

The Senior Essay in Humanities

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Introduction

The Humanities Major was conceived six decades ago as a hothouse for Yale College students of exceptional promise. To disciplined, self-motivated learners seeking immersion in Western history, ideas, literature and art, Humanities offers an unmatched blend of breadth and intensity, of flexibility and focus. Now as ever, the goal is to foster wide and cultured expertise in those whose interests and abilities range across traditional disciplinary lines. This means that the Humanities Major is charged to instill breadth and depth of knowledge simultaneously. While the open curriculum invites wide-ranging and interdisciplinary study, other aspects of the program ensure that students develop demonstrable expertise in concrete areas. In the final year, this mix of flexibility and rigor yields tangible fruit in the Senior Essay, which is required of all students in the Major.

The Senior Essay in Humanities is a substantial scholarly work that reflects the author's personal concerns, talents, and interests. It is also a serious work of intellectual argument and communication. A successful Senior Essay not only sets the author's erudition and passion on display, but also makes a genuine contribution to the wider community of learning.

Most Humanities students experience the Senior Essay as a source of simultaneous excitement and anxiety. That is as it should be. The Senior Essay is at once an end and a beginning. It is both the culmination of one's own choices and achievements as a student *and* one's debut as a serious scholar. It is both deeply personal and deeply public. And for the overwhelming mass of graduates, the Essay is, in hindsight, a source of immense pride.

For students currently in the Major, this guide aims to maximize the excitement and eventual pride that the Senior Essay process induces, and to minimize the anxiety. We have sought to do this by assembling all of the information and advice we have about the Senior Essay into a single accessible document. For advisors, we have tried to make the entire process as transparent as possible. The pages that follow collate calendars of the relevant deadlines with guidelines for the document itself, narrative accounts of the various stages in the Senior Essay process, and examples of notable past essays. We hope that this information allays many of the concerns you may have. Questions not addressed here may be forwarded directly to the DUS at norma.thompson@yale.edu. The Senior Essay in the Humanities is a project that commonly occasions both deep discoveries and lasting self-discoveries. We wish you the very best of both!

Calendars

Humanities majors in the Class of 2017 may choose to write their Senior Essays following any of three basic schedules. You may elect to write

- (1) a full-year Essay, to be written over the course of both Fall 2016 and Spring 2017;
or
- (2) a one-term Essay to be completed during Fall 2016;
or
- (3) a one-term Essay to be completed during Spring 2017.

[The first two options require that you have already submitted a prospectus signed by your advisor to the Program's Director of Undergraduate Studies, by the end of spring term, 2016.]

The full schedules for all three options are as follows:

(1) Full-Year Essays

noon on Monday, May 2, 2016	Your prospectus, signed by your advisor, is due to the DUS in her mailbox at the Whitney Humanities Center (WHC) and via email to norma.thompson@yale.edu .
"Shopping Week," September 2016	Meet with the DUS to discuss and register for HUMS 491a, "The Senior Essay." (You will receive a grade of SAT or UNSAT, later to be converted to a grade.)
Fall 2016	A semester of research and writing under your advisor's close supervision.
"Shopping Week," January 2017	Meet with the DUS to discuss progress on essay and register for HUMS 491b, "The Senior Essay."
Spring 2017, first half	Eight weeks of writing under your advisor's close supervision.
noon on Monday, March 27, 2016	The complete rough draft of your Essay is due. Please submit two loose-leaf copies: one to your advisor, the other to Connie Pascarella at the Humanities Office, WHC #206. In addition, please send an email copy to norma.thompson@yale.edu .

noon on Monday, April 11, 2017

The final version of your Essay is due. Please submit two (2) formally bound copies, one directly to your advisor, and one to the Humanities Office, WHC #206. In addition, please send an email copy to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

(2) One-Term Essays (Fall 2016)

noon on Monday, May 2, 2016

Your prospectus, signed by your advisor, is due in the DUS mailbox at the Whitney Humanities Center (WHC) and via email to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

“Shopping Week,” September 2016

Meet with the DUS to discuss and register for HUMS 491a, “The Senior Essay.”

