# Senior Honors Thesis Handbook

**Tufts University**

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So you’re thinking about writing a senior thesis? Great! In the following pages, you’ll find an overview of the process, including information about the various resources available through the Academic Resource Center and tips for every stage of the writing process from determining if the senior thesis is for you to prepping yourself for the defense.

As you write your thesis, keep this handbook ...ahem... handy. The senior thesis is different than any other writing project you will have undertaken up to this point, and calls on a new set of skills that you are probably still developing; the strategies that have earned you success so far might no longer work (I’m looking at you, 3AM paper-writing!). From managing your time for a nine-month project to figuring out how to structure a 60-page argument to timing your experiments so that you aren’t stuck trying to write your thesis in a week to learning how to hold your own among tenured faculty at the defense, the experience of writing a senior thesis can be both exhilarating and exhausting. The tips included in the following pages will help you to navigate the project and steer away from common pitfalls in order to reach your goal: coming into your own as an intellectual and a scholar.

Onward!
Section One: Getting Started
1 - Five Reasons to Write a Senior Thesis

1. **“I wrote a research paper for a class, and I felt like I only scratched the surface of what I want to say about the topic.”**
   While you can’t just cut and paste a previous paper into your Senior Thesis, this desire to expand on previous work suggests that your central idea has a good balance between depth and breadth.

2. **“I’ve done independent research before, and I find the experience really rewarding.”**
   The Senior Thesis will be more challenging than the smaller projects you’ve taken on in the past, but you will come into the project with a sense of the bigger challenges such as goal setting and time management.

3. **“I want to go to graduate school in my field, and I have the grades but little to no experience doing independent research.”**
   The Senior Thesis is a great chance for you to demonstrate that you are capable of the independent, self-directed work that characterizes graduate study. Furthermore, it will prepare you for other post-graduate research opportunities such as the Fulbright U.S. Student Program.
   (us.fulbrightonline.org)

4. **“In all the work I’ve done in my major, I find myself continually circling back to the same problem/ set of ideas—I feel like I can’t stop writing about it!”**
   Ideally, the Senior Thesis offers you a chance to crystallize the interests that have characterized your work throughout your undergraduate career, building on what you’ve done in your previous classes and taking it to a more focused and complex level.

5. **“I’ve been deeply involved in my advisor’s research as an RA, and I want the chance to do something more independent.”**
   Talk to your advisor about potential directions for a thesis, preferably during the spring (or even the fall) of your junior year. If you get started early, you can find a way to take the research you’ve already been doing in a new direction.
2 - Five Reasons not to Write a Senior Thesis

1. “It’s required in my department.”
   The thesis is not required by any major, nor is it a prerequisite for Latin honors. You may be required to do independent research for your major, but there are multiple ways to fulfill that requirement, including a capstone project or a senior seminar. You should only do a senior thesis if you want to commit a full year to a project you’re really passionate about.

2. “It’s September, and I don’t have a concrete idea of what I want to write about, but I love my major, and I want to do something independent.”
   From the Philosophy website: “An abstract desire to write a thesis rarely provides sufficient or specific enough motivation to see a genuinely productive project through.” There are lots of ways to do independent research; if you’re going to write a thesis, make sure you’ve chosen a tenable topic and that you have appropriate time and resources. Deciding to scale back now is by no means as disappointing as realizing in March that you need to abandon or radically downsize your project.

3. “My grades haven’t been particularly good throughout my time at Tufts, and I’m hoping that a Senior Thesis will make me look better to future employers.”
   Don’t write a thesis because of what you think it will get you down the line—that’s impossible to predict. Write a thesis because you want to spend a year exploring an idea you care about deeply.

4. “I want to learn everything that’s ever been said about Jewish culture/ particle physics/ Latin American post-imperial politics! I need to develop a grand theory that explains it all!”
   Obviously, I’m being parodic, but it’s important to remember that the most common problem with Senior Thesis proposals is that they’re far too broad. The Senior Thesis is an exercise in depth, not breadth.

5. “My friends are all writing theses, so I feel like I should, too.” OR “My advisor told me to, and I’m afraid to say no.”
   Both of these reasons are rooted in a desire to please someone else. You’re the one who will be spending late nights at the library researching and writing. The work of independent research is ultimately quite isolated—make sure it’s something you really want to do.
3 – Requirements for Different Types of Independent Research Projects

**Honors Thesis**
- Register for “Senior Honors Thesis” in your major department (see Bulletin). You must have been on the Dean’s List at least twice before senior year.
- You must do the Honors Thesis in your major department.
- You must form a 2-person committee. The chairperson must be a full-time professor in your major department. The 2nd reader must be a Tufts faculty member and may be from another department. Occasionally you may have a 3rd reader from another institution or from outside academia. Some departments might require a 3-person committee.
- The project will last for two contiguous semesters with variable credit.
- You will receive one letter grade for both semesters, with a temporary “Y” grade in January.
- Honors may be conferred at year’s end. Possible honors include: Thesis with Honors; Thesis with High Honors; Thesis with Highest Honors. These honors will be recorded on your transcript but they are separate from the Latin honors based on your GPA. If no honors are conferred, there is no indication on your transcript, other than a grade and credit for Senior Thesis.
- Honors Theses must be substantial and must demonstrate excellence.

**Other Research Projects**
- Register for “Special Topic,” “Independent Study,” or “Senior Special Project” (see Bulletin).
- You may do a special project in any department, as long as you have permission of the department and find a faculty advisor in that department.
- You must find one faculty member to advise your project and grade it. This professor must be a member of the department in which you want to do the senior thesis or project.
- The project will last for one semester with variable credit.
- You will get a letter grade for the semester.
- No special honors are involved.
- Requirements are generally more flexible.

**Note:** If you start out doing an Honors Thesis, but your research does not go as planned, you can speak to your advisor about switching to an independent special project. You would then complete the new proposed project and receive a grade for it.
4 – Advice from Past Senior Thesis Writers

**Why write a senior thesis:**

“I learned more from writing my thesis than any other course at Tufts. It was a great feeling to sit down at the end of the year and have 3 faculty members talk to you like a fellow scholar."

**Be aware of who you are as a scholar:**

"Do [a Senior Honors Thesis] only if you have passion for the subject you are writing on. Otherwise, it will not work."

“Everyone works on this long project differently. Part of the thesis writing experience is becoming accustomed to your own unique working habits and then tailoring your own independent work schedule around them."

“Every thesis is unique. Just because someone else has more pages written doesn't mean that he/she is farther along than / ahead of you. Just concentrate on your own work. If you don't pay attention to other people's progress it will be a much less stressful experience."

“I would just emphasize that students research and write about a subject that they are extremely passionate about…. I cannot image enduring this process if I wasn't writing about a subject that is very important to me. Since I cared so much about the subject, working on my thesis was never a chore; it was an obligation that I was dedicated to completing."

**Take advantage of resources:**

“Choose and get in contact with your thesis advisors the summer before and discuss with them your possible topic."

"Also, take advantage of any faculty help you can get . . . it may be your project, but they are a gold mine of information and advice, and every little bit counts."" 

"Make sure to frequently meet with your advisors because they can help direct you through the process, and because they have the final say."

“Take advantage of the resources that Tufts offers for thesis writers. Though your committee may only have three people, there are many more people on campus that offer an extended support network that are invaluable in the writing and researching process."

“I found it helpful to look up theses written by students before me in my department, to get an idea of the format, content, and length I should aim for. It was also helpful to read publications in my field - this helped with the format and language as well."
“Schedule a time management tutor. Meet with them weekly if you need to. They will help schedule your time, create logical goals, and can keep you on track. Also, find a good graduate writing consultant to help with your writing. Your committee might not be able to look over every grammar mistake and small detail of your thesis, so an extra pair of eyes is good... Remember, despite your committee, this is largely an independent project. You will not have any professors holding your hand throughout, so you will need to seek out information on deadlines and requirements yourself. Find extra readers, and utilize all the services the ARC offers.”

Manage your time:

"Start early. And make a timeline for yourself and your committee."

"Plan everything out well—starting in September, with deadlines along the way, not just when the entire thesis will be done. And set that date a week or two ahead of when it really needs to be in, just in case."

"Get it all figured out before you start! I wasted so much time first semester reading books I never used—either pick a subject you are familiar with, or find a faculty member who can guide you well."

"Make deadlines for yourself and submit as many drafts as possible to professors, writing tutors."

"Write consistently, starting no later than winter break – many seniors leave the bulk of the writing for the spring and are bogged down come Senior Week."

