Undergraduate Program - Writing a Thesis

Writing a Thesis

Department Timeline of Thesis Preparation

The thesis writer and adviser should agree on a working schedule which will adequately conform to the calendar of thesis requirements established by the Senior Honors Adviser. Each of these written requirements should be submitted to the Tutorial Office for review by the Senior Honors Adviser. Paradigms for each of the written requirements are held on file in the Tutorial Office, for consultation. An updated schedule of departmental dates and deadlines relative to the thesis will be available at the beginning of each Fall Term. All writers of the senior thesis shall enroll in an HAA 99 for course (and requirement) credit - joint concentrators will enroll in the 99 course of their primary concentration.

Beginning in 2006-07, every concentrator writing a thesis will enroll in the senior thesis seminar in the fall of the senior year. Overseen by the Senior Honors Adviser, the senior thesis seminar will meet several times during the semester for a two-hour session devoted to facilitating the preparation and writing of a thesis. These sessions will cover such topics as compiling a bibliography, using archives, and constructing an effective argument. Late in the semester, each participant will deliver a twenty-minute presentation on his or her thesis topic, illustrated with slides or digitally projected images. All departmental faculty and students will be invited to these presentations. By the end of the semester, each participant in the seminar will submit a complete first draft of the thesis, complete with illustrations.

Key Dates

- Application for Pulitzer and Abramson Travel Grants: Early March. See Undergraduate Prizes, Grants and Opportunities for details on grant and application.
- Announcement of Pulitzer and Abramson Grant Awards: Mid-March. By letter to the recipients.
- Adviser's Review: Early March. Ideally, you should present the full, finished and finalized draft of your text to your adviser for a final review before formal submission to the Department.
- Thesis Submission: Mid-March - a week before Spring Break. You must submit your thesis in the afternoon at a Thesis Reception. In exchange for your finely crafted magnum opus you will receive a glass of champagne and our heartiest congratulations. Please do attend this afternoon because a thesis submitted late is usually not accepted.
- Reader's Response: after Early May. Senior Honors Theses are read and critiqued by Members of the Faculty and the Museum at the request of the Senior Honors Adviser. Readers' identities no longer remain anonymous.
- Faculty Meeting on Honors: Early May. Department Faculty meet to vote on final honors recommendations, after which thesis writers will receive by letter from the Senior Honors Adviser notification of their thesis grade and recommendation for honors. Writers will also receive at this time the written responses of their readers. Students should speak with their Allston Burr Senior Tutor for anticipated final honors decision of the College.

Grading of the Senior Thesis

Theses are read and critiqued by faculty members applying a higher standard than expected for work written in courses or tutorials. Faculty do make use of the full range of grades, and students should consider that any honors grade is a distinction of merit. If you have any questions, please contact the Senior Honors Adviser, the Director of Undergraduate Studies, or the Undergraduate Coordinator at 495-2310.

SUMMA CUM LAUDE: A summa thesis is a work of "highest honor." It is a contribution to knowledge, though it need not be an important contribution. It reveals a promise of high intellectual attainments both in selection of problems and facts for consideration and in the manner in which conclusions are drawn from these facts. A summa thesis includes, potentially at least, the makings of a publishable article. The writer's use of sources and data is judicious. The thesis is well written and proofread. The arguments are concise and logically organized, and the allocation of space appropriate. A summa is not equivalent to just any A, but the sort given by instructors who reserve them for exceptional merit. A summa minus is a near miss at a summa and is also equivalent to an A of unusual quality.

MAGNA CUM LAUDE: A magna level thesis is a work worthy of "great honor." It clearly demonstrates the capacity for a high level of achievement, is carried through carefully, and represents substantial industry. A magna plus thesis achieves a similar level of quality to a summa in some respects, though it falls short in others; it is equivalent to the usual type of A. A magna thesis is equivalent to an A-. For a magna minus, the results achieved may not be quite a successful due to an unhappy choice of topic or approach; it is also equivalent to an A-.
CUM LAUDE: As is appropriate for a grade "with honors," a cum level thesis shows serious thought and effort in its general approach, if not in every detail. A cum plus is equivalent to a B+, a cum to a B, and a cum minus to a B-. The cum thesis does not merely represent the satisfactory completion of a task. It is, however, to be differentiated from the magna in the difficulty of the subject handled, the substantial nature of the project, and the success with which the subject is digested. Recall that, as students putting extraordinary effort into a thesis most frequently receive a magna, theses of a solid but not exceptional quality deserve a grade in the cum range. When expressed in numerical equivalents, the interval between a magna minus and a cum minus is double that between the other intervals on the grading scale.

