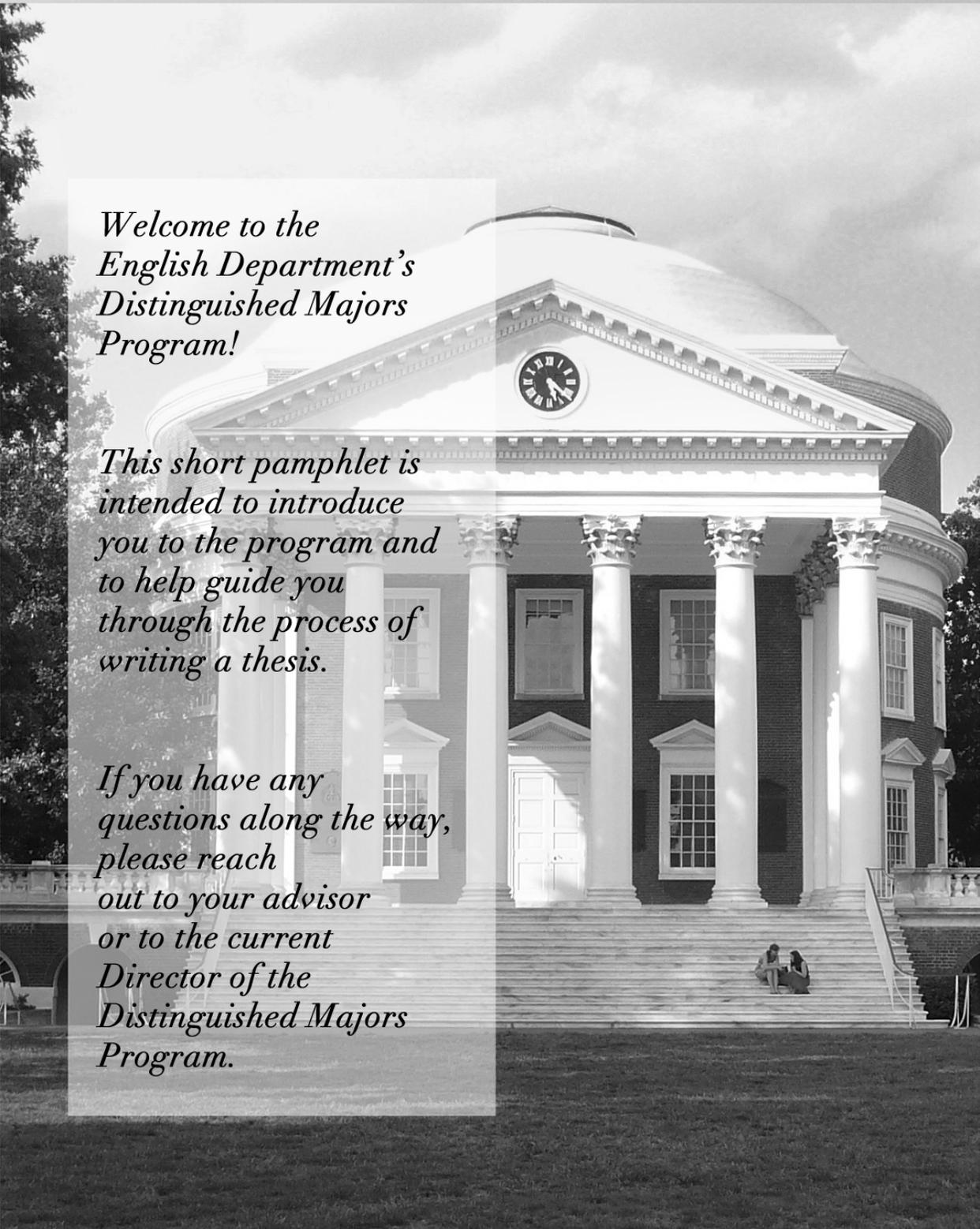


Writing a Thesis for the **Distinguished Majors Program**

Elizabeth Fox, Department of English
with assistance from the DMP Class of 2016



*Welcome to the
English Department's
Distinguished Majors
Program!*

*This short pamphlet is
intended to introduce
you to the program and
to help guide you
through the process of
writing a thesis.*

*If you have any
questions along the way,
please reach
out to your advisor
or to the current
Director of the
Distinguished Majors
Program.*

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Requirements for the Distinguished Majors Program

In order to be eligible for the DMP, by spring of third year you must:

- be an English major
- have a University GPA of at least 3.600
- have a Major GPA of at least 3.700

If you meet these requirements, you may submit an application to the Director of the Distinguished Majors Program. This application requires you to have a **formal research proposal**, which means you should take some time before applying to develop your ideas and a research plan for your project.

You will also need to find a **thesis advisor** before applying to the program, so be sure to meet with faculty in your field to discuss your ideas. (If you are struggling to find a faculty member to advise your project, the current Director of the Distinguished Majors Program may be able to help you.)

If you are accepted for the DMP program, you will need to enroll in the DMP Honors Seminar (ENGL 4998) in the fall of your fourth year, and in the DMP Independent Research Course (ENGL 4999) during the following spring.

DMP candidates must also have taken at least two 4000-level seminars in literature to graduate with distinction.

The official thesis deadline varies slightly from year to year, but it usually falls in early April.

