

# **The Senior Thesis Handbook**

**Louisiana Scholars' College at Northwestern State University**

[Revised and Approved, October 24, 2008; slightly revised Oct. 14, 2024]

This handbook contains information and advice on procedures and regulations governing the preparation, submission, and evaluation of senior theses in the Louisiana Scholars' College. Students should find it to be a helpful resource as they negotiate the exciting challenges of writing a senior thesis.

After an [overview](#) of the purpose and basic timeline for a senior thesis, this three-part guide continues with a [step-by-step discussion](#) of the whole thesis process, from finding an advisor to scheduling a defense. The final section is an [appendix](#) which gives sample patterns of theses according to discipline, a precise specification of formatting requirements for the archival copy, style guides (arranged by discipline), and other useful details. Very likely, students who are just beginning the thesis process will find Parts 1 and 2 most useful, while those who are beginning to actually write chapters, to format a bibliography, etc., will find Part 3 an invaluable reference.

## **1. Overview**

### **The Nature and Purpose of the Senior Thesis**

Beginning with work at the end of the junior year and continuing through the senior year, the thesis is the culmination of a student's work in one of the College's interdisciplinary concentrations or one of the departmental majors at the University. Though theses vary in length and scope, each is a substantial work of scholarship, criticism, scientific research, or artistic creation. In general, theses have ranged from 40 to 150 pages, excluding front matter and back matter, with theses in the natural sciences, mathematics, and fine arts tending to be somewhat shorter than theses in the social sciences and humanities. The thesis should demonstrate familiarity with existing work in the given field, together with the ability to define a significant topic or problem, carry out independent scholarly research, analyze evidence, and sustain a complex argument. The thesis will become part of the collection of the University library as well as the College's collection in Morrison Hall. More importantly, the thesis experience--the final copy and the process of creating it--will almost certainly count as the most memorable part of each student's education.

### **The Timeline**

Students will define a topic and select a thesis advisor and second reader prior to taking the Thesis Research Methods course (SLSC 4000 or SBUS 4000). These appointments are subject to the approval of the College Director. The Thesis Research Methods course will be taken the semester before students begin the bulk of their research in the 480T course, usually in the spring semester of the junior year. While in the Thesis Research

Methods course, students will develop a formal thesis proposal, present this proposal to the instructors of the course and to their classmates, and meet with their thesis advisors. Several draft versions of the proposal will be completed, progressing from a brief description to a detailed proposal including background to the thesis, methodology, implications, and a beginning bibliography. The due dates for these proposal drafts will be assigned in the Thesis Research Methods course. The proposal should be approved by the end of the course so the student can begin research during the summer before the senior year.

Students begin in-depth research in the Thesis Research course (480T), which is usually taken in the fall semester of the senior year. The primary research, whether library, laboratory, or field, should be largely completed by the end of the semester when the student is in Thesis Research, and the composition of the thesis should be well underway. By the end of this semester, students should have completed at the very least one chapter of the thesis.

Students register in the last Thesis course (482T) for the final semester of the thesis project. The final composition and revision of the thesis occurs in this semester. At the beginning of each semester, the College will publish a thesis calendar. This calendar will include the following dates:

- Thesis Examination Copy Due Date (usually in March for spring semester graduates) – This is the date when a complete and fully critiqued copy of the thesis is due. By this time, the first and second readers should have requested all substantive changes in the thesis, leaving primarily stylistic and grammatical revisions for the Archival copy. The Examination copy will be the basis of the Thesis Defense.
- Thesis Defense Dates: a range of dates (usually within one month) when students will publicly present and defend their theses.
- Thesis Archival Copy Due Date (usually in late April) – This is the date when the final copies of the theses are to be submitted to the College office (see Format Matters: The Archival Copies).