"Try and finish a working draft by March."

"Having a defense earlier rather than later gave me plenty of time to do my other classwork and not have to worry about my thesis too around exam time."

“Start as early as possible. Overestimate the amount of writing time you will need, it will always take you longer than you think it will. Be patient with your thought process; it takes time to develop concrete ideas.”

“Start the writing early and communicate with your advisor as much as possible.”

“Leave time in your schedule for the thesis by taking an easier course load and fewer outside responsibilities.”

“Your life will be infinitesimally better if you make gradual and consistent progress throughout the year. Using the summer before senior year for research was also key because then the year can be spent writing, and finding new research areas as needed.”

“Get started as EARLY as possible, and keep in constant contact with your advisor.”
5 - Working with Advisors

Your senior thesis might be your first opportunity to work closely with a faculty member. Chances are you admire your advisor very much. This is exciting, but it can also lead to anxiety about sharing rough ideas or early drafts. You also might have a different work style from your advisor, and your advisor could be very busy with many obligations. All of these are common and very manageable challenges. The important thing to remember is that your advisor also has an obligation to you – by committing to be your advisor s/he is committing to be a reliable resource all year. Don’t be afraid to take advantage of your advisor as you would any other resource at Tufts. The tips that follow are designed to help you make the most of your relationship with your advisor.

General Tips

- **Start thinking of yourself less as a student and more as a scholar.** Although you still have much to learn, make sure to take your own ideas seriously. Learning to think of yourself as a serious writer and thinker will increase your confidence when interacting with your advisor.

- **Be professional.** Write down specific questions and concerns that you have before meetings with your advisor. This will give you a sense of control over meetings and will make them more effective.

- **Discuss your vision.** Have a conversation with your advisor at the beginning of the academic year to talk about your vision for your thesis and your goals for each semester. This is also a great time to figure out what kind of working relationship you and your advisor will have: How often will you meet? At what stage can you begin showing your writing to your advisor? What are the best method(s) of communication?

- **Know what your needs are.** Are you the kind of person who needs explicit direction and guidance or do you need more space? Are you able to ask for help when you need it? After determining your own needs, find out what kind of support your advisor is able and willing to give.

- **Know your resources.** Familiarize yourself with any additional forms of support that are available in case your advisor is unable to meet all of your needs.

- **Keep your advisor updated.** Force yourself to remain accountable by sharing your progress with your advisor. Because the senior thesis is such an independent project, it’s easy to lose contact with your advisor. But remember, the more your advisor knows, the more s/he can help you. Staying in touch will help you avoid receiving last minute critiques and anticipate questions during the defense.
6 – Back Up Your Work

Establish a consistent system for saving frequently and backing up this important project. Your computer can crash at any time, or someone could steal your laptop. Don’t wait until you start writing – even notes and freewriting are worth protecting.

- Save your work frequently to your hard drive and to an external system, such as a flash drive and/or online server.
- An inexpensive way to save your writing frequently is to email it to yourself. This way, you can access your research and writing easily from any computer.
- In case of the loss or theft of both your laptop and flash-drive, always save significant sections of your research and your writing to a web-based system that can be accessed from another computer. A web-based email inbox is a good choice, as is a free or inexpensive service such as www.dropbox.com
- Some anti-virus software programs, such as Norton 360, also provide online back-up of your hard drive and/or important files.

7 – IRB Approval

If your senior thesis involves interviews, surveys, or the use of human subjects for social, behavioral, educational, or medical research, you will need prior approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before you may proceed with your research. If you think your research might require IRB approval, talk to your advisor. You may also call the Tufts University IRB office (627-3417) or visit their website (http://www.tufts.edu/central/research/IRB/main.htm) for more information about the application process.

Many senior thesis projects involve interviews and surveys. Find out early if you need IRB approval and submit your protocol as soon as possible. You will need approval before you begin your research – failing to obtain approval could have serious consequences, on both a personal and an institutional scale.
Section Two:
Resources and Support
1 – ARC Resources and Contacts

**Writing:**
Graduate Writing Consultants are available to help with every stage of the writing process. To book an appointment, visit the ARC’s online tutor finder through WebCenter: [https://webcenter2.studentservices.tufts.edu/login.aspx](https://webcenter2.studentservices.tufts.edu/login.aspx).

It is entirely appropriate and recommended to work with the same consultant throughout the process. Contact Kristina Aikens, associate director of the ARC, at Kristina.Aikens@tufts.edu if you need help or have questions.

**Presentation Skills:**
Graduate Speaking Consultants are available to help you prepare your defense presentation, polish your delivery, and develop strategies for staying calm during public speaking events. Use the online tutor finder to book an appointment, or contact Kristina.Aikens@tufts.edu if you need help or have questions.

**Time Management:**
If you are struggling with the time management aspect of the senior thesis, confidential support is available from ARC Time Management Consultants. Email Time.Management@ase.tufts.edu to set up an appointment.

**Logistics and Policy:**
For any questions about paperwork, deadlines, Tufts University policies, or if you have concerns about your working relationship with your advisor, contact Anne Moore, Program Specialist in Scholar Development at Anne.Moore@tufts.edu.

**General Information & Online Resources:**
2 –Workshops & Info Sessions Throughout the Year

**Humanities Thesis Exchange**
- Meet regularly with a support group of other senior thesis writers and ARC graduate writing consultants.
- Bring questions and concerns about any part of the senior thesis process, from organizing your thoughts into chapters to your relationship with your advisor to the binding process.
- Practice for the defense by talking about your work or exchange your writing with a peer reviewer.
- Meeting agendas are driven by your ideas and needs.

**STEM Thesis Group**
- Similar to the Humanities Thesis Exchange (described above), but with a focus on the particular issues raised by experiment-based research and STEM-fields writing.

**Documentation and Citation Workshop**
- Learn tips for avoiding accidental plagiarism.
- Discuss the differences between the documentation styles and decide which one is most conducive to your research. Should you use endnotes, footnotes, or parenthetical citations? Do you need a bibliography or references?
- Learn how to handle unusual citations like archival research, appendices, or visual images.
- Bring your questions about your thesis!

**Presentation Skills for Senior Thesis Writers**
- Look for location and date specifics in March.
- Learn how to give a successful presentation of your research at the Undergraduate Research Symposium or at your thesis defense.
- Learn how to avoid PowerPoint pitfalls and other presentation blunders.
- Learn tips for controlling anxiety when speaking before an audience.

**Preparing for Your Thesis Defense: Last Chance Info Session**
- Look for location and date specifics in early April.
- Find out what happens at the defense, what to expect, and how to prepare.
- Learn tips on presentation skills and controlling anxiety.
- Discuss post-defense steps, like manuscript preparation and final edits.
3 - Tutoring Guidelines

Graduate writing consultants are available to work with senior thesis writers on:

- brainstorming
- researching
- structure and organization
- time management
- argument building
- drafting and revising

How long is a tutoring session and how often can I schedule them?
Tutoring sessions are usually no longer than an hour. You can schedule no more than three sessions per week and no more than fifteen sessions in a semester.

What do I need to bring to my tutoring session?
- Always come prepared with specific questions and concerns about your work. Your priorities will drive the sessions.
- Bring a hard copy of your work to the session. Graduate writing consultants will not read your work on a laptop.
- You may bring up to 20 pages of new material to your session, but keep in mind that writing consultants will not be able to read large pieces of writing during a typical 1 hour session. Come prepared with specific sections you would like to focus on.

What should I expect out of my tutoring session?
All sessions are collaborative learning experiences: we expect you to come prepared to discuss your overall concerns about the project with us. We will use our experience and the information you give us to figure out how best to assist you. Keep in mind that you are responsible for revising your work on your own and that we can only provide guidelines for revisions based on the work we review together in our session.

What if I just need proofreading?
Our goal is to offer you writing advice and guidance in a comfortable setting and to serve as critical readers who offer suggestions to help you improve your writing overall. Because of our teaching mission, we need you to participate fully in the session and we cannot offer proofreading services.

Can I submit my work to a tutor in advance of my appointment?
Your first appointment will be a general discussion about your project so you should not contact the tutor about submitting work in advance before that session. Once you have established a relationship with the graduate writing consultant, you may ask the consultant if s/he will accept your work in advance of your next appointment. It is up to the consultant if s/he is willing to do so.
What happens if I miss an appointment or if I’m late?

