

Department of English

Honors Program

The Honors Program in English gives seniors the opportunity to pursue independent work on a literary or theoretical topic of their choice, leading to a critical essay (major Plan A), or to produce a significant body of creative writing (major Plan B). Through close collaboration over the course of a year with one or more faculty members, students are able to refine and extend the skills they have developed throughout their time at Macalester and to complete a large-scale project.

Requirements

The program is open to English majors who have a cumulative GPA of at least 3.3 and a departmental GPA of at least 3.5.

To apply for the program, students should first generate a very short list of research or creative projects that they wish to pursue, identifying periods, authors, cultures, issues; then discuss their projected plans with a faculty member who would make a likely supervisor. After consultation with a faculty member who agrees to supervise, the student composes a formal description (the Honors Proposal) of the work, accompanied by a thorough bibliography of primary and secondary materials. (See below for a full description of the proposal.) This document will be circulated to all full-time faculty in the department, for feedback; students should anticipate revisions based on comments from the departmental faculty. Where appropriate, two (or even more) faculty members may co-sponsor a project, but one of those sponsors will serve as the primary advisor of record.

Procedures

Students devote eight independent study credits to their Honors Project (four in the fall, and four in the spring). It is possible to include a maximum of ten credits, with the addition of two over January. In certain cases, a project might include four independent study credits, and a four-credit seminar the topic of which feeds the project. The precise packaging of credits can be left to the discretion of the student, the advisor, and the Chair, but Honors Projects should be ambitious enough to reflect a full year's effort (at least twenty-five percent of a senior's work load). Analytical essays typically run fifty pages or more. Creative writing portfolios will vary in length, depending on the genre being explored: a full year's work in fiction should be a novella, or a series of stories, or the start of a novel, totalling 75-125 pages. Creative nonfiction should be 75-125 pages. A screenplay or play should be 100-150 pages. A poetry project should be 75-100 pages.

The proposal is itself a significant part of the project, and needs to be fully developed, both for literary-history and for creative writing projects. Proposals should include a descriptive account, in at least 1000 words, of the thesis and its parts; a clear list of the primary works to be analyzed (for literary history projects) and a substantial list of scholarly and critical works that will inform the project's methodology, theoretical premises, and thinking; a clear statement of a rationale and goals for the final project. Creative writing proposals, as fully detailed as literary history proposals, should include details about the genres in which the student will work; exemplary titles of ambitious, published creative works in the genre that the student is undertaking to engage; scholarly works that inform the student's thinking about his or her genres and its history; a rationale for the student's choices of form, media, genre, and literary details (plot, character, setting, and so on).

Students preparing for an Honors Thesis will need to study the sample proposals and theses that the Department provides, and emulate their scope and ambitions.

No administrative means exist for students to do interdisciplinary projects; to do the project in one department but gain credit for it in another department; to take on media or topics outside the range of our faculty's expertise. Faculty members are free to decline requests to supervise honors projects for any reason.

The student and advisor together work out a concrete calendar of work for both semesters. They may, for example, plan to meet every two weeks, with specific tasks accomplished by the time of these meetings. Faculty advisors will work with students to develop a large-scale thesis, to work out means of writing a large investigation (e.g., beginning with a traditional 20-page research and argumentation essay that can then be expanded), to refine research methods, and to communicate well with other faculty readers for the project.

Early in the second half of the Spring term, after the thesis has been read and revised by all committee members, students will undergo an oral defense of the thesis. These meetings between committee members and students may, at the student's request, be open to invited students and faculty, or opened to all interested attendees. The defense normally runs 60 to 90 minutes. The student gives a brief description of the project and a narrative about its impetus and development, then responds to questions from the committee members. In the happiest defenses, these questions open out into informed conversation about the project and its implications. After the defense, the committee members confer to decide whether to grant the project Honors.

Schedule

At the beginning of each academic year the department will make available to students an information sheet with program deadlines for the year in question. A typical schedule will be as follows:

- 1) April of the junior year – Submission of the honors application to the Chair. Full project proposals circulate among department faculty from spring of junior year through the very first days of fall of senior year.

2) October 2 of senior year – The Department Chair forwards the names of all honors candidates and advisors to the Dean of Academic Programs, along with a working title for the proposed project.

3) Fall of senior year – The faculty advisor, in consultation with the student, chooses two outside readers for the project (one of whom will be, if possible, from outside the department).

4) January 31 of the senior year – By this date, the student and advisor will jointly evaluate the progress made during fall semester and January, and must inform the Dean of Academic Programs as to whether or not the project will continue.

5) Beginning of April of the senior year – The completed project is submitted to the advisor and the two outside readers.

6) Mid-April – An oral examination is conducted by the three-person committee of readers. At this time, a decision as to honors is made. Students should be aware that the awarding or withholding of honors is a process separate from evaluation of the related independent or course work, which will be graded separately by the advisor or other appropriate faculty member.

7) April 30 – The department furnishes to the Dean of Academic Programs the names of all majors who will be graduating with honors.

8) Late April or beginning of May – Honors students will present their work at a department symposium. [In recent years the English Department has waived this event.]

Note: For students graduating in December, these deadlines move up by a semester. For students studying abroad in the spring of junior year, final formulation of a project can occur later than April, but should be in place before the start of the senior year.