

**PSYCHOLOGY**

**HONOURS**

**THESIS**

**HANDBOOK**

## Introduction

Third and fourth year students majoring in psychology at York often ask for additional information about the Honours Thesis. The purpose of this handbook is to provide some of this information along with some useful advice about completing your thesis work. It is a good source of information, but it is not the only available source of information. If you have a question or a problem that pertains to your thesis work, you may consult a number of sources, including your thesis supervisor, your academic advisor, the Psychology Supplemental Calendar, and the Psychology Undergraduate Office in Room 291/292 BSB. Also, the Workshop series described toward the end of this handbook may deal with many of your questions. If necessary, you can also speak with one of the staff in the Undergraduate Office to get in contact with a faculty advisor for fourth-year psychology students.

### WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO DO AN HONOURS THESIS?

You are not eligible to do an Honours thesis unless you are in the fourth year of one of the BA or BSc Psychology Honours Programmes. In addition, you cannot enrol in the Honours Thesis course until you have in your possession an Honours thesis agreement form that has been signed by a valid thesis supervisor. If the thesis arrangement does not materialise for whatever reason, you will have to satisfy your degree requirements by taking the Advanced Research course (PSYC 4170 6.00). The Undergraduate Office (291/292 BSB) will help you to enrol if you succeed in finding a supervisor.

Please note that you should not use the Web-based enrolment system to register for the thesis course (PSYC 4000 6.0) until you have submitted the completed contract to the Undergraduate Office.

### WHAT IS AN HONOURS THESIS?

PSYC 4000 6.0, Honours Thesis, is a full-year six-credit course that is open only to fourth-year psychology students in the Faculty of Health completing a BA or BSc degree. It is described more fully in the York University Undergraduate Calendar and in the Psychology Department Supplemental Calendar (4000 level). Please go to <http://www.yorku.ca/health/psyc/undergraduate.htm> in order to download copies of these calendar's. The Honours Thesis course differs from other courses in several respects. First, there are no required lectures, seminars, textbooks, tests, etc. Instead, the course consists of an ongoing series of meetings between you and your thesis supervisor, during which you talk about each phase of your research (selecting a topic, designing your study, collecting your data, analysing your data, and writing up your results).

The end product of the course is the written document, the Honours Thesis. These may vary in length, although most theses are around 30 pages. The length will vary depending on the nature of the project and the expectations of your supervisor. In the case of a thesis, bigger is not necessarily better. The thesis itself is similar to an M.A. thesis, but it is considerably less ambitious in scope. The purpose of a thesis is to make a contribution, however small, to the existing body of knowledge in the field of psychology. Consequently, it is quite different from the kind of course paper that is just a summary of published research, designed to show that the students have done their work. In contrast to this, the goal of a thesis is to add some new finding

or new insight to what is already known. Some students fear that they will have trouble coming up with an original idea. Fortunately, psychology is still a very young science and not everything has been done already. Moreover, in comparison to many other disciplines, modest but meaningful research in psychology does not require a tremendous amount of background knowledge and technical training. The possibility of making a small, but significant contribution to psychology is well within the capabilities of most fourth-year Honours students. The question is how to go about it. Here are three pieces of advice:

First, one way to get an original idea is to spend some time searching topics that interest you using PsycINFO. For the most recent research, you can also browse through the current periodicals section of the library. Look through some of the more recent psychology journal articles and get some idea of what sorts of things are being done today. You may be able to spot a methodological problem with a recently published paper, or you may be able to think of another variable that could be of some importance.

Second, you should visit the Psychology Resource Centre in 162A BSB. Why? Copies of Honours theses from past years are stored in this room. Have a seat and take look at past efforts. This is one of the best ways to learn what a feasible project is and what may be expected of you.

A third bit of advice is simply to approach a potential thesis supervisor and say that you are interested in their field of study (check out their research interests and some publications first), but that you are having problems narrowing down a research idea. Typically, you will find that a potential advisor can at least point you in the right direction by suggesting some helpful readings. Taken a step further, a professor will probably have several good ideas that need to be tested and that would make wonderful projects.

