

The University of Texas at Austin  
Department of Religious Studies  
Undergraduate Honors Program

# Senior Thesis Manual

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# Applying to the Religious Studies Honors Program

## Requirements for Admission

We choose participants based on the personal statement, strength of background, evidence of commitment, and grades. We require that applicants have a reasonable chance of meeting the final requirements for graduating with "Special Honors in Religious Studies." If you are applying to the honors program, you should:

- Have upper-division standing.
- Have a University GPA of at least 3.0.
- Have a GPA in Religious Studies of at least 3.5, or be able to convincingly demonstrate the ability to increase the RS GPA to a 3.5 by the time of graduation.
- Have strong research and writing skills. Completion of one, preferably two, writing flag courses with a grade of B+ or higher is strongly preferred.

## Special Circumstances

- Transfer students may apply for the Honors Program.
- Students interested in honors and studying abroad should consult the Honors Advisor.
- Plan II/Religious Studies majors wishing to write a Religious Studies thesis should apply. A Religious Studies thesis will satisfy the Plan II thesis requirement. Students pursuing this option will receive Special Honors in Religious Studies (instead of Plan II).
- It is possible to register for 679HA in the spring semester and 679HB in the fall. Occasionally, a student can enroll in either course over the summer. Students should consult the Honors Advisor in these situations.

## Procedure

1. Consult the Honors Advisor before or during the Spring of your third year. The earlier you start thinking about your project the better.
2. Find a faculty member who will agree to serve as your faculty advisor. Ideally this person should be a professor who shares your particular interests, and one with whom you have already developed a rapport.
3. Download the Honors Application Form from the Department of Religious Studies website and submit the application form with your advisor's signature and a short personal statement to the Honors Advisor by the deadline.
4. Once approval is obtained, the Program Coordinator will enroll you in RS 679HA. The student and faculty advisor will set up times to meet and discuss the thesis.

## Requirements for Graduating with Honors

- Thirty-three semester hours of Religious Studies coursework, including completion of all major requirements.
- R S 679HA, Honors Tutorial Course, with a grade of at least "B."
- R S 679HB, Honors Tutorial Course, with a grade of "A," in which the student completes a senior thesis approved by the Religious Studies Honors Advisor.
- Maintain a UT GPA of at least 3.0 and a GPA in Religious Studies of at least 3.5.
- Completion at UT of at least sixty semester hours of coursework counted toward the degree.

# Getting Started: Choosing a Topic and Writing a Proposal

## Reflection

Finding a topic is a process and will more than likely grow out of conversations with friends, professors, and advisors. So start talking about your ideas and the connections you see between courses you have enjoyed. A senior thesis should be based on something that has interested you during your pursuit of an undergraduate degree. Often, a thesis topic grows from a persistent question you have studied or written about in a course you valued. How does this question connect with other things that interest you?

## Background

A thesis is not the place to explore a discipline for the first time. You must have some background experience in your topic. This ought to involve some coursework in the area that you propose to study, almost certainly beyond a single introductory level class. Taking elective courses in areas that involve possible thesis topics is a wonderful way to initially explore those topics. It is never too early to start taking those classes. If you are unsure of the best courses to explore your interests, go see a Religious Studies faculty member. As long as you go during their office hours, they will be happy to talk to you.

## Focus

After you have traced several branches of your main idea, choose one of these and pare away all excess material. This aspect may be your thesis topic. Think, "Which main question do I want to answer?" The best test to see if this idea can be made into a thesis is to prepare a proposal.

## Writing a Proposal

A proposal is a refined synopsis of your thesis topic. A well-composed proposal guides your research and writing. It also helps you engage a faculty advisor and secure research funding. The proposal is broken down into the following questions/topics.

**Research Question(s):** This is a short statement—2-4 sentences—which proposes a question or set of questions that you will seek to answer in your thesis.

**Method** – Is there a theoretical model you will follow? What is your evidence? Are you doing field research?

**Goals** – What do you hope to accomplish by writing this? Will you fill a particular gap in the research on this topic or introduce a special perspective?