Developing Your Thesis Topic

Coming up with a thesis topic can be tricky. You will usually have to apply to write your thesis before you have had time to delve deeply into much research about it. As a non-specialist in your field, you might also be unsure of what a useful and original work looks like. For many students, the thesis will also represent your first long-term academic writing project, which can make it difficult for you to determine whether your project requires a doable amount of work.

To help solve these difficulties, try the following steps:

Pick a topic that excites you

This is the most basic and also the most important part of writing a thesis. You are, after all, going to be working on this project for a whole year. Think of your thesis as an opportunity to explore a subject that interests you. Is there a text, author, or genre that you have always wanted to investigate? Would you like to delve more deeply into a period or a group of texts that you discussed in a past class? Would you like to look at the intersections between subjects (poetry and music, literature and science, etc.) that you have always explored separately?

Writing a thesis allows you the chance to develop your own research agenda and to go where your interests lead you.

Develop a project that is significant but doable

Although your thesis does not have to be a totally unique and groundbreaking work, you also do not want to rehash exactly what many people before you have already considered. In addition, you do not want to pitch a project that is overwhelming and impossible to complete within a year. Your advisor — usually an expert in your field — can help you with both of these problems.

Schedule a meeting with him or her to discuss your thesis, and ask for advice on refining it into something that is useful and still achievable. You might also benefit from talking about your ideas with other faculty members, TAs, or graduate students in your field. They, too, can assist you in shaping the early stages of your project.

Think of your thesis as a series of questions

Especially when you are just launching your thesis, there is still much you will not know about your subject. You should, however, have a clear idea of some questions that you hope to answer.

If, for example, you are writing about feminism in early twentieth-century novels, you might ask yourself: What visions of feminism do these novels offer? What literary devices do they use to discuss them? Do authors address pushback against these ideas within the novels? Are there any changes in the ways they represent feminism over time or within different genres?

Although you might not ultimately explore all of these options — you may, for example, end up focusing only on literary devices used to represent feminism — considering them all will help you to envision the potential scope of and possibilities for your project.

Important People for Your Thesis

The most successful thesis writers take advantage of the wide support network available to them within the English Department and at UVa. Consider the following list of people who may be of use to you while working on your project:

Your advisor

Your advisor is your go-to person for all thesis-related issues. He or she will help you to develop your thesis topic, come up with a plan to tackle it, set deadlines, offer feedback, and provide guidance and inspiration along the way.

When selecting an advisor, it is often helpful to choose a specialist in your field of study. This will allow your advisor to assist you in choosing important texts and will enable him or her to answer your questions about your topic.

Be sure, too, that you and your advisor are on the same page about your thesis before you agree to work together. Does your advisor approve of your topic? Do you have the same goals for your project? Will he or she be available to advise students during your fourth year?

Director of the DMP

The current director of the Distinguished Majors Program will run your DMP seminar. He or she may not be an expert in your field, but will know a great deal about thesis writing in general. The director of the DMP will set in-class deadlines for you and help you with your work during the DMP seminar.

He or she can also be an immensely valuable resource if you have questions about the thesis program in general, if you are struggling with your project and your advisor is unavailable, or if you want to discuss your work with another audience. Finally, the director of the DMP will keep copies of past theses in his or her office, which can serve as great sources of inspiration for your own work.

Research librarian

Among the many excellent people at the UVa library is a librarian dedicated specifically to assisting those working on English projects. He or she is a great resource for anyone needing guidance about research.

The librarian can help you to hone your focus and can direct you to books, databases, and research tools that might be helpful for your work. If you need help figuring out how to tackle your project — or even if you are just worried that you might have missed important sources — you can benefit from scheduling a meeting with him or her. You can reach the current librarian for English, Sherri Brown, at slb4kt@virginia.edu.

Other Faculty

Do not be afraid to consult faculty beyond your advisor and your DMP instructor. There are likely several professors, both in the English Department and outside of it, who know a great deal about your topic.

If, for example, you are studying natural science in eighteenth-century literature, you might benefit from discussing your work with professors who specialize in eighteenth-century studies, in the history of science, and, if you are working with a specific literary genre, in prose or poetry.

Most professors are happy to consult with students who reach out for guidance on thesis projects, so do not be afraid to send a professor an email or to stop by during his or her office hours.

Your peers

Your peers, especially your DMP cohort, can be an invaluable source of guidance and support. You will rely on them in class for feedback and suggestions, and you can request their ideas, comments, or guidance outside of class as well.

The Library and Its Resources

As a general rule, the library will be your number one resource for research. The library itself, however, is a massive entity with many helpful parts. Be sure to take advantage of all of them when planning and executing your thesis.

Some of the library's many resources are listed below:

Stacks

Browsing open stacks can be an easy and helpful way to find material for your thesis. If you find a book that is relevant to your subject, be sure to check out the books near it on the shelf. Often, this can lead you to discover large swathes of literature that are applicable to your work.

Virgo

By this point in your career, most of you will be familiar with using Virgo to search for books you need. When you find a helpful book in Virgo, though, be sure to click on the title and then take a look at the "Related Subjects" listed on the left side on the page. These subject guides group your title with other books on similar topics — by following these links, you can discover other books that might be helpful to your research.