The main point of the above discussion is that you should not base your decision of whether to do an Honours thesis on the fear of an inability to come up with your own unique idea.

### SHOULD I DO AN HONOURS THESIS?

*On what criteria should you base your decision?* This question is difficult to answer because it strongly depends on three things: your personality, your goals, and your degree of time pressure. If you consider yourself to be relatively resourceful, self-disciplined, and motivated, then you may be the type of person who should do a thesis. These are personal characteristics that are often associated with your psychology grades. If you have an average of B+ or better, it is likely that you are quite capable of doing a thesis. You will experience more difficulty if your psychology average is much lower than B+. A common misunderstanding is that you must have an A average in order to do a thesis. This is not true. There are examples of students who did not have the highest grades but were still able to do fine theses. How? Usually through a great deal of hard work!

*Is it necessary to do a thesis if you plan to apply to graduate school?* Doing a thesis may be very helpful for at least two reasons. First, if you want to go to graduate school, you will need letters of recommendation from professors who know you well enough to comment on your ability, motivation, knowledge of psychology, research experience, etc. Your thesis supervisor would be in a better position to appraise your efforts and write you a recommendation letter than would one of the instructors of the Advanced Research in Psychology course (PSYC 4170 6.00).

More importantly, doing a thesis will provide you with some much needed information about yourself. Almost every graduate programme requires that you do a research based thesis of some sort. Some students take a few years to complete a thesis at the Master's level and many more to do a doctoral dissertation. Your fourth year Honours thesis experience should give you some indication of whether you enjoy this type of work and whether you would ever want to do it again.

As for time pressure, you should realise by now that students who do an honour's thesis usually become quite involved in their research project and spend more time and energy than they would in PSYC 4170 6.0, the Advanced Research course. Students who have serious outside commitments, a heavy course load, or who want to finish off their degree requirements as easily and efficiently as possible might be advised to take the Advanced Research course (please note that doing a thesis in the PSYC 4170 course is also an enormous commitment). It is a real mistake to do an independent thesis simply because there are no required lectures or seminars.

In summary, you are not disqualified from applying to graduate school if you don't do a thesis. However, it may be helpful to do a thesis for the reasons outlined above.

#### WHO CAN SUPERVISE AN HONOURS THESIS?

Only the following people are allowed to supervise Honours Thesis and Independent Reading courses in our Department.

- a) Full-time members of the Psychology Department in Health and Glendon;
- b) Full-time members of other York departments who are appointed to the York Graduate Programme in Psychology;
- c) Retired members of the full-time faculty in Health Psychology.

People outside the above categories cannot supervise. You should avoid signing up with a valid supervisor "in name only" on the understanding that the actual supervision is to be done by someone else. This too easily leads to trouble because there is no material commitment on the part of the "phantom supervisor."

#### HOW DO I FIND A SUPERVISOR?

Since it is your thesis, it is your responsibility to find a supervisor. Many students are unable to find a supervisor, and so there are no guarantees. If you cannot find a supervisor, then you will need to enrol in the Advanced Research course (4170 6.0) in order to fulfil your degree requirements. You should be aware of the fact that professors do not have much material incentive to undertake the considerable work that Honours thesis supervision entails. This does not mean the professors are unwilling to supervise one or more students. Many faculty members enjoy supervising thesis students. However, it does mean that students must show a good deal of initiative, persistence, and ingenuity in getting a supervisor.

Your prospects for getting a supervisor will be enhanced if you follow the tips listed below:

**1. Do your homework.** It is best to be familiar with professors' areas of interest before you approach them. In this regard, there is a list of Faculty Research Interests available from the Psychology Undergraduate office (291/292 BSB). This list will give some idea of the things that are studied by the various professors. Also, you may want to track down their graduate students

to find out what is going on in their lab. Finally, check out their publications using PsycINFO. You should note that most professors prefer students to work on topics that are closely related to their own research interests. This is not an attempt on the part of the faculty to stifle creativity or to get their own research completed. Rather, professors realise that they will be more helpful to students if they have some degree of experience and expertise in the area.