## 2. The Details, Step by Step

### Finding a Topic

It is important to select an area of study and a topic worthy of a senior thesis at the earliest possible date, and certainly no later than early spring semester of the junior year. Some suggestions for coming up with topics include:

- Consider a topic encountered in junior level courses and especially for continuing work on a topic already studied and written about in a 3000-level researched essay or longer essay for an upper division major course.

- Meet with a professor you might like to write with and brainstorm some ideas.
- Look at theses from previous years, examine excerpts and abstracts from the College's first one hundred theses, to see the diversity of topics students have undertaken.

Once you begin to narrow in on a topic, and a specific guiding purpose or thesis, the student should take a careful look at all the theses in the area of interest. A sample of abstracts from Senior Theses is available on the web at <http://www.nsula.edu/scholars/Alumni/Thesis.html>. The College's copy of each thesis is displayed, in alphabetical order, by author, in the Thesis Room. Watson Library also holds archival and microfilm copies in the Cammie Henry Research Center.

### **Finding an Advisor**

Theses may be co-directed by faculty in other University departments, but primary responsibility for supervising and evaluating the thesis must rest with a member of the College faculty.

The senior thesis experience demands self-discipline, so the student must demonstrate motivation and the ability to work independently. In general, thesis advisors in the College work with no more than three students, so students should contact their desired advisor as early as possible.

Students should consider the interests of faculty members in choosing an advisor. Although the College will make every attempt to accommodate students with unusual interests, there is no guarantee that a faculty member with the appropriate expertise will be available to direct a thesis outside the disciplines represented at NSU.

Many University majors will also require a thesis advisor from their departments. In such cases, the student should approach a potential advisor having given serious thought to possible topics or research questions.

It is important to note again, however, that the thesis is the creation and realization of the student, not the advisor, and both the process of writing it and the final archival product represent the student's education and discipline.

### **Special Requirements**

Students who propose to study human subjects, whether through surveys, interviews, or formal observation or experimentation, must submit a proposal to the University's Institutional Board Review (known as "the IRB"). Students should understand that this committee will be rigorous in checking to see that the study of human subjects is carefully planned, informed by the latest scholarship, and sensitive to the privacy and well-being of those studied. For specific forms, please contact the Office of Institutional

Research. Students who propose to study live animals may need to submit a proposal to the University's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). See a biologist in the College for more information.

For those in the Fine and Performing Arts, the senior thesis may take the form of an artistic exhibition or performance. A 5 to 10 page commentary or analysis demonstrating the student's scholarly abilities must accompany such exhibitions or performances, and a permanent record in the form of a video tape, audio tape, slide portfolio, or other appropriate medium must be provided by the student. Students should be aware that material of recent origin may be subject to copyright regulations. In particular, any material taken from the world-wide web may be subject to copyright and require special permission to duplicate. This is particularly applicable to visual material.

### **The Examination Copy**

Students must submit complete drafts for review and comments by the advisor and second reader by the examination deadline, which is determined by the faculty at the beginning of each semester. The examination copy need not conform to all formatting regulations, but it should be complete. If, for some reason, an extension of the deadline is necessary, the student and advisors must submit a written request to the Director, explaining the reason for the delay and offering a firm revised schedule for the submission of the exam copy. Completed work must be submitted with the request for the extension.

### **The Oral Defense**

In the defense, the student should summarize rather than read the work done for the thesis. During the course of the defense, the student may be asked not only to defend the arguments of the thesis, but also to explore the relationship between the thesis and other aspects of his or her course of study. The defense is open to all members of the university community and must be scheduled to permit attendance by the advisor, the second reader and the Director of the College. In the Fine and Performing Arts, a performance or exhibit may be part of the thesis project in addition to the formal defense. Such events should be scheduled so that the complete project can be evaluated by the entire committee prior to the submission of final grades.