**Implications** – So what? What about your thesis is different from what has been written before? How will your project fit into the big picture of Religious Studies?

A good proposal usually goes through several drafts, and it will continue to change even as you write. It is essential to get feedback at every stage of proposal development.

# Supervisors

## Finding a Faculty Advisor

A Faculty Advisor is usually a member of the UT faculty associated with the Department of Religious Studies—typically a professor who has taught you before, but this is not requirement. Your advisor must be a faculty member with expertise in the area of your thesis work. This is important because your advisor will be the person who suggests sources to you, discusses your ideas with you, and then evaluates your work. Someone outside the area may be unaware of very relevant material for your work or of critical questions that you need to consider. Feel free to meet with several professors and run your ideas past them. Even if they cannot advise you, they may point you in a helpful direction.

If you are having trouble finding an advisor, consult the Religious Studies Honors Advisor or the Program Coordinator. They know the faculty and can give good advice. If you need more help finding faculty with similar research underway, consider utilizing the resources available to undergraduates at EUREKA:

<http://www.utexas.edu/research/eureka/>

You should approach prospective supervising professors in the spring of your third year (or the semester before you plan to begin your thesis). Provide a thesis proposal and meet in person, as this will greatly increase your chances of getting a positive answer from the professor. Your application to the Religious Studies Honors Program (due on the eighth class day) must include your advisor's signature.

## The Role of the Faculty Advisor

The Faculty Advisor is just that: an advisor who guides your research, provides constructive criticism of your writing, and assigns your grades for the thesis course, in consultation with the second reader. If your advisor thinks your work is an acceptable honors thesis, s/he will sign your title page.

You should meet with your Faculty Advisor regularly to discuss your progress. Regular meetings and communication with your supervisor are essential for successful completion of your thesis. Thus, your Faculty Advisor MUST be someone who will be working on campus for the length of your project. Make sure that you and your advisor understand what you expect from each other; we recommend that you put your expectations in writing at the start. Early in the process, your advisor will offer suggestions, directions, and advice to help you narrow down your topic to something you can cover well.

Come to a clear, explicit agreement with your advisor about:

- The topic and the limits of your research, as worked out in your proposal.
- A schedule for regular meetings or communications.
- A timeline for completing outlines, bibliographies, drafts, and revisions.

You should raise these points in your first meeting and confirm them in writing or email. Get momentum going quickly on the project to develop the thesis itself and to develop the working relationship with your advisor.

## The Second Reader

Second Readers must be regular UT faculty members or recognized, established experts in your field, approved in advance by the Honors Advisor. The Second Reader should be selected no later than the 12<sup>th</sup> class day of the second semester.

The Second Reader is an advisor who reads your thesis, gives you helpful comments, and signs your title page if s/he judges your work to be acceptable as an honors thesis. During the fall semester, consult with your Faculty Advisor about possible Second Readers, and then work out a feedback schedule with the Second Reader. Although you may only meet a couple of times, it is nonetheless important that you arrive at an explicit agreement of mutual expectations. Be clear about dates: when drafts are due, how often you need to meet, etc. If your topic crosses fields, then the Second Reader's expertise may complement that of your advisor, and s/he might meet with you

regularly throughout the semester(s). Moreover, if you are writing an interdisciplinary thesis, be sure that your work takes into account the scholarly practices of different fields. Scholars from different fields read theses with different expectations.

Finding a Second Reader is like finding a Faculty Advisor, only easier. Usually your advisor will help you in your search. If not, follow the steps for finding an advisor or ask the Honors Advisor or Program Coordinator for advice.

### **Changes in Faculty Advisors or Second Readers**

Occasionally circumstances arise in which a student may need to find a new Faculty Advisor or Second Reader. This is an extremely stressful situation for the student and should only happen when no other alternative for successful completion of the thesis project exists. If such a situation should arise or seems like it might be imminent, DO NOT DELAY in discussing your situation with the Honors Advisor.