**2. Be flexible.** It is important for you study a topic that you find interesting. However, you should realise that you will dramatically increase your chances of landing a supervisor if you are willing to be flexible in terms of your thesis project. This is the best way to end up with a project that is tailored to both your interests and the professor's interests.

**3. A proposal.** One way of impressing a potential supervisor is to prepare an Honours thesis proposal. The proposal will show the professor that you are serious about doing a research project. It will also provide an indication of your writing ability, so you should be careful about its content. It should be concise (about 200 words in length) and it should not include any grammatical or spelling errors. It is essential that you conclude your proposal by stating that you are flexible and willing to consider alternatives.

**4. Timing.** It helps to start seeking a supervisor as soon as possible. Ideally you could obtain a supervisor at the end of your third year (April to June) rather than waiting until September of your fourth year. Some professors will already have their allotment of students by September and they would be unable to accommodate Sigmund Freud if he walked in the door and asked for supervision. There are other obvious advantages to obtaining a supervisor in the spring or summer. In addition to no longer having to worry about getting a supervisor, you can get an early start on your project by doing some reading over the summer. Nonetheless, it may still be possible for you to find a supervisor in September and to do a good thesis in September. You should realise, however, that you are getting a later start than some other students, and should be prepared to put in the time and effort required to catch up to them.

**5. Sensitivity.** You should try to be sensitive to the fact that professors may be busy when you first approach them. If you use e-mail, which is probably the best first contact approach, you should provide a brief description of yourself and your research interests, and ask if they could suggest an appropriate time for a meeting.

**6. High profile professors.** You should be aware of the fact that certain "high research profile" professors doing research in popular areas may already have a full complement of graduate students. These professors usually receive more requests from students than they can possibly handle. Obviously, you have a better chance of getting a supervisor if you approach someone who is not already overloaded with students. This is not to suggest that the professor with the lower profile is not capable of supervising your thesis. In fact, you may receive more attention from this type of individual than from someone who has many "irons in the fire."

**7. Fill in the document entitled the "Honours Student Data Sheet"** found at the end of this handbook. This sheet can be filled out, copied, and handed in to prospective supervisors when you meet with them. As well, feel free to hand in a copy to the undergraduate office to be placed in a binder for prospective supervisors to look at it. It is possible that someone may notice your availability that way and get in touch with you.

WHAT ARE SOME GUIDELINES FOR DOING THE ACTUAL THESIS?

You can do your thesis on anything that both you and your supervisor consider appropriate. Obviously, it must have something to do with psychology and it should be a substantial piece of work. As noted above, the thesis should make a contribution to existing knowledge rather than a recapitulation of existing work. Once you have selected your topic, here are some important goals to keep in mind:

- 1. On creating your own monster.** It is great to be ambitious, but students usually underestimate the amount of time and effort that goes into completing a thesis. Keep your thesis manageable and avoid creating your own monster. A small project that is well done and completed on time is more impressive than a grandiose project that is late and incomplete. It is better to focus effectively on a topic of limited scope. You should ask yourself two questions when designing your project; How difficult will it be to get research participants for your study, and will the study's design necessitate the use of statistical skills that you have never been taught? Aim to do your project with a readily available population of research participants, and structure it so that only basic statistics such as correlations and analyses of variance are required.
- 2. Keep it clear.** Get your topic defined as early as possible and as clearly as possible. There is a great temptation to reach agreement on a topic that is extremely vague in the hopes that the mist will clear somewhere down the road. You could waste two or three important months in the process. It is better to work out a more specific topic at the outset and then revise it as necessary. The details of the agreement can usually be renegotiated with your thesis supervisor, either formally or informally, without any problem. Your supervisor is aware of the fact the best-laid plans of mice, women, and men often do not work out the way everyone expects. It is okay to change the focus of your project if you encounter difficulties.
- 3. Empirical is the best.** You have the option of doing an empirical thesis (quantitative or qualitative) or a theoretical paper that involves an integrated review of some area of the literature. If your thesis is empirical, it involves the collecting and analysing of data. There are two reasons why most students find this more rewarding than the second type of thesis, the theoretical thesis. First, it is better to do something empirical if you want to go to graduate school because you will gain some much-needed experience. Most theses at the graduate level are empirical. Second, it is very difficult for a fourth year student (or anyone for that matter) to do a theoretical paper. This paper has to be comprehensive, organised, and well written. Most importantly, it must still make an original contribution to the literature and provide a unique perspective on our current knowledge. This is a difficult challenge even for famous scholars. Of course, there are exceptions, and you may encounter a professor who favours this type of thesis. You can still have a successful experience, but be aware of the enormous undertaking involved in this type of project.