- We want to make ourselves available to as many students as possible. If you are unable to make your scheduled appointment, we ask that you promptly cancel your appointment through our tutor finder.
- Notice of cancellation must be given at least 24 hours before your scheduled appointment.
- If you are more than 15 minutes late for an appointment, it will count as a no-show.
- If you consistently cancel appointments without proper notice or if you are a regular no-show, we may have to ask that you not use our services for the remainder of the semester.

How can I let the writing program know if I’m happy with the work they’re doing?

The ARC will send out an evaluation to all senior thesis writers using our services. You can always email your questions, comments and concerns to Kristina Aikens, Associate Director of the ARC, at Kristina.Aikens@tufts.edu. We value your input and constantly look to your feedback for ideas on how to assist senior thesis writers.
4 - Tisch Library Resources

Tisch Library provides a variety of resources to aid Senior Thesis Writers as they begin the research process. Taking advantage of the resources listed below early on in the semester will help make your research more effective, organized, and can save you loads of time in the long run.

One of your first steps might be to look at past senior theses from your department to get a sense of length, format, and scholarly tone. You can view all of Tufts University’s past senior theses at the Tufts Digital Library: http://hdl.handle.net/10427/14639.

Tisch Library offers Research 4 Success: Using the Library for Thesis and Capstone Projects, a ½ credit research methods class specifically designed for students who are engaged in undergraduate thesis research. Please see http://www.library.tufts.edu/tisch/ra/honorsTheses.htm or contact Regina Raboin (Regina.Raboin@tufts.edu) or Laurie Sabol (Laurie.Sabol@tufts.edu) for additional information.

Students also have the option to meet one-on-one with a subject specialist librarian if the class is not feasible. See http://www.library.tufts.edu/tisch/refcoll_directory.htm for a directory of reference librarians. Students come away from both the class and individual appointments surprised at the amount of material they did not previously know about.

Tisch Library offers RefWorks, an easy-to-use software program that not only will help students reduce their occurrences of unintentional plagiarism, but will also allow them to automatically format a bibliography in the proper style. See http://www.library.tufts.edu/tisch/ra/aboutRefWorks.htm, for more information on RefWorks and to view an online tutorial.

The Tisch Library website also offers useful information about research-related workshops offered by the library throughout the year, as well as information on citation methods and links to online style guides. Just visit the following web address: http://www.library.tufts.edu/tisch/ra/undergrad.htm.
Section Three: Time Management
1 - Senior Honors Thesis Timeline

This timeline is meant to be a very general guideline. It is mostly designed for theses written in the humanities. If you are doing empirical research, your timeline might look very different. You probably won’t begin the bulk of your writing until late in the spring semester when you start collecting lab results, although some sections, like your methodology section, can be written in advance.

You know yourself better than anyone. If this timeline doesn’t match your work habits, consider it a working example. The important thing is to keep track of major deadlines and come up with a system that gets you to each one. Remember, you might need to adjust your usual work habits for the complexity of the senior thesis.

Over the summer, you should have:
- Submitted your Proposal (if required in your major department).
- Conducted background research to determine viability of topic.
- Decided on a topic or approach.
- Contacted possible faculty advisors and readers.
- Obtained IRB approval for any research using human subjects, including interviews and surveys.
- Sought funding for your research.
- Conducted necessary field research.

By the end of September, you should:
- Decide whether your thesis will be an honors thesis.
- Finalize your topic and research approach.
- Confirm your primary advisor and secondary readers.
- Think about the length and breadth of your finished product and consider chapter breakdowns or other ways of structuring your project.
- Attend informational meetings and understand all requirements.
- Create your own project timeline and goals.

October and November:
- Conduct online, library, lab and field research.
- Meet with librarians for guidance on advanced research.
- Create a system for organizing your ideas, research, and working bibliography.
- Begin writing any sections that don’t depend on empirical results or that will help organize your argument: an annotated bibliography, a literature review, a methods section, or a historical overview. You do not need to complete your research before beginning to write!
- Establish a regular meeting time with your primary advisor and committee.
- Email weekly progress reports to your advisor.

November 15, 2013 deadline: Submit signed “Thesis Honors Candidate Form” to Dowling Hall Student Services Desk. Your department chair must sign this form. Download the form from the Student Forms web site at: http://uss.tufts.edu/registrar/SS_StudentForms.asp
December:
- Reassess chapter breakdowns; work on an outline of your thesis as whole.
- Begin to draft the chapter you can envision most clearly.
- **Mid-year assessment:** You and your advisor should assess your progress so far to determine if you should continue to pursue the Honors Thesis in the spring or switch to a senior project or independent study. If you decide to continue with the Honors Thesis, you will receive a Y (for year-long) instead of a grade on your report card in January.
- Plan a research and writing agenda for Winter Break. If you are doing a traditional thesis, begin writing over Break.

January:
- Submit a chapter or section draft to your advisor and schedule a meeting to discuss your work.
- Create a new spring timeline. Think about what kind of a spring break you want to have.
- Continue to send regular email progress reports to your committee.

February and March:
- Write your thesis section by section and submit drafts to your primary advisor for comments.
- Cite and incorporate research as you write to avoid accidental plagiarism.
- Make sure you are on track to have a complete draft of your thesis finished by mid-April.
- Schedule your defense for late April. All of your committee members must be present at the defense. Remember to book a room that is equipped for your a/v needs. Your department administrator can help with this.

April:
- Begin rewriting and revising. Now is the time to pay attention to the clarity of your expression and your prose style.
- If possible, schedule a meeting with your entire committee so you can anticipate concerns before the defense. Make sure you have at least received some feedback from each member.
- Rewrite and revise according to your advisors' recommendations. Be sure the committee is in agreement on what they expect from you during the revision process.
- Submit completed thesis with complete and accurate bibliography to your committee at least two weeks before your defense date.
- **Deadline:** You must hold your defense by the end of reading period on Thursday, May 1, 2014.

May:
- **Deadline:** “Recommendation for Thesis Honors Form” must be submitted by **Friday, May 2, 2014** to the Degree Audit Coordinator in Dowling Hall.
- Complete any revisions your committee suggested during the defense.
- Prepare your final document for the archives.
2 - Spring Semester Time Management

Make your thesis your priority this semester:

- Your thesis is worth 1 credit this semester, so treat it like a 1-credit class. For some writers, this means scheduling time for their thesis as they would any other class.
- Give your thesis the time it deserves. Fully committing yourself to your own research and ideas is what the best college experiences are all about. It is just as important and valuable as job hunting and LSAT studying.

Design a schedule that is flexible but effective:

- No matter what your personal time management plan looks like, some deadlines are set in stone. Work backwards from personal and institutional deadlines when you are planning your time.
- Although you won’t always have control over your schedule, anticipating when you will have to hunker down for a few days of thesis work will help you schedule them around busier times in your semester.
- Don’t get too down on yourself for not meeting all of your goals on time. Good writing doesn’t always follow a schedule. The most important thing you can do is make sure your plan has the potential for adjustment and motivation.
- It is better to overestimate than underestimate the amount of time each step will take. Be honest with yourself about how much time you are willing to dedicate to your thesis during certain times of the year.

Establish a support network:

- Find friends or peers who are also working on a senior project and establish deadlines together to share your work. You will be responsible for meeting these deadlines without the pressure of pleasing an advisor.
- Listen to other senior thesis writers’ concerns and solutions. You will feel less alone and might learn some strategies that help with your own stressors.
- Talking out loud about your thesis with someone will help you formulate and solidify ideas, stay on track, prepare for your defense, and keep you from feeling isolated.

If you start to feel overwhelmed:

- Design a year-long calendar. Each month, design a new month-long calendar, and each week design a detailed week-long calendar.
- Sometimes just making a list makes the tasks at hand seem manageable.
- Try to work for at least an hour a day. Give yourself credit for tasks that might not immediately involve writing, such as conducting research, meeting with advisors, and completing annotated bibliographies.
Overcoming Writer’s Block:

- Take a minute to appreciate it as a good sign. Writer’s block usually means you are working out an important and complex idea. The level of writing required by a senior thesis shouldn’t always come easily.
- Consider using times when you are stumped to solicit feedback from your advisor.
- Consider a change of scenery. Sometimes relocating from Tisch to a local library, or from your dorm room to a café, can be incredibly refreshing.
- Come up with a reward that will keep you motivated when you have to write but you don’t feel like it.
- Don’t underestimate the power of staying visually, aurally, and tactilely inspired. Redesign your work space into an interesting and inspiring environment.
- Especially when you are feeling panicky or depressed, exercise can make a big difference. It will clear your brain and help you sleep.
Section Four: Writing It
1 - Getting Going and Keeping Going

Your senior thesis should feel like a new kind of writing. This is a long term project that is completely grounded in your own ideas and research. The complexity of the project calls for a new writing process, one that is rarely linear and that can be brilliantly messy.