NO DISTINCTION: Not all theses automatically deserve honors. Nevertheless, a grade of no distinction (C, D, or E) should be reserved only for those circumstances when the thesis is hastily constructed, a mere summary of existing material, or is poorly thought through. The high standards which are applied in critique of theses must clearly be violated for a thesis to merit a grade of no distinction.

Examples of Past Theses

Senior Honors Theses which are written by students who graduate Summa or Magna are deposited in the University Archives in Pusey Library. Copies of theses which are awarded the Hoopes Prize are held in Lamont Library. Students are urged to consult past theses as much can be gained in exploring precedent or seeking inspiration.

Discontinuance of a Thesis

The process of writing the thesis is a serious commitment of time and energy for both the writer and the adviser. In some cases, however, it might be agreed that the thesis should be discontinued at mid-year. The Senior Tutorial HAA 99 may be divided with credit through a procedure in which the student must submit a written paper presenting the project and research to that point.

Guidelines for Writers and Advisers of Senior Theses

Senior Concentrators wishing to graduate with honors in the Department must write a senior thesis and carry academic standing of Group II or better, with a minimum GPA of 3.00 in concentration grades. In deciding whether one wishes to fulfill the honors requirements the student should consider his/her academic interests, commitment to independent research and other deadlines and obligations during the thesis year. Many students find the task of researching and writing a substantial piece of critical scholarship interesting and rewarding, but others find the senior thesis can become a frustrating and unwieldy burden. Some students prefer the freedom to savor extra-curricular pursuits during their last year at the College unhampered by the encroaching demands of thesis preparation. In general, it may be remarked that students are unlikely to do well in the honors program who are not already committed to this process of scholarship, and proven practiced writers; the senior thesis is not the place to acquire basic skills in writing and research. In considering the Department's honors requirements, it should be remembered that students with honors grades overall may graduate with University Honors (Cum Laude) even if they do not receive Honors in History of Art and Architecture.

Academic Requirements

The writing and evaluation of the thesis is a year long process, during which the writer meets at scheduled intervals with his/her adviser, to formulate, develop, and ultimately refine their thesis work. The Department has also instituted a "thesis writing seminar" which writers will participate in through the fall term. The thesis is due just before spring break, and is then sent to its readers for their judgment and critique. The final thesis grade and recommendation for honors is determined at a faculty meeting in mid-May. Students working towards a March degree will follow a schedule to finish the thesis in early December.

The Department encourages seniors to think broadly and explore a problem of interest. The thesis topic does not necessarily have to be within the writer's declared major field, except when required for a joint concentration, in which case, the topic must address an issue shared by both concentrations. The thesis should demonstrate an ability to pose a meaningful question, present a well-reasoned and structured argument, and marshal appropriate evidence. The student should apply a clear methodology and be aware of the assumptions behind the argument, the possible deficiencies of the sources and data used, and the implications of the conclusions. The various parts of the thesis should cohere in an integrated argument; the thesis should not be a series of loosely connected short essays. A primary expectation of the thesis is that it is a work of independent scholarship, directed and crafted by the student, with the thesis adviser serving in a capacity of "indirect overseeing of the project".

There is no set pattern for an acceptable thesis. The writer should demonstrate familiarity with scholarly methods in the use of sources, but this should not be the sole criterion for evaluation. Of equal if not greater importance is the development of the central argument and the significance of the interpretation. A thesis may be research on a little-studied problem or a perceptive reassessment of a familiar question. A well-pondered and well-presented interpretive essay may be as good a thesis as a miniature dissertation.

Skill in exposition is a primary objective, and pristine editing is expected. The department encourages writers to keep to a very short page count, so as to craft a clear, concise paper, and further edit it to an exemplary presentation. In general, a History of Art and Architecture thesis will have a text ranging from 40 to 80 pages, dependent upon the topic. Students are encouraged to explore the resources available to thesis writers at the Writing Center and the Bureau of Study Counsel.

The writer must indicate the source of material drawn from others' work, whether quoted or summarized. Violations of this rule are considered serious and should be brought to the attention of the Director of Undergraduate Studies immediately.

Senior Honors Adviser

The process of taking honors and writing the thesis in this Department is overseen for all concentrators by the Senior Honors Adviser. The Senior Honors Adviser leads the Fall Term thesis-writing seminar, and directs the meetings for departmental approval once theses have been submitted. The department's Office holds examples of the written requirements (Thesis proposal and prospectus) and of the Pulitzer, and Abramson Grant application which students might wish to consult as paradigms.

