

Generating Ideas for an Honors Thesis in English

Students have a tendency to think that the Honors Thesis Topic should be very broad (Women in Literature, Shakespeare, Irish Drama, The Self in the Novel); successful topics, however, usually involve defining a clear focus that combines specific literary

need to answer these three questions:

1) What specific literary period, author and/or genre does it address? (Ex: 19th

2) What specific critical issues will the reader address? (Ex: gender and identity, the

relationship between biography and fiction, the significance of formal experimentation, the thematic function of narrative voice, the significance of historical context, poetic techniques and their relationship to content, the role of the city, modernism and the body)

3) What literary texts will be addressed in the project? (Ex: The poetry of Keats, Shakespeare's sonnets, Eliot's early poetry, Hemingway's war novels, Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Eliot's *Middlemarch*)

Here are some examples of recent honors theses in the English Department:

"Imperfect Herald: The Potent Silences of Shakespeare's Comedies"

"The Legible Child: Innocence, Shame, Ambiguity and Desire in *Henry James*"

"Do I Imagine the 'I'?" *Yiddish* and the American Identity Crisis"

"National Fiction: British Identity in the Novels of Sir Walter Scott"

"Dickens City Renaissance? The Decline of the City of Newark in the Novels of Philip Roth"

"The Limits of Murder: The Grapes in the Fictional Self of *Oliver Twist*"

"Dickens and Collins: The Role of the Detective in Victorian England's Public and Private Worlds"

Successful honors theses often (but not always) evolve out of classes taken in the English

Department. In department in locating a thesis advisor, your best bet is almost always to approach a

related to the work done in his or her course. The problem is that you may not know who

is handling theses at a time. Faculty members typically do not advise theses when they

on leave.

Successful theses often involve following up on existing broad-based

essays. You need not (and probably should not) feel that you are reinventing the wheel.

Instead, try to locate an area of existing interest that you'd like to explore further in order

to build on your knowledge base and lend depth and consistency to your work.

Think about developing a topic that takes advantage of your strengths as a reader, a writer,

or a researcher, to see how they can be brought to bear on a topic that

allows you to draw on your strengths.

overly broad terms. Be wary of defining a topic too broad in scope. If you have

background in interdisciplinary training, incorporate that into your project.

In order to help you better understand your own interests and strengths, answer the questions below.

1. List the literary authors you have most enjoyed:

2. List the English classes (taken in high school, at BC or elsewhere) that you have most enjoyed:

3. In what fields of literature, theoretical approaches, critical methodologies or related areas of study are you strongest, in terms of background and preparation?

4. What are your strengths as a thinker and a writer? What are your weaknesses?

5. Review the essays you've written in the major and list the issues you tend to write about in your literary critical papers (some examples are: gender, the relationship between literature and history, character psychology, race, immigration, homelessness, food, family, humor, the city, domestic space, poetic form, staging drama, author biography, etc.). Might you be able to adapt one of these topics to a thesis proposal?

5. Of the faculty you've worked with, list the English Dept. professor(s) you would most like to work with on a thesis:

6. How might you envision continuing work you've done in a class with that faculty member? (You might, for example, follow up with an objective study of one author you studied there, follow up on a survey course by concentrating on one issue in one literary movement, such as representations of gender in Victorian poetry or the depiction of war in British modernist fiction, or make a connection between two courses, such as thinking about race in the 18th Century Novel)