The Senior Thesis Experience

Department of Psychology
Haverford College
Fall 2021

Welcome to your senior year at Haverford! One of the most important and rewarding aspects of the psychology program is the senior thesis. This handout will describe key aspects of the senior thesis experience in our department, including goals, expectations, assignments, timelines, and advising information. You will want to read it carefully before the beginning of the semester and then refer to it as needed throughout the senior year. We look forward to getting started with you on your thesis work!

Goals of the senior thesis experience

The overarching goal of the thesis program is for you to create an original scholarly contribution in psychology. Although the specifics of the thesis project will vary, what all thesis projects have in common is that you will become an expert in a particular topic within psychology, through reading, discussing, and evaluating prior scholarship in that topic, and you will develop your own contribution to extend knowledge in that area, whether through an original data collection project (the two-semester experience, described below) or through an original synthesis of literature on that topic (the one-semester experience, also described below). An exciting aspect of working on a thesis project is the realization that you are moving from being a “consumer” of knowledge in the field towards being a creator or contributor to new knowledge.

Beyond these general goals of the thesis project, you will also find that working on a thesis develops a number of skills that are relevant to many career directions. You will enhance your ability to critically evaluate and synthesize prior scientific research on your topic, and you will hone your writing through a draft-and-revision process. If you choose a two-semester project, you will also gain more in-depth experience with issues in research design and data analysis and interpretation. Regardless of what kind of project you work on, you will gain confidence in your ability to carry through a large-scale project from beginning to end. All of these aspects of the thesis experience make it excellent preparation for graduate work and for many career paths in psychology and related fields.

Types of senior thesis experience

The psychology department supports two types of thesis experience: the one-semester project and the two-semester project. Therefore, your first decision as a senior should be which of these two types of thesis you choose to conduct. As described below, the key distinction between these two types is that the two-semester project includes data collection and analysis conducted on a topic that falls within a faculty advisor's area of scholarly expertise. A one-semester thesis typically does not involve data collection/analysis, but rather involves a synthesis of existing literature on a topic of your choosing.

One-semester project. The one-semester project is sometimes referred to as a "library thesis" to distinguish it from a thesis that involves original data collection. The student conducts an in-depth literature review of a given topic and develops their own original synthesis and analysis of the issues. The one-semester thesis project can be appropriate for students who have a deep interest in researching a topic that is not amenable to the empirical methods available at Haverford, or that does not fall within a faculty member's area of expertise. An advantage of the one-semester project is that any topic within psychology can be appropriate; you are not limited to the research interests and directions of program faculty. Note that if you choose the one-semester project, you will need to complete one additional elective course towards the psychology major, so that you have the same number of total credits as a student completing a two-semester project. The one-semester thesis can be conducted in either the fall or spring semester.

Two-semester project. The two-semester project differs from the one-semester project in that it involves designing and conducting an original study, including some combination of data collection and analysis. This kind of project is carried out over two semesters because of the time-consuming nature of original data collection and statistical analysis and interpretation of the data. The two-semester project also involves an in-depth literature review and synthesis, just like the one-semester project, but students who choose this option will also gain more in-depth experience in research design and data analysis.The two-semester project is akin to a "lab-based thesis", although depending on the topic, it may or may not take place in an actual lab. (Some forms of data collection could occur online, for example.) Because original data collection is involved, the two-semester project is conducted in a research area for which the faculty advisor has the expertise and methodological tools to conduct the study. Therefore, the topics for two-semester projects are more constrained. A two-semester thesis project can sometimes involve working in a small group of 2-4 students, whereas one-semester projects are always conducted independently. For those

students who conduct a two-semester project, major papers are due in both the fall and spring semesters, as described in more detail below.

Off-campus thesis projects. In some circumstances, students may have the opportunity to work on a thesis project in an off-campus lab, for example at Bryn Mawr or Penn. In most cases, this opportunity arises when the student already has a connection with that off-campus lab, for example having worked at that lab in the summer or a prior semester. Regardless of where the work is done, the form and scope of the research project must conform to the Haverford model, as outlined in this document. To ensure this, a member of the Haverford department will serve as your departmental "point person" even as the research is directly supervised by an off-campus advisor. If you are interested in working with an off-campus advisor, please talk to the chair of the Haverford psych department as soon as possible. In order to conduct your thesis off-campus, you must have the department's permission, which typically occurs after the chair or another faculty member consults with the off-campus advisor about expectations.