Thesis Adviser
Proposal for Senior Thesis Design Projects, Honors Consideration

Summary

The History of Art and Architecture concentration asks Harvard College students to select an Area of Emphasis for fulfillment of their degree - either Design Studies or History + Theory. The History + Theory Area of Emphasis has traditionally required the completion of a senior thesis paper and presentation as a product of two requirements in order for the student to be eligible for honors consideration: 1/ completion of course HAA 99a Senior Thesis Tutorial and 2/ discussion of a thesis topic to be studied in said course supported through advisement by History of Art and Architecture faculty over the fall and spring semesters of senior year.

The Design Studies Area of Emphasis orients students toward making-based design courses wherein students develop design experiments engaging disciplinary issues, often incorporating both historical and contemporary architectural precedents. The primary courses currently offered that address thinking through making include: HAA 179x Tectonics Lab (fall), HAA 92r Design Speculations (fall), HAA 96a Transformations (spring), and HAA 96b Connections (spring). An increasing number of Harvard College students who have selected the Design Studies Area of Emphasis are interested in extending their architectural design focus to their conclusive senior year work via 'creative thesis' projects. These creative thesis projects would include a hybrid of written text and visual and physical design materials originally produced by the student.

This proposal outlines a draft course requirement guideline and set of final submission requirements for a senior thesis design project that aims to support the design and making-based methodologies as thesis research on a topic of interest while simultaneously paralleling the well-conceived course requirements of the traditional thesis paper and presentation within HAA. This proposal offers that through the requirements outlined here, this senior thesis design project could be eligible for honors consideration for any student pursuing this final thesis option.

Course Requirements for Honors Consideration

Senior Year – Fall Term

1. HAA 92r Design Speculations Seminar – required
   a. course prerequisite: completion of either HAA 96a Transformations or HAA 96b Connections studies
   b. this course requires students secure a pair of faculty advisor - one from Harvard History of Art and Architecture (HAA) faculty and one from the Harvard GSD to support their research work within the course; course faculty advisor(s) would serve as advising faculty for senior thesis design project
   c. Megan Panzano, GSD Arch Studies Director, and Jennifer Roberts, HAA DUS, would both help make faculty advisor connections for students pursuing this path
2. HAA 99a Senior Thesis Tutorial (fall) – strongly suggested to be taken in parallel with HAA 92r above
3. Presentation of design work to History of Art and Architecture and select GSD faculty as part of HAA Thesis Colloquium (fall) – required
   • to be coordinated with senior thesis tutorial presentations usually made to faculty in December of senior year fall term

Senior Year – Spring Term
1. Advisement meetings with individual faculty advisors to guide production of design work (architectural analytical drawings and/or physical models) and edits to digital presentation made in Fall term to HAA
2. Submission of final senior thesis design project digital presentation inclusive of photographs of physical models, high resolution originally-produced design drawings as a PDF and descriptive written text to accompany images in presentation

**Submission Requirements for Honors Consideration**

**Senior Year – Spring Term**

Final Project Requirements: A single multi-page PDF file labeled with student’s full last name and first initial and should be submitted containing the following elements:

- **Visual Bibliography** (sorted visual project references with annotated description)
  - Assemble a visual bibliography of references for your ongoing research project. The references included should be sorted into categories of your own authoring in relation to the research. Each reference should be appropriately cited using the Chicago Manual of Style for recording citations, and each reference should also include an affiliated image. This bibliography should include a brief annotation, which should comprise a description of the rationale/intention behind sorted categories of research references. This description should be approximately 200 words.

- **Written Manifesto** (text describing specific research focus and the role of design in its address)
  - A written design manifesto of approximately 500 words that concisely articulates the issues, problems, and questions embedded in your research project, what your project specifically engages among these, and how design is posited to have agency impacting the topic. The statement should address two main areas of association with the research:
    - **Discourse**, the development of a proposition for the role and significance of architecture relative to the project topic of interest, and
    - **Context**, the relationship of the project topic of study to broader surroundings which include but are not limited to the discipline of architecture, cultural contexts, technical developments and/or typologies.
  - The manifesto should take into account the intended audience for the project and use language and modes of communication that reflect this audience in the written text.

- **Visual Method(s) Diagram** (description of design methodology for research by student)
  - A visual drawing or info-graphic that describes your process of design research on your topic. This will include the criteria for evaluating the project, the steps planned to be taken in examining the topic, and when/where along the process of working it may be necessary to stop and assess outputs and findings.

- **High resolution drawings, animations, and/or diagrams and photographs of physical models** (if applicable) that have been produced through research. These should be assembled in single-page layouts of slides to follow preceding elements listed here.

*Submission deadlines would parallel HAA thesis paper draft and final submission schedule*