

Honors Thesis Guidelines: Comparative Literature

Writing an honors thesis is one of the most rewarding things you will do as an honors student in the Comparative Literature major or World Literature minor. Below is a guide to the process. Please review them carefully and feel free to reach out to the honors adviser if you have any questions.

Who may write an honors thesis in Comparative Literature?

If you are a Comparative Literature major or a World literature minor, and have taken at least two CMLIT courses, you are eligible to earn honors in Comparative Literature and to have a thesis supervisor in the Department of Comparative Literature. Please contact the department's Honors Adviser if you have questions (for example, if you have just declared the major and it is not officially showing up yet, or if you are presently completing your second CMLIT course).

What is an honors thesis?

The Schreyer Honors College offers good advice about how to choose a topic, find a thesis supervisor, and budget one's time: <https://www.shc.psu.edu/academic/thesis/>. The Honors College describes the thesis as "a scholarly piece of writing in which the writer is expected to show a command of the relevant scholarship in his (or her) field and contribute to the scholarship." "It should confront a question that is unresolved and push towards a resolution."

The thesis is likely to be one of the most challenging and rewarding assignments of your undergraduate career. It is an opportunity to engage in scholarly analysis at an advanced level. In the process of pursuing a topic, conducting independent research, and formulating, articulating and crafting a sustained argument, you will build on what you have learned in your coursework, gain insights into disciplinary scholarship and methodology, and develop your talents as a writer and thinker. Upon completion of your thesis, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have produced a work of scholarship that will be permanently archived in the Schreyer's (electronic) thesis archive and the Penn State Library system.

The Department of Comparative Literature expects honors theses to be based on thorough research and to offer an original interpretation. You are also expected to situate your research and analysis within the scholarship of the field and to clearly articulate and support the significance of your project and its contribution. Be careful not simply to summarize your sources, but rather center the thesis on the analysis and interpretation of your research in such a way that you make an argument. Thesis supervisors should help determine the appropriate balance between primary research and scholarly contextualization, between presentation of the evidence and interpretation.

How do I choose a topic and a thesis supervisor?

Comparative Literature honors theses explore a range of topics. Ideally, the language, the thematic concentration you develop for the major, or your other courses should help you to formulate a suitable topic by the spring semester of your junior year, when you will submit a thesis proposal. The thesis represents an opportunity for you to integrate and deepen the knowledge acquired in your coursework.

In choosing a topic, think about something that you are passionate about *and* that is feasible to pursue

within the time and other resources available. Unless you are planning to attend graduate school in the future, this may be the last opportunity you have to pursue an intellectual interest in a formally structured manner. If you are planning to pursue graduate study, consider working on a topic that will help to prepare you for that next phase.

An excellent source of advice on the craft of research, including formulating a topic, is Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. We recommend reading it before your junior year, so that you understand the process in advance.

The thesis supervisor you choose must be a faculty member in the Department of Comparative Literature. You might choose a faculty member in whose course(s) you have succeeded. If you are unsure about whom to ask to take on the role of supervisor, ask the Comparative Literature honors adviser for their advice.

You will also need the approval of the Comparative Literature honors adviser, who will be a second reader of your thesis.

Be sure to read the section on thesis writing on the Schreyer Honors College website:
<https://www.shc.psu.edu/academic/thesis/>.

The Honors College will ask you complete a thesis proposal to identify your thesis supervisor and give a basic outline of the topic you intend to address in your thesis. Honors College deadlines apply for the submission of the thesis proposal, which is typically one year before you intend to graduate.

If you are writing an interdisciplinary thesis in two majors, you will need a thesis supervisor from one of your major areas and honors advisers from both majors to approve your thesis.

What is CMLIT 494H and how do I register for it?

