

Preparing for Honours - Hints and Tips

What is Honours?

In this university, Honours is described as follows:

"The award of Honours at UWA results only from successful completion of a degree or, in rare cases, a diploma programme that includes a distinctive dissertation or portfolio-based component. This component trains and assesses students' abilities to contribute to the future development of their disciplines through research that extends existing knowledge and/or through the original and creative application of knowledge in ways likely to impact upon future thinking in their fields of study.... The dissertation/portfolio component of each honours programme must contribute at least 20% towards the final Honours grade" (Academic Board Resolution 134/99; [UWA Policy on the Award of Honours](#)).

In other words, the goal of the Honours programme is research training. To achieve Honours you must successfully complete a dedicated programme that includes independent research and preparation of a dissertation or portfolio worth at least 20% of your mark for the year.

There are various models for Honours programmes in the University. In some areas of the University, such as Science and Arts, students wishing to do Honours enrol in an optional fourth year after they have completed their three-year degree. Generally, students must have achieved a minimum average mark to qualify for entry into Honours. In other areas, such as Agriculture and Engineering, the Honours programme is part of the standard four-year degree. In some discipline areas the research project and dissertation comprise 100% of the activity and assessment for the year. In others, students are required to complete coursework comprising up to 80% of the assessment, in addition to a dissertation. What all Honours programmes at this University have in common is that they all require some (at least 20%) component of individual research and they all require submission of a dissertation or portfolio of work.

How does Honours differ from other undergraduate courses?

In most areas of the University, Honours differs from other undergraduate courses in that it requires a much higher degree of independent thinking, planning and activity. Most students find their Honours year the most challenging and worthwhile of their university experience. Indeed, it is common for students to describe the Honours year as simultaneously their best and worst year at university. It is the best because it provides a unique opportunity to follow your interest in an area of research, to focus on this and contribute to the development of your chosen research area. This is exciting and rewarding. Conversely, the Honours year is challenging because the type of thinking and the skills required for independent research are somewhat different than the thinking and skills required in most undergraduate courses. The focus is on your capacity for independent thinking, time and project management and problem-solving. Thus, the Honours programme usually involves a step into the unknown. An important issue for many students is managing their time - Honours requires you to execute multiple tasks and manage conflicting demands to a tight schedule, which you must develop for yourself. In addition, the requirement for submission of a dissertation or portfolio means that you must demonstrate advanced skills of communication and organisation of information.

Is the award of Honours worth an extra year of study?

Honours provides you with extra preparation for independent work and research, and is an opportunity to develop and demonstrate important skills that are in high demand by employers. In particular, successful completion of Honours indicates to a prospective employer that you are able to think independently and critically, manage a project, solve problems and communicate effectively. This

practical demonstration that you have these skills is often more valuable to a prospective employer than simply a list of high marks in undergraduate units. Furthermore, Honours is essential if you wish to progress into a postgraduate research degree.

How can you prepare for honours?

You can prepare for Honours by thinking, reading and talking with others about several important elements of Honours: supervision; choosing a topic; independent research; and preparing a dissertation. In some faculties there is provision for students to choose between discipline areas for their Honours programme. In this case, it is also important for students to find out about the programmes in different discipline areas (e.g. the balance between coursework and dissertation, type of coursework etc) and decide on the one that suits their individual preferences and needs.

Supervision

Usually, the research and dissertation component of Honours involves one-to-one supervision of the student by a member of academic staff. Some students have more than one supervisor. Generally, allocation of supervisors is a matter for individual negotiation between student and supervisor, and students are relatively free to choose. This is a choice that should be made with great care, because the effectiveness of the student-supervisor relationship has a large effect on the student's experience.

The role of the supervisor is to advise, guide and provide constructive feedback to the student through the processes of choosing a realistic topic, designing a project, doing the research and interpreting the findings and writing the dissertation.

Things to do before deciding on a supervisor:

- read some literature about research;
- talk with a few prospective supervisors about their styles of supervision and what they expect of their students;
- talk with your prospective supervisors' current and former Honours and postgraduate students about their experiences; and
- talk with prospective supervisors about their research interests and prospective topics.

Select a supervisor whom you expect will: maintain an interested, professional and supportive supervisory relationship with you throughout your Honours year; meet with you regularly (at least fortnightly) to discuss your project; provide on-going clear, adequate, good-quality advice on the planning and execution of your project; and provide you with timely and constructive feedback on all aspects of your work.

