Faculty Contacts

Please note: Email is the best and most reliable way to contact the faculty listed below with any questions or concerns that you may have regarding the Honors Program.

Professor Ineke Murakami, Honors Director
imurakami@albany.edu
(518) 442 – 4080

Professor Paul Stasi, Director of Undergraduate Studies
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(518) 442 – 4070

Feel free to stop by and check out the Honors Resources Room (Humanities 385), a space set aside for students who are members of the Honors Program. The Honors Resource Room houses a library of theses from past years, and is supplied with personal computer stations, a printer, and other research resources. It will provide a nice meeting space for Honors students to work individually on their projects or to meet, talk, and share ideas or plan upcoming events.

What Is Honors?

If you become part of the Honors Program, you will join a relatively small community within the department's undergraduate population. In your junior year, you join a community of ambitious and interesting students like yourself who are committed to their own intellectual and academic development. In a seminar setting, you will work closely with a faculty member to study a special topic you are interested in working on in-depth, and you will begin developing the research skills that you need to do an original project of your own. In your senior year, you will join a group of thesis writers; usually there are between 10 and 25 people in this class. Each member of that group will be writing an independent research project in a field of her choosing and on a topic of her own design. These research projects, which are called undergraduate theses, usually average between 50 and 80 pages in length. In your own thesis, you will focus on an in-depth critical project on a cultural issue, a theoretical issue, an author, a literary period, or some other element of English Studies that intellectually stimulates and is particularly appealing to you.

Is the Honors Program Right for Me?

Students often hesitate to apply because they wonder if they are “right” for English Honors, if they are able to write a long research project, or if they are “smart enough.” The truth is that most English majors are capable of doing the work required of Honors. The question you should be asking, then, is: Is
the Honors Program right for me? There are many reasons why the English Honors Program may be a good match for you. Here are a few:

(1) Honors may be right for you if you want to pursue a question which may have been stimulated in a course you have taken or may have arisen out of your academic and intellectual experiences in another setting. Such an interest would be so stirring that you would like to spend a year reading, writing, and talking about it.

(2) You are interested in producing innovative, original research. Thesis topics can fall either on the “traditional” or on the “nontraditional” side of literary studies, yet still be exciting and innovative. You yourself design your own project so as to reflect and explore your own individual interests. Recent project topics in the last few years include: a materialist and cultural study of the coca leaf; transgender theory and the cultural politics of the cult film Hedwig and the Angry Inch; a cultural study of AOL’s instant messaging and its effects on the language of everyday communication; a literary study of race and gender in Toni Morrison’s novel The Bluest Eye; a literary study of homophobia and the chivalric tradition in medieval literature; and how tropes of Eros and Thanatos operate historically and conceptually in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. If you want to do cutting edge work, this is the venue for you.

(3) You definitely should consider the Honors Program if you want to go to graduate school. Honors theses will give you refined material for application writing samples, and they indicate that you have the ability both to do research in the field and to sustain a long project, two skills required in and expected of you before you enter any graduate program. Also, writers of honors theses develop more sophisticated senses of how to ask and explore a thetic or problem question. Graduate programs will take more seriously those candidates who not only write good compositions but who are thinking in original ways and who are asking interesting critical questions of literary and cultural texts.

(4) You get to work closely with a faculty member. If you’re thinking about applying to graduate school, this may mean a better recommendation letter by someone who really knows you, your interests, and your work. You also will get an experience you do not often have in a class with 40 other students: Your faculty advisor will push you to work hard, so that you can learn your limits yet still have the freedom of doing an independent project that, in the end, is entirely reflective of you and your abilities.