The course number for writing a thesis in Comparative Literature is CMLIT 494H. You may register for CMLIT 494H for one or two semesters, for a maximum of 6 credits, usually during the academic year in which you intend to graduate. Students typically register for CMLIT 494H for 3 credits in the semester preceding their final semester. If you are on a four-year path to graduation, this would mean that you register for CMLIT 494H in the fall semester of your senior year. Students may repeat CMLIT 494H, registering for 2 or 3 credits during their final semester while completing their final revisions before submission. Permission to repeat CMLIT 494H for 2 or 3 credits is determined in consultation with the thesis supervisor and the honors adviser.

You cannot register for CMLIT 494H on Lionpath, as access to this course is controlled within the department. To register, unless an online form is available, pick up a registration form from the Academic Adviser for Comparative Literature. The form requires the signature of your thesis supervisor. Return the signed form to our staff coordinator Becky Cross (rlc21@psu.edu, 814 863-4517, 466 Burrowes Building), who will complete your registration.

What is the procedure and timeline for developing the thesis?

A thesis proposal is due to Schreyer Honors College in the spring of your junior year, assuming you're

on a four-year path to graduation. The proposal outlines the scope of the proposed research and should include a preliminary bibliography. The proposal will have to be approved by the department's honors adviser and your thesis supervisor.

You will register for CMLIT 494H (3 credits) in the semester preceding your final semester at Penn State. You and your thesis supervisor will then create a calendar of meetings for CMLIT 494H.

You should aim to submit to your thesis supervisor a complete draft of your thesis by the end of your CMLIT 494H semester. This draft will be graded by the thesis supervisor, with the expectation that you will revise and polish the thesis before submitting a final version. Your grade for CMLIT 494H will be based on (1) consistent progress on your research and writing; (2) regular communication with your thesis supervisor; and (3) good faith effort to address suggestions made by the thesis supervisor.

Permission to register for CMLIT 494H for 2 or 3 credits in your final semester is contingent upon your successful completion of course expectations in the prior semester. Either way, you should aim to submit a revised copy of your thesis to your thesis supervisor within 45 days of the conclusion of the semester in which you take 494H for 3 credits. This will allow time for one final revision before submission to Schreyer and to the honors advisor.

You must submit a full final draft of the complete thesis to your thesis supervisor, the honors adviser, as well as to the Schreyer Honors College by early March for format review. This is a hard deadline; failure to do so may result in not having your thesis approved. You should make sure to follow the most up-to-date formatting and submission guidelines on the Schreyer website.

File the final version of your thesis, as well as signatory page with the signatures of the thesis supervisor and the honors adviser, with the Schreyer Honors College by their formal deadline in early April.

The final approval signatures are not automatic and are subject to the discretion of the thesis supervisor evaluating your work. You should allow at least a week for the thesis supervisor and the reader(s) to sign your final approval page.

What are the formal expectations for the Comparative Literature honors thesis?

While the length of your thesis and the number of chapters it includes will vary with your specific plan of study, the department recommends that the following guidelines be used by thesis supervisors, thesis writers, and the honors adviser.

An honors thesis in Comparative Literature is typically 50 pages in length, including a brief introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. Alternate formats are possible, pending discussion with and approval by the thesis supervisor and the honors adviser.

You are strongly encouraged to engage with some primary and/or secondary material in at least one other language than English; for World Literature minors, it may be feasible to include non-Anglophone material in translation.

Literature reviews and plot summaries are supporting details, not core components of an honors thesis.

Your thesis should aim to make an original contribution to the study of comparative literature by recovering little-known primary works, engaging existing works of literature using a new conceptual framework, or bringing together works from two literary traditions or media forms that have not been combined in the past. In addition, students writing an honors thesis are expected to situate their research question and analysis within a body of existing scholarship, and to clearly articulate the significance of their project and its contribution in that context.

Citations in your thesis must correctly follow a standard format, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) or Chicago Style, as recommended by the thesis supervisor.

Updated on April 2021; contact Nergis Ertürk, Honors Adviser for Comparative Literature, if you have any questions.