- Dive in. Your argument is going to continue to grow all year in sophistication and specificity. The only way to get your ideas to where they need to be is to start writing. As your writing grows more focused, you will probably return several times to the research stage. Beginning to write before your research is complete will help you refine your argument earlier rather than later and will increase the efficiency of your research. Some sections, like literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, historical overviews, and methodology sections, can be written very early in the process and will help you stay focused.

- Remembering that this is a long term project might help if you feel you must perfect each sentence before moving on. Try not to worry about sentence level details until you are confident that your idea has staying power. You can correct these details if you are feeling blocked later down the road.

- Engaging with so many other scholars and experts can be both exhilarating and intimidating. If you start to feel overwhelmed by other voices, put your research away and try to refocus on what makes what you are saying important and worthwhile.

- If this were something you could get right on the first try, it wouldn’t be worth the struggle. Be prepared to cut and delete for the sake of the quality of your project.

- Don’t be limited by past experiences. For example, even if you consider yourself a visual learner, don’t be shy about talking out your ideas. If you have always been told you are an auditory learner, don’t eliminate visual diagrams without trying them out first. If you have always needed to work in blocks of hours at a time, don’t dismiss what you can accomplish in thirty minutes. Stay inspired by being open to new ways of working.
2 - Stages of a New Writing Process

The writing process for this project will probably not be linear. Don’t consider returning to the library or rereading an article to be backtracking. Instead, think about the purpose behind each step you take so your energy is focused on developing your ideas.

Eventually, **background research** will turn into **focused research**. Rather than reading in order to form ideas, generate questions, and get the big picture, you will be reading in order to gather evidence for your own argument.

Always **take notes** with a purpose. How are you going to be using the source? As a point of comparison or contrast to your own methodology? As evidence for your argument? As an example that shows why your project is important?

Know what you need to get out of **brainstorming** moments—do you need to organize your ideas? Visualize a complex process you have been reading about and need to summarize? Think structurally about an analogy you are trying to draw?

**Pre-outlining** will give you an initial plan. Once you have a full draft, reverse the process and make a **post-outline** from your writing. Look for places where you need transitions or where the logic and order don’t make sense.

**Pre-draft freewriting** is for yourself. Practice explaining to yourself what you are trying to say without worrying about language. When you begin **drafting** you begin writing for your audience and developing a scholarly tone. **Mid-draft freewriting** relieves the pressure of writing for an audience when you are feeling stuck or out of ideas. Consider focusing your freewriting with a question. For example, if you have drafted a messy version of a section and aren’t sure what to do next, ask yourself “What am I really trying to say in this section? Why is it important to the rest of my project?”

**Revision** doesn’t just mean editing and proofreading. It can also mean making global changes and returning to a section to develop an idea differently, work out a transition, or reorganize. Sometimes revision can be a productive way to use your time when another section is keeping you blocked.
3 – Revision and Feedback

The thought of revising your entire thesis can be daunting. You have probably been revising as you go, but inevitably there will be a lot of revising to do once you have completed your final draft. Figure out what seems the least overwhelming and start there. Either revise in order, starting with your first section, or pick one area of revision (like transitions) to tackle first, or start with the section you feel most comfortable with. One way to break it down is provided below:

1) Development of your Argument
2) Integration of Sources
3) Organization within Chapters
4) Paragraph Structure
5) Sentence-level Revisions
6) Formatting: Bibliography, Table of Contents, Margins, Title Page

The effectiveness of advisor feedback depends a lot on you. The sooner you get a draft of your writing to your advisors, the more time you will have to review their feedback and implement their suggestions.

- Because writing and revision are processes that take time, give your advisor small sections of your writing at a time. Discuss with your advisor when or at what stage s/he would prefer to see your writing. Get used to sending your advisor writing that you aren’t entirely happy with. This is also the stage when you will be most open to feedback. If your advisor does not want to see early drafts of your writing, take advantage of the ARC or start a writing exchange with a small group of senior thesis writers.

- After receiving feedback from your advisors, take time to read through all comments closely. Mark places where you cannot decipher the handwriting and places where you do not understand the comments. Give yourself some space after this first read through – advisors are busy and don’t always take time to finesse their comments with your feelings in mind.

- Ask for clarification from your advisor. Schedule a meeting to discuss your questions about the feedback, including any changes that you strongly disagree with. Remember, this is your thesis so you have the final say about how the finished product looks. If you receive some suggestions that seem unfeasible given your timeline, remember that sometimes you must make choices about what gets done. If you do decide to forgo any of the suggestions given by your advisor, be prepared to explain your decision during the defense.

- Once you understand all of your advisor’s comments, prioritize the feedback. Start with the feedback you feel most comfortable addressing.
Section Five: Documentation Methods
1 - The Basics

**What to cite:**

Any language or idea borrowed from another source and any statistics, facts or data that are not common knowledge in your field.

**Why to cite:**

When you write a research paper, you are entering into an ongoing conversation about your topic. Cite borrowed ideas to acknowledge your debt to the work that has come before you.

**How to cite:**

There are three options for correctly citing borrowed material:

- **When you copy a source word for word you are using a direct quote.** Enclose all copied language with quotation marks. Use direct quotes when a source’s language is especially vivid or when you plan to take issue with the source’s language. Direct quotes should be used selectively. When you use direct quotes too frequently, they lose impact and it can suggest you haven’t mastered the material.

- A **summary** condenses a large amount of borrowed material into a few sentences. Summaries should always be in your own words and must include a sentence level citation. “In your own words” does not mean using a thesaurus to replace the original source’s words with synonyms or mixing another author’s language with your own. Writing material in your own words means you use your own language, sentence structure, and voice to capture another author’s meaning.

- A **paraphrase** relates borrowed ideas in about the same amount of words as the original source. Like summaries, paraphrases should always be in your own words and must include a sentence level citation.

**Note:** What exactly does “in your own words” mean? When you borrow another source’s idea, you are borrowing it to serve a purpose: to support your own argument. Because you are using the information in an entirely new and different context, you must modify the idea to fit into your prose and support your argument.
2 - Documentation Styles

Each discipline has a preferred documentation style. Check with your advisor to find out which style your department requires. Common styles include MLA and Chicago in the humanities, APA in the social sciences, and number systems in the sciences. Each style emphasizes different information. For quick style guide reference and examples, visit http://www.library.tufts.edu/tisch/ra/citingSources.htm.

**MLA (Modern Language Association) style** is used in the Humanities and emphasizes the author and page number for the information you reference. Parenthetical sentence-level citations correspond to a works cited page. Discursive endnotes or footnotes may be used for supplementary information.

**Chicago style** is used by a wide variety of scholars. There are actually two versions of Chicago style. In one version, full bibliographic information and page numbers are provided using in-text footnotes. A bibliography at the end of the paper then lists the sources again. In a more abbreviated version of Chicago style parenthetical in-text citations provide the author, date of publication, and page number. The bibliography then provides the full bibliographic information.

**APA (American Psychological Association) style** is used in the sciences, especially the social and behavioral sciences, or in any project in which the date of publication is more important than the page number.

**Number systems** are used in the sciences. Each scientific discipline has its own specific number system. In-text parenthetical citations include a citation number that corresponds to a numbered reference list.
3 - Tips for Successful Documentation

- Try to introduce a citation with a **signal phrase**. A signal phrase prepares your reader for the borrowed material and can lend credibility to your source. The first time you use a source, provide at least the author’s full name, and consider providing the author’s job title and the title of his or her work.

- To avoid **unintentional plagiarism**, write your summaries and paraphrases without looking at the original source. Then check your language against the original source for accuracy and overlap. This will keep you from relying too much on the original source’s language and will demonstrate whether or not you have mastered the material.

- **Cite while you write.** Don’t leave your citations for the night before. If you start out incorporating citations, you decrease the chances of forgetting to include a citation.

- **Stay organized** throughout the research process. Take good notes that include bibliographic information, a source’s main ideas, and reminders about how you plan to use this information to support your argument. A working annotated bibliography can be especially helpful. In your notes, use a consistent system to identify language and ideas that are not your own.