**Sequence and Description of Courses in English Honors**

Before you apply for English Honors in your sophomore or junior year, you should take the following prerequisites: English 210 and either English 305Z or English 398Z. (Occasional exceptions may be made if your application is exceptional and you are currently registered for these courses.) Students are also strongly encouraged to take English 310 before or after their acceptance into the program, so as to develop their work with critical theory and textual analysis. The Honors Program consists of a sequence of three courses:
English 399 Honors Seminar: Special Topic

In this course, you will be engaging in an intensive study of a special topic designed by the faculty instructor and varying from year to year. You will begin the process of developing those skills needed for the accomplishment of a research project. (Note that, with the permission of the Honors or Undergraduate Director, 399 may be substituted with a 500- or 600-level course relevant to your thesis topic during your senior year.)

English 498 Honors Seminar I: Developing and Writing a Thesis

This course begins with a brief shared reading list to discuss strategies for identifying problem questions and developing working theses in literary and cultural texts. The remainder of the semester is devoted to getting your individual projects not only under way, but quite far along. Over the course of the semester, you will develop abstracts for your thesis idea; write a prospectus that outlines the chapter-by-chapter structure for your argument; find and begin working with faculty advisors; learn how to communicate your individual ideas and insights into a public presentation for a general audience; and complete the first chapter of your project.

English 499 Honors Seminar II: Thesis Writing

In this last course in the sequence, you will finish writing and revising your undergraduate thesis, under the direction and mentorship of your faculty advisor. Toward the end of the semester, there will be at least one public forum where you will have the opportunity to present your original and innovative work to a general audience.

Applying to the Honors Program

When to Apply

Interested majors should apply to the English Honors Program in the Spring of their sophomore years, but applications are sometimes accepted through the Spring of one’s junior year. Juniors who are considering the program are strongly encouraged to apply in the Fall before pre-registration for their Spring courses; then, you will be able to take English 399. Interested majors who are transfers from other institutions should take English 210 and English 305Z as soon as possible, and then apply to the program. Any students who have questions about admission or requirements should contact and set up a meeting to talk to the Honors Director.

How to Apply
Applications for the Honors Program are now available online. Go to the main departmental website, and find the link to Honors on the Undergraduate Studies homepage. Or, you can go directly to the Honors page with the following URL:

http://albany.edu/english/und/honorsprogram.htm

Fill out your applications online. Be sure to fill out all of the required field boxes, and click the “Submit” button to send your application electronically to the Honors Director. You can cut-and-paste your writing sample into the text box at the bottom of the application, or you can email it under a separate email to the Honors Director (whose email is specified on the application) with your name and “Honors Writing Sample” in the subject line. All applications will be read by a committee comprised of the Honors Director and 2 to 3 other members of the English faculty.

What Kind of Essay to Include as a Writing Sample

With your application, you must include a writing sample, and it should represent your best critical work. Your writing sample should be a close reading or a critically- or theoretically-informed (i.e., researched) reading of a primary literary or cultural text. Remember that thesis writers are first and foremost original critical thinkers, so avoid submitting summaries of literary texts or historical or textual overviews of changes in a theoretical concept. Essays that have been revised versions of an essay from a 300+ level English course usually prove to be the best ones. Writing samples average from five to ten pages in length.

Conditions that May Affect Applicants’ Eligibility

GPA: Although individual exceptions may be made on a case-by-case basis if one receives very strong faculty recommendations and provides a strong writing sample, each applicant’s cumulative GPA should be a minimum of 3.25, and she should have a 3.5 GPA in the English major.

Course Prerequisites: English 210; English 305Z or English 398Z

Strongly Recommended Course: English 310

Requirements for Graduating with Honors*

Students in the program complete 37 credits as follows:

English 210, English 305Z or 398Z, English 399 or a 500– or 600-level course relevant to the thesis topic to be taken as advised during the senior year; English 498 and 499, and 21 additional credits distributed along the lines laid out for the major. Fulfillment of the honors program waives the regular requirements of the English major. To remain in the honors program, students are required to maintain
a minimum cumulative grade point average of 3.50 in English courses and a minimum 3.25 overall.**

Any student who leaves the honors program is held responsible for the English major requirements.

* Honors students should be sure to review their audit from English Advisement upon their acceptance into the program, and bring any questions and concerns about graduation to the Honors Director who will help you to choose the appropriate courses sequence.