Fall 2016, first half

Research and writing under your advisor’s close supervision.

noon on Friday, October 28, 2016

The complete rough draft of your Essay is due. Please submit two loose-leaf copies: one to your advisor, the other to Connie Pascarella at the Humanities Office, WHC #206. In addition, please send an email copy to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

noon on Monday, December 5, 2016

The final version of your Essay is due. Please submit two (2) formally bound copies, one directly to your advisor, and one to the Humanities Office, WHC #206. In addition, please send an email copy to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

(3) One-Term Essays (Spring 2017)

“Shopping Week,” September 2016

Meet with the DUS to discuss the Senior Essay.

noon on Friday, November 18, 2016

Your prospectus, signed by your advisor, is due to Prof. Thompson in her box at the Whitney Humanities Center (WHC) and via email to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

“Shopping Week,” January 2017

Meet with the DUS to discuss and register for HUMS 491b, “The Senior Essay.”

Spring 2017, first half

Research and writing under your advisor’s close supervision.

noon on Monday, March 27, 2017

The complete rough draft of your Essay is due. Please submit two loose-leaf copies: one to your advisor, the other to Connie Pascarella at the Humanities Office, WHC #206. In addition, please send an email copy to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

noon on Monday, April 11, 2017

The final version of your Essay is due. Please submit two (2) formally bound copies, one directly to your advisor, and one to the Humanities Office, WHC #206. In addition, please send an email copy to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

Requirements and Guidelines

Note on this list

Please note that this list treats the three documents connected with the Senior Essay process in the order opposite to that in which the documents are actually written. We begin with expectations for the final version of the Essay (section A), before proceeding to those for the rough draft (B) and, finally, those for the prospectus (C). This is to underscore the importance of keeping the requirements for the final product in mind at every stage.

A. The Final Essay

1. The Senior Essay in Humanities is a substantial work of interdisciplinary scholarship addressing questions of general interest to humanists. It is also a rigorous work informed by the standards of the particular disciplines that the Essay's topic touches upon. Finally, the Essay is a personal work that reflects the author's own intellectual interests and trajectory in the Humanities major.
2. All three of the above elements are considered in the evaluation of each Senior Essay. Every successful Essay addresses a topic that is intrinsically interdisciplinary and of interest to a wide audience, argues for its main claims in a manner credible to scholars of the relevant research fields, and showcases the student's own care and determination along the way.
3. In practice, the Senior Essay in Humanities takes the form of an essay substantially longer than a standard Yale College term paper. Thirty (30) double-spaced pages in a standard 12-point font is the *minimum* length for the main text *excluding* the bibliography, appendices, and other notes of unusual length. There is no maximum length.
4. The content of the Senior Essay must reflect the author's original research and writing. The *topic* need not be original, and some familiarity with and attention to existing secondary literature is expected. It is vital, however, that a Senior Essay in the Humanities not be overwhelmed by a review of existing scholarship. At the heart of every Essay, the author is expected to strike out on his/her own in a manner that is both well-motivated and well-organized.
5. Proper citation is expected, using any of the standards in common use in Yale humanities departments (MLA; Chicago style; APA). It is up to the individual student and his or her advisor to decide which citation standard is most appropriate. Both footnotes and endnotes are permitted, at the advisor's discretion.
6. A full bibliography must accompany each Senior Essay. It must include *both* all sources cited in the Essay itself *and* all sources consulted, but not cited, that have had more than a trivial influence on the author's argumentation.

7. Within the main text itself, each Senior Essay must contain all of the following internal components:

- a cogent *main claim* that is articulated prominently and concisely in the opening pages.
- an *introduction* that attracts the general reader's attention effectively, first to the overall topic, and then to the author's main claim.
- *body paragraphs and/or sections* that each make a single point well, so that the Essay's argument builds from one body paragraph and/or section to the next.
- *signposts*—references to where the argument has come from, and where it is headed—to mark transitions from one body paragraph and/or section to the next.
- a satisfying *conclusion* that both reprises the Essay's main claim and highlights the new, more informed perspective on the material that the Essay has imparted to the reader.

While these internal components must all be present in the Essay, they need not be explicitly marked. In general, it is up to the student and advisor to decide to what extent headings, subtitles, or other explicit marks of internal structure should be used in a particular Essay.