Assignments and expectations

Your graded thesis work will be centered around several assignments that have different goals. First we describe each of these assignments and their timelines, followed by more information about grading.

Annotated bibliography. One of the key goals of thesis is to become an expert in your topic, which requires reading prior literature in your subfield. Your advisor can get you started, but the primary responsibility for finding relevant literature lies with you. Over the first weeks of the semester, and then continuing beyond, you will aim to become a voracious reader of relevant theory and empirical findings relevant to your topic, and you will regularly discuss what you read with your advisor (and group members, if you are in a thesis group). Because forming a base of knowledge gives you a crucial leaping off point for developing your own ideas, the first thesis assignment involves representing and organizing that knowledge base. This assignment is generically referred to as an "annotated bibliography," although the exact format and mechanics can differ depending on your advisor. The main goal of this assignment is to allow you to catalog, in a conceptually organized fashion, each of the readings you have done along with their key points and relevance to your topic. This assignment is due on **Friday October 29**. Your advisor will provide more details about the format that they will expect. Of course, you can continue to read additional literature beyond the October 29 deadline, but by

October 29 you are expected to have a substantial body of references (approximately 30 references) to organize and synthesize.

Thesis presentation. One important goal of thesis is to hone your communication skills, allowing you to get across your ideas effectively to an audience and to consider feedback from your audience. Although your written work is the primary way in which you will communicate your knowledge and ideas, we also expect you to make a brief presentation about your project to your cohort of senior psych majors and department faculty. The presentation will cover the background of your project and key research questions; for two-semester projects, it should also cover your hypotheses and research design. Presentations will be scheduled for **Friday, Nov. 5 and Friday, Nov. 12,** starting at 1:30 and going to approximately 3:30 each of those days.

Thesis paper. An important element of your thesis experience is the thesis paper, which is due at the end of the semester. Although the structure of the paper will differ for one- versus two-semester projects (see below), in both cases the paper will go through a draft-and-revision process, in which you will hand in a draft to your advisor, who will then provide extensive feedback on your writing and ideas. You will then revise your paper before the deadline for your final thesis paper. For fall semester papers, the first draft will be due on **Friday November 19**. Your advisor will provide feedback by Monday November 29, and then your final paper will be due on **Monday, December 6**. Many advisors will also ask you to complete an outline of your thesis paper prior to the first draft, in order to reinforce the organization of your ideas and provide a scaffold for the paper itself. Deadlines for an outline can be worked out independently with your thesis advisor, but ***deadlines for the first draft and final draft of the paper are hard deadlines that are non-negotiable except in extreme circumstances***.

Format of one-semester paper. For students completing a one-semester project, your paper should provide an integrated literature review of your topic, combined with original insights, applications, or synthesis. In other words, the expectation is that the paper will go beyond merely a summary of relevant literature, and instead will include an original contribution. The form of that original contribution could differ depending on the topic. For example, originality could come from a critical evaluation of the existing state of the evidence and recommendations for new directions in research in that area; or it could come in the form of developing a new theory to account for discrepant results in the literature; or it could come in the form of applying existing theories to a new or different psychological phenomenon. You do not need to have complete overlap between the sources in your annotated bibliography and your final thesis paper, as your thinking may evolve over the semester and certain references may come to seem more

or less important. A typical one-semester paper is approximately 20-25 pages in length, followed by an APA-style reference list.

Format of two-semester paper. The fall-semester paper for students who conduct a two-semester project involves two main sections, an introduction and a methods section, along with an APA-style reference section. The introduction should be approximately 10 pages long, and should include a literature review and rationale for your project. Please note that not all of the literature that you included in your annotated bibliography needs to go into your paper. As your ideas develop and evolve over the course of the semester, you may find that only some of the articles that you read are directly helpful in developing the rationale for your proposed research. Therefore, while your introduction certainly should contextualize your project in reference to prior theory and findings, the main goal of your introduction is to build a persuasive argument that your project will fill an important gap in knowledge. Your introduction should work towards building momentum for a set of defined hypotheses that your project will test. The second major section of your paper, the methods section, will differ in length depending on the nature of your project and the methods you plan to use. Your advisor will guide you on key elements that must be included in your methods section, but the general rule of thumb is that your methods should include all details that would be needed to replicate the study. In many cases, adjustments to the methods may occur during the spring semester as you actually implement the study, but nevertheless, by the time of your fall-semester paper, you are expected to have a detailed plan described in your method section.