Databases

UVA subscribes to many databases that offer you access to both scholarly articles and to primary works. (The latter category covers everything from sixteenth-century English texts to early-twentieth-century American newspapers.) Christine Ruotolo, the former librarian for English, has put together a list of useful databases at <http://guides.lib.virginia.edu/DM2015>.

These databases — which you can access even when you are away from Grounds — can be immensely helpful to you during all stages of your research. If you are just starting your project, you may find the MLA International Bibliography especially helpful in situating your work, as it can offer you an index of all previous texts (including books, articles, and past dissertations) on your topic.

Special Collections

UVa's Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library houses many rare and unique objects, including rare books, manuscripts, maps, and photographs. If Special Collections holds objects applicable to your project, you may find it very rewarding to work with its resources. It can, however, be difficult to navigate the collections on your own.

If you are interested in using Special Collections and are unsure if the library holds materials relevant to your project, try emailing curators Molly Schwartzburg at mas5by@virginia.edu or David Whitesell at dw8sd@virginia.edu.

Managing Your Time

Time management often turns out to be the hardest part of writing a thesis. At first, that might sound crazy. After all, you have a whole year to work on this project! How difficult can it be to produce a couple dozen pages over the course of 365 days? The answer: pretty difficult indeed. Producing a thesis requires you to do more than just write. It is an ongoing process of researching, drafting, meeting with your advisor, meeting with your librarian, scouring databases, discovering new materials, editing, and redrafting.

Your thesis will also compete with other demands on your time, including classes, homework, extracurricular and service activities, and jobs. When push comes to shove, most of us are far more likely to focus on the coursework due tomorrow than on our thesis, which is not due for several months. As a result, it is easy to fall behind on your thesis work and to feel overwhelmed by it

This is especially true for students who put off the bulk of their work until the spring semester, forcing them to tackle research, drafting, editing, and rewriting all in a matter of weeks.

To help avoid this calamity, along with the stress and inevitable regret that attend it, try planning out your time in advance. As soon as you are admitted to the honors program, work with your advisor to develop a yearlong calendar that includes multiple due dates and checkpoints. At the beginning of each new term — summer, fall semester, spring semester — come up with a reasonable weekly calendar that allows you to manage your time day-to-day, ensuring that your thesis never gets lost in the shuffle.

For more tips on both, see the following sections.

Managing Your Time for the Year

The easiest way to manage your time over the course of your thesis-writing year is to develop a **calendar**.

Your yearlong thesis calendar does not have to include the day-to-day business of thesis writing, but it should include:

- **all necessary departmental deadlines**
- **intended goals (arranged by term or month)**
- **a series of general checkpoints during which you will meet with your advisor to ensure that you are on track.**

Your calendar will probably change and develop over the course of the year, becoming more nuanced as you add advisor meetings or new deadlines for your DMP course. You may also find you need to adjust your methods for different sections of your thesis, as each chapter may follow a different pattern of research and writing.

You should make a very general calendar, however, in the **spring of your third year**, just after you have had your thesis project approved. Do not put this off until a later date. It can be tempting to wait until later in the summer, or even until the fall semester, to begin worrying about “next year’s” project. Getting started right away, however, helps you to take advantage of all the time available to you, and it makes the process of thesis-writing much less overwhelming.

Once your thesis topic has been approved, schedule a meeting with your advisor. Bring to this meeting a list of required deadlines and of goals that you would like to meet along the way. Working together, you and your advisor will be able to assess your timeline and come up with a very general calendar for the coming year.

It might look something like this:

Sample Calendar

Spring of Third Year

April 15 Meet with advisor to discuss summer reading

April 25 Prioritize your reading lists

May 5 Skim important secondary sources to make an annotated bibliography

Summer Before Fourth Year

May 10 – July 1 Read (or reread) all primary works for your thesis

July 1 – Aug. 15 Tackle secondary reading on X and Y topics

Aug. 15 Email advisor with an updated annotated bibliography and a list of ideas on subjects X and Y

Fall Semester

Week of Aug. 30 Back-to-school meeting with advisor

Aug. 15 – Sept. 15 Do secondary reading on Z topic

Oct. 1 Complete draft of 1/3 of thesis

Nov. 1 Complete draft of 2/3 of thesis

Spring Semester

Jan. 20 Complete draft of full thesis

April 15 Thesis due

As you can see, this calendar is pretty sparse. It does, however, give you a specific timeline of events for completing major portions of your thesis, as well as a list of discrete issues to tackle over the summer.

Once you return to school in the fall semester, you will want to schedule another meeting with your advisor to go over your summer work and to plan out your meetings for the coming semester. (You might decide to meet weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, as needed, etc.) You will also get a syllabus for your DMP course, which will give you added deadlines.