### **The Honors Advisor**

The Honors Advisor for the Department of Religious Studies is responsible for overseeing the Honors Program and certifying the successful completion of senior theses. Although the Faculty Advisor provides the main source of guidance on the project, the Honors Advisor is available to support honors students throughout the project.

# Suggested Timeline

In coordination with your faculty advisor, work out a schedule for your plan of work based on the following important deadlines. Pay special attention to deadlines on the fourth class day, mid-semester, and last class day.

## First Semester

**Fourth class day:** Last opportunity to submit thesis proposal to the Religious Studies Honors Advisor.

**Twelfth class day:** Submit research prospectus and bibliography to your faculty advisor.

**Mid-semester:** Complete the initial research and reading phase. Discuss findings with your faculty advisor. Turn in completed and signed Thesis Contract.

**Last class day:** Submit a detailed outline and draft of introduction to receive a grade for the first semester.

## Second Semester

**Twelfth class day:** Complete first draft of first section or chapter. Select second reader and inform Honors Advisor.

**Early February - Spring Break:** For a 60-page thesis, aim to produce 8-10 pages a week. Leave time to incorporate changes your readers suggest.

**Mid-semester:** Submit a COMPLETED FIRST DRAFT to the faculty advisor for comments. Advisor will return draft with comments within two weeks.

**Twelfth week of class:** Submit a final draft to both readers. This will leave two weeks for final corrections, revisions, binding, and collecting signatures.

**Last class day:** Submit bound, signed copies of your thesis to the Department of Religious Studies (Program Coordinator), your faculty advisor, and your second reader.

# Grades

## Range

Students are required to make a grade of at least a B in R S 679HA in order to be certified for departmental honors. Therefore, a student who receives a B- or lower in R S 679HA should be aware that he or she cannot graduate with honors. In this case, he or she may still sign up for R S 679HB, but cannot graduate with honors, regardless of the grade they earn (even if it is an A). In addition, the advisor of a student who receives a B- or lower in R S 679HA has the option to decline to advise him or her further. Should the advisor choose not to continue working with a student, he or she can seek out another advisor and continue the thesis, but cannot graduate with honors.

A full range of grades may be given for a senior thesis from an "A" to an "F." You are not guaranteed an "A." An "A" thesis should be much better than an "A" term paper, but it is not expected to be at the graduate level. If you turn in a thesis that is below average, you may prefer to accept a very low grade rather than take an incomplete and delay graduation while you rewrite it.

## Guidelines for You and Your Faculty Advisor

You should give your Faculty Advisor and Second Reader a full final draft of the thesis at the beginning of April for students finishing in the spring, or early November for students finishing in the fall. Students should be prepared to revise as the advisor suggests. You need to demonstrate that you faced, identified, and surmounted a problem in research process. If the thesis does not meet these requirements, the advisor may assign an incomplete and allow the student to finish by a date convenient to the advisor and Second Reader. Otherwise, it will be assigned an "F."

The grade for the first semester of the two-semester thesis course should be based on the amount of research completed and the quality of the outline, which is due at the end of the first semester. Talk with your advisor early in the first semester about how much work s/he expects from you and when it is expected.

The two readers will assess the thesis with the following criteria in mind:

- Quality of argument
- Breadth of research in primary and secondary sources
- Quality of writing and organization
- Conformity with current rules of proper academic conduct

## Final Grades and Unfinished Theses

Students who submit the final bound copy after the deadline assume the risk that their grades may not be posted in time for final grades or graduation.

Religious Studies strongly discourages incompletes, but we understand that there may be situations in which a student requires more time to complete the thesis than the semester allows. If you do not finish, or your thesis is judged unacceptable, you cannot graduate until the thesis is completed and approved.

If you do take an incomplete, you must agree on a new schedule with your advisor. Tell the Program Coordinator what this schedule will be and when you plan to graduate. It is your responsibility to keep up with the deadlines set by the student division of Liberal Arts for students with incompletes and to keep in touch with the Program Coordinator.

