

The Honors Thesis and the History Major

The Process of Matching Students with Mentors:

We recognize that a crucial component of a successful honors thesis comes at the beginning of the process, in the identification of a faculty mentor. In this process, it is important that both students and faculty enter the mentoring relationship with a full understanding of their mutual rights and responsibilities. Students should be fully aware of which faculty members in the department are available to serve as mentors, and what kinds of theses those faculty members feel competent to direct. Faculty members, in turn, should know something about the students interested in working with them on the thesis and why they are drawn to their topics.

While we do not feel it necessary to institute any formal departmental procedure in the process of matching students with mentors, we do agree that, as faculty members, we each have a responsibility to engage in careful, serious conversation with potential honors thesis advisees before agreeing to direct a thesis. There are two principal goals of those initial conversations: to ensure that the student has an appropriate level of background and interest in his/her topic; and to make the student aware of other faculty members who might also be qualified to direct the thesis. Honors students may also meet potential mentors in the Research Methods course (HST 3010), required of all history majors and intended to be taken in the student's sophomore year. Representatives from the department will present their research to majors in this course, exposing them to the breadth of expertise among our faculty.

The Senior Honors Thesis and the Existing Senior Seminar:

We agree that four hours of honors thesis credit will count as the senior seminar requirement for history majors, provided that the thesis director is a historian. Furthermore, the departmental comprehensive evaluation also applies to honors students. That is, honors students who are history majors must achieve a satisfactory rating on each of the eleven items on our rubric (covering everything from thesis and argument, to use of evidence, to writing and mechanics).

At the end of the first semester of honors seminar research credit, faculty mentors and honors students will discuss the project with specific emphasis on the probability that the thesis, in its final form, will satisfy the departmental requirements. Students whose performance in that first semester places a satisfactory performance in doubt will be urged to drop the thesis and take the history senior seminar course. In that way, these students' participation in the honors thesis project will not have the effect of jeopardizing their chances of graduating as history majors.

What Constitutes Acceptable Thesis Work in History:

While we all agree that there should be flexibility here because length does not automatically equate with quality, there is consensus that an acceptable honors thesis should be at least 40 to 50 pages in length (or, approximately twice the length of a history seminar paper). The honors thesis should consist of multiple chapters or sections, including a historiographical review, and whenever possible it should incorporate primary sources into its argument. In any case, the honors thesis must be a work that advances an original interpretive thesis, that adheres to disciplinary expectations regarding sources and citation, and in which the writing is of high quality.