a large sheet of unlined paper or poster board. Having enough space is important.
- Sift through your project material for the most important elements. These will become the components of your diagram. Work towards articulating your thesis statement or “hook” into this material. Place this critical statement in the center of your diagram, then place related ideas on branches that radiate out from it.

#### Mapping Tools

- Lines/Arrows: Use lines to present the inter-relationships between your ideas and project areas. You also may want to use arrows. Use vectors (→) to point to ideas that are

offshoots or subsets of larger ideas. Use continuum arrows ( $\leftrightarrow$ ) to indicate ideas that are in opposition or to foreground important tensions in your material.

- Branches: An idea may branch many times to include both closely and distantly related ideas.
- Groupings: If a number of branches contain related ideas, you may want to draw a circle around the whole area.
- Explanatory/Exploratory Notes: You may want to include a few sentences to explain, question or comment in more detail within an area or on the relationship between some of the ideas.
- Lists
- Color-coding, Images or Important Citations: These may strengthen your presentation and help to differentiate the sub areas to be investigated and to provide supporting detail.

### The Purpose of Diagramming

- Diagramming allows you to examine your thesis material in terms of how your ideas fit together (convergent thinking).
- It helps to strengthen and clarify your central idea or hook.
- It allows you to see all of your information simultaneously.
- It makes it easier to examine your material in different ways, from different points of view.
- It gives you experience with visual presentation formats that are often utilized in presenting research across disciplines at conferences, e.g. poster sessions, Power Point.

### **Working Proposal Draft**: October 29 (NO EXCEPTIONS)

Your draft needs to include the following:

1. a working title
2. page numbers
3. double spacing

4. sections with titles
5. section 1: introduction. Include an in depth presentation of your organizing questions, thesis statement, or your “hook” into the material.
6. section 2: a thorough description of the project including a discussion of the key areas to be explored
7. section 3: methodology, a discussion of your approach, how you plan to go about this project, and a timeline
8. section 4: annotated bibliography
9. then submit **three** copies

Advice:

1. Be honest. If there is an area that is less developed but nonetheless important, say so. Having a study phase for the actual thesis process is fine and not uncommon. Organize that into your plan.
2. Remember that in any successful piece of writing, the meaning comes through specifics, details and examples. Have you included enough detail? How and where can you be more specific?
3. Where fitting, use the work and the ideas of other researchers, thinkers and writers to develop your points and to strengthen your proposal. Remember: you can't create in a vacuum, and it's important to establish your work—though unique—within a tradition where possible.

**Final Proposal:** Due December 17

## **Attendance and Grading**

The workshop only meets once a week, fourteen sessions in all. Students are expected to attend class and to be on time, unless other arrangements have been made. Absence and tardiness will have an impact on your grade.

50% of your grade will be determined by the process part of the workshop:

1. Project Log (pass/fail)
2. Socratic Dialogue with six faculty (pass/fail)
3. Level of engagement with the readings for your evolving project (pass/fail)
4. Research Components A and B (pass/fail): 7 reading summaries

50% of your grade will be determined by the product part of the workshop:

1. Preliminary Idea Paper (pass/fail)
2. Project Diagram (pass/fail)
3. Working Proposal Draft (temporary grade)
4. Final Proposal Draft (final grade)