At this point, you will update your yearly calendar to include these new due dates:

Revised Sample Calendar

Fall Semester

Aug. 27	Back-to-school meeting with advisor
Aug. 15 – Sept. 15	Do secondary reading on Z topic
Sept. 4	DMP assignment; read and present on a past thesis
Sept. 10	Meeting with advisor
Sept. 18	DMP assignment; submit five pages to your advisor
Sept. 24	Meeting with advisor
Oct. 1	Complete draft of 1/3 of thesis
Oct. 2	DMP assignment: submit 10 pages in class for peer review
Oct. 8	Meeting with advisor
Oct. 22	Meeting with advisor
Oct. 23	DMP assignment: write a five-minute abstract of your thesis for presentation
Nov. 1	Complete draft of 2/3 of thesis
Nov. 5	Meeting with advisor
Nov. 15	Edit first 1/3 of thesis, taking note of advisor's comments
Nov. 19	Meeting with advisor
Dec. 3	Meeting with advisor

Spring Semester

Jan. 20	Complete draft of full thesis
Week of Jan. 25	Back-to-school meeting with advisor
April 15	Thesis due

Finally, during the spring semester, you will want to update your yearly calendar a final time, adding advisor meetings for the spring (do you and your advisor still want them to be bi-weekly? do you need to schedule any extra ones?), adjusting any unworkable deadlines, developing a timeline for editing, etc.

Revised Sample Calendar

Spring Semester

Jan. 20	Complete draft of full thesis
Jan. 28	Back-to-school meeting with advisor
Feb. 11	Meeting with advisor
Feb. 19	Edit 2/3 of thesis, taking note of advisor's comments
Feb. 25	Meeting with advisor
March 4	Edit full thesis, taking note of advisor's comments
March 10	Meeting with advisor
March 18	Introduction and conclusion
March 24	Meeting with advisor
April 1	Edit introduction and conclusion
April 7	Meeting with advisor
April 15	Thesis due

By adding to your calendar each semester, but keeping your major deadlines consistent, you will be able to stay on top of your work.

This calendar is, of course, just a sample. You will want to develop your own calendar that suits your personal research methods and writing styles. All calendars are also subject to change — in fact, you will probably need to update yours as you find out new information and as your project itself alters. Having a clear sense of the various steps of your project, though, and of the timeline needed to complete them will make the experience of writing a thesis much more straightforward.

Managing Your Time for the Week

Once you have your yearly calendar set, you will want to come up with strategies to manage your time on a day-to-day basis.

In many cases, the easiest way to do this is to incorporate thesis work into your weekly schedule, setting aside a certain amount of time for thesis work. How you do this is up to you — some people like to work on their theses for small amounts of time every day, while others prefer to set aside larger blocks of time (say, Monday and Thursday afternoons) to delve into their project. Many find some combination of these systems works: do a little on your thesis every day so that it is never far from your mind, but set aside larger blocks of time to tackle the knotty parts of it in depth.

In every case, though, you will find that you benefit from putting time to work on your thesis into your weekly schedule. That is, set aside specific blocks of time each week that are *only* for your thesis. Write them into your calendar and stick to them. If you make vague promises to work on your thesis in the future (“I’ll get to it sometime on Thursday”), you will often find that it ends up getting dwarfed by other, more immediate concerns.

In his book, *The Clockwork Muse*, Eviatar Zerubavel lists some specific guidelines that can help you to develop a weekly schedule for your thesis work:

Start from the beginning

Sit down with a calendar or spreadsheet that lists **hours-per-day** over the course of a week.

(Excel can be great for making your own such spreadsheet, listing hours on the y-axis and days of the week on the x-axis.)

Narrow it down

Cross off all the times in each week when you will *not* be able to work on your thesis. You cannot, for example, work on your thesis while you are in class or at your job. You might also not be able to work on it on Friday nights, when you anticipate being out with your friends, or on Sunday afternoons, which you reserve for physics homework.

The trick here is to be realistic about how you spend your time; if your favorite TV show airs on Thursday evenings, set that aside as thesis-free time.

Choose work times based on your availability

Take a look at the remaining spots on your list. These are times during which it will be possible to work on your thesis. You probably will not have to devote all of this time to thesis work, but you should make regular commitments to spending some of it on your project.

To maximize your efforts, think about when and for how long you are most productive. Are you a morning person, an afternoon person, or an evening person? Do you tend to get work done best in five-hour chunks or in one-hour bursts?

Based on your knowledge of your own tendencies, set aside specific subsets of time in which you will consistently work on your thesis.

Experiment

If you are not certain about when and for how long you work best (or even if you are), it can be helpful to spend a week or two trying out different writing times. Keep notes for these days about when you worked, for how long, how you felt during your research/writing time, and how much you actually got done. You might find that you felt sluggish on Saturday morning after a night out, but that you got a lot done on Tuesday morning. Similarly, you might find that you dither during half-hour blocks of time, but you get many things accomplished during three-hour blocks.

Once you know how you work on different days/times, it will be easier to optimize your thesis-writing schedule.

Stick to it

Once you create a thesis-writing schedule, follow it.

All good schedules allow for some flexibility, but you should be wary of adjusting yours too much. Even if you are having an off day with your research or find yourself staring down the barrel of another big project, make sure you commit the promised amount of time to your thesis. It will pay off in the end.

Accountability and Acceptance

Working with your peers to reinforce time management

Setting up a thesis-writing schedule can be hard work and sticking to it can be even more challenging. For some people, the solution to this problem is to work alongside other people. You might form writing groups to motivate each other, pair up with a friend to edit each other's work, or even ask someone besides your advisor to review sections of your work and keep you accountable for finishing on time.

If this sounds like a system that would suit you, consider finding a thesis-writing buddy or two (or more!) among the many members of your DMP cohort. Peers who are also writing theses will face many of the same concerns and deadlines that you do, and watching your theses progress side-by-side can help motivate all of you to keep going.