** Students accepted into, and who continue with, the honors program who do not have these GPA minimums can complete their independent thesis projects and share in this opportunity for independent research; however, they will not receive an “honors” designation on their diplomas or transcripts. Such exceptions are determined by the Honors Director, on a case-by-case basis.

How Do I Start Developing an Original Thesis Project?

Some Suggestions for Students in the Spring and Summer Before Their Thesis Year

Because your thesis is not a directed reading but an independent research project, it is of the utmost importance that each of you generates your own reading lists and research agendas. But since few of you have definite plans for what your thesis will be about, it makes the most sense that your first task — before the Fall semester when you begin writing your thesis — is to identify your major interests in this thing called English Studies. How do you do this? There are three ways:

If you already have a definite textual interest, you can begin by identifying and pursuing a problem that interests you in that text. Try to frame that problem in the terms of a “why” question. For instance, why does “preference” seem so problematic or frustrating in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener?” Why do handbags play a central role in the fashion system through which many women construct their identities today, as is seen on television shows like Sex in the City? Why does the image of Guy Fawkes seem to surface in popular culture in moments of political crisis? Narrowing you’re your problem question often results from finding and tracing a trope that you can focus on in a text or series of texts, such as Walt Whitman’s recurrent images of hands (to denote touch, affect, even masturbation) or the recurrence of disabled and housebound figures in the fiction of William Faulkner.

If you are unsure of a primary text or a set of primary texts that you wish to focus on, you often can begin developing a topic by first identifying your general interest. Identify a genre that you are drawn to: poetry, fiction, film, critical theory, belles lettres, autobiography / memoir . . . or some combination thereof. Get a little more specific: a particular national literature (U.S., British, Irish, Canadian, West Indian, South African)? a particular literature representative of an identity group (queer, black, women's, Chicano/a, Cuban-American, Korean American, exile writers from the Indian Subcontinent)? a particular type or period of literature (modernist, contemporary, Victorian, antebellum, post-bellum, colonial)? You can go through the same gambit of questions for filmic texts, cultural texts, philosophy, nonfiction
prose . . . But you and only you can take that first step and identify what you like enough to devote (yes, devote) a good 10 to 12 months of your life to reading, thinking, talking, and writing about. Reflecting on past courses that you have had at university can be a good way of going about this stage of identifying your point of interest. Do not limit yourself to thinking only about English courses. Through cultural studies approaches to texts, there is a place at the English table for critical analyses that intersect with what you might have been introduced to in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, LACS, foreign language, Africana, and other humanities and social sciences departments. If you have a slight to a strong sense of what your thesis might be, you should begin registering for courses in or outside the English Department whose topics will “feed” your thesis and expose you to more texts in your related field. If one fits your interests and potential topic, consider registering for a graduate course in the fall of your senior year.

Identify something that you are uncomfortable with, something that bothers you and that you think deserves some critical attention. This could relate to literature. For instance, you may be irked by the equation of realism with historical fact, or the degree to which literature is presumed to reproduce history or to represent a political voice. So, perhaps you would be inclined to write a thesis about the relationship between history and literary representation. Or, you might be annoyed by something a bit more generally cultural in scope. For instance, you might be appalled by the current political climate, domestic or international. So, perhaps you want to spend one year thinking, reading, and writing about neoliberalism, or the so-called "war on terror," or the governmental infractions of the right to free speech. There is probably a project fit for an English Studies thesis in those irritations: a little discourse analysis, a little cultural studies, and you are well under way to a critical analysis of a cultural problem.