The student should meet with the thesis advisor to plan the defense, which should be no more than 50 minutes long. The defense will begin with a concise presentation of the project (no more than 25 minutes), during which the student should explain how the project developed from the initial question through its completion. This presentation should include an explanation of the research methods used, an analysis of the results of the study, a discussion of the student's work within the larger context of related scholarship, an assessment of the limitations of the present study, and a consideration of possible areas for future study. Questioning should begin with the thesis advisor and the second reader. Then, questions are taken from all others in attendance.

### **Setting a Date and Time**

Thesis defenses are usually scheduled for Morrison Hall at a time when the Director, the thesis advisor, and the second reader are available. To schedule the defense, the student should contact the College secretary in March for spring defenses or in early November for fall defenses and indicate if any special facilities are needed. Schedule as early as possible; dates will fill up quickly.

### **Publicity**

Seniors have imaginatively publicized their defenses with posters in the College and across campus. Some defenses have even been publicized by the University's News Bureau. All defenses are open to the public.

### **Arranging for Equipment**

Students requiring audiovisual equipment for their defenses should make arrangements with the Director or with their advisors.

### **How You Will Be Graded: Evaluation Guidelines for 481T and 482T, and Degree Recommendations**

Though students are encouraged to consult with other appropriate members of the faculty throughout the writing of the thesis, the thesis supervisor, who alone assigns the student's grade, is principally responsible for guiding the project.

A grade of "IP" (Incomplete/Passing) or "F" is assigned for the first semester's work (481T) on the project. Following submission of the thesis in the spring semester, the "IP" grade is changed, and the grade for the second semester (482T) is assigned, to reflect the thesis supervisor's evaluation of the completed project. Students who do not complete their thesis work after the second semester must continue to enroll in 482T until their archival copy is submitted.

Written evaluations of the thesis and thesis examination, together with a degree recommendation are submitted by the thesis supervisor and the second reader to the faculty of the College. Where the thesis committee cannot reach accord on a single degree recommendation, and where the dispute is plainly attributable to differing assessments of the thesis, the Director of the College appoints a third reader, who reports his or her judgment of the thesis to the faculty. Functioning as a committee of the whole, the faculty of the College reviews the record of each degree candidate and recommends to the Director of the College that certain students be awarded degrees "with distinction" or "with high distinction." Such recommendations take into consideration the student's entire undergraduate career, with the thesis understood to be one significant element of that experience.

### **Heart of the Matter**

Do not expect the advisor to do the research or writing.  
Do not expect the advisor to be responsible for deadlines.  
Do show up for scheduled meetings.  
Do provide polished writing by agreed upon dates.  
Do respond quickly to advice and comments from the advisor.  
Do involve the second reader from the earliest possible moment.  
Should the thesis topic require cooperation from a faculty member of the university at large, students should make an appointment and then forward a copy of the thesis proposal. In writing letters or e-mails to faculty at other institutions, offer an efficient presentation of the topic and thesis and note what research has already been done.

## **3. Appendix**

### **Sample Patterns for Economics Theses**

#### 1. Historical Economics Thesis

- Chapter 1. Introduction
- Chapter 2. Historical overview
- Chapter 3. Analysis
- Chapter 4. Current issues
- Chapter 5. Conclusions

#### 2. Empirical Economics Thesis

- Chapter 1. Introduction
- Chapter 2. Historical overview
- Chapter 3. The problem today and presentation of basic data
- Chapter 4. The model or theoretical basis for your analysis
- Chapter 5. Analysis
- Chapter 6. Conclusions

3. Theoretical: This type of thesis is not suitable for students at NSU because no economics classes at a sufficiently high level are offered here.

### **A Sample Pattern of a Natural Science Thesis (e.g., biology, ecology, chemistry)**

- Chapter 1. Introduction and Background
- Chapter 2. Materials and Methods, including analysis procedures
- Chapter 3. Results, including analysis
- Chapter 4. Discussion and Conclusions

### Sample Patterns for Literature Theses

Pattern 1: (This works well if one is treating a series of literary works or films.)