The only caveat to this plan: make sure that writing or editing in a group actually helps you to get work done. If you meet up intending to write, but find yourself chatting instead, you may need to find another group of people — or another system entirely — to help you to finish your thesis.

Embrace the fact that you will never have enough time

No matter how much time you put into your thesis, it will never be enough. There will always be another book that you could read, another resource that you might consult, another chapter that you might write. The key is to work with your advisor to figure out what are appropriate goals and to manage your time so that you complete them without causing yourself undue panic and stress.

Also be sure to cut yourself some slack in terms of planning. For most who undertake a thesis, a yearlong research and writing project will be an entirely new experience. It is okay to make mistakes, to over- or under-schedule, to miss deadlines.

Just make sure that you have a plan in place to deal with any mess-ups: talk to your advisor or the instructor of your DMP class, set aside a day to catch up on your missed work, or adjust your calendar so that it better reflects your available time.

The Research Process

Good research forms the backbone of every thesis. It will help you to develop a strong project, to flesh out ideas and arguments for your work, and to position yourself within the current critical conversation. Good research methods are also crucial, as they allow you to keep track of your ideas and make it easy for you to incorporate other critics' voices judiciously into your own work.

The following sections will walk you through some of the most important, but also most difficult, parts of the research process. If you have any additional questions about research, feel free to talk to your advisor, the Director of the DMP, or your research librarian.

Finding the Major Voices in Your Field

When you embark on a research project, it is important to figure out which are the leading voices on your subject. You probably cannot read everything ever published on your topic, but you will want to be sure that you look over the major works on it so that you know the key ideas underlying your field. That will allow you to join the critical conversation in an informed, scholarly fashion.

There are several ways you can discover the major voices in your field:

Talk to your advisor

You have likely chosen your advisor because he or she is knowledgeable about your topic. Schedule a meeting with him or her during the spring of your third year to talk about some major critical works you will want to read.

Pay attention to citations

Look for oft-cited works as you read around in your field. Your early research will likely take a scattershot form, as you pull various books related to your topic off the library shelves or review relevant articles on databases. When you are reading or skimming them, take a look at the resources these texts reference. Are there certain names or works that everyone cites? If so, you should probably read those texts too.

You may also benefit from focusing your early attention on recent works; they will often give you an idea of the current state of the field, and they may helpfully summarize important older works.

Find reviews

Search journals (especially through JSTOR or MLA) for literature reviews, which summarize and evaluate previous writings on a given topic, thus providing a sense of the current state of a particular field.

Literature reviews can appear as either “articles” or “reviews,” and often cover broad topics (women’s history, postcolonial studies, etc.).

Anthologies

Read critical anthologies about your field. A number of companies — including Cambridge, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, etc. — offer introductions and companions to various subjects. (Sample titles include *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, Blackwell's *A Companion to Romanticism*, etc.) These books can offer brief introductions to a field. Most of them will also offer short bibliographies or recommended further reading after each chapter, giving you a helpful survey of works related to a specific topic within that area.

Although these bibliographies do not always focus on influential authors, they will almost always lead you to scholars who *do* reference them.

DNB

If your work centers on a particular literary figure, try looking him or her up in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. The DNB summarizes the lives of important figures, and it offers complete lists of reliable bibliographical works about each person under “Sources.” Its “Archives” section also catalogues the various holdings of that figure’s primary materials around the world.

Documenting Your Research

Organization

Even before you begin researching, it can be helpful to think about how you will organize your various research materials. You will likely end up recording your notes on a computer — how are you going to file them? You will also undoubtedly have various papers related to your thesis (handwritten notes, handouts from class, etc.) and research books — where will you store these and how will you organize them?

Developing an organizational plan at the outset of your research can prevent you from descending into chaos as you gather information, and it can save you the trouble of sifting through infinite computer documents and piles of papers as you begin to write your thesis.

Taking notes

As you already know, it is important to take notes while you do research for your thesis. After all, it is highly unlikely that you will be able to recall in February the things you read and ideas you had back in September. You likely already have a note-taking system, developed over years of writing essays. If that style carries over well to thesis writing, keep at it!

If, however, you are having trouble translating your current style of note taking to the thesis world, then it may be worth rethinking your process.

You might, for example, want to consider these strategies:

- **Make a list of works you have read**, along with brief (2-3 sentence) **summaries** of them. Listing each text will help you keep track of your reading; summarizing each text will help you to distill other authors' arguments about your field. Both list and summaries will prove helpful to you months from now, when you are struggling to remember which author brought up that one point that you need to discuss in chapter three of your thesis.
- **Reconsider the type of notes you are taking**. What, exactly, are you taking notes on, and how are you recording those important points for later? Are you, for example, taking down **full quotes** from works or are you just jotting down **major ideas** with page numbers? Are you organizing your notes by **text** — listing all the information you find in each book, website,

or article in the same place — or are you organizing your notes by **category** — putting all of your information on one topic in the same place? Would it be helpful for you to develop a key, marking certain notes with letters or symbols that indicate their place in your thesis? (See “Examples of Note-Taking Styles” on the next page for some sample ways to record your research.) Each style has its advantages and disadvantages. Writing down full quotes, for example, will take more time during your research than jotting down ideas, but it will also prevent you from having to look at the book itself later. No style is right or wrong, and it is worth experimenting with different forms to figure out which one is most helpful for you.

