

Honors Thesis Defense

Purpose: The thesis defense represents a ritual of closure marking the completion of a substantial academic achievement. It allows a small group of faculty readers to assess the quality of the thesis and to determine whether it fulfills the requirements of the Honors Program. It provides an opportunity for the student to “defend” their final product and engage intellectually with questions related to the work they have carried out over the course of the last two years. The thesis defense is intended to be a thoughtful, supportive interchange that is in-depth but not intimidating.

When: The defense should occur at a time when the student and the three committee members can attend during the window specified by the Honors Program (April 24-May 4, 2009). Faculty on the committee should be given the full polished draft of the thesis at least one week before the defense (and maybe two weeks, depending on length of the thesis and mentor preferences).

Who coordinates: The thesis mentor is the chair of the committee and schedules the time and place of the defense. The faculty mentor is also responsible for reporting the date, place, and outcome to the Honors Program. The student should bring the title/approval page (printed on acid-free paper) to the defense so that the committee members can sign it if they approve the thesis.

Who attends: The Honors Fellow and the defense committee attend the defense. The committee consists of the faculty mentor, a representative of the Honors Program (usually another mentor), and a third faculty reader from the field who is selected by the student and mentor. Although additional faculty members or other guests may be invited if the mentor and student desire, that is the exception rather than the rule.

Format: The defense will usually last about one hour, and no more than 90 minutes. There will be no formal presentation, although the student may make opening remarks in the first five minutes that serve as a brief summary reminder of their main project/arguments/issues. The defense should be a discussion in which the student responds to questions and comments from the faculty (who take turns). Typical topics may include the student’s methodology, conclusions, most significant lessons, things that would be done differently if starting over, things that could be done if the project were continued in the future, the project’s significance and connection to other work, etc. The tone of the conversation should be serious and collegial; any criticism should be offered in a constructive and supportive manner.

After an hour or so of discussion, the chair will conclude and ask the student and any guests to leave the room. In the student’s absence, the members of the committee will discuss the merits of the thesis and the defense. After conferring, the committee will invite the student back into the room and inform him or her of its decision. If the committee finds that the student has fulfilled Honors requirements with regard to the thesis and defense, members will sign the thesis title/approval sheet.

What constitutes “meeting Honors Program requirements?”

- The thesis should meet the expectations for what an Honors thesis should look like as specified in the relevant departmental document posted on the Honors website at <http://www.elon.edu/honors>. Those expectations may pertain to type of project, methodology, length, format, quality, etc.
- The honors thesis should be a substantial project that goes beyond normal requirements of the major and represents the student's best work in their discipline. It should be an example of excellent undergraduate work.
- Each thesis should demonstrate clear critical thinking, a mastery of some disciplinary material, clarity in communication of complex ideas, and professionalism in production.

Outcomes: If the committee members decide the thesis meets Honors Program requirements, the student will graduate as an Honors Fellow. In some cases, the committee may request minor revisions to an approved thesis (e.g. add a few paragraphs, fix some citations, etc.). If committee members decide that the thesis does not meet Honors Program requirements, they will provide the student with specific feedback about the deficiencies and the student will not graduate as an Honors Fellow.