Be especially conscientious if you want to finish and graduate during the summer, since faculty members are often away from campus. Make sure that your advisor and Second Reader have the time to work with you to complete the thesis and that there will be someone available to read and check your completed thesis in time for you to be certified for graduation. Check your email for deadlines from the College of Liberal Arts.

# Thesis Standards

## Revision, Review and Grading

Your Faculty Advisor or Second Reader may call for further revision to your final paper, even if doing so will delay your graduation. Be sure you know in advance what standards your professors expect you to follow. If your advisor expects too much, let us help you resolve this before it is too late.

The Department of Religious Studies requires that you submit your thesis in a particular format. (See the "Format" recommendations below, as well as Appendices.) The Honors Advisor will review your thesis before your grade is submitted. If he determines that it is below standards, he will hold back the grade, pending a conference with the advisor. The Faculty Advisor and Second Reader have the final say on standards and grading.

## Subject

Although you may not know exactly what you are doing at the start, a finished thesis should have a well-defined problem or purpose clearly stated in the introduction. A research thesis should use primary material when it is available. A technical thesis may be written in the language of its field, but the abstract and the conclusion must be written for the intelligent layperson.

## Conclusion

Your thesis should have a conclusion. No thesis will be accepted that is plainly unfinished. A thesis that breaks off after fifty pages without a conclusion is not acceptable.

## Length

Our guidelines are approximately 50 pages for a two-semester thesis. There is no upper page limit; the thesis should be as long it takes to address the topic adequately.

## Citations

You must use notes that cite the sources of your information and give credit for ideas and phrases that are not your own. Footnotes, endnotes, and parenthetical notes are all acceptable. Talk with your advisor about his/her preferred method of citation. Form a lasting relationship with whichever method you choose. Consistency might be the hobgoblin of small minds, but it is the key to acceptable citations.

## References

In addition to your many citations, your thesis needs a list of works cited in a standard bibliographic form. If you think your thesis is an exception, please discuss with the Honors Advisor.

## Format

The final, bound copy of the thesis should:

1. Be neatly typed or laser-printed (printed on both sides of the page to conserve paper).
2. Be printed on 100% cotton, acid-free paper.
3. Have numbered pages.
4. Have one-inch margins.
5. Follow a manual of style that is in use in its field.
6. Be proofread: a thesis with more than a few errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation will not be accepted.
7. Include a title page, abstract, and table of contents (see examples in appendix).

# Submitting the Thesis

## Deadline

The final date for submitting the thesis is the last day of class of the semester in which you completed the thesis.

## Presentation

Your thesis will represent many hours of hard work. It should be neatly printed on good quality paper and well bound. (See “Format” guidelines above.) Use chapter headings if you can and provide a table of contents with page numbers for the start of each chapter or section.

## Binding

You can get your thesis bound at any printing or copy and binding store. Most stores recommended you provide your thesis in hard copy or in .pdf format—rather than in a Word document—so changes to your text or formatting are not inadvertently made. The thesis should have “fast back” or “closed” binding (no spiral binding) with a Velo vinyl report cover. All theses are required to have your name, thesis title, and the current year on the spine. There is no single correct way to put titles on the spine; just make them neat and long lasting.

Make at least three copies of the final thesis. One copy is for the advisor, one for you to keep, and one is reviewed by the Program Coordinator and eventually placed on display in the Department Chair’s office. Many students also give the Second Reader a copy. Keep in mind that commercial copy shops are very busy at the end of a semester.

## Required Pages for All Theses:

1. A proper title page, which includes the signatures of the Faculty Advisor and Second Reader; see sample in Appendix A. Original signatures on the title page are required in the final, bound thesis submitted to the Department of Religious Studies. PLAN AHEAD to arrange meetings with your advisor and Second Reader to obtain these signatures by the deadline. In unusual situations, an electronic signature may be submitted (a digital image of the signature placed within the title page document). Electronic signatures must be accompanied with an email from the professor giving permission to use their electronic signature. The email should be printed and loosely (not bound) placed in the final thesis.
2. A one to two-page abstract briefly summarizing the thesis should follow the title page; see the model in Appendix B. The abstract should be bound in the thesis after the title page and before the table of contents.
3. A table of contents listing each chapter, image, and figure in the thesis. See Appendix C.

