

Honors Theses in Communication – Preliminary guidelines

Length of paper

20 page minimum - 50 page maximum. Most students write papers between 25 and 30 pages. The minimum requirement may be lower if the student's project is the design and execution of an experiment.

Sources

20 source minimum. Secondary sources may be used, but do not count in this total.

Bibliography

An annotated bibliography of at least 15 items is due by midterm. The completed paper must include a minimum of 20 works cited.

Style

Depending on the topic, the student may use either MLA or APA style.

Presentation

A 25-30 minute presentation, using a least two different types of audio-visual aid is required. This presentation constitutes 20% of the student's final grade for the project.

I. What is a Senior Thesis?

A senior thesis is a scholarly piece of writing in which the writer is expected to show a command of the relevant scholarship in her field and contribute to that scholarship. It should confront a question that is unresolved and push towards resolution. For many students, the thesis differs from traditional essays in scope and length. If they have never written a paper so broadly conceived and so lengthy, they may need to see a model of other papers in their field, or even in a different field, to help them to define a manageable topic.

II. Choosing a topic

The choice of a topic usually is made by a student in conjunction with an adviser. Here are some questions an adviser might ask to help the student define a workable topic:

- Is the topic interesting – both to the writer and to a potential reader?
- How can the topic be researched?
- Does the topic present problems that can be explored or analyzed?
- Will the student bring a fresh perspective to this topic?
- Is the student writing with honest questions that she cares about?

III. Getting Started

Students and advisors might want to set up a schedule for the writing of the paper, requiring the student to check in regularly with a progress report. Such a schedule might include an outline, a proposal, a preliminary bibliography, a paragraph outline of the main sections of the proposed paper. Any of these documents can help the student and the adviser talk concretely about the progress of the paper, and identify problems as they might occur.

Students might set aside time - at least an hour a week in the beginning - to write an exploratory draft on an issue raised in that week's research. Such a draft might begin, "The thing that preoccupies me about this whole matter this week is. . . ." Such a draft encourages the student to begin thinking about and shaping her material. These sixty-minute drafts soon accumulate and, as the writer's attention begins to focus more narrowly on specific issues, these drafts begin to fit together and form chapters.

IV. The Introduction

Introductions written before much of the paper has been drafted tend to be generalized, vague, and wandering. Often, students write better introductions if they do them after the rest of the paper is complete. Here are some suggestions for an effective introduction:

The first paragraph should arouse interest, not announce intentions.

Avoid announcing throughout the introduction. Sentences that begin "I will discuss" or "the purpose of this thesis" only stall the introduction. Just launch into the issues. You may find it easier to formulate your introduction after you have written some--or even most--of your thesis. Some students find it helpful to summarize each section of the senior thesis and use these summary sentences to formulate a thesis statement for the entire project. Unless it is required by the discipline, avoid writing a thorough survey of the literature in the introduction. While it is useful to refer to sources relevant to the background of the topic, the introduction is no place for a bibliography.

V. Developing a personal voice

Two questions recur from students writing a senior thesis: How much theory should be included? Is it all right to use "I"?

a) Students should not rush into theory. We suggest that students draft theoretical sections in their own words, without references or citations, which can be added in later drafts.

b) Even if the conventions of a particular discipline require that "I" not be used in a formal essay, we encourage students to use "I" in a draft, giving them the freedom to risk their own opinions and to engage fully in a scholarly dialogue.

VI. Revising and Organizing

The use of drafts may prove messy for some students. It may encourage rambling. After several drafts, students may have trouble organizing a mass of material into a coherent paper. Organizing becomes more manageable if a preliminary outline is made and revised as the work progresses. The outline, then, becomes a test of the logical structure of the piece. There are several kinds of outlines that may be effective.

VII. The Final Version

During the final phase, the adviser helps the writer polish the work. Editing for style doesn't mean that the thesis will fit into some prescribed style, but that it is improved on its own terms. If grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other technical matters were addressed during the first drafts, the final version will be a better product. On-going attention to writing is more useful than a crash attempt to "fix" a paper.

All contents Copyright © The Writing Center, Barker Center 019, Cambridge, MA 02138.