Bibliographic Management Tools

Programs like Refworks, Endnote, and Zotero are research tools that help you to store and organize bibliographic information for your project. Especially when you are working with a large number of sources, they can help you to keep track of all your resources, and they can save you a lot of time and energy in creating a bibliography. Endnotes and Refworks require purchase, but Zotero is free through Uva, at <https://www.zotero.org/>.

Examples of Note-Taking Styles

SAMPLE NOTES 1: FULL QUOTES, ORGANIZED BY TEXT

Watson, Donald G. *Shakespeare's Early History Plays: Politics at Play on the Elizabethan Stage*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.

Page 148: "The paradox of ceremony equally exposes and disguises not only the monarch but all those to whom the liturgy of state assigns roles. Though Henry V understands this paradox better than other Shakespearean kings, from the opening scene of *1 Henry IV* and throughout the other four earlier plays, the masks of ceremony reveal and hide true motive. Ceremony forces its participants to assume traditional behavior required by their roles for the static, ritual conduct of the ceremony to go forward...."

Category: Chorus

Holderness, Graham. *Shakespeare: The Histories*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

Page 5: "Where comedies and tragedies tended to derive their plots from fictional narratives, history plays, written in close relation to historiography, were (and are) considered as dealing with matters of 'fact' rather than of 'fiction'."

Category: History plays

Page 15: "This language of the female, which as a subtext permeates the history plays in the way that female power (as I will be arguing in Chapter 1) permeated Elizabethan society, is of course traditionally associated with creativity, back to the Greek Muses. But in the early modern period artistic creativity continued to be associated with the muses and with the female body."

Category: Women, Elizabeth

Page 136: "At one level a mere technical apology for the limitations of the contemporary theater, the opening Chorus also expresses a defensive conviction of the present as immeasurably inferior to the past. Just as history seems to impose standards of heroism impossible to emulate, so are the actors conscious of themselves as unworthy representatives of the aristocratic subjects they are attempting to imitate."

Category: Chorus

SAMPLE NOTES 2: MAJOR IDEAS, ORGANIZED BY CATEGORY

Shakespeare' s History Plays

- History plays = fact, not fiction (Holderness 5)
- History play focuses on community of men, not on nation (Smith 37)
- History play = confirmation of contemporary monarchical political values, as well as grand scope of history (Smith 38)
- Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences aware of possible contemporary applications for historical plays (Gazzard 425)

Chorus in Henry V

- Chorus showcases present as inferior to past, actors as inferior to their subjects (Holderness 136)
- Chorus not in agreement with rest of play; form imperfect links between scenes; possibly deliberately misleading (Smidt 131-32)
- Chorus may not have been part of original version (Smidt 132)
- Chorus, forced to assume traditional role, comparable to king, forced to assume traditional state role (Watson 148)
- Chorus sounds like Henry (Goldman 59)

Other Considerations

Writing as you research

Pre-writing: Some people find it helpful to begin each research session with a few minutes of pre-writing. Pre-writing allows you to ponder what you hope to achieve during this research session: what questions are you working to answer? What gaps in your project will today's research help you to address? What ideas do you have that you want to verify? Taking a few moments at the outset to consider these issues can help you to get into the zone with your research.

Post-writing: By the same token, some people enjoy post-writing after finishing a research session for the day. Post-writing allows you to reflect on what you have discovered, thinking about the questions you have answered, the new ideas you have considered, and the conundrums that still remain.

How to know when you have done enough

In most cases, you will find that far more has been written about your subject than you can possibly read. If so, you will be faced with a dilemma: how can you know when you have done enough research?

The simple answer: when you feel well-versed in your field, and you know enough to write your thesis. What exactly that looks like varies from person to person. You can test yourself by considering whether you would feel comfortable discussing your topic with someone in your DMP seminar. Could you comfortably talk about your argument with a friend or parent who does not know about the nuances of your field? Would you be able to talk through your work with a faculty member who is not a specialist in your field — say, perhaps, the Director of the DMP? If you feel comfortable in one or more of these hypothetical situations, you probably know enough to start writing your thesis. You can then fill in gaps in your knowledge as they arise during your writing.

Remember, you do not have to know everything about your subject or read every book that has ever been published on it. Just make sure that you know sufficient information about the specifics of your thesis and about the critical conversation surrounding it to write a compelling, engaging project. If you find yourself overwhelmed by material or you are worried about where to focus your attention, talk to your advisor. He or she can help you to determine the resources most important for your project.

The Writing Process

Writing, like time management, can be a deceptively difficult. Although DMP students are generally talented writers who have no trouble producing polished essays, most find the thesis both longer and more complex than their previous work.

Many students struggle to begin writing, to distill masses of notes into an original argument, or to hone months of ideas and insights into a single, coherent work. If you are struggling with any of these issues, the following sections may be of some help to you.

Preparing to Write

Often, preparing to write is harder than actually writing. It can be difficult to know where to begin or how to approach your topic. Here are a few strategies to help you get going. Keep in mind that you will likely find some strategies more helpful than others:

Review your DMP proposal

Back when you first proposed your honors thesis, you had ideas about what you would be tackling in this project. Are those ideas still the same after your months of research? Are you still making the same argument and taking the same approach? If not, consider the ways that you will have to reframe your thesis to accommodate your new ideas.