8. The final version of the Senior Essay must be submitted in two forms. Please submit two (2) formally bound copies, one directly to your advisor, and one to the Humanities Office, WHC #206. In addition, please send an email copy to norma.thompson@yale.edu no later than noon on the due date.

9. Late submissions will be penalized with a lower grade on the Essay. What is more, students submitting late work will lose their eligibility for distinction in the Major.

10. Each Senior Essay in Humanities is evaluated by two readers, including a “second reader” selected by the DUS with input from the student's advisor. While the choice of a second reader is at the discretion of the DUS, students are certainly welcome to suggest names. All such suggestions should be made well in advance of the final due date.

B. The Rough Draft

11. The rough draft of the Senior Essay is due only three weeks before the final version. This leaves little time for major revisions in response to feedback. Accordingly, while it may certainly be raw and unfinished, and while it may be somewhat shorter than the minimum length for the final version (see §3 above), the draft *must* run through the entire argument of the Essay.

12. If the final version of the Essay will include illustrations, copies of those illustrations should be submitted with the rough draft as well.

13. The rough draft is not graded as such. However, failure to submit a rough draft by the deadline will jeopardize a student's chance to do well on the Essay itself—and will be taken into account by the DUS in her evaluation.

14. The rough draft must be submitted both electronically, via email to norma.thompson@yale.edu, and in looseleaf paper format both to the DUS and to the student's advisor.

C. The Prospectus

15. The Senior Essay prospectus is a statement of intent. It is submitted several months—and in the case of full-term essays nearly a year—before the final version of the Essay in question is complete. It is to be expected that a student's plan, main claim, and even topic may change substantially over the course of this period.

16. Nevertheless, it is important that there be a clear plan in place well in advance of the student's enrollment in HUMS 491a or 491b. The purpose of the Senior Essay prospectus is to formalize such a plan. The prospectus has five required components:

- (i) a *title* that does justice to the student's proposed topic;
- (ii) a brief section (one to two paragraphs) summarizing the projected *main claim* of the proposed Essay;
- (iii) another brief section (one to two paragraphs) summarizing the projected *methodology* of the proposed Essay;
- (iv) a preliminary *bibliography* organized so as to distinguish clearly between works that the student has already consulted, and those that the student has yet to read; and
- (v) the *signature* of the student's advisor.

17. One (1) paper copy of the signed prospectus must be submitted to the DUS mailbox at the Whitney Humanities Center. In addition, an electronic copy should be emailed to norma.thompson@yale.edu.

The Process

Selecting a Topic

Writing a Senior Essay takes months of energy and requires a deep personal investment in the project and its success. So take care at the outset to choose both a topic that you find compelling and a thesis that you are motivated to bring to your audience. Give yourself room to discover where your interests truly lie. Start hunting for a topic early in your junior year, so that you have time to try several possibilities on for size.

Be aware that not every topic is suitable for the Senior Essay. Your topic must be of interdisciplinary interest within (and perhaps beyond) the Humanities. It should be expansive and ambitious enough to appeal to a wide audience, but specific enough to invite a well-defined and substantially original thesis. Last but not least, it must be *doable* in a reasonable amount of time and number of pages.

If you are having difficulty coming up with a suitable topic that is sufficiently compelling to you, one strategy we recommend is to go back through the syllabi of courses that you have especially enjoyed in the past. Look there for lists of “recommended,” “related,” or “additional” readings. Investigate those texts. There is reason to expect that they will lead you to topics that you will find of interest—just as your interest was held by the courses themselves.

Once you have a topic in mind, take it for a test-drive. Practice framing it as a prospectus to present to an advisor. Explain what questions you propose to answer, and how those questions and/or answers are in some sense new. Describe what methods you propose to use, and defend your choice. Summarize the state of the relevant primary and secondary literature. Then ask yourself: can you do all of these things without losing touch with your initial enthusiasm? If you can, you are ready to proceed to the next stage: selecting an advisor.

Selecting an Advisor

You are responsible for finding an advisor to supervise your Senior Essay. This is best done early, ideally before the start of the semester in which you will submit your prospectus. If you wait to begin the search until after your senior year has begun, you may find yourself at a competitive disadvantage. That is because Humanities is an interdisciplinary program with faculty drawn from a variety of individual departments. By the start of the Fall semester, the faculty member of your choice may already be fully booked with senior advisees majoring in his or her particular discipline.