Introduction  
Chapter 1: (Treats one novel, film, etc.)  
Chapter 2: (Treats a second novel, film, etc.)  
Chapter 3 (Treats a third novel, film, etc.)  
So on for as many works as the thesis treats  
Conclusion

Pattern 2: (This works well if one is doing an in-depth exploration of one work.)

Introduction  
Chapter 1: Character 1  
Chapter 2: Character 2  
Chapter 3: Character 3  
So on for as many characters as the thesis treats  
Conclusion

Pattern 3: (This works well if the thesis treats a specific kind of theory.)

Introduction  
Chapter 1: Discussion of the theory  
Chapter 2: Discussion of the literary work  
Chapter 3: Application of the theory  
Conclusion

Pattern 4: (Here is an actual table of contents of a thesis which treated six authors but the writer was more interested in overlap than in separation. It treated African-American women's writing through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theory.)

Introduction  
Chapter 1: A History of Reading Racially  
Chapter 2: The Gaze  
Chapter 3: Language  
Chapter 4: Oh How We Love Our Mulatto  
Chapter 5: Magic and the Matriarchy  
Conclusion

### Sample Pattern for a History Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction  
Thesis statement; sources and historiography; brief historical background of the subject, *if necessary*.

Two suggested ways to order the remaining chapters (4-6 chapters total is typical):

Structure A – Topical.

Chapter 2: The Views of the British Press on the Iraqi Revolt.  
Chapter 3: The Military's Perception of the Iraqi Revolt.  
Chapter 4: etc.

Structure B – Sometimes a narrative *with analysis* can form the backbone of the thesis structure. If this structure is used, the chapters should be devoted to handy chunks or periods of time.

Chapter 2: The Genesis of the Iraqi Revolt: Nineteenth Century to Spring 1920.  
Chapter 3: The Climax of the Revolt, May-August 1920.  
Chapter 4: etc.

In each of their chapters, history students should continually make reference to their thesis argument.

### **Format Matters: The Archival Copies**

For useful tips on using MS Word to format your thesis, see <http://www.nsula.edu/scholars/ThesisGuide.html> by Dr. Cochran. The College has stringent guidelines about form and format for the archival copy. Observe these meticulously.

1. Theses must be printed on standard 8 1/2" x 11" white paper of high quality, i.e., at least 50% cotton content. Acid free paper is required. Punched or erasable paper is not acceptable. **N.B.** – Do not print the thesis on good paper until your advisor agrees that all needed changes have been made and you are ready to print the final copy.
2. Printing should be of "letter quality." The laser printer in the College's computer lab meets this requirement.
3. Students using a word processor compatible with the College's main computer lab, or with our administrative Macintoshes, may bring their own cotton-bond paper and print out three official copies (for the library, the College, and the advisor). Students must arrange additional copies through private photocopying firms--the College's photocopy machine may not be used for this purpose.
4. The Times New Roman (11 or 12 point) is required font. It is available in the College's computer lab.