## Resources and Practical Advice

### Choose a topic about which you are passionate.

If you're genuinely interested in your topic, you'll be more motivated to research and write.

### Form a small group with other thesis writers.

Get to know your fellow Religious Studies honors students and share your work with each other. Writing for other student readers can help keep your style clean and fresh, and they can help you spot problems before you submit drafts to your supervisor.

### Read successful theses.

The Program Coordinator has a collection of recent theses.

### Share your work.

Scholarship is meant for publication. Make multiple copies for friends and family. Look for campus-wide thesis symposia to attend. Better yet, submit a proposal for a conference. You can't get accepted if you don't apply.

### Utilize the resources on campus.

On a campus of this magnitude, resources abound in all departments. Faculty members are always willing to help, and facilities exist for your use. Don't forget about the Ransom Humanities Research Center, the LBJ Library, the Blanton Museum, the Briscoe Center for American History, and the Benson Latin American Collection.

### Communicate with your Faculty Advisor.

If you get stuck, do not avoid your advisor! In fact, this is the best time to go see them. Your advisor is there to help you untangle complicated issues, organize your thoughts, or find strategies to beat writer's block. In most cases they will have been in these situations themselves and will have valuable insights that can help you move forward.

### General Resources

- Barzun, Jacques. *The Modern Researcher*.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Craft of Research*.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.
- Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual*.
- *The Essentials of MLA Style*.
- *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- *The SBL Handbook of Style*.
- Turabian, Kate. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. *The Clockwork Muse*.

## Appendix A: Sample Title Page

### **This Place Had a Name: Changing Landscapes in Navajo Religion**

Elizabeth Sanders

RS 679HB  
Special Honors in the Department of Religious Studies  
The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

\_\_\_\_\_ [first reader's signature] \_\_\_\_\_

Steve Friesen  
Department of Religious Studies  
Supervising Professor

\_\_\_\_\_ [second reader's signature] \_\_\_\_\_

Erika Bsumek  
Department of History  
Second Reader

## Appendix B: Sample Abstract

### **Title of Thesis: double-spaced and centered**

Student's Name (as registered with the University), degree sought (abbreviated) The University of Texas at Austin, (year)  
Supervisor: (Professor's name without titles or degrees)

Your Proposal goes here. It should not exceed two pages and should address the questions that are discussed in Part Two of this manual. A proposal can give "teasers" about your big findings, but keep your best work for the introduction and body of the text.

## Appendix C: Sample Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	#
List of Tables [if any].....	#
List of Figures [if any].....	#
Chapter 1: Title of Chapter.....	#
Chapter 2: Title of Chapter.....	#
Appendix A: Name of Appendix [if any].....	#
Glossary [if any].....	#
Bibliography.....	#

# Appendix D: Sample page

## CHAPTER ONE

### Title of Chapter (optional)

Sometimes people will put a quotation here to begin a chapter. This is optional, but can often set the tone for your chapter.

*Author's name, source*

### Sectional Heading (optional)

You should indent the first line of your paragraphs one-half inch. Then, the paragraph should be double-spaced and justified on both sides. If you have quotes that run longer than three lines, then you would do a block quote format, which looks something like this:

Here is your block quote. You will use this format for longer quotes. If you don't use a block quote format, then your reader may not realize that it is not you writing. This can take away from the power of the quote, or just be misleading for your audience.

Here you return to your normal format. Don't get fancy when you don't need to. Style should only enhance your thesis, not mask any lack of content or distract.<sup>1</sup> Let your words do the magic, not your word processor.

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<sup>1</sup> Author's Name, Source (Publisher's location: Publisher, Date), p. xxx. Footnotes are also where you can insert your own thoughts. If you have something to say that may not work in the main body of the text, but you feel that it is important, try a footnote. Work out in advance with your supervisor if you are going to use footnotes or endnotes. The only true advice about footnote and endnote formatting is simply to be consistent. Once you decide on a format, stay with it.