Things to discuss and negotiate with your supervisor very early in the programme:

- the regularity, timing and format of your meetings;
- the type and level of assistance that you would like, and your supervisor is prepared to give, with respect to: choosing a topic and refining the project; planning a schedule; setting goals; finding appropriate literature; collecting the data and information; analysing and interpreting your findings; planning the dissertation; and writing and reviewing the dissertation; and

- a schedule for the research and preparation of the dissertation, including deadlines for key elements of the process.

Choosing a Topic

Before deciding on a topic, it is usually a good idea to first identify one or more prospective supervisors according to the criteria above. Then, in consultation with your prospective supervisor/s, identify some possible topics and projects according to the following criteria:

- choose an area that is interesting to you, about which you are sufficiently interested and curious to maintain your enthusiasm for a year-long project;
- choose an area that is interesting to your prospective supervisor;
- choose a topic in which you can identify questions to be answered or gaps to be filled in the current knowledge; and
- find a project that is realistic for you to complete within the time allocated for your research and dissertation.

Independent Research

It is important that new research students prepare themselves by thinking about the nature of research as carefully as they think about the subject of the research. Too often, students concentrate on the content of what they are doing at the expense of the process, and realise too late that they don't really understand what is expected of them.

Some things to think about:

- How will Honours research differ from your previous academic experience?
- What skills will you require for successful completion of Honours?
- How can you acquire the skills that you do not already have, and improve or develop those that you do have?
- What problems commonly occur during Honours and how can you avoid them?

Some things to do prior to starting your Honours year:

- read some literature about starting research;
- discuss the research process with postgraduate students and previous Honours students in your and other disciplines; ask them for their advice for success;
- familiarise yourself with the resources, assistance and training available through the [Library](#) and introduce yourself to your reference librarian;
- familiarise yourself with the details of the Honours programme in your department: structure of the programme, assessment criteria, rules and regulations, important dates and so on;
- read the [UWA Policy on the Award of Honours](#);

- learn to use bibliographic software such as Endnote; and
- learn to touch type (there are various typing tutors available on-line)

Early in your Honours year, attend some *STUDYSmarter* workshops about the research process.

Preparing a Dissertation

Preparing a dissertation differs from the processes of writing with which most undergraduates are familiar. Not only is an Honours dissertation a larger document than most students have previously tackled, but it requires a particular style of thinking. A dissertation is much more than a long essay or research report. Central to a dissertation is the thesis: the core idea or argument. In the words of Anderson and Poole (1994), "a thesis is not the same as a topic to be investigated... while a topic may be the structure of a particular crystal or the novels of Miles Franklin, a thesis is a statement that says, for instance, something about crystals or an author's novels. The distinction is important since in many ways the statement of a thesis determines the approach and stance writers take towards their topics or research questions... a thesis is an idea or theory that is expressed as a statement, a contention for which evidence is gathered and discussed logically." Thinking about the thesis should start at the very beginning of the project.

Activities to help you to start thinking about your thesis and dissertation:

- read some literature about writing dissertations;
- read Honours dissertations in your field to see how previous students have structured theirs (many departments and most supervisors have a collection of these); and
- attend some *STUDYSmarter* workshops on how to manage your research project and write your thesis.

Sources of advice and assistance for Honours students

Service/Resource Contact Details
 Departmental/School Honours Coordinator
 Your department/school
 Guild Education Office
 education@guild.uwa.edu.au
 6488 2295

UWA Student Services:

- [STUDYSmarter – Learning, Language & Research Skills](#)
- [Counselling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#)
- [Careers Centre](#)
- [UniAccess: UWA's Disability Office](#)
- [Financial Aid Service](#)
- [Housing Service](#)

Useful resources

(these and many other useful materials are available for from [STUDYSmarter's Resource Area](#), which is located on the 2nd floor of the Social Sciences South building)

- Anderson, J & Poole, M (1994) *Thesis and Assignment Writing*, John Wiley and Sons, Brisbane
- Baxter, L, Hughes, C & Tight, M (1996) *How to Research*, Open University Press, Buckingham
- Brown, S, McDowell, L & Race, P (1995) *500 Tips for Research Students*, Kogan Page, London
- Christian, R, Davies, K, de Chazal, J, Krebs, E & Melbourne, B (1997) *PhD Supervision: a Guide for Students and Supervisors*, The Australian National University, Canberra
- Preece, R (1994) *Starting Research*, Martin's Press, New York
- Punch, KF (2006) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*, Sage, London