

McGill University Department of Linguistics

Guidelines for Honours and Joint Honours Theses

Undergraduate students pursuing the Honours Degree in Linguistics are required to write a thesis, which they do as a two-term, 6-credit course, LING 480 D1 and D2. This is a "spanned course": you must register for both parts. It is also possible to do a Joint Honours Degree, combining Linguistics and some other field. Students in this program must also write a thesis, which addresses a topic common to both fields. The Linguistics half of the thesis course is LING 481. This document is intended to give you some general advice on writing a thesis. Except where indicated, this advice applies to both Honours and Joint Honours students.

GENERAL REMARKS

The thesis is an independent research project, which you carry out under the supervision of a single faculty member in the department. In rare circumstances, a student may be co-supervised by two faculty members. Joint Honours students are supervised by one faculty member in Linguistics and one in their other field. Unlike the term paper for an ordinary course, the thesis is the only written work you do in LING 480 and 481: there are no lectures, assignments, or exams. Therefore, it is a bigger undertaking than an ordinary term paper. As a rough guide to its proportions, consider that a term paper is often worth around half of the grade in a one-semester course, and that your thesis is a full-year course. It should therefore be equivalent to something like four term papers, in terms of the work you put into it, and in terms of the amount and quality of what you produce. Its length should be discussed with your supervisor, but something between 30 and 50 pages (double-spaced) will likely be appropriate.

That said, an undergraduate thesis is not a Masters thesis or a Ph.D. dissertation. Unlike a dissertation, which is expected to make an original contribution to the body of knowledge on some topic, the undergraduate thesis is primarily an educational tool, designed to deepen your knowledge of the topic you choose to write about, and to teach you about the process of research. For the department, it provides a means of evaluating your skills in research, and your ability to work independently. In this respect, it can be a good preparation for graduate studies. It gives you a foretaste of the kind of work you will do in graduate school, and it gives the programs you apply to a basis on which to measure your aptitude for advanced study. If you are interested in graduate school, a positive letter of recommendation from a thesis supervisor will be a powerful aid.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

The first step in planning a thesis is to choose a topic that interests you. The most natural way to do this is to envision a significant extension or elaboration of the work you did for one of your classes. Alternatively, you may be interested in some topic that is not covered by the courses offered by the department. Nevertheless, the topic you choose must fall within the expertise of at least one faculty member. You will receive guidance in refining your topic from your supervisor, but you should have at least a basic idea of your topic before you approach potential supervisors, if only because this will determine whom you approach. In choosing a topic, think small: a well-defined research question in a specific area provides a better starting point than a vague and diffuse interest in a general topic. It is easier to expand small topics as your work progresses than to narrow your focus halfway through the year.

Joint Honours students are expected to choose a topic that addresses both of their fields of study. Ideally, your thesis should illustrate the benefit of an interdisciplinary approach, applying methods, data, or theories from both fields to a single question that

lies in the intersection between them. In fields closely allied with Linguistics, like Anthropology, Cognitive or Computer Science, Education, Philosophy, Psychology, or Sociology, it should not be difficult to identify a common issue. Students who choose more distantly related fields for their Joint Honours program may have a harder time with this. In such cases, it may be acceptable to write two smaller theses, one in each area. However, you should consult with your supervisors before proceeding in this way. The idea of the Joint Honours program is to stimulate interdisciplinary thinking, and preference is given to thesis topics that exemplify this approach.

CHOOSING A SUPERVISOR

Your supervisor should obviously be someone who works in the area you're interested in. If there is a choice of more than one faculty member in an area, you should choose someone with whom you think you will work well. Trying to work closely with someone whose personal style is markedly different from yours can sometimes be problematic. Of course, your choice of supervisor is only half of the story: the supervisor also has to choose you. The faculty member you want to work with may not have time to work with you, or may not feel he or she can advise you properly in the area you have chosen. Request exploratory meetings with potential supervisors at which you can each assess your potential for working together. These meetings will be more productive if you arrive with a fairly well worked-out idea of what you want to work on. The exact plan can change in consultation with your supervisor, but a potential supervisor will be much more impressed with you if you appear to have done some reading in the relevant area and some thinking about promising topics for research.

