

HONORS THESES IN PSYCHOLOGY

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Students are encouraged to conduct original, empirical research and to submit their work, whenever appropriate, as honors theses. A thesis may qualify a student for graduation with distinction from the College of Arts and Sciences (see your Undergraduate Bulletin for criteria for graduation with honors.) The purpose of this document is to describe the policies and procedures for theses submitted to the Department of Psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, based on a student's original, empirical research.

The Department of Psychology takes a great deal of pride in the quantity and quality of research conducted by psychology majors. The Department leads the College in the number of theses submitted. We also have many students who present their research at conferences and submit their work for publication. Once you have done the work, get maximum use from it. We value good research and applaud your efforts to engage in this important process.

Preliminary steps: Most students enter the research enterprise through an "apprenticeship" process. That is, they find a professor or graduate student who is in need of research help and spend a semester or more reading the scientific literature on a research topic, gathering or analyzing data, and so on. It isn't always easy to find such an apprenticeship. One must talk to faculty, graduate students, and other undergraduates to find out who may need help. However, perseverance pays off. Start early and keep at it! It helps to take Psychology 350 (Research Methods and Data Analysis) to learn how to conduct these activities, so take that course as soon as possible in your career. Follow up by taking Psych 450 or 451 (or both) as soon as you can. Psi Chi and the Undergraduate Psychology Organization usually host a research fair once or twice a year that serves as a way of getting researchers looking for help together with students who are looking for research positions. Keep your eyes open for these sessions and attend if you can.

If you find a general research topic interesting, you will probably find yourself asking a variety of questions about the topic and about the data that you are collecting and analyzing. These are research questions. They are *your* questions, and they need to be answered. So, now you have an idea for your thesis research, and, although the idea may still be rough, at least it's a start.

Empirical Research Proposal: Follow up with your supervising professor in the initial stages of developing a research proposal. Discuss your ideas, modifying them as needed. Talk with as many others as you can and obtain feedback. If your research group has periodic meetings, volunteer to present your ideas to the group at a meeting and ask for constructive criticism. Out of these interactions, your ideas will take stronger shape and methods can be conceptualized.

At some point these ideas need to go on paper. Write them in the manner of a manuscript, as you have learned to do in Psych 350. Include a brief introduction to the topic with a literature review, a proposed method of collecting data, and a section on how you intend to analyze the data that you would collect, including the appropriate statistical techniques. If you are doing survey work or use other pencil-and-paper methods of gathering data, include these documents/questionnaires as appendices. Have your supervising professor critique your proposal. Consult with your supervising professor and identify another professor who is willing to oversee your work and

approve your proposal. When the proposal is ready, make a copy and submit it, along with the Thesis Prospectus form, to the Chair of the Department's Undergraduate Issues Committee (UIC). **Only one copy of the prospectus is needed.** Although you may need to submit an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or to the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) before you can begin your work, the UIC does not require seeing IRB or IACUC approval in order to review your prospectus. If your prospectus is approved by the UIC but then you need to make significant changes to your work based on IRB or IACUC feedback, you may need to resubmit your prospectus to the UIC.

The Department office, 238 Burnett, can give you the name of the current Chair of the UIC. The Thesis Prospectus form can be obtained from the College of Arts and Sciences Advising Center on the first floor of Oldfather Hall.

The UIC is charged by the Psychology Department with establishing and maintaining standards for theses. The Department has a long-standing tradition of accepting only empirical research reports as theses. That is, *data* must be collected, analyzed, and interpreted. A thesis that involves only a review of the literature is not acceptable as a thesis for distinction in Psychology, although some other departments allow them. In some cases the data may have been collected by someone other than the student, but in all cases the student must undertake its analysis. The research may involve true experiments, correlational analyses, or data description (quantitative or qualitative), or any combination of these approaches. Your supervising professors will have a good idea about what is acceptable as a thesis proposal, so follow their advice. Aside from the requirement that the thesis be empirical, there are no set guidelines for how extensive the research must be. However, the UIC will not accept what it judges to be perfunctory research (e.g., projects that employ so few subjects or measures that it is unlikely that meaningful results could be achieved regardless of the nature of the data).

Proposals should be submitted by the end of the semester before the semester of graduation. Be aware that the UIC may be slow in performing its duties if your proposal comes in during the summer or at especially busy times during the regular semesters. The UIC will notify you in writing of the status of your proposal.

Academic credit: Students are not required to sign up for academic credit for a senior thesis or honors thesis research, but Psych 399H or 499 are available for one or more semesters for those who wish to receive credit. Arrangements should be made with your supervising professor.

Post-proposal procedures: Once your proposal has been accepted by the Undergraduate Issues Committee and you have all the necessary permissions from the IRB and the Department's Ethics Committee, you may begin your research. This will culminate in the written manuscript, which constitutes your thesis.

The thesis: Your thesis should be written in any science journal format (such as APA) that your Supervisory Committee specifies. The thesis can be written as though you are planning to submit it to a journal for publication. Generally, this means that the introduction should be a more extensive "literature review" than is typically found in the proposal. However, it should contain a tightly focused discussion of the rationale for your particular project. Generally speaking, following the format taught in Psych 350 will be fine. The thesis should also contain a detailed methods section, results section, and discussion of your results. Write and revise your thesis based on comments from your supervisory committee.

The examination: Schedule a time (at least one hour) to meet with your Supervisory Committee for your final examination. The Supervisory Committee members will ask questions about your thesis research, including data analytic techniques and the relation of your findings to data or theory in your field. They may ask other questions as well. At the conclusion of the exam, the Committee will ask you to leave the room while they evaluate your performance. The Committee will then tell you their decision (which is generally positive!) regarding the exam and thesis. Don't be surprised if they want you to revise the thesis in some way. The committee members will be asked to fill out and sign two reports that are included with the Thesis Prospectus Form. One report concerns the thesis itself and the other report deals with the examination.

These reports need to be submitted to the Chair of the UIC along with TWO copies of the final draft of the thesis. Provided that the work you submit was the same as the work you originally proposed, the UIC will sign off on the thesis and submit it to the College, which ultimately makes the final decision regarding graduation with distinction. One copy of the thesis will be retained in the Department.

Timing: As you have probably gathered, this process takes time. The thesis must be submitted to the UIC about a week before the thesis deadlines announced in the Undergraduate Bulletin and on the College information sheet "Degrees with Distinction in the College of Arts and Sciences." The UIC chair will quickly review your package to make sure everything is complete, and will hand deliver your package to the College on the deadline date. *Allow yourself plenty of lead time* in scheduling your exam so that you can make any revisions and get it to the UIC Chair in time. The following is a rough timetable for a student planning to graduate in May of 2007:

Jan 2006: Discuss your ideas with your primary professor, reading the literature and beginning to write the proposal.

Mar 2006: Meet with your two supervising professors, finalize your proposal and send a copy to the UIC.

Apr 2006: Complete the IRB and IACUC forms and submit the approval package to the Department's Ethics Committee. If using the humans subjects pool, complete the necessary paperwork.

Summer 2006: Make final preparations for gathering data.

Fall 2006: Gather data, conduct statistical analyses, and write one or more drafts of your thesis.

Dec. 2006: Submit your draft thesis to your primary supervising professor (although called a "draft," make it as close to a final copy as you can).

Jan. 2006: Make revisions on your thesis based on comments from your supervisor, and, once approved, give the thesis to your secondary supervisor.

Feb. 2006: Schedule the final oral exam. Revise the thesis one more time, and submit it along with the Examination Report to the Department's Chair of the UIC.