

Senior Thesis Helpful Hints Psychology Department

Union College

Updated Winter 2026
How to Get Started on a Senior Thesis

NOTE: PSY 200 (Statistics) and PSY 300 (Research Methods) are prerequisites for the thesis.

1) Identify a topic to research.

- ☐ Eventually, you will need to narrow your topic to something specific, but this is usually done with the help of the faculty member who is willing to supervise your project.

To get you started you may wish to:

- ☐ Look at the type of research the faculty are working on and see if any of those projects seem interesting to you. You can find this information on our “How-To” webpage, section 3B. Some faculty will only supervise students who work on one of their projects, and most faculty will only supervise students who select a topic that is related to their general area of expertise.
- ☐ Begin by thinking about the areas of psychology you have found most interesting. It may help to look back through the index of introduction to psychology textbooks. Once you have some general ideas of areas that interest you, you might check Shaffer Library’s PsycINFO database and Google Scholar, searching out different topics to see what kind of work has been done in the past.

2) Find an advisor who will agree to supervise your work.

- ☐ Talk with faculty who are in the general area that interests you. Before you approach a faculty member, you should attempt to articulate possible research questions. For example, if you are interested in memory, you may approach the professor and say you are interested in “how glucose levels affect memory recall” or “how stress levels affect memory recall.” Alternatively, you could say that you are interested in one or more of the research projects the faculty member is working on.
- ☐ Due to the fact that thesis supervision is a very large time commitment, faculty typically will take on only a small number of thesis students. This is especially true when the thesis projects are not closely aligned to their own research, since such projects usually require a larger time commitment.
- ☐ If you are uncertain about which faculty member would be appropriate for your project, contact a professor that you know well, or the Psychology Department Chair.

3) Submit a proposal of your project.

- ☐ After your thesis advisor and you have agreed to work together, your thesis advisor will assist you in preparing the proposal.
- ☐ Proposals must be submitted to the department chair no later than the end of the eighth week of the spring term. The thesis proposal form is on our “How-To” webpage, section 3F.

Answers to some common questions:

❑ ***Do I have to do a thesis to get honors?***

Yes. In addition, you must meet the other criteria for honors in the department (see the current College Catalogue).

❑ ***Do I have to be eligible for honors to do a thesis?***

No. Anyone can apply to do a thesis.

❑ ***Do I have to do a thesis if I want to go to graduate school?***

No. While most graduate programs look favorably on you having research experience, it is probably not that important that your experience is from writing a thesis. Your research experience can come from other sources, such as an independent study, a senior project, a summer research fellowship, etc.

❑ ***What about interdepartmental majors?***

To get honors, interdepartmental majors must meet the criteria for honors in both departments. That means they must do a thesis for psychology. It is normally an interdepartmental thesis (two advisors, one course credit in each department).

❑ ***Must theses be done in the fall and winter terms?***

No. Theses are usually done fall-winter in order for the work to be presented at the Steinmetz Symposium in the spring; however, they can be done in any two terms of the senior year. Under special circumstances, it is also possible to begin your thesis in the spring or summer before your senior year.

❑ ***Do I have to do a thesis if I want to do a research or a major project in my senior year?***

No. You can do a one or two-term senior project. However, this will not qualify you for honors.

❑ ***Does a thesis have to be an empirical study?***

No, but most are. A thesis can be based on an empirical investigation (an experiment, an analysis of survey data, interviews) or on library/textual research. However, a thesis should be more than a literature review – you should make some original scholarly contribution to the field.