Your initial contact with potential supervisors should be in April or May of the year before you plan to start your thesis, so that you can begin your reading over the summer and get right down to work when the new year starts in September. The basic plan of your thesis should be worked out with your supervisor no later than early September. Remember that if you plan to do research using human participants, your research procedures may need to be approved by the Research Ethics Board before you can begin, which may take several weeks. For information and application forms, see:

<http://www.mcgill.ca/researchoffice/compliance/human/>

THE CONTENT OF THE THESIS

The content of your thesis will be subject to discussions with your supervisor. Its general nature will depend on the area of linguistics you're working in, and on your interests and your supervisor's inclinations. While most theses will involve a review of the literature on your topic, doing no more than this is not generally considered to be an acceptable basis for a thesis. Beyond getting to know the literature on your topic, your supervisor will likely expect you to develop a hypothesis about some aspect of your subject, and to test this hypothesis by analyzing a set of data. This may be an existing set of data, or one you collect yourself, in which case experimental design and data collection will be part of your thesis work. Your project may involve setting up an experiment, doing fieldwork with informants, or developing a questionnaire. Possible analytical techniques range from examining how two or more competing theories account for an observed phenomenon, to quantitative analysis using computers, to instrumental measurement using specialized software or equipment.

PLANNING THE WORK

Before you begin the thesis, you and your supervisor should develop a careful plan of the work you are going to do, with a time-line specifying target dates by which you will have each phase of the work completed. Some supervisors require a written thesis proposal before the work begins. It will most likely be helpful to establish a program of regular meetings at which you will present a progress report on what you've been doing, or hand in a draft of part of your thesis. Some people prefer to schedule meetings as they are needed. Either way, you should make sure that you get regular feedback on your work and regular opportunities to ask questions and discuss issues that have arisen. It is your supervisor's responsibility to provide this. However, it is *not* your supervisor's responsibility to make sure that you do your work and show up for meetings! Part of the challenge of an Honours Thesis is working effectively on your own, without someone organizing and supervising your time for you.

Scheduled meetings help to prevent you from procrastinating. It is all too easy to put off work on a paper that is due in seven or eight months, especially when you are taking other courses with more pressing deadlines. If you get into this habit and try to do the bulk of your work in the last month or two of the year, the quality of your work will almost certainly suffer and your grade for the thesis will likely reflect this. Think of yourself as taking a course for which there are no lectures, and plan to devote the same amount of time to your thesis each week as you would devote to all of the work associated with a regular class (going to lectures, doing readings or assignments, studying for exams, etc.). Nine hours per week is a reasonable commitment.

Whatever your strategy for getting the work done, your goals should be reasonable. Do not take on a more ambitious project than you could possibly complete in the available time. Discuss what is "reasonable" with your supervisor: your plan should be challenging but not impossible. You should also have a fairly exact idea from the outset of what you are going to produce. Take the time to be specific about this at the beginning of your project, so you have a clear idea of what you are working towards. Keeping your long-term goals in mind will help you avoid getting bogged down in details that are ultimately unimportant, or sidetracked by tangential topics, interesting though they may be.

THE FINAL PRODUCT

The product of your work will be a paper that you submit to your supervisor, who bears sole responsibility for grading it. Theses are due on the last day of classes of the winter

term. You may wish to submit a first draft to your supervisor well before this date, so that you can make revisions before you write the final draft; you can discuss this with your supervisor.

To maintain your Honours standing, you must get a grade of B+ or higher on your thesis. This grade is not automatically awarded to anyone who submits a thesis of any kind. Supervisors have every right to award lower grades to work they deem to be inadequate in one or more ways. As indicated above, the general standard for undergraduate theses is that they need not make an original contribution to the literature on your topic, or be of publishable quality. Nevertheless, the standard is very high, since the thesis is the primary means of distinguishing Honours students from Majors, who may have similarly high GPAs. A successful thesis should demonstrate a promising ability to carry out research and to work independently under supervision. In particular, it should display strong conceptual, analytical and written communication skills, as well as a thorough knowledge of the most important literature on your topic.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

If you have further questions about undertaking an Honours degree in Linguistics or writing an Honours thesis, contact your (intended) supervisor or the Undergraduate Advisor, or visit the Honours page of the Linguistics Department website, at:

<http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/programs/linguistics/PROGRAMS/HONOURS.HTM>

These guidelines were prepared by Prof. Charles Boberg, March, 2008.