- You do not have to cite information that is considered **common knowledge**. Usually, common knowledge is information that can be found in encyclopedias, dictionaries, and textbooks. Within your specific field, an idea is considered common knowledge if you can find it undocumented in 5 other sources. This concept can seem a bit arbitrary – remember, you are writing to a committee of experts in the field, and you are the best judge of what you need to cite. Use your common sense; when in doubt, check with your advisor.

- Keep a **style guide** handy so you can quickly cite your sources in a consistent manner as you write. Examples of style guides include the *MLA Style Manual*, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and Diana Hacker’s *Rules for Writers*. If you are unsure, confirm with your department what documentation style you should be using.
Section Six:
The Defense and Beyond
1 – The Defense: Before, During, and After

The Senior Honors Thesis defense may take a variety of forms based on the kind of project you completed. Usually, you will present the results of your thesis, and then the committee will ask you questions. You should also be prepared to ask your committee questions about possibly preparing your thesis for publication or continuing your research in graduate school. All members of your thesis committee must be present during the defense. Most defenses are closed defenses, with just your committee present, but you may request an open defense with friends and family or the department may require a public defense that would be advertised on campus. The defense usually lasts from sixty to ninety minutes and has four parts: 1) your presentation; 2) the question-and-answer period; 3) private deliberation among the committee members; and 4) your feedback.

Before the Defense

Set a date for the defense in the last week or two of classes. You or someone on the committee or the department administrator should reserve a room. Make sure the room is of the appropriate size and has the correct kind of a/v capacity for your presentation.

Submit your completed thesis to your committee two weeks before the defense. Think of this as your final version. It should be carefully edited, proofread, and meticulously formatted. Ask your primary advisor in what form the committee would like the thesis manuscript. (stapled? velo-bound? in a three-ring binder? loose-leaf in a manila envelope?)

The Presentation

If your research is in the Fine Arts or if you have completed a Creative Project, your defense will usually consist of a presentation or performance followed by a question and answer session. Defenses in Science or Social Science departments usually consist of a poster or PowerPoint presentation followed by a question and answer session. Defenses in the Humanities usually involve a shorter formal presentation and a longer conversation with your committee about your work.

Regardless of your discipline, the presentation portion is your chance to remind your committee why your project is important. Even if you are only presenting for 10-15 minutes, that’s 5-8 pages of written work. Allocate some time to think carefully about what you will include in this presentation. Obviously you can’t talk about everything that is in your thesis. This is your chance to reflect on the year you have dedicated to the project.
The Question and Answer Period

In addition to specific questions about the content and argument of your project, be prepared to answer versions of the following questions:

In one sentence, what is the main point, claim, or argument of your thesis?
How does this project contribute to work in your field?
How has your conception of this project changed over the past year?
What have you learned about conducting research in your field?
Were you unable to accomplish any aspects of this project as you originally conceived it? Why?
I notice you didn’t change this part as I suggested in an earlier draft. Why not?
What part of the thesis process did you most enjoy? What part was most difficult?
What have you learned from doing a long-term independent project?
If you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?
Do you plan to continue working on this project? In what context?

Tips for Preparing for the Defense:

Find out from your department or your committee what exactly will be expected of you. How long will you have for your presentation? What form should your presentation take?

It's your thesis, and the defense is your last chance to get professional feedback about your work and your writing. Plan the defense to meet your needs and interests.

Re-read your thesis. Pencil in any minor corrections. Anticipate the sections of your thesis that may raise questions from your committee. Jot down any questions or concerns about your thesis that you can ask your committee at the defense.

If you will do a PowerPoint presentation, demonstration, performance, reading, or poster session at your defense, prepare for it thoroughly. Create professional-looking visual aids. Practice your presentation so that you do not go over the amount of time allotted. Do a dress-rehearsal for a small group of friends or with an ARC public speaking consultant.

Arrange a mock defense with your friends playing the role of your committee members. Practice giving a presentation from notes or prepared text so that you can read confidently and make eye contact. After your presentation, your friends should ask questions about your thesis so you get used to responding confidently and articulately.

Spend some time in the room where your defense will be held: arrange the chairs as you'd like them to be; sit or stand and practice speaking aloud; visualize the defense situation and the kind of exchange you want to have with your committee.

Plan in advance what you will wear and what you would like to do to celebrate.
After the Defense

Make sure your thesis advisor completes and signs the **Recommendation for Thesis Honors Form** and submits it to Dowling Hall by **5:00 PM Friday, May 2, 2014**. The form will be sent directly to your advisor. If s/he does not receive it, your advisor should contact the Degree Audit Coordinator in Dowling Hall. Your thesis advisor must also submit a grade and indicate to the registrar the need to change the fall thesis grade of Y to a letter grade.

Inevitably, your committee will have some minor suggestions for revision. You have a few weeks before graduation to make any corrections and prepare your manuscript for archives. Don’t forget to have personal copies made in addition to the archival version.
2 - Advice from Past Senior Thesis Writers

"My defense was by far the easiest part of the project. I didn't do a poster session or power point presentation because a conversation was by far the best way to discuss my project; anything else wouldn't have impressed the committee and would have seemed contrived. I spoke for quite a while about some of the difficulties I had writing the thesis and the things I would have done differently if I could have done it again. The committee asked me some questions, but nothing was too difficult or put me on the spot and it was all very friendly and relaxed. Also, something worth noting is that my thesis was in French but, as required, one person on the committee was from another department and we didn't want to oblige them to speak French at the defense. So it was completely bilingual and we switched back and forth between languages without paying too much attention to it and without any formalities. I was quite nervous beforehand, but I shouldn't have been, as the written thesis itself was really the important part – the defense wasn't about to make or break anything." -- Alison Brooks, French literature

"My thesis defense was scary. I ended up second-guessing myself and not feeling ready, and I had to postpone it a few days, which caused some stress and annoyed my committee. I would advise students to finish absolutely everything, final-version, a week before the defense, and resist the urge to make ANY major changes between turning in the draft and defending. Also, reserve a room your committee is happy with -- check with them first. . . .
I would also script an intro, major points you want to discuss with your committee, and questions you have for them in case they don't take the ball when you get there. You need to be prepared to manage the defense from an offensive point of view, in case your committee surprises you by being passive like mine did. . . ."
-- Ariana Steinberg, creative project in Art History/American Studies

"The defense was more like a conversation, with three professors. I gave a short introduction about the experience of writing the thesis and how I did my research. The professors were all really nice and weren't trying to trip me up or anything. One thing that surprised me was that they asked about specific lines in the paper. This was 46 pages, and they literally said, "OK, second sentence, third paragraph on page 23--what did you mean by that sentence? Where did you get that?" So basically my best advice is to just know your paper really well. Make sure you reread it before the defense, because some of it was written long ago. You'll definitely remember all the research, but you might need to refresh yourself on what you were thinking when you wrote certain lines. Good luck!"
-- Chelsea Davenport, Spanish literature
3 - Preparing Your Manuscript for Archives

The following information is based on specifications made by Tufts University Office of Digital Collections and Archives. **It is your duty to submit your completed Senior Honors Thesis manuscript to Digital Collections and Archives in Tisch Library before May Commencement.** Theses may be submitted electronically or in traditional bound form and should adhere to the following archival submission guidelines:

**Margins**
There should be a one-inch margin at the top and bottom and at the left and right sides of the page. The right margin should not be justified (aligned) unless it can be done without leaving large gaps between words.

**Figures, Tables, and Appendices**
If you will be referring to a visual image, table, chart, map, or graph, it is normally best to include it in the body of the text, as close as possible to that portion of the text where you discuss the figure.

An appendix (or appendices) is reserved for the complete texts of surveys, statistics, lists, graphs, and maps that are too long or too peripheral to be included in the thesis text itself. If you are not sure if something should be incorporated into the text as a table (or figure) or appended to the end of the document, talk to your advisor.

**Pagination**
Page numbers should be centered on the bottom of the page. "Every page of the paper, including blank pages, must be assigned a page number. Although counted in the pagination, the number should not appear on the title page or on other display pages such as the copyright, epigraph, or part titles." (Turabian, Section 14.6; see also Sections 14.7 - 14.9). Usually, the first page of the thesis itself begins with the Arabic numeral 1. Pages before this—such as title page, acknowledgements, and table of contents—are numbered with small Roman numerals, such as i, ii, iii, iv, etc. The title page is number i, but do not print any numeral on this page or on the acknowledgments page, if included. Subsequent pages, such as the table of contents, would be numbered ii or iii. The first page of your thesis text is number 1, but do not print any number on this page. The page numbers would appear on the second and subsequent pages of the thesis. The pages of the bibliography and any appendices should continue the Arabic numbering of the thesis text itself.

