

Student Perspectives on Completing the Senior Thesis in Literature

Geoa Geer (AY 2011-12): "Creating a thesis is like any piece of art or writing: it's daunting, terrifying, and ultimately a joy to create. You learn to stay organized and sane as you weave together hundreds, if not thousands, of pages of information into a fascinating argument no one has ever heard before. You discuss the finer elements of writing with your two favorite professors and are given mostly free license to analyze topics, texts, and authors you love. We chose to be English majors because we love to write and read; doing a thesis is therefore the logical extent and wonderful conclusion to our studies. The most fulfilling part of my academic career was writing the massive and (I think) beautiful text that is my thesis. I am so happy and proud that I accomplished such a difficult task, and I highly recommend you pursuing your own interests by writing your own."

Danielle Grimm (AY 2010-11): "As an English major who had become interested in fantasy literature, I viewed the senior thesis as an opportunity to create my own coursework on a topic that was deeply interesting to me Though my research was focused on the novel *Lilith* by George MacDonald, the scope of my research expanded beyond this work, and what I learned became applicable in many of my other literature courses, even a senior seminar on John Milton In addition to the benefits that the research provides, the mentoring process for the thesis gives undergraduates the opportunity to work closely with professors The relationship that I built with my mentor, Dr. Campbell, continues into the present, beyond my graduation from the University of Pittsburgh. I do not believe that I would have been able to complete the task to the best of my ability without her help and encouragement, and I do not think that I would be where I am, a first-year Teach for America teacher, if it had not been for her influence on me as a teacher and mentor If you plan on teaching or going to graduate school for English, you absolutely cannot underestimate the practical value of completing the project, and the feeling of pride that you will experience upon completing the task."

Jake Robbins (AY 2011-12): "The best part of working on an English Honors Thesis is the experience of following through with something on a level that you didn't know you could do. Projects can differ in scope and intensity, but my project particularly could have only been attempted as a Thesis. It is extremely rewarding to produce something that you know took you as far as you could go down a certain rabbit-hole (not to mention as a seriously good line on your CV). The English Honors Thesis is an opportunity to connect with faculty closely and develop a personal relationship with your field of study. When you have read what you have always seen in bibliographic info; when you have books of notes from different viewpoints; when you have edited a paper for publication--these are the foundations of serious academic research in any field."

"I recently got my thesis published as a book, and in a recent job interview, being able to link an Amazon link in my resume set me apart. The Honors Thesis is challenging, but in many respects it can be a huge personal milestone full of inward looking and pride. Give it your all, but never get too attached to details. Never limit your focus, but don't overreach. Write about what you like, how you like, and the rest will come together. The Senior Honors Thesis is a great way to learn more about yourself, even if you do not see a lifetime of academic research in your future."

Lauren Schmeer (AY 2012-13): "There are a lot of things I would do differently if I had my senior thesis to do all over again. A lot of the changes would have been doing things sooner—meeting with my advisors for the first time, narrowing down my topic, starting the daunting task of then revising those 60 hard-earned pages just a little bit sooner. I would have read more, wrote more, deleted more. There were a lot of ideas that just didn't make

it onto a page, and maybe some of those ideas deserve an entire thesis of their own. A senior thesis is twelve months of working up the nerve to create something so substantial, so in-depth, so focused on what you think you want your senior year, your academic studies to have been. And it's doing that all while your finishing your last classes, interning at your most important placements, taking your final exams, and applying for graduate schools or jobs. It's not like your other classes, and that's the worst and best thing about it. It's something you won't get from any of those other experiences, and when you reach the end of the year, when you feel that wonderful, best feeling of hitting send after investing so much of yourself in a project, you may want to change nothing or everything about it, but you won't want to change having done it."

Elaine Short (AY 2010-11): "Pursuing a literary thesis was the smartest thing I did as a senior literature student at Pitt. For those of you considering post-graduate work in the humanities, a trial run with the thesis will prove whether that path is for you. Certainly, graduating with a hefty piece of self-directed work felt good and I knew I could use it for reference later down the line, but what was truly valuable about the experience, however, was the process of creating my own inquiry and following it through with the support and direction of Dr. Murray-Twyning. I value that project more than anything else I completed as an undergraduate because it was of my own wielding, from start to finish. If you are lucky enough to find a professor who has the patience and sincere interest to guide your work, do the thesis."

Becca Stern (AY 2011-12): "I definitely think that there are many benefits to working on a senior thesis. I think that I learned as much about myself as I did about my thesis topic. As I'm beginning graduate school, I'm learning that the process of coming up with an idea, "selling" it to a professor, researching, and then writing and revising was great preparation for the work that I hope to do in both my graduate school and professional careers I was able to work very closely with my committee . . . [and] I am confident that the relationships I developed with each of my three committee members are strong enough that I can continue to list them as references in years to come."

"In short, writing my thesis was the single greatest academic accomplishment of my undergraduate career. I grew and learned more in my last year of college because of my thesis and I can't imagine having graduated without this capstone project. As I begin graduate school, I feel that I am at a huge advantage over my peers who did not write theses because of the research and writing skills that I honed."

Liam Sweeney (AY 2010-11): "The senior thesis was, distinctly, the most edifying educational experience I've had. This is, in part, because the project demands self-exploration. You take a year; you make your reading list; you take piles of notes and change your project half a dozen times. When you earn a victory, when you have days where pages are boiling over, when there are paradigm shifts and discoveries made, you feel something that is at the heart of the Humanities. There are plenty of ten-page papers I had to write as an undergrad that felt like a chore. In hindsight, the best way to describe the Senior Thesis is that it was a luxury."

Ashley Werlinich (AY 2012-13): "The senior thesis is one of the most interesting and rewarding experiences a student can have as an undergraduate. With an essay of this magnitude, the text is constantly changing: through suggestions from advisors and peers, through research, and even through sheer chance. Ideas change, and nothing is ever exactly what it was in the beginning--and yet, it is exactly this fluidity and changeability that makes this project so appealing."

"By writing this essay, you begin to see many literary works in a different light--not only did my research yield a very interesting analysis of my focus works, but my research also

enabled me to see texts I was reading in other classes in intriguing, utterly new ways. You learn through your work to take risks, to follow the areas of exploration that interest you--even if that means revamping the work entirely--because ultimately these interests result in a thoroughly rewarding and intriguing text.

"Through the guidance of your advisors, you learn to hone your writing, and ultimately become a much better writer in the process. If you have any inclination at all to pursue the senior thesis option, do yourself a favor and enroll in it, because there are few experiences as entertaining, informative, and ultimately gratifying as working on the senior thesis."