

Strategies for Success in Completing an Honors Project

From: Benjamin Glover, Class of 2008

Project Title: Protein Interactions in the nematode *Caenorhabditis elegans*

Department: Biology

Faculty Advisor: Beth De Stasio

Most honors projects in the sciences typically develop as an extrapolation of students' summer research projects. As soon as you conceive the idea of undertaking an honors project, it is essential that you inform your faculty advisor so that he or she can help you right away to work towards certain formulated goals. It is never too early to start working on your honors project. For most honors projects in the sciences there are some portions that can be done independently of any experimental results. For example, reading relevant scientific articles and writing your introduction can be done as early as is convenient. Since our library has limited access to certain articles, journals, periodicals and archives, it is important to plan ahead to determine what articles one will need and to place requests for material that our library may not have through the interlibrary loan system. You'll want to make these requests as soon as possible since it may take up to 2 weeks or more to retrieve some articles.

Personally, I found that keeping electronic copies of my lab records (including protocols for experiments, spreadsheets of results and scanned copies of imaged agarose gels) accelerated my writing process and saved me a lot of time in my writing. For example, protocols can be written initially in bullet point format and then rewritten into organized prose when needed.

When a student decides to pursue an honors project, it will be beneficial to set up an independent study during the academic year to enable your faculty supervisor help keep track of your work. I met with my advisor usually once a week or other times when necessary to report my progress, help me to refocus and to help in troubleshooting any difficulties I encountered in my experiments. Checking in with faculty also helps to pace yourself in the writing process and to prevent the rush right before the deadline. Soliciting the opinion of other faculty on various aspects of my project also proved very helpful at times.

For the oral exam, I found that summarizing the key parts of my project using as little technical lingo as possible was very important: I needed to demonstrate that I could explain my project to someone who was unfamiliar with work of this sort. In preparing for questions, it was important for me to think about my project from a larger perspective considering how ties might be made from various aspects of biology to my project. Additionally, it was critical to be able to think at a very reductionist level in terms of what the physical changes I was observing might mean at the molecular level.

From: Emily Passey, Class of 2008

Project Title: Writing from the Margins: The Poetry of Robert Kroetsch and Lorine Niedecker

Department: English

Faculty Advisor: Faith Barrett

Here are my tips for completing an Honors project. I hope they can be of use to future project writers.

1. Choose an advisor who knows a lot about what you're doing. This will help because your advisor is source number one for getting started on your research. Furthermore, your advisor should ideally be someone familiar with the rules when it comes to "the basics" (recent articles on your topic, grammar and citation rules, publishing options, etc.).
2. Set yourself WEEKLY goals. I found that daily goals were next to impossible to reach sometimes. Between your other classes and all your other responsibilities—not to mention a desire to stay somewhat social and sane—you will find that there are days when you don't get "enough" (or any!) work done. For me, at least, I found that setting weekly goals significantly lessened the stress of a lost day.
3. This is probably a humanities-specific tip: Write. A lot. From the very beginning. Seriously. This is not a 12-page paper that you can (possibly) pull out of nowhere in the last week of the term before it's due. While I'm sure a lot of people can write decent work that way, for your honors project you should respect yourself, your advisor, your future readers, and put a lot of work into crafting your paper. The only way I was able to finish a three chapter, 150-page project by May was to get to writing on day one. You will find that you throw out a lot of writing and that you have to edit A LOT (more than you ever imagined!), so having a lot of material to work with helps. I also found that the more I wrote, the more I found out what my argument actually was. It's like writing fiction: you start with an idea of "a character" (one part of your argument maybe), but as you write (and read) the "character" takes on a new shape and you might have to follow along for a bit to find out what that shape is.
4. This is a silly one, but worth mentioning. Did you know that you are able to check out library books for months at a time? You can. All you have to do is talk to the head librarian and explain that you need any given book (or stack of books) for an Honors project. She will then work some magic and re-stamp your books with a new due date (in June). This is good because then you can take books home for the holidays and freak out your family when you walk in with a whole box of smarty-pants books and explain that they are for your "thesis." (This tactic might result in a significant increase in parental pride/satisfaction when it comes time to write the check to Lawrence.)
5. The main thing is: allow yourself time for your project. Things will come up that might "screw up" your master plan. I ended up having to leave Appleton quite suddenly for a week in fall term--a week during which I did NOTHING towards my project at all. It was hard, but I felt that I made it through by writing a lot from

day one (see #3) and by letting myself feel okay about a few days' setback (see #2).

From: Sveinn Sigurdsson and Ashlan Falletta-Cowden, Class of 2009
Project Title: From Sustenance to Symbol: A Multi-generational Study of Traditionality and Modernization in the Icelandic Diet
Department: Anthropology
Faculty Advisor: Mark Jenike

Honors projects in the social sciences are different in a few respects. The research is often collaborative, and may occur well before you defend your thesis. While collaborative work has many benefits and, depending on the scope of your project, can be quite necessary, deciding to do a joint honors project is not a decision to take lightly. Having two sets of hands working does not mean half the work; on the contrary, it usually means having twice the work to get through, and you also need to allocate time to discussion and collaboration. That said, having two people working on the same project can lead to an interaction of skills and ideas that can allow a project to achieve levels of thoughtfulness and creativity that are more difficult to do alone. In our case the anthropological research we performed in Iceland required two ethnographers, and the amount of data we collected was too much for one student to analyze. Thus, having two people working together allowed us to take on questions and topics that would not have been feasible for either of us alone. Psychology honors projects, particularly those involving original research, often need at least two authors in order to handle the amount of time such work entails.

In terms of writing a joint honors project, we suggest starting by discussing the objectives you need to accomplish and dividing the work according to your strengths and weaknesses. For example, Sveinn analyzed the interview transcripts because of his fluency in Icelandic, and Ashlan worked on the quantitative analysis because of her previous work with anthropological statistics. Also, make sure the amount of work you each do is approximately equal; one person may be doing more than the other at times, but try to have it all even out in the end. After you have finished drafts of the data analysis and written results, check each other's work to make sure you agree with each others' direction and analysis, and try to maintain an open dialogue while working on the sections. When it comes to integrating your project into one written work, make sure the writing styles are consistent and complimentary, for you do not want a manuscript that sounds disjointed.

Overall, we recommend joint honors projects for people who know they can work together and have the patience to put up with each other for an extended period of time. Know what you are getting into, and be sure that the kind of project you are looking at would benefit from the input of other individuals. Good luck with your project.