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Title Page
The title should be centered on the horizontal measure of the area within the margins of a page of text. It should be one-third of the way down the vertical measure of the page and should be typed in capital and lower case letters with no end punctuation. If it takes more than one line, it should be double spaced and the second line should begin with a capital letter whether or not it otherwise would do so. Centered five lines below it should be the statement: An honors thesis (or project) for the Department of __________. On the next double-spaced line below should be centered the author's name (in the same form as in other official college records). On the last line of the typing area of the page should be centered: Tufts University, 2013.

Acknowledgments
Tufts Digital Collections & Archives discourages students from including an acknowledgements page in their Senior Honors Thesis except to acknowledge professional academic support from those outside the thesis committee (for example, special funding, access to special archives maintained by a scholarly organization, or feedback provided by an influential scholar).

Uploading Your Manuscript to Tufts Digital Collections and Archives
Most departments now require that students submit their completed Senior Honors Thesis to archives in digital form, not in hard copy. Go to the following web site for information on how to upload your manuscript into Digital Collections and Archives: https://dca.lib.tufts.edu/submissions/.

If you wish, you may still have a hard copy printed for your own records, for your family, or for your department if they request it. Below are guidelines for the submission of printed manuscripts and non-traditional projects to archives.

Paper
The thesis must be in high quality print, double-spaced, on high quality 8 1/2 x 11 inch bond paper. (While not required, paper that meets Standard #Z3948 of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) is recommended.)

Tip: You can buy high-quality bond paper at Staples; look for low-acid or acid-free paper, with some percentage of cotton content. Doctoral dissertations and masters theses must be printed on paper that is at least 25% cotton—you can use this as a guideline. Use white paper only!

Binding
The thesis should be "velo bound" with a clear mylar cover on the front and a heavy stock paper on the back. The title page should show as the first page after the clear mylar cover.

Tips: Gnomon Copy Center on Boston Avenue in Medford does this kind of binding. Past seniors have found the service available at Gnomon Copy Center in Cambridge
to be superb—you can submit your thesis to them in electronic form for super-fast service. See their website at www.gnomon-copy.com. Staples may also do it—check around for prices.

**Non-Traditional Projects**
Some honors projects result in products other than the traditional printed text (e.g. videotape, CD, large format artwork, etc.). Please contact the University Archives for information about submitting these types of projects.

**Questions?**
Contact Tufts University Office of Digital Collections and Archives at Archives@tufts.edu or 627-3737.

Special thanks

to Tisha Brooks, Laurel Hankins, and Caroline Gelmi

for compiling this Senior Thesis Handbook

and for writing, revising, and updating

much of the material contained within.
1. Begin* with something unresolved, some question about which you are truly curious. Make clear to yourself and your readers the unresolved question that you set out to resolve. This is your governing question, the question that directs the structure of the piece.

Keep your eye on your governing question. You might want to put that question somewhere where you will see it every time you sit down to work -- e.g., on a piece of paper you attach to your computer, your bulletin board, or the wall. This will serve as your lighthouse, your beacon on the horizon that helps you stay on course. You need not be bound to the original form of this question; you may need to revise it or supersede it several times as you move along. Keep a record of how your governing question evolves.

*Although it is important to "begin" your focused exploration with a governing question and to make that question clear early on in your thesis, you need not -- in fact, probably can not -- begin the entire research and writing process with a question. It takes a lot of work -- reading, talking with people, thinking -- to generate and focus your governing question.

2. Show your readers what leads you to pose your question in the first place. Your governing question derives from competing observations, i.e., observations that appear to you to be in tension with one another and to indicate an apparent puzzle, problem, discrepancy, oversight, mystery, contradiction, or surprise. In the introduction to your piece, let your readers know how what you observe leads you to ask the question you ask.
3. Identify your subordinate questions. Just as the thesis as a whole is a response to a governing question, each chapter, each section, and each paragraph of the thesis is a response to a subordinate question. Subordinate questions are the questions you will need to address or resolve on the way to addressing your governing question.

Make clear to yourself and your readers the subordinate questions to which each chapter is a response. When you are having difficulty developing an idea or structuring your piece, make a question outline, i.e., an outline in the form of questions. Write out the questions to which each paragraph is a response; questions tend to beget more questions and to form a natural pecking order and nesting order.

4. Freewrite. Write brief, uncensored pieces to loosen your mind (like stretches before running) and to let yourself follow the playful, associative, non-linear logic of your mind. Often we don't follow that associative logic very far because we dismiss it early on as entirely illogical and useless. While it is true that in our final product ideas need to be in the form of linear logic so that others can follow our thinking, we need to draw upon our associative logic in the creative process. Associative logic is the logic of dreams, of those times when our mind is free to wander (e.g., just before we fall asleep, in the shower, while we're driving), and of those generative, free-flowing conversations that lead us seemingly -- yet not entirely – far afield from where we started. If we follow our mind's wanderings and associations far enough, they often lead to something creative and useful. Freewriting -- without thinking about whether what we are saying is elegant or grammatical or concise or logical -- promotes the generation of ideas and of creative connections between ideas. Think of freewriting as soil, not seed. Soil is the muck that nurtures a germinating idea rather than the perfect seeds that become the actual sentences and paragraphs of the final product.

5. Do focused, or prompted, freewriting. Sometimes freewriting works better with a focus and/or a running start. Consider using the following questions and sentence stems as prompts for your freewriting. Complete the sentence and continue writing from there.

   1. When I started this course/paper/project, the thing that really interested me was . .
   2. What makes it hard to engage with what I'm doing is that . . . . 
   3. Of all the stuff I'm doing these days, what really interests me is . . .
   4. The questions I find myself thinking about these days are questions like . . .
   5. If I had to put my paper into the form of a single question, it would be . . .
   6. The observations I make that lead me to pose that question are . . .
7. I want to know . . .
8. I want to figure out how . . .
9. I have a hunch that . . .
10. I wish I could say in my paper that . . .
11. I doubt I can say in my paper that . . .
12. If things were as neat and tidy as I'd like them to be, . . .
13. I'm stuck. I'm stuck because I can't figure out . . .
14. [A letter to a friend or to your reader] Dear _____. I'm trying to write this piece about _____.
   And do you know what? . . .
15. What stands out to me about all the stuff I've been reading is this idea that . . .
16. Dialogue between me and the experts (this exercise comes from writing teacher Eileen Farrell):
   This author/professor/theorist/expert says . . .
   And/but I say . . .
   He or she also says . . .
   And/but I say . . .
17. What I've been reading makes me wonder . . .
18. I'm learning that . . .
19. What makes my question hard to reckon with or difficult to resolve is . . .
20. One way in which I could attempt to reckon with those difficulties is . . .
21. If I could say what I really want to say, . . .
22. If I could approach this project in the way I really want to, . . .
23. If I could write about the question that really interests me, . . .
6. Work in 15-minute stretches. We tend to approach big jobs by thinking we need big amounts of time. We say to ourselves, "I need to write this paper. It's 1:00 now. I'm free until dinner at 6:00. That's five hours. I should get a lot done." But in fact, we barely make a dent. We brush our teeth, do our laundry, water our plants, pay a few bills, straighten our room, make a list of errands, hang out with our friends, chat on the phone. But we spend very little time on task (the task of writing). That's because few of us can work for five solid hours on one thing, especially something as difficult and anxiety-provoking as writing.

Especially if you are having difficulty getting started or staying with writing, try to work for very small stretches of time. Most of us can do anything for fifteen minutes. Work for fifteen, break for five is not a bad guideline. You may be surprised at how much you can get done in fifteen focused minutes. It is much better to work for fifteen minutes and get something done, however small, than to keep thinking for five hours that you should be working and be so daunted or scared that you get nothing done and then feel discouraged, demoralized, and guilty.

7. Employ the SOS strategy: specific, observable steps. (The phrase "specific, observable steps" comes from Jane Burka and Lenora Yuen, authors of Procrastination: Why You Do It, What To Do about It.) Think in terms of specific, fifteen-minute tasks that you can picture yourself doing and completing. "I am going to take fifteen minutes to write down a list of questions that my thesis will need to address"; "I am going to take an inventory of all the things I can say, all the things I wish I could say but don't know if I have the evidence to support, and all of the hunches I have"; and "I am going to write a memo to myself about what makes my question a hard one to answer" are examples of such tasks. "I'm going to work on my thesis for five hours between lunch and dinner" is an example of a plan that is neither specific nor observable: with such a vague intention, there is nothing specific you can picture yourself starting, doing, and finishing.