Table of Contents

Create various tables of contents for your thesis, especially if you are not yet sure what it will look like. Do not worry about creating a product; instead, think of this as an imaginative exercise where you project possible models for your argument. Dreaming up different shapes for your thesis will give you some of idea of the potential directions your argument could go, while comparing them against each other will help you to discern the best, most logical structure. Homing in on the best model will ultimately help you come up with an outline for your thesis, which will, in turn, help you to write your thesis efficiently (see “Writing in Pieces,” pg. 32).

Close reading

If you are struggling to get going on your writing, start with a close reading. Close readings, which allow you to focus on only one or two texts, are generally easier to write than theoretical analyses or discussions of criticism. They require you to examine only on the text at hand and allow you to highlight your excellent analytical skills without trying to balance competing critical voices. Once you have one good close reading under your belt, the rest of the thesis can become less daunting, since you can build off of those pages.

Freewriting

Freewriting, or writing without a plan or direction, can sometimes get your creative juices flowing, whether you are struggling to begin writing or stuck somewhere along the way. It is often helpful to freewrite with as few rules as possible; simply write something, *anything*, about your topic, even if it begins, “I am struggling to discuss this subject because...” The act of putting something down on paper can help you to think through a topic.

Locating Yourself in the Critical Conversation

When writing your thesis, it is important to engage in a dialogue with previous criticism on your topic, making clear that you understand the state of the field and that you are making a clear and necessary contribution to it.

Much of this should happen at the outset of your argument (i.e., in the introduction), although you will very frequently find it necessary to address elements of this critical conversation within individual chapters.

The first step to locating yourself in this conversation is to understand it. You can accomplish this by researching the key works that have already been written on your subject (for more on this topic, see “The Research Process”). Once you have read these works, you will understand the current views on your subject and develop a clear sense of how your own work adds to or differs from to them.

Having comprehended the conversation around your topic, you should present it to your reader in the introduction to your thesis. This does not mean providing summaries of all the books you have read; instead, give the reader a sense of the current landscape of criticism on your topic *as it is relevant to your own argument*, referencing key texts and ideas as necessary.

Once you have laid out the basics, show how your current argument engages in this dialogue, either by acknowledging the value of previous work and adding to it or by pushing back against current critical assumptions to highlight alternative ideas. If, for example, your thesis discusses a particular author’s works, you might point out that critics tend to read these texts as conservative, but that your own argument will reveal strains of radicalism in them.

Choosing Your Methodology

Methodology refers to the system of methods you use to make your argument. In an English thesis, your methodology will inform the texts you consider, the way you analyze them, and even the ultimate shape of your argument.

If, for example, you are writing about queer literature throughout the nineteenth century, your methodological approach might be to select several sample texts from the early, middle, and late decades to cover the entire sweep of the century.

Alternatively, you might elect to study certain authors, arguing that they represent key figures in the history of nineteenth-century queer lit.

Or you might choose to limit your study to one particular form (e.g., novels) if you think that these are especially important texts in the history of nineteenth-century queer literature.

In each case, the choice that you make is a methodological one, and it will inform the nature of your argument.

Make sure that you have a clear understanding of your methodology — which texts you are using, why you are using them, and how you will be analyzing them — before you begin writing your thesis. Also be sure to explain this methodology to your reader in your introduction, so that he or she can see why you made these argumentative decisions.

Writing in Pieces

Although we generally read texts from beginning to end, it often does not make sense to write them that way.

This is especially true of lengthy projects like the thesis, in which your ideas may change over time and you may lose familiarity with texts if you wait too long after reading them to discuss them. Many people find it more convenient to write theses in pieces, tackling chapters one at a time (often out of order), and writing the introduction and conclusion last.

The key to writing in pieces is to have a clear sense of the different sections that will comprise your thesis. You should, for example, be able to break your thesis down into various chapters, as well as an introduction and a conclusion. In many cases, you will also be able to break those chapters down into different sections themselves, as each considers a different set of texts, ideas, or subject matter. Having a sense of the separate sections of your thesis will allow you to write them out of order: you might, for example, write section three of chapter two first, if that is the section that you feel most prepared to tackle.

Even if you do not have a clear sense of the defined sections of your thesis, you may still be able to write up parts of your thesis before placing them in your larger work. This can be especially helpful when you are dealing with close readings of individual texts or historical summaries. Not only are these pieces of writing often cohesive and easy to import into your larger document as necessary, but they are also often easiest to write shortly after reading the works they discuss. In fact, if you are struggling to begin writing your thesis, it is often easiest to start with a close reading of one of the texts you will be considering.

Introduction, Conclusion, and Citation

Introduction

The introduction to your thesis should set out your argument, establish its place within the larger critical conversation about your topic, explain your methodologies, and briefly map out the upcoming chapters of your thesis. You might think of your introduction as answering a series of questions: What are you discussing? Why is it important? How did you tackle this problem? How will you consider it in the following pages?

(Please note that you do not have to explain every single nuance of your forthcoming argument in the introduction, but you should indicate its overarching direction and provide a general roadmap of what lies ahead.)

Conclusion

The conclusion of your thesis — like that of a good essay — will briefly recap your argument and point to the larger implications of your work. What issues does your thesis settle? What questions does it raise? Should we, for example, reconsider a particular author's importance, rework our understanding of a text or genre, or expand our conception of a certain theoretical approach?