Attendance at departmental talks. In developing your base of knowledge as a psychology major, it's helpful to balance a "deep dive" into your specific thesis topic with a broader view of the field of psychology as a whole. Towards this end, throughout the fall, the psychology department will be hosting a series of talks by distinguished speakers in a wide range of subfields of psychology. The speakers will be scheduled for the time-slot of senior thesis so that you all can attend, and indeed ***your attendance is expected***. The departmental talks may not be directly related to your thesis topic, but they provide a great opportunity for you to learn about different kinds of exciting research, to interact with the researchers themselves, and to participate in the community of psychology students and faculty.

Grading

Your final thesis grade for the semester will be determined according to the following weighting of contributions:

30% of grade: annotated bibliography
50% of grade: thesis paper
20% of grade: participation (effort, initiative, leadership, and departmental citizenship)

The third grade component listed above will be a subjective assessment that is based on your active participation in your thesis project, your contribution to the oral presentation of your thesis, your engagement with other students' presentations, and your attendance at departmental talks.

Your annotated bibliography will be graded only by your primary thesis advisor, whereas the final paper will be evaluated by both your primary advisor and the second reader. The participation component will be discussed among your primary advisor, second reader, and the department faculty as a whole.

Advisors

The primary thesis advisor is the person directly supervising your project, with whom you will meet regularly throughout the semester. The second reader is another department faculty member, to be assigned a few weeks into the fall semester, who will read and evaluate your final paper along with your first reader, and who can be consulted for general advice as needed along the way. Typically only the first reader gives the student feedback on the first draft of the thesis paper, which is not graded.

The purpose of having second readers is twofold. First, it is an important reminder to you that the audience for your thesis paper is not only someone who is already expert in your topic; instead, you should aim to write in a way that is persuasive and comprehensible to people who may be expert in other areas of psychology. Second, having each thesis paper read by more than one faculty member allows the department to maintain consistency and fairness in evaluation and grading. If you are working with an off-campus advisor, your second reader (a Haverford psychology professor) will take on more responsibility than a typical second reader, because they will give feedback on the first draft of your thesis paper and they will make sure that communication with your off-campus advisor happens smoothly.

Your primary thesis advisor will be determined within approximately the first week of the semester. By Friday of the first week of classes, you will be asked to complete a

questionnaire to communicate to us (a) whether you choose a one-semester project in the fall or spring, or a two-semester project; and (b) for a two-semester project, what are your first, second, and third choices of advisors/project areas. Note that although we will try to honor the first-choice preference for as many students as possible, *we may not be able to give you your first choice*. It is important for the department to balance the workload of thesis advising across different professors, both for fairness and to make sure that professors can devote the time needed to thesis advising, a job we all take seriously and towards which we devote significant effort.

Looking ahead to the spring semester

This handout pertains to the general structure of the thesis process and the expectations for the fall semester. For those of you who complete a one-semester thesis in the fall semester, you will be finished with thesis in the fall. For those who plan to complete a one-semester thesis in the spring semester, the general goals and expectations described here will also pertain to the spring semester, and we will communicate relevant dates before the start of the spring semester. For those who conduct a two-semester project, your project will continue on into the spring semester with data collection, analysis, and interpretation. At the end of the spring semester, your final two-semester thesis paper will include both the sections you wrote in the fall (introduction and methods; revised in response to feedback), along with new sections detailing your results and conclusions. More detailed information about the format of the spring paper and its deadlines will be forthcoming before the start of the spring semester. Finally, in most years we plan an end-of-year event to showcase and celebrate the accomplishments of all of our thesis students, and we will provide more information about that in the spring.

In the meantime, best wishes in beginning your thesis journey! Although thesis can feel like an enormous undertaking, remember that your advisor is there to guide you and offer support through all the stages of your project.