

Honors Oral Examination Guidelines

The Honors Oral is an examination conducted by a committee of voting members of the Lawrence University faculty. At least three faculty members (with at least one outside of the department within which the project was conducted) serve as voting members of the examining committee. If the advisor is a non-voting member of the faculty, he or she should include the project's co-sponsor as one of the three committee members. A representative of the Honors Committee who is not a voting member of the examining committee oversees the administration of the exam. The examinations are closed to all others with two exceptions: a) Lawrence faculty members may attend as observers with permission of the project advisor, b) on occasion an outside expert who is uniquely qualified to shed insight into the quality of the project may be invited by the advisor to attend. The advisor will inform the student if observers will be present.

Conduct of the Examination:

The Honors Committee representative calls the examination to order when all members of the examining committee and the student are present. In the sciences, it is customary for the student to present a brief summary of the project (typically no longer than 15 minutes). Students from other disciplines may or may not present a summary, depending on the recommendation of the advisor.

After the summary, the Honors Committee representative opens the floor to questions from the examining committee members. As a courtesy to the non-voting member of the examining committee, the Honors Committee representative may also ask questions but allows the examining committee to ask the majority of the questions. Although circumstances vary, the examination of the candidate typically lasts no longer than one to one and a half hours.

When the examination draws to a close, the Honors Committee representative excuses the student from the room. Observers are also typically excused at this time, with two exceptions: a) faculty observers who are attending in order to gain familiarity with the examination process may remain quietly to observe the entire process and b) at the advisor's discretion, outside experts who may be able to add unique insights on the strengths and weaknesses of the project may remain and contribute to this discussion. In all cases, non-voting members may not take part in any way in the recommendation as to whether or not honors should be awarded or any subsequent discussions. For this reason, it may be prudent to excuse outside experts immediately before the first recommendation of levels of honors is made. After the student has been excused, the Honors Committee representative outlines the procedures to be followed in the examining committee's deliberations:

a) The Honors Committee Representative distributes the "Criteria for Honors in Independent Study." Examining Committee members are instructed to review the criteria for *cum laude*.

b) The examining committee members discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, the project, and the oral examination *pertinent to the dimensions specified in the "Criteria for Honors" sheet*. The Honors Committee representative ensures that all of the relevant criteria for

determining honors are addressed. Both the advisor and the Honors Committee representative should take notes during this discussion for their respective reports to the Honors Committee.

c) Once the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, project, and oral examination have been fully discussed, the Honors Committee representative solicits an initial recommendation from one of the examining committee members other than the project advisor as to whether or not the project should be awarded honors. Examining committee members are reminded that to be awarded honors the thesis, project, and oral examination must meet *all* of the standards listed in the "Criteria for Honors" sheet. Diligence, pluck, and hard work on the part of the student are relevant, but alone are not enough for the awarding of honors. **IF THE PROJECT DOES NOT MEET ALL OF THE CRITERIA FOR CUM LAUDE, HONORS ARE NOT AWARDED.** Although the Honors Committee does not give a formula by which to weight each part of the project, the written thesis is of central importance, except in cases of projects in the arts, for which the works of art typically are viewed as the primary component of the project. Nevertheless, for projects in the arts, the greater emphasis on the art work is no excuse for a sloppy or cursory paper.

d) After the discussion of whether honors should be awarded reaches a consensus or an impasse, the Honors Committee representative calls the matter to a vote, polling each of the voting members of the committee. The tally is duly noted by the Honors Committee representative for his or her report to the Honors Committee. If the majority votes “no honors,” the meeting is adjourned.

e) If the majority of the committee votes that honors should be awarded, the Honors Committee representative directs the committee's attention to the criteria for *magna cum laude* and *summa cum laude* and solicits opinions from the voting members of the committee other than the advisor as to whether a higher level of honors may be appropriate. If there is sentiment that a higher level of honors is warranted, an initial recommendation for a higher level of honors is proposed by a voting member of the committee other than the advisor. Once this recommendation is fully discussed by all members of the examining committee including the advisor, a vote is taken. After this vote (or once it is apparent that a higher level of honors is not warranted), the Honors Committee representative adjourns the meeting.

The examining committee must be present throughout the entire process – the oral examination itself, the discussion of the thesis and the examination, and the vote(s) on the level of honors.

After the Examination

Immediately following the examination, **students for whom the majority of the examining committee has voted “no honors” should be informed of the committee's recommendation.** Advisors are free at this point to discuss with the student the reasons for this decision.

Students for whom the recommendation of the committee was **to award honors** should be informed that the committee will send a positive recommendation to the Honors Committee. **It is extremely important, however, that the advisor say only the following to the student:**

“The majority of the examining committee has recommended that your project receive honors. This recommendation, however, is only the first step in a two-stage review process that is complete *only after* the Honors Committee itself has independently reviewed your project. The Honors Committee meets in about __ week(s) from now and will then make the final recommendation concerning your project.

“According to procedures, I am not allowed to discuss the level of honors recommended by the examining committee. After the Honors Committee meets, its chair will relay its recommendation to me and I'll inform you immediately. At this point, I'll be free to discuss the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the project, thesis, and oral examination with you.

“If the Honors Committee's recommendation is positive, it is at this point that you may truly consider yourself recommended for honors. For now, you should keep in mind that you have passed the first hurdle, which is an accomplishment in itself, but that honors has not yet been awarded. The Honors Committee, based on its independent review, has over-ruled recommendations by past examining committees. Because you have successfully passed the first hurdle, however, you should now make the minor revisions in your thesis indicated by the examining committee so that if the Honors Committee does recommend honors for you, a final copy of the thesis will be ready for addition to the Library's holdings.”

Advisor's Report to the Honors Committee

In all cases, subsequent to the examination, the advisor writes a report to the Honors Committee summarizing the examining committee members' opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, project, and oral examination. Although the advisor should take care to represent the opinions of every voting member of the examining committee (and his or her report must be signed by these individuals), minority reports may be submitted by other examining committee members if the vote was not unanimous. The report, signed by all voting members of the examining committee, is submitted to the chair of the Honors Committee, along with a signature page for the library copy of the thesis (see the Committee's web page for the format of that page). The Honors Committee representative also writes a brief report for the Honors Committee.

Based on review of the reports submitted by the project advisor and the Honors Committee representative (as well as any dissenting report) the Honors Committee makes the final recommendation as to whether a project should be awarded honors and, if so, at what level. Although (in practice) this process most often results in the endorsement of the examining committee's vote, the Honors Committee, based on dissenting reports and/or an examination of the thesis, may make a different recommendation. It is this recommendation that is sent to the faculty for its approval. The Honors Committee will immediately inform project advisors of the recommendation they have reached so that the advisor may convey this news to the student. At this point the advisor is free to discuss with the student the strengths and weaknesses of the project, paper, and oral exam.