#### WHAT CAN I DO TO PREPARE FOR THE THESIS?

There are many ways to answer this question. As noted earlier, one important source of information is available in the Psychology Resource Centre in Room 162 BSB. This room contains Honours Theses from past years and may someday house your thesis as well. You can get a good idea of the nature of an Honour's thesis, both in terms of content and style, by spending an hour or two in the Resource Centre with these efforts from the past. Some theses are better than others are so you should look at a broad sample of previous theses. Another way to prepare for the thesis is to read any basic text on research methodology in Psychology. A

third way to prepare for the thesis is to become familiar with APA format. Your final edition of the thesis must conform to the publication guidelines set out by the American Psychological Association. These guidelines are outlined in the APA Publication Manual. Copies of this manual are usually available in the Psychology section of the York Bookstore. You are especially advised to purchase the publication manual if you plan to continue in psychology.

## EVALUATION

The grading procedure for PSYC 4000 6.0 is as follows:

First draft:	20%
Poster day participation:	5%
External evaluation:	20%
Supervisor evaluation:	55%

A brief description of the components of the evaluation can be found in the next section on important dates.

### WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT DATES AND DEADLINES?

Starting date. You should get started as soon as possible. **The ideal strategy is to work out a thesis agreement, get it signed, and then register in Psychology 4000 6.0 during the Spring Enrolment period.** One of the worst scenarios is to get the agreement form signed and course enrolment completed at the last minute (which is sometime in October according to the Faculty regulations). The worst possible nightmare is to not get enrolled in either of the courses required of Honours students, PSYC 4000 6.0 (Honours Thesis) or PSYC 4170 6.0 (Advanced Research in Psychology).

First draft. A draft of the Introduction (literature review) and Method (proposed methodology) sections must be submitted by the ***last day of the December examination period*** and when this is not possible, no later than January 15<sup>th</sup> by permission of your supervisor. The supervisor will grade this work and the mark received would go toward 20% of the final grade. This deadline will ensure that you begin writing in the first term, that progress has been made in the development of your methodology, and will give you the opportunity to receive feedback about your writing from your supervisor.

Final version & finishing date. In order to give the second reader enough time to evaluate your work and provide his/her grade to your supervisor, you will be required to submit the final draft of your thesis ***some time in mid-April***. Another faculty member who evaluates the final product (the written thesis) and not the process (e.g., the amount of work that was involved in getting to the final product) will provide the external evaluation. The Thesis Coordinator(s) will be responsible for assigning a second reader to your thesis. When planning for your finishing date, remember that everything connected with the thesis will take much longer than it should. Aiming for an early completion date will provide a little extra time if anything goes wrong. You should leave enough time to make revisions to your thesis. Most students write a first draft and then revise it several times before giving it to their supervisor. If you leave enough time, your supervisor may be able to read it over and suggest revisions that should be incorporated into the final draft. It is reasonable to aim for a mid-March date for completion of the first draft.

Other dates. It is a good idea to make a date for a formal progress report at midyear and

to work out a week-by-week completion schedule with your supervisor. If your supervisor is willing, we strongly recommend setting regular weekly or biweekly meeting times where you meet for 30 minutes or so to report on how the work is going and to ask questions.

Poster Day. Poster Day is usually held in *early April* (the exact date will be announced). Participation in Poster Day is mandatory. If you have a class scheduled at the time of the poster session, you should have someone put up your poster for you. Poster Day represents an opportunity for you to show off your work and to learn about the work of others. A poster representation is relatively easy. You summarise your information on a poster and people will stop, read, and maybe ask a few questions. Most questions are requests for either clarification or more information about your study. No sweat. The poster presentation will provide you with an opportunity to receive feedback about your thesis before submitting your final draft (about one week later). A pass (5/5) or fail (0/5) grade will be assessed by your supervisor.