Citation

You can write your thesis using either **MLA** or **Chicago** citation styles. Ask your advisor if he or she has a preferred style.

Revision and Advisor Feedback

Revising your thesis can seem like a daunting prospect, especially given all the time and energy you have put into writing your first draft. Your advisor, however, can provide you with a wealth of help and information. As an expert on your topic, he or she can help you to transform your ideas into a cogent, polished piece of work.

At the beginning of the year (or even earlier), discuss with your advisor the circumstances under which he or she will review your writing. Would he or she prefer to see work at certain times, or when it contains a certain number of pages? (This is especially important since your advisor will likely have other commitments that may make him or her unavailable to you at particular times.)

As a general rule, it is best to **give your advisor your writing sooner, rather than later** — the earlier in the year you give him or her a draft of your work, the more time you have to receive and implement his or her comments.

If your advisor is amenable, it can also be helpful for you to give your advisor drafts of your work in small pieces (e.g., individual chapters). That can make the process of revising your work seem less daunting, since you will be dealing with fewer pages at once.

Once you receive feedback from your advisor, take some time to consider the comments. Feel free to schedule another meeting to discuss them, covering anything you do not understand or with which you disagree. Again, be sure to give him or her advance notice in scheduling this meeting so that you both have time to review your work beforehand.

Tips for When You Feel Stuck

At some time during your thesis writing experience, you will probably get stuck. The causes for this can vary: maybe you are finding it difficult to articulate your argument or struggling to organize your ideas. Maybe you are having trouble finding a book to answer your questions or you have developed writer's block. Maybe you have simply lost the motivation to work on your thesis. Whatever the case, though, the end result is the same: you are not making progress on your work.

**If this happens to you, do not panic!
Instead, try one or more of the tips below:**

Freewriting

Freewriting can be an excellent way to jumpstart the creative process. As usual, there are no rules for freewriting, so long as you are discussing some aspect of your project. If you know that you are struggling with a particular issue, though, it can be helpful to start your freewriting session by musing about that issue, even if only discussing the problems you are having.

Talk to your advisor

Your advisor is there to help you, so do not be afraid to speak to him or her about your struggles. He or she not only knows you and your project well, but also has likely encountered many of the same issues in his or her own work. Your advisor is thus in an ideal position to guide you through

your problems. He or she can help you to reframe your argument, point you toward a necessary critical source, or remind you of the ideas that led you to tackle your thesis in the first place.

Talk to other students in your thesis cohort

The group of people writing theses alongside you can be an invaluable source of empathy and inspiration. They will almost certainly understand the problems you are facing — they may even be struggling with the same problems themselves — and, by working together, you may be able to tackle your problems more effectively. If you are struggling to make sense of your ideas, you might benefit from talking them through with a peer. If you are finding it difficult to write,

you might set up a writing group, competing to see who can produce more each day.

It can also be helpful to you to hear members of your cohort describe their own work. Discovering the nuances of someone else's argument will often inspire you to reconsider your own.

Talk to people – especially friends and family – who know little to nothing about your project

Although it can be immensely helpful to talk through your project with people who are familiar with it and with the thesis writing process, it can also be helpful to get an entirely fresh take on the subject. If you are struggling with your ideas or argument, try describing your work to someone who knows nothing about the subject. Their questions and points of confusion may alert you to moments that are unclear in your own thinking, which can help you to refocus your project.

Read over past theses

The DMP theses of years past might help to inspire your own project, showing you different ways of making literary arguments and tackling interdisciplinary subjects. Past theses are available in the office of the

program director. When in doubt, stop by to check one out.

Read a book unrelated to your thesis

Sometimes it can be helpful to give yourself a break from your thesis topic, even as your mind remains on literature. Pick any book for this exercise — a novel, a work of nonfiction, an academic text, a short story. Reading this text will allow your mind to tackle new ideas, which can ultimately help to inspire you to return, rejuvenated, to your thesis.

Take a break

When all else fails, take a step back from your project and think about something else entirely. Go for a walk, take a shower, or take a nap. Grab dinner with a friend or work on your homework for a different class. Giving your mind a break from struggling with your thesis will allow you the space to get a different perspective on your problems, and you may come back to your work feeling refreshed and full of new ideas.

After Turning In Your Thesis

On or before the thesis deadline, you must turn in two copies of your thesis. One copy will go to your director, and the other will go to a second reader. (You will not know the identity of your second reader.) Both your director and your second reader will go through your thesis thoroughly and thoughtfully, and both will write a report on your work. If a significant discrepancy exists between the two reports, your thesis may be given to a third reader for additional feedback.

Once these thesis reports are complete, they become part of a docket on your work in the English department. In addition to reader reports, your docket will include a report on your coursework from each of your 4000-level English seminars, a detailed breakdown of all the courses you have taken in the English department and the grades you received, and your overall GPA.

The Honors Committee will read through your docket and determine whether to award you honors. If the Committee approves you for honors, you may be awarded Distinction, High Distinction, or — in very rare cases — Highest Distinction. Receiving honors, regardless of the level of distinction, indicates that the committee is very impressed by your work on your thesis and throughout your tenure as an English major. Your honors will be announced at graduation and will appear on your diploma.