By contrast, those who begin the search early sometimes find themselves at a competitive advantage in angling for a potential advisor’s time. Humanities seniors have a good reputation: faculty know them to produce work of exceptional quality and interest. Our advice, therefore, is

to start the search process as early as you can. Even if your first-choice faculty member declines to take you on as an advisee, do not hesitate to ask her or him for advice on other possibilities.

You are not restricted to the list of faculty associated with the program of Humanities. You are also welcome to choose an advisor who is an active instructor in the College or University with expertise in one of the humanities disciplines.

Please bear in mind, however, that compatibility of interest is not the only criterion you should consider (though it is a necessary one). Your advisor should be not only committed to and knowledgeable about your topic, but also frank in offering advice, supportive of your efforts, and committed to meeting with you on a regular schedule. If after several attempts you are still having difficulty identifying a faculty member who fits this bill, please consult the DUS.

The Prospectus

The prospectus is an informal contract between three parties: you, your advisor, and the Program of Humanities. It formalizes (1) your intent to submit a Senior Essay with a certain thesis and a certain methodology on a certain topic, (2) your advisor's readiness to vouch for you and supervise your work, and (3) the Humanities Program's endorsement of the project. The prospectus is thus a product of—not a prequel to—negotiation among all three parties.

This means that, in the weeks leading up to the prospectus deadline, you should meet regularly with your advisor to iron out a plan that you can both agree on. It also means that you should make sure the DUS has an advance sense of what your proposed topic and thesis will be.

The formal requirements for the prospectus are detailed in section (C) of the "Requirements and Guidelines" above. Do bear in mind that although you are required to submit an acceptable prospectus by the deadline—as that is one of the prerequisites for enrollment in HUMS 491a or 491b the following semester—your prospectus will not be assigned a grade. What is more, the prospectus leaves you wiggle room: your thesis, your methodology, and even your topic may evolve as you move from prospectus to draft. What is crucial is simply that your prospectus forecast a workable *potential* Senior Essay that would satisfy all three parties. This provides a chance to head off potential large-scale problems, and make course corrections, while there is still ample time to do so.

The Draft

Depending on which schedule you are following, your prospectus and draft deadlines will be separated by four, six, or eleven months (see "Calendar" above for details). When you meet with your advisor in advance of the prospectus deadline, be sure to discuss how you intend to make use of this time and how often you intend to meet. We normally recommend that you split it up into three roughly equal periods: one for research; one in which you start writing the draft, and pursue additional research threads triggered by your writing; and one for completing the draft. If you and your advisor prefer a different scheme, that is fine. What is essential is that you and

your advisor *have* a plan—and that your plan includes regular meetings, with clear expectations of the progress you expect to have made by the date of each meeting.

Think early and often about the calendar, especially if you are writing a one-term essay in Spring 2017. In that case, you will have four months to work with between the prospectus deadline (November 18, 2016) and the draft deadline (March 27, 2017). Familiarize yourself with the landscape of the Yale calendar between these dates. Consider that you will be busy with Fall finals until mid-December and with your other Spring classes from mid-January until early March. Do you have travel or other activities planned for Winter or Spring Breaks? If so, it will be crucial for you to make regular, measurable progress on your Essay during *every* week that you are on campus, no matter how busy you are with your other coursework. Even if you will have time during Winter or Spring Break to work on your draft, do not try to tackle the whole project then. Slow but steady wins this race.

The formal requirements for the draft are detailed in section (B) of the “Requirements and Guidelines” above. Please note that you are not graded on the draft. It is a wake-up moment for you, and a troubleshooting moment for your advisor and Humanities staff.

Final Revisions

Time will be tight between your submission of the draft and the final due date. Make the most of it! These final weeks are the most intensive and valuable part of the Senior Essay process. Leave room for careful rereading and last-minute changes, as well as for the inevitable printer jam, computer failure, and disk corruption. (On this note, bear in mind that computer-related disasters are not accepted as excuses for a late essay. We expect you to back up your files regularly, to be prepared to make use of campus computer labs and printers, and to leave extra time for troubleshooting.)