Ontario Undergraduate Psychology Thesis Conference. Another important event occurs either on the last Friday in April or the first Friday in May. This is the Undergraduate Thesis Conference for the province. This conference is held at a different university and it involves students from all over Ontario. It is not compulsory that you present your work at this conference. If possible, however, you should plan to attend this conference and give a 10-15 minute presentation of your work. If you hope to attend graduate school or expect to be in a career that involves public appearances, this conference is a great opportunity to get some much needed experience in a very friendly atmosphere. Also, your willingness to present is important because it represents an opportunity to let others know about the good research projects done in the Psychology Department at York.

#### WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR HONOURS THESES?

Note that there is little financial support for your thesis. At best, the Psychology Department budget allocation provides limited funds for reimbursing a portion of students' legitimate research expenses. A little money may be available but there are no promises. The lack of money is unfortunate but it reflects a funding situation over which the Psychology Department has little or no control. Also, you are expected to bear much of the cost because there are no expensive textbooks for this course. One of the challenges in doing your research may be to figure out how it can be done cheaply. You can take some solace in the fact that this is a problem that your professors also encounter.

Other support is available in the form of a series of Wednesday afternoon workshops dealing with various aspect of thesis work. Typically, the workshops begin at 11:30 a.m. and most usually occur in the first half of the year. Some workshops will be of interest to all thesis students, whereas other workshops will be of interest only to those students who are aiming for graduate school. Information on these workshops including dates and details will be posted near the Undergraduate Psychology Office. You can also refer to Dr. Susan Murtha's website [http://www.psych.yorku.ca/smurtha/courses/4000/index\\_4000.html](http://www.psych.yorku.ca/smurtha/courses/4000/index_4000.html) Some of the workshops are listed below.

Applying to Graduate Schools: This workshop will discuss graduate school training and the application process. This is a must for anyone who is interested in applying for graduate work. It is open to students in all years.

Preparing and Writing the GRE: This workshop will deal with the admission tests that

must be completed in order to gain admittance to most graduate schools.

Preparing Posters and Conference Presentations: Tips will be provided on poster and oral presentations, as well as an example of posters.

Awards/Scholarships Workshop: This workshop will involve a visit from someone in the graduate school who will describe the various Awards/Scholarships available to those students who wish to apply to graduate school.

Jobs in psychology: What can you do when you finish your degree and how do you find employment where you can use your skills?

#### WHAT DO I DO WHEN MY THESIS IS FINISHED?

Once your thesis is finished, you must hand in two copies of the finished product. One copy is destined for the Resource Centre, Room 162 BSB. Therefore, your thesis supervisor (along with his or her final grade) must submit one copy in the special Honours Thesis Binder that you can get from the Undergraduate Psychology Office in April. You will also receive a cover sheet and a sticker that will go on the front of the binder. The other copy of your thesis is for your thesis supervisor.

#### WHERE CAN I FIND INFORMATION FOR FOURTH YEAR STUDENTS?

There is a Fourth Year Honours Bulletin Board located outside Room 249 BSB. It carries some notices and information for Fourth Year Honours Students including scholarships, stipends, and awards (Ontario Graduate Scholarships), the Fourth Year Workshop Series. You should check this board regularly for notices of the workshops outlined above. You can also go to [http://www.psych.yorku.ca/smurtha/courses/4000/index\\_4000.html](http://www.psych.yorku.ca/smurtha/courses/4000/index_4000.html) for further information about multiple topics such as how to apply to graduate school, tips on writing your GRE, where to go for help with your analysis, etc..