5. Greek symbols and mathematical characters are available in most word processors. Although typesetting is preferable, characters unavailable on standard printers may be inserted neatly with black, permanent ink.
6. Margins must be as follows: left, one and one-half inches; right, top and bottom, one inch.
7. Students must not, under any circumstances, justify right margins.
8. Chapter titles (or other major internal divisions) should begin two inches from the top of the page. Minor divisions may be set off from the text in boldface type, or by centering, numbering or lettering. Such divisions should be parallel and consistent between sections and may be included in the Table of Contents.
9. Students should avoid auto-hyphenation programs. When it is necessary to hyphenate, students should check the conventions in the handbook to make certain the reader will not be confused or inconvenienced.
10. "Block" or "extracted" quotations, notes, and references should be single-spaced. The rest of the thesis should be double-spaced.
11. Students must adhere strictly to the conventions of their discipline in all matters of spacing indentation, quotation, punctuation, chapter headings, and so on. Those conventions are outlined in some detail in Frederick Crews, *The Random House Handbook*.
12. Figures (graphs, photographs, and illustrations) and tables (charts) must be clear, suitable for photocopying, and accompanied by an appropriate explanatory legend. The title should contain sufficient explanatory material that the figure or table may be interpreted without reference to the text. Figures and tables should always appear after the first reference in the text. They may be inserted in the text if they are oriented vertically and occupy less than one-half a page. Otherwise they should occupy the next page. Figures and tables should each be numbered sequentially, i.e., Fig. 1, Fig. 2, etc., Table 1, Table 2, etc. The citation for a figure or table should be inserted parenthetically and inconspicuously, e.g. "Administration of the drug methylprednisolone reduced the inflammatory response as indicated by decreased skin temperature (Fig. 8)." A list of Figures and a list of Tables should follow, and be included in, the Table of Contents.
13. Mathematical or chemical equations should be set off from the text in the same manner as a block quote. Equations that will be referred to again in the text should be numbered or lettered in a consistent style, and the label placed in parentheses or brackets and right justified. Equation editors and Greek alphabet fonts are available in most word processors; in extreme cases equations may be hand lettered in permanent black ink.
14. Foreign language phrases, including genus and species names, should be italicized in the same font as the text. A species name should be spelled out completely, with the

genus capitalized and the specific name in lower case, the first time it appears and anytime it begins a sentence. Subsequent occurrences should abbreviate the genus, e.g., *E. coli*.

15. The results of statistical tests should include: reference to the test, the test statistic itself, degrees of freedom, significance level and whether the result was or was not significant (i.e.,  $X^2 = 12.5$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $P = 0.032$ ).

16. Numerical results, whether from computer simulations, measurements, calculations from data, or statistical tests should be reported with no more digits than are justified by the precision of the measurements. Most students err by reporting too many digits.

17. Theses are to be assembled as follows (bracketed items may be optional):

Title Page

[copyright and notice of permission to use copyrighted material]

Abstract: no more than 200 words [some disciplines may dictate 100 words]

[Acknowledgments]

[Foreword or Preface]

[Table of Contents]

[List of Tables, Figures, and Illustrations]

Main Text of Thesis (patterns differ by discipline; for sample patterns, see above)

[Appendices]

[Substantive and Bibliographic Notes]

List of Works Cited

18. The title page, though it should be regarded as the first page of the thesis, is unnumbered. (See below for a sample title page.) Subsequent prefatory material (e.g., a foreword or list of illustrations) is numbered with lower-case Roman numerals, starting with "ii," centered one-half inch from the bottom of the page.

19. The main body of the text should be numbered with Arabic numerals, either in the upper right corner of each page and one inch from the right edge, or at bottom center, one-half inch from the end of the page. All pages except the first, including those containing appendices and notes, should be numbered consecutively. Each chapter should begin on a new page. Do not allow the last sentence of a paragraph to begin the top of a page, nor the first sentence of a paragraph to begin at the bottom of a page. If this happens, insert a page break to force another sentence from the paragraph to join the isolated one, so that new pages always begin and end with at least two lines of text.

20. The abstract should begin with a definitive statement of the problem or project. Its purpose, scope, and limit should be clearly delineated. Then, as concisely as possible, describe the research methods and design, major findings, including the significance of the work, if appropriate, and conclusions. In general, the abstract should be no longer than one page.

A student whose thesis involves "creative" work (original, fine art, music, writing, theatre, film production, dance, etc.) should describe process and production, indicating the forms of documentation on file as "thesis" material. All require a scholarly research component.

Review the abstract for organization, content, grammar, and spelling before submission.

