Some general information on Honours Theses

Department of Philosophy, McGill University

1 Requirements and responsibilities

Students registered in the philosophy *Honours* or *Joint Honours* degree programs have to work on a thesis project and submit an Honours Thesis as part of their degree requirements.

Before being able to register for the 6 credits thesis course (PHIL 499D1 and 499D2), you need to first find an adviser and a thesis topic. — Joint Honours students have the option of writing a 6 credit interdisciplinary thesis, supervised by two advisers from the different departments, or two separate 3 credit theses, one in each department.

It is the student's responsibility to find an adviser and to ensure that satisfactory arrangements are made in time. It's best to do this well before the semester begins.

To register, you need to get a form from the Philosophy Undergraduate Student Coordinator (Angela Fotopoulos), fill it out, sign it, have it signed by your adviser, and return it to the department before the Add/Drop deadline.

There are no formal requirements regarding frequency of meetings, length of thesis, etc. These have to be negotiated between the student and the adviser.

2 Some advice on finding a topic and adviser

a) Pick a topic   →   Find an adviser.

- Pick something that you have the *background* for, not something that might just be interesting. . .
- Some advisers require a detailed reading list before agreeing to supervision.
- Supervising is a time commitment and professors usually don't have much time; they don't want to waste it. So, you might have some work to do to convince or persuade a professor that you're up to the task.

b) Pick an adviser   →   Pick a topic.

- Ask somebody who you've taken a class with; this reduces the likelihood of surprises for everybody involved.
- Many advisers prefer to know the students before agreeing to supervise them.

3 Thesis planning and writing

- Main issues: *Motivation* and *organization*.

    "10% inspiration and 90% perspiration," or something like that.

- Make sure to be and stay motivated: After all, it is *you* who has to work on it for a year!

- To help you with the organization, take a rough plan (plan backwards from the date of submission):

    a) Reading and research   (1/3 of allotted time)

    b) Research and writing first draft   (1/3 of allotted time)

    c) Revising draft and additional research   (1/3 of allotted time)

    Set deadlines and milestones! Be realistic and honest.

- Be ready to work independently, without much explicit guidance. For example, you might have to identify the relevant literature and end up reading a lot of material that will turn out not to be helpful for your project.

- Keep in mind that also creative tasks, like composing, drawing, making a sculpture, writing, etc., require discipline and revisions: So, the motto is: Revise, revise, revise!

    Be prepared that some sections that you spent ages writing will turn out to be irrelevant to the overall argument and will have to be cut; many sections will have to be written over and over; and the thesis may have to be reorganized at various points.

- Write *from the beginning*: Your thoughts, ideas, questions, summaries, bibliography, . . .

- Use bibliography software; learn to type with 10 fingers; avoid binge writing.

- Don't worry about length: After doing your research, you will have enough to say to fill 500 pages (but you need only ca. 30–60, flexible!).

- Writing *a lot* is easy, bringing it *to the point* is hard.

- If you have trouble formulating your thoughts in English, you might want to consult the McGill Writing Centre: `http://www.mcgill.ca/mwc`

- Learn how to describe your topic in one or two sentences (in case somebody asks you in the elevator); and in 5 sentences (in case somebody asks you in the hallway).

- Supervision *style* depends on adviser and advisee. Find out which works best for you.

- If you are unhappy because of problems, difficulties, stumbling blocks: Talk about them to your adviser as soon as possible. Don't drag it out.

- Finally, take breaks to rest your mind — and have some fun!