8. Use the So/And Even So Exercise. Whenever you find yourself saying "I have only fifteen minutes, so I can't do anything productive," try saying, "I have only fifteen minutes, and even so . . . I could make a phone call/jot a few notes about what questions I might address in this paper/skim the beginning and end of this chapter to identify the question the writer's addressing."

The So/And Even So Exercise can also work when you are feeling tired, sad, lonely, scared, discouraged, overwhelmed. It is my version of an exercise that comes from a friend who used to coach beginning adult runners. He told them they didn't need to run every scheduled running day but that they just needed to suit up -- put on their running clothes and running shoes -- every running day. If they said to themselves, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely/, so I can't run today," he asked them to say, "I'm
tired/busy/sad/lonely, and even so, I could suit up." The idea is that if you put yourself in a position to work, you often find that you can -- and even want to -- do some work.

When you find yourself saying things like "I'm sleepy, so I can't work on this"; "I haven't called my best friend in a week, so I can't work on this"; "I have rehearsal in half an hour, so I can't work on this"; "I really want to see a movie, so I can't work on this"; "I'm scared I'm going to fail, so I can't work on this," try replacing the "so" with "and even so": "... and even so, I could work for fifteen minutes on tracing the line of thinking that leads me to pose my questions"; "I could brainstorm for fifteen minutes on tracing the line of thinking that leads me to pose my questions"; "I could read for fifteen minutes to see how this author defines this tricky term."

9. Save often. Just as you need to save often when you're working on a computer, you need to save often (in your brain) when you're reading and studying. The way to save your thoughts is to jot them down. Otherwise your ideas may get deleted, especially if you have a power surge (get caught up in another idea) or a crash (fall asleep). (Interestingly, the Macintosh Users' Guide makes this save-frequently analogy in the other direction. A section called "Save Your Work," reads, "Since work that exists only in memory is lost when you shut down the computer, you need to save your work so you can come back to it later. If you don't save your work, it disappears -- like thoughts that are lost unless you write them down.")

Believe that some notes are better than no notes. As you read or listen, jot down even brief notes about what is standing out to you, puzzling you, or bothering you. These need not be extensive or grammatically correct or stylistically elegant notes. Their purpose is two-fold: to help you do something active with the material to make it your own and to leave you with enough of a record of your reading and thinking that you can recall it later.

Write notes to yourself. One way of saving often is to keep a thesis journal or memos folder on your computer. Use your thesis journal or memos folder for freewriting (prompted or unprompted) (see #5 and #6 above). Also use your journal or folder to write your notes in the form of brief memos to yourself about your latest response to, or further questions about, or musings on a particular question. If your word-processing program allows you to keep two windows open, keep a memo window open whenever you are writing at your computer (no matter what you're working on). This double-window approach allows you to catch those fleeting thoughts that fly through your mind in the middle of whatever else you're doing.

Create two thesis journals or folders: one on your computer (i.e., a folder for memos -- see above) as well as one for hand-written entries (i.e., a notebook, big envelope, manila folder, or big piece of paper on the wall) to record thesis thoughts that come to you in moments when you're not at the computer. Great ideas don't always come at appropriate
or convenient times, so you have to log them in as they arrive. You may do some of your most creative thinking in the spaces in between your official work sessions and end up jotting some of your best ideas on cocktail napkins, the backs of old envelopes, scraps of paper, and receipts. Just make sure you have once place or "bin" where you keep them all together. Some people keep one such bin for the introduction, another for the conclusion, one for each chapter, and one miscellaneous file for what writing teacher Larry Weinstein calls "gems without a setting."

10. Let your reader in on your reasoning, your thinking, your understanding. Let your reader know what you want him or her to take away from or learn from a chapter and from your thesis as a whole. Don't just present data. Show your reader how you want him or her to make sense of the data, what you want him or her to see as meaningful about all that data. Show your reader the inferences you make, the things you see as you read between the lines.

11. Make a point. Many senior thesis writers tend to rely on summarizing, describing, narrating, and categorizing and never get around to making a point. While an elegant and clarifying summary, or a careful and sensitive description, or a well-chosen and illustrative narrative, or a new and intriguing categorization may be a contribution to your field, chances are you will be expected to develop some sort of argument or point, that is, to use your summary, description, narrative, or categorization in the service of an analytic response to some unresolved question or problem. If you find yourself relying on summaries, descriptions, narratives, and categorization, ask yourself, "What larger question is this in the service of?"

12. Reckon with the complexity of your question. You don't necessarily need to resolve your question completely. Sometimes it is enough to talk clearly about how and why things are complex rather than to clear up the complexity.

13. Show the subtleties of your thinking. Many students rely on variations of "and" to connect their ideas: "and"; "in addition"; "also"; "next"; "another example"; "later"; "plus"; "besides"; "yet another thing." It is as though they knit one very long piece with a basic knit-one-purl-one stitch and then decide after it is long enough that they will cast off, add a few tassels, and call it a scarf. That is fine when we are just learning to knit or to write, but to construct complex garments and arguments, we need to make more complex connections between things.
Don't say "and" when you mean to form a more precise connection: "even though"; "seems like, but"; "is insignificant unless we consider"; "is based on the problematic assumption that"; "does not adequately address the question of"; "goes even farther and demonstrates that"; "despite its problems is nonetheless useful for"; "but this definition differs in one critical respect"; "addresses that question but does not address the matter of." An analogy or metaphor can also help you clarify a connection between ideas.

14. Use chapter titles and subheads as important signposts for your reader and as ways of challenging yourself to summarize your thoughts. To name is to know.

15. Let readers of your draft know the questions you have about the draft. While you may also want to give your adviser and friends carte blanche to respond to whatever strikes them in your drafts, sometimes specifying some of the questions you have helps you feel less vulnerable to getting feedback. You can ask people to tell you what they see as your governing question, or to name three things they learned in reading your chapter, or to tell you what they liked most and what they had the most trouble with, or to tell you where your argument is weakest and where it is strongest, how the tone works in a particular place, etc.

16. Accept that anxiety and anxiety-management are part of the writing process. Upon the completion of his doctorate, a graduate student commented that 80% of the time and energy involved in writing a dissertation goes to anxiety management. You can't wait until you are not afraid or not anxious to begin writing. You need to find ways to write even when you're anxious. Writing in your thesis journal about your fear or anxiety can be a way of keeping yourself company in your fear, discovering what your fear is about, letting the fear be there without letting it stop you from doing what you need to do. In addition to writing about your fear or stuckness, working in 15-minute stretches, taking frequent breaks, getting regular exercise, meditating, using the SOS strategy, using the So/And Even So Exercise, and talking with people are all ways of managing your anxiety.

17. Take frequent breaks. To sustain your focus and concentration, you need to pace yourself. Pacing requires well-timed breaks. Take a break before you get to the "breaking point," that is, the point at which you are so exhausted that you collapse or so frustrated that you avoid getting back to the task.

Many people say, "But my 'little' breaks inevitably last for hours." You can avoid the potential for dangerously long breaks if you: a) develop a repertoire of refreshing activities; b) experiment with breaks of different sizes; and c) develop a sensitivity to when you need a break and to what kind and what length of break you need at any given point. Your repertoire of breaks might include talking with a friend, meditating, dancing in
your room to a favorite song, reading the mail, making a phone call, getting something to eat or drink, taking a brief nap (notice how long is "just right" for you), reading a novel or a newspaper, doing the dishes, taking a walk, doing some artwork, starting a letter to a friend, getting exercise, or running an errand. When you take a break, ask yourself what exactly you need right now. Do you need a change of activity (e.g., to do something physical rather than something sedentary or to work on an art project rather than a problem set)? Do you need a change of environment (e.g., to get some fresh air or to work in a friend's room)? A change of perspective (e.g., to talk with a friend or to see a movie)? Sleep? Company? Nourishment? Distraction? Entertainment? Notice which sorts and sizes of breaks are most responsive to particular needs. Sometimes only a long break will do. But frequent, brief breaks can be surprisingly restorative.