21. The "Bibliography" or "References" section should be arranged following the format given in an approved style manual. Entries should be single-spaced with double-spacing between entries. All books, articles, and other materials used in preparation of the summary should be listed. Footnote form in a bibliography is not acceptable. Such abbreviations as *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*, and *ibid.* will not be approved in bibliographical entries. If a specific annotative need is not addressed by the style guide in use, students may wish to observe the practices of a particular scholarly journal in their field. In all such cases, the student should follow closely the advice of the thesis advisor.

22. Certain material that does not actually form a part of the text, such as questionnaires, extensive tables of data, or detailed descriptions of apparatus and test forms, should be placed in appendices. Appendices should be numbered and assembled in the order in which they are referred to in the text. Appendices precede the bibliography, are paginated sequentially as part of the text, and must appear in the Table of Contents. If the thesis involves human subjects, the approval form from the IRB must be placed at the end of the thesis as an appendix.

23. Two copies of the thesis, placed unbound in a manila folder, are to be submitted to the College by the stipulated deadline. Thesis binding will be handled by the College. One copy will be placed in the Watson Library and one copy will be placed in the College Thesis Library. Additional copies desired by the student are the student's responsibility.

#### **General Style Guides:**

Chicago Editorial Staff. *Chicago Manual of Style*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Strunk, William Jr. and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc.

Turabian, Kate, L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## Style Guides For Individual Disciplines:

### **Biology**

Style Manual Committee. *Council of Biology Editors Style Manual: A Guide for Authors, Editors, and Publishers in the Biological Sciences*, Bethesda.

McMillan, Victoria. *Writing Papers in the Biological Sciences*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

### **Chemistry**

Dodd, Janet S., editor. *The ACS Style Guide: A Manual for Authors and Editors*, Washington D.C. American Chemical Society.

American Chemical Society. *Handbook for Authors of Papers in American Chemical Society Publications*. Washington: American Chemical Society.

### **History**

Turabian, Kate, L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

### **Humanities**

Gibaldi, Joseph, and Walter S. Achtert. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, New York: Modern Language Association of America.

### **Mathematics**

American Mathematical Society. *A Manual for Authors of Mathematical Papers*, Providence: American Mathematical Society.

### **Music**

Helm, Eugene and Albert T. Luper. *Words and Music: Form and Procedure in Theses, Dissertations, Research Papers, Book Reports, Programs, and Theses in Composition*. Hackensack, N.J: Joseph Boonin.

### **Physics**

American Institute of Physics, Publication Board. *Style Manual for Guidance in the Preparation of Papers*, New York: American Institute of Physics.

### **Psychology**

American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

## **Copyrighting Your Work, and Making the Copyright Page**

Use the standard form for copyright notice:

c. 1999 by Firstname Lastname. All rights reserved.

Officially registering a copyright is not necessary unless the work produced is original work that may be used without respect to authorship. In that case, one may wish to register the thesis with the Federal Copyright Office, using appropriate forms providing "best" copies, and paying the required fees. Registration is not required to establish copyright, which exists from the moment the archival copy of the thesis is submitted to the College. For further detail on the intricacies of copyright law, consult the most recent edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

## **A Sample Title Page**

Below find a sample of a thesis title page, with spaces for the appropriate signatures.

(three inches)

An Analysis of Petroglyphs at Mesa Verde, an Anasazi Archeological Site

by  
Jane Doe

(approximately two inches -  
spacing should place signature lines at bottom of page.)

A Senior Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Louisiana Scholars' College  
at Northwestern State University  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Liberal Arts  
with a Concentration in Humanities and Social Thought

24 April 2008

(3/4 inch)

---

Dr. John Smith  
First Reader

---

Dr. Nancy Drew  
Second Reader

---

Dr. Richard Leakey  
Research Supervisor

---

Dr. Davina McClain  
Director

**Commented [CP1]:** Specific disciplines, e.g., Business, may require specific lines. Consult with your thesis advisor.

**Commented [CP2]:** (An outside Research Supervisor is optional. In the absence of a Research Supervisor, the College Director's name and signature line should be centered.)