#### POLICY FOR THE ETHICS REVIEW PROCESS FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

The Senate of York University affirms that investigators must respect the safety, welfare, and dignity of human participants in their research and treat them equally, fairly, and not only as a means to an end. The University values the academic freedom of its researchers, and the ethics review process should not be used unfairly to censor research. However, academic freedom is complemented by the requirement to respect the rights of human participants. Information on the ethics review process can be found at the following website (this site is in development and will change periodically) <http://www.psych.yorku.ca/ethics/>. Please pay attention to all of the information provided on this web-page, and pay particular attention to the information for Undergraduate Student's. In order to insure that you satisfy all ethical requirements, you must do the following:

**NOTE: The first 2 steps must be completed BEFORE you begin to collect data; the third step comes after the data collection.**

1. **Complete the online Introductory Ethics Tutorial** for the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS), <http://pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/tutorial/>

and when all Sections of the Tutorial have been completed correctly, please print out two copies of your "Certificate of Completion". Keep one copy for yourself and give one to your supervisor.

**IMPORTANT: This tutorial is a MUST for ALL PSYC 4000 students**, even those who have already received ethics approval for their thesis projects or who are collaborating with their supervisor or with graduate students on a pre-approved project.

**2. Complete the “Ethics Form 2: Individualized Protocol” that has been modified by the psychology dept**

(<http://www.psych.yorku.ca/ethics/Form2forHonoursThesisUndergraduateStudents.htm>). Keep one copy for yourself and give one to your supervisor for his/her approval.

**IMPORTANT: Again, as a PSYC 4000 student, you MUST complete this form even if your thesis supervisor has received prior ethical approval for the research that you will be conducting.** This is an important learning exercise in research ethics.

If you and your supervisor consider your study to have only minimal risks for research participants, you do not need to submit your "Ethics Form 2: Individualized Protocol" to anyone else. Minimal risk studies in PSYC 4000 have been granted ethics approval through the Generic Protocol for Course Related Research that will be submitted by the PSYC 4000 thesis workshop coordinator.

If you and your supervisor deem that the research involves more than minimal risk to the research participants and if your supervisor does not have ethical approval for this work, your protocol form must be submitted for approval to the Department of Psychology's Research Ethics Board. You can only proceed once you have received this approval.

**If you are using the Undergraduate Research Participant Pool (URPP)**, also complete the “Supervisor’s Approval for the student’s use of the URPP” form (found at the end of this document) with your supervisor and submit the completed form with your request to use the URPP.

**3. All data collected as part of your thesis must be safely stored for a minimum of 2 years.** You must also make arrangements with your supervisor to store other relevant documentation such as signed Informed Consent forms (ICFs).

When you pick up the binder for the final copy of your thesis in April, you must sign the “Ethics Form 3: Confirmation and Reporting” provided by the undergraduate studies office indicating that you are properly storing research information.

*POSTSCRIPT*

*If you have any suggestions about how this thesis handbook can be improved or ideas about how to improve the life of thesis students, please send them to Dr. Susan Murtha ([smurtha@yorku.ca](mailto:smurtha@yorku.ca)).*  
*Revised September, 2010*

## Psychology Honours Student Data Sheet

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Last Name

First Name

Student Number

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Telephone number

e-mail address

A. Which Psychology courses have you already completed?

Course Number

Course Name

Instructor

Grade

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

B. Which Psychology courses will you complete next?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

C. What do you hope to be doing next after you graduate? What kind of job? Or what graduate programme? Or travel where?

D. What computer experience do you have? What word processing package(s) do you use? Are you familiar with any of the statistical software (e.g. SPSS, SAS)?

A. If you were to do a thesis, what topics or areas of interest would be most attractive?

B. What sort of special skills, interests, or characteristics do you have? (e.g. second language, volunteer, work research experience).

C. What potential research populations do you have special access to?

**PSYC 4000 – Supervisor’s approval for the student’s use of the URPP**

The research being conducted by \_\_\_\_\_ (print student’s name) is in partial fulfillment of research project being conducted for the Psychology 4000 course. All Psychology 4000 students conducting research involving minimum risk have received ethics approval through the generic ethics protocol that was submitted for this course. This generic protocol was approved by the Department of Psychology’s Research Ethics Board (REB).

The only additional approval must come from the thesis supervisor. As the thesis supervisor, I attest that this student has

- (1) completed the Introductory Tutorial for the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS)
- (2) completed “Ethics Form 2: Individualized Protocol,” which I have read and approved.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Supervisor’s name (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Supervisor signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date