

FAQs for Juniors Considering a Senior Honor Thesis in the Department of American Studies

What is an American Studies Thesis?

A senior thesis is a genre of writing intended to convey mastery and excellence in one or more academic fields. Writing a thesis in a particular department (or across multiple departments) requires adherence to specific methodological and evidentiary standards. When pursuing a thesis in the department of American Studies, students are expected demonstrate their comprehension of key concepts, theories, and/or approaches taught in the curriculum. In accordance with the broader aims of the field of American Studies, students must choose an interdisciplinary methodology (see below).

The thesis project can take multiples forms and should be no more than 100-pages (with the proviso that if the advisor feels that a greater page limit is truly warranted it will be allowed), inclusive of all endnotes and the bibliography. Joint majors may submit a thesis to both majors if the topic is appropriate for each field and the other major allows double thesis submission. *Please be aware that each department/program has their own standards of evaluation. It is the student's responsibility to make sure that their project adheres to the standards of each department. The information provide below with regard to the assessment procedure also ONLY applies to the Department of American Studies.*

For university-wide senior thesis policies (regarding formatting, submission, and so on), please see: https://www.wesleyan.edu/registrar/honors/honors_program.html.

What is a research methodology?

Method refers to the modes of inquiry, information gathering, and “proof” that characterize a particular discipline or field. While interdisciplinary scholars may draw their methodology from a variety of disciplinary fields, they need not employ multiple methods at once. Instead, they may choose to focus on one method, while drawing upon ideas and arguments from a diverse range of (inter)disciplines and/or fields.

When is the AMST Application for writing a senior honors thesis due?

The application is due by the last Friday of March at 5pm to the chair of the department. Students are strongly encouraged to search for a faculty adviser for their respective projects and develop the application in consultation with the appropriate faculty member.

What tutorials do senior thesis writers enroll in and with whom?

During the senior year, thesis writers enroll in an honors thesis tutorial (AMST 409 and 410) with a thesis advisor. The advisor is usually a core faculty member in American Studies, but sometimes an advisor is not a member of the American Studies Department's core faculty (in this case the major should consult with the faculty advisor).

What is the role of a thesis advisor?

The thesis advisor is responsible for guiding the student through the research and writing process. The exact nature of the tutorial meetings and related assignments will be determined on an individual basis between advisors and advisees. Please note that advisors are *not* responsible for: originating a project concept; making major decisions regarding the direction of the project; conducting research; heavily editing underworked ideas and/or writing; and so on.

Importantly, advisors are not involved in the process of assessing their own advisees' theses during the final evaluation. Instead, advisors assign a traditional letter grade at the end of each semester that is reflective of the work the student has completed during the term. *Please note that if a student has not made significant progress by the end of the fall semester, they will not be allowed to continue to pursue their project.* While "significant progress" will vary depending upon individuals' research and writing plans, the critical point is that the advisor will assess the work at the end of the fall semester in the interest of determining the appropriateness of its continuation.

What makes for an excellent thesis?

Scholarship becomes meaningful through the original contribution it makes to existing frameworks of knowledge. An original project may pose a new question or reframe an existing one; it may rethink available evidence, or produce or discover new evidence; and so on. Understanding whether or not a project topic is original requires a deep understanding of the scholarly field(s) in which it is situated (i.e., how can you know what is "new" before knowing what is "old"?). At the undergraduate level, it is not expected that students would enter the thesis process with a comprehensive overview of their field(s) of inquiry. *Instead, it is expected that senior theses pose research questions that are not easily or readily answered, and that are deeply engaged with the aims of their intended field.* If a substantial body of writing already exists on a given topic, it is the thesis writer's responsibility to grapple with that literature; to make sense of where their project fits in relation to it; and to make sure that they are engaging with, rather than simply recapitulating, others' works.

How are theses evaluated and by whom?

Two faculty readers other than the honors thesis advisor evaluate the thesis; each writes a substantive review of the thesis (given to the thesis writer). The readers' recommendations determine the honors ranking. If the evaluators' recommendations are in conflict, the Department will arrange for a third faculty reader. If a senior receives "Honors" or "High Honors" on the senior thesis, this is printed on the Wesleyan diploma and listed in the commencement bulletin. If the readers recommend "Credit" rather than honors for the thesis, "Honors in American Studies" is not awarded. In general the category of High Honors is reserved for *exceptional* work, while Honors is generally awarded to work that is at least of B+ quality. Work of lesser quality is generally awarded Credit.

Thesis readers will also assess:

1) Project design and structure: What central questions does the project ask, why do they matter, and are they reasonably original? How well does the chosen interdisciplinary methodology address the question? Does the organization of the project provide an appropriate scholarly context?);

2) Execution of primary research and engagement with secondary research: How thoroughly does the project engage with the research outcomes? Are the citations comprehensive? Engaged with critical American Studies concepts and theories? Are there gaps in the project, and if so, are these gaps accounted for and/or are they reasonable?);

3) Argumentation and writing style: How well does the project address its central question(s)? Does the argument carry throughout the whole project? Do the chapters flow logically and are they meaningfully connected? How well does the project integrate ideas from other authors? Is the document properly edited?

Resources and Other Information

Library specialists

Aside from meeting with their project advisor, students should plan early and regular meetings with reference librarians. Meeting with a librarian can drastically improve the efficiency of your research, while also providing access to unexpected materials. When scheduling an appointment, students should be prepared to explain their general topic and the types of sources they are looking for (<https://www.wesleyan.edu/libr/services/makeappointment.html>).

Using Human Subjects and the IRB Application

Students intending to use methodologies that involve human subjects (e.g., interviewing, participant observation, etc.) are required to apply for project approval through the IRB (<https://www.wesleyan.edu/acaf/support/reviewboard.html>). Students must plan ahead and seek approval for their project during the spring semester of their junior year. Because the process can be time consuming and complicated, it is recommended that students contact their prospective advisors about the IRB application process as early as possible.

Research Funding

Students may apply for senior thesis research funding through the following sources. Please be aware that certain deadlines may be earlier than the thesis proposal deadline:

- The Department of American Studies:
<https://www.wesleyan.edu/amst/images/AMSTResearchGrant.pdf>
- The Davenport Grant, if your project deals with social/public policy:
<https://www.wesleyan.edu/allbritton/cspl/davenport/apply.html>
- The Olin Fellowship through the English Department, if your project is a literary study:
<https://www.wesleyan.edu/english/prizes/index.html>

Center for the Humanities Student Fellowships

Juniors who intend to conduct a senior thesis and whose research relates to the center's current themes may apply for a semester-long student fellowship at the Center for the Humanities to be held during their senior year (<https://www.wesleyan.edu/humanities/fellowships/students.html>). The fellowship takes the place of a class, and provides students with the opportunity to engage with Wesleyan faculty and visiting speakers on issues related to their thesis projects.

Thesis Prizes

There are currently two prizes on campus that American Studies thesis students are eligible for:

- The Marni Goldstein White Prize is awarded to the best senior thesis written by an American Studies major. Students who receive a designation of High Honors will automatically be entered into the running for the White Prize, which is allocated by a faculty committee.
- The GLASS (Gay, Lesbian, and Sexuality Studies) Prize is awarded for the best research and writing on a subject in queer, trans, LGBT, or sexuality studies (and is not department-specific). Students may submit their theses for consideration as specified online (<https://www.wesleyan.edu/queerstudies/glass.html>).

If you are a double major and intend to pursue honors in both departments, you may also be eligible for other prizes as well.