18. Think of your work in terms of relationship, a process of continually connecting and re-connecting. Things get out of perspective when they fall out of relationship: we cannot tell how big or small things are unless we see them in relation to something else. To keep your work in perspective, or to bring your thesis back to scale once you've lost perspective, try to stay in relationship with, i.e., connected with
   • your curiosity and your caring (also known as your interest, your passion, your desire to understand or to know) -- by remembering what drew you to your question in the first place.
   • your question -- by freewriting, being playful with ideas (see #5 and #6 below).
   • your coaches (i.e., teachers), colleagues (i.e., fellow students), and loyal fans (i.e., friends) by talking with them about your ideas and about your experience of trying to write.

You may find the following three metaphors of connecting and reconnecting helpful:

   • Engaging, disengaging, and reengaging gears. Imagine your mind and your project as two gears. To turn, they need to engage, to mesh. Questions are the cogs of the gears, the means by which your mind engages with your project. You prepare to write (or read) by remembering the questions your piece is addressing (or discovering the questions an author is addressing) and by generating questions of your own. These questions set the gears in motion. Whenever your mind disengages (i.e., you lose your concentration) use these questions to help you reengage.

   • Relating (to your project). Relationships, whether with your studies or with people, share common phases and themes: Getting acquainted. Courtship. Falling in and out of love. Disillusionment. Negotiating new terms. Staying in touch. Getting reacquainted. Remembering what about the other initially attracted you, appealed to you. Remaining curious about the other. Finding common ground. Negotiating more formal relationships, i.e., those based on something other than love or friendship.
Practicing Zen (an approach to everything in life, including one's writing, reading and studying). A Zen approach to life involves mindfulness (vs. mindlessness); being present (vs. being absent); and cultivating an abiding awareness of your relation to all you do and encounter in your life.

When your attention wanders, as it inevitably will, just notice that it has, and bring it back to your task. Don't judge yourself or your behavior ("There I go again being such a poor writer (or reader). I never keep my focus. I have such a short attention span. I bet I have the poorest concentration of anyone. I can't believe I am so distractible. I must be doing something wrong. Everyone else in this class (or this library, or the world) knows how to keep their focus. I'm just not a good reader. . ."). Such judgments waste your precious time and energy. When you lose your concentration, just notice what you are doing, and then bring your attention back to your focus.

19. Negotiate with yourself. When you seem to be sabotaging your own efforts to do what you intend, listen for internal voices that express your competing needs, desires and fears. Part of you might be saying, "Me, I really do want to do well on this project. I want to get down to work." But another part might be saying, "Me, I'm going to make sure I get some time to hang out with friends no matter what." And yet another part might be saying, "Me, I'm afraid I'm really not competent to do this project. I'm afraid that if I work on it now, I'll just discover that I really don't know what I'm doing or that I can't do as good a job as I want to."

At times like this, it is as if our behavior is being guided by an internal committee whose members each have a vested interest in their own particular preferred activity. The committee as a whole has trouble either accomplishing a task or enjoying itself wholeheartedly because its members keep quibbling over which activity should have priority. Worktime tends to be compromised by the desire to rest or play, and playtime tends to be contaminated by guilt and anxiety over not working.

To work and play with less internal conflict, you need to form alliances among various parts of yourself --for example, among the part of you that aspires to do your best, the part that values other things in life besides achievement, and the part that is afraid of failure, compulsive working, loneliness, or other potential risks of engaging with your work. To form such an alliance requires that all of the separate, uncooperative, "me/I" voices join to create a generative "we/let's" voice (e.g., "Okay, we have a lot of different things that matter to us. Let's figure out how can we get going on this project and also help manage our fear about not being good enough and also guarantee that we can have time to play"). In creating a "we/let's" voice, you bring together all of your energies in the effort to live a life that feels whole and true to the complexity of who you are.

20. Let yourself be surprised in the process of writing your thesis. True learning involves a transformation of sorts, and we all know how disorienting transformations can be.
Appendix 2: Worksheets for Senior Thesis Writers

Worksheets for Senior Thesis Writers
(and other writers, too)

prepared by Sheila M. Reindl

c/o Bureau of Study Counsel
Harvard University
5 Linden St., Cambridge, MA 02138 (617) 495-2581

These worksheets provide prompts for freewriting, i.e., questions and sentence stems that give you a running start when you sit down to do some focused freewriting. Focused or prompted freewriting is uncensored writing that is done in the service of creativity, of generating ideas and potential links between ideas.

Connecting with Your Curiosity, p. 1

Putting Vague Thoughts into the Form of Questions, p. 2

Identifying Your Governing Question, p. 3

Questions and Prompts toward an Introduction, p. 4

Questions and Prompts toward a Literature Review, p. 5

Questions and Prompts toward a Methods Section, p. 6

Questions and Prompts toward a Chapter, p. 7

Questions and Prompts toward a Conclusion, p. 8

Reckoning with Complexity, p. 9

Narrowing the Scope, p. 10

Gems without a Setting,* p. 11
1. Connecting with Your Curiosity

What really interests me is . . .

(OR, alternatively, When I started this project, the thing that really interested me was . . .)

(OR, alternatively, What really drew me to this topic in the first place was . . .)
2. Putting Vague Thoughts into the Form of Questions

Here is a list of questions -- large and small, near and far, grand and modest, and in no particular order -- that I might want to consider in my thesis:
3.
Identifying Your Governing Question

If I had to put my topic into the form of a single question, that question would be . . .

(OR, alternatively, What I really want to know is . . .)
4. Questions and Prompts toward an Introduction

or

So What and Why Bother?: Identifying What Makes Your Question a Question at All and What Makes It a Question Worth Addressing

My governing question derives from competing observations*, i.e., observations that appear to me to be in tension with one another and to indicate an apparent puzzle, problem, discrepancy, oversight, mystery, contradiction, or surprise. The competing observations that give rise to my governing question are . . .

. . . on the one hand . . .

. . . but on the other hand/and yet . . .

This problem/puzzle, discrepancy etc. and my governing question are of interest to other scholars/researchers because . . .

*Any given paper might be a response to more than two competing observations.
5. Questions and Prompts toward a Literature Review

Who else (or what other body or bodies of literature) has attempted to address my governing question (or related questions)?

The question they asked was . . .

The way they approached their question was to . . .

What they ended up saying in response to the question they posed is . . .

What remains unasked / unresolved / overlooked / unexplored / unaddressed / misunderstood is . . .

My project addresses that gap by . . .
6. Questions and Prompts toward a Methods Section

I can think of my methods as being, in part, the actual tasks (e.g., library research, interviews, viewing of videos or film, field observations) I will need to undertake to approach the question I am posing. Those tasks are (and I will try to be as specific as I can) . . .

Other methods I could potentially use (i.e., other tasks I could potentially undertake) to approach the question I'm posing are . . .

My reasons for choosing to use some of the methods I list above and not others are . . .

Terms I will need to define to do this research include . . .

Some of the methodological issues/problems/challenges with which I will need to contend are (these include both questions others might ask about how I am approaching my question as well as questions I myself have about how I am approaching my question) . . .

I might respond to or deal with those methodological issues / problems / challenges by . . .
7. Questions and Prompts toward a Chapter

If I had to put this chapter into the form of a single question, that question would be . . .

Here is a list of other questions I need to address in this chapter:
8.
Questions and Prompts
toward a Conclusion

The headway I've made toward resolution of my governing question is . . .

What remains unresolved is . . .

It remains unresolved because . . .

My research has implications for . . .

For instance, my research has methodological implications for future research, that is, implications for how we frame the questions in this field and implications for the methods we use to address those questions. Those implications include . . .

Other implications include (e.g., implications for specific practices or policies, implications for how we interpret results of previous research) . . .
What makes my question a particularly complex* one with which to reckon is that . . .

I will attempt to reckon with those complexities by . . .

*Remember: You do not necessarily need to clear up all of the complexity, but you at least need to be clear about how and why things are (and remain) complex.
It is beyond the scope of my paper to . . .

Therefore, I won't consider/explore/analyze that issue in depth in this piece. For the purposes of this paper, I will . . . (e.g., assume . . . / work on the premise that . . . / summarize others' thinking on this matter. . . / refer the reader to . . .)

I make that particular assumption/work on that particular premise/summarize that particular person's thinking/refer the reader to that particular literature because . . .
Here are some of the ideas that I might not be able to include in this thesis or paper but that deserve safekeeping because they are brilliant and precious thoughts -- or at least interesting thoughts -- that might come in handy for some other project:

* I borrow this term from writing instructor Larry Weinstein. He encouraged me to write down the ideas and questions that I found interesting but that did not seem to have a place in my current paper.
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