Submitting the Final Essay

The formal requirements for the final version of the Senior Essay are detailed in section (A) of the “Requirements and Guidelines” above, with submission instructions at §8. Once again, the final Senior Essay deadlines for 2016-2017 are **noon on Monday, December 5, 2016**, for One-Term Essays in Fall 2016, and **noon on Monday, April 11, 2017**, for Full-Year Essays and One-Term Essays in Spring 2017.

If a Senior Essay is late, it is assessed a grade penalty and becomes ineligible for departmental and Yale College prizes. What is more, the author becomes ineligible for distinction in the major.

Evaluation

Once you submit your Senior Essay, it is passed on for initial evaluation by both your advisor and a second reader selected by the DUS. The role of the second reader is to offer a dispassionate assessment of your Essay based solely on its merits as a scholarly contribution to the humanities. In choosing a second reader, the DUS looks for an unbiased expert. This is a faculty member who (1) is knowledgeable about your topic, and (2) is not presumptively hostile to your methodology.

The evaluation process takes several weeks. Once your advisor and second reader have finished assessing your essay, both submit their recommendations to the DUS. She then takes both sets of recommendations into account when assigning your Essay its final grade and determining its eligibility for Yale College prizes. Be aware, therefore, that while your advisor and the second reader play important indirect roles in the grading of your Senior Essay, the DUS is the final arbiter.

Notable Past Essays

- Marissa Bass ('03): "The Invention of a Poet: Catullus in the Twentieth Century"
- Justin Zaremby ('03): "A History of Directed Studies"
- Raisa Rexer ('04): "The Unanswered Question: The Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik"
- Noah Chesnin ('04): "Francis Bacon's Commitment to Revision: The Implications of the Pursuit of New Natural Knowledge"
- Eve Howell ('05): "Burke and Carlyle on the French Revolution and the Enlightenment"
- Rebecca Wiegand ('05): "The Eleanor Crosses: Queenly Intercession and the Burden of Power in the Middle Ages"
- Sam Spears ('06): "The Naming Power of the Gouffre sans Fond: Defining Symbolism in the Aesthetic Thought of Paul Valery and Martin Heidegger"
- Jessica Feinstein ('06): "The Art of Lolita and Commonsense"
- Brendan Cottington ('07): "Social Competition and Religious Violence in Late Antiquity"
- Ann Gaul ('07): "Not Your Average Pyramid Scheme: Pharaonicism and Egyptian National Identity, 1798- 1914"
- Laura Kremen Adler ('08): "Performing Memory: World War II Memorials in the American Landscape"
- Alexander Borinsky ('08): "Ezra Stiles, the Jews, and the Invention of America"
- Spencer Gray, ('09): "The Limits of History: Contrafactuals and the Representation of Historical Contingency"
- Andres Torres, ('09): "Stalin's Boulevard: The Struggle to Rebuild Berlin"
- Margaret Blume, ('10): "A Pilgrimage of Faith"
- Matthew Shields, ('10): "In Search of Lost Time: Reflections on Benjamin, Nietzsche, and Proust"
- Kevin Gallagher, ('11): *De Aesthetica in nuce ad litteram*.*

*Wrexham Prize Winner

- Charlotte Thun-Hohenstein, ('12): “Mapmakers, Poets, and Playwrights: Imagining the World as Round”
- Jeania Ree V. Moore, ('12): “Grounding the American Firmament: The National Mall and the Evolution of American Civil Religion”
- Bijan Aboutorabi, ('13): “Taming Faith: The Problem of Christianity in Early Modern Liberalism”
- Kate Liebman, ('13): “Passion in Painting: Barnett Newman’s *Stations of the Cross*”
- Nicolás Medina Mora, ('13): “Negations of Nostalgia: Nabokov, Kundera, Bolaño”
- Dylan Kenny, ('14): “Workaday Worlds: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Technology, and the Work of Art.”
- Emma Schindler, ('14): “Losing Control in the Shadows of the Dragnet: The Changing Status of the Individual in the Age of Big Data and Mass Surveillance”
- David Molina, ('15): “Andrei Tarkovsky and Leonardo da Vinci: Visual Art in *Sacrifice (Offret, 1986)*”
- Kelly Schumann, ('15): “Christianity & Schism in the Church of The Holy Sepulchre”

→**Note: Old essays are available for you to peruse. Make the request to DUS**