In the spring and the summer you will want to identify your point of interest. And then you will want to do what you should all be doing as thinking, university-educated, ambitious individuals: read. Rather than rely on a shared reading list, you should follow your bliss. If you dig modernist poetry, read around in some modernist poets. Pick up some Stevens, read some Pound, pore over Moore. If you are crazy about African-American literature, and you've read a lot of contemporary stuff but you want to read what was written before the twentieth century, do a little online research for names of black American authors from the nineteenth century. Pick up some of the magazine fiction by Pauline Hopkins; check out Paul Lawrence Dunbar; see what all the fuss is about Charles Chesnutt’s Reconstruction novel The Marrow of Tradition. If you feel like you really want to do something on representations of gays in the media, spend your summer watching classic films like Prick Up Your Ears to the politically correct television show Will and Grace. Read John Waters' books on trash cinema, read Samuel Delany on public sex in Times Square theaters.

Cast your net wide: Identify a general interest. Then, go to the library, browse Borders or Book House or Dove and Hudson, or do keyword searches on Amazon. The more you read, the more you can refine that reading into a thesis.

An anecdote by Professor Keenaghan about his undergrad thesis
My undergrad thesis was on something I called "the literature for disaffected youth." Basically, I wrote on books about punk by punks for punks. My thesis focused on literary figures like Kathy Acker and Stewart Home, but I didn’t just read and write on literature. I also wrote on porn, comic books, and internet communities. I took a general interest ("punk") and examined how various textual forms contribute to the creation of an identity at once at odds with and complicit with market logics. (You are not just punk, you buy punk to become punk.) Everything was framed through critical theory (Deleuze and Guattari, de Certeau, Bourdieu, Gramsci, Hebdige) that I was introduced to not in my English classes but in my Sociology classes about underground, ethnic, and sexual cultures. I was interested in how the cultural theories I read in one field intersected with the textual and semiotic theories I read in my English classes. What happens when culture is not just a text, but is actually created out of texts? I spent the summer before my thesis year doing what I normally did in the summer: I worked in a record store during the day and at a restaurant at night. At both jobs, I had enough down time to sit back with a book. I asked my friends about books, and I got turned on to quite a few new 'zines through a woman who managed a local bookstore. I read some more theory (actually reading Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus cover-to-cover for the first time). When September came, I walked into my advisor’s office and said, "I want to write a thesis on punk, on how punk tries to use language and texts to resist mainstream, middle-class ideals. And I think Deleuze's ideas about anti-capitalist resistance might help me." I signed up for classes that “fed” my thesis with related reading material, including a sociology of subculture course and an independent study on critical theory, sexuality, and media. When you come into the first class of English 498, you should be able to tell the Honors Director what your interest is and a general approach you might take to solve a related problem.

An Exercise to Identify Your Interest and Develop a “Problem Question”

Sit down and write a paragraph or two in which you identify a possible topic for your thesis project and begin the process of narrowing down your topic. The points that you will want to identify before you write this exercise are:

1. a subfield of English Studies that most interests you. Cultural studies or literary studies would be the two main rubrics. Then, go a step further and identify a historical period (or periods) and a genre (literary, cultural, or media). For this example, we’ll say you are really drawn to modernist fiction authored roughly between 1910 and 1930 in Britain — which includes books by authors such as E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, H.G. Wells, Wyndham Lewis, Elizabeth Bowen, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Ronald Firbank.

2. a few general issues that are especially pressing and of interest to you in this field. Your thesis often will develop out of creating sophisticated links between related issues. For instance, you may be irritated or intrigued by the representation of women in Edwardian fiction. You also might be fascinated by how this fiction depicts struggles with economic changes.
(3) any links you can articulate between your key points of interest. In our example, you might intuit that the fictive representation of women owes to shifts in gender roles accompanying economic or industrial shifts between the wars.

(4) a possible primary text or two. If you are working in cultural studies, you may specify a particular text/venue (such as AOL, Radio Martí, Jane, Adbusters) or you may specify a type of media (country music, comic books). For literary studies, specify which author(s) or what text(s) are of the most interest to you. In both fields, the more specific you are, the further along you are. But don’t feel like you are obligated or tied down to those choices. Theses can change over time. For our example, let’s say you are drawn to Virginia Woolf’s novels, especially *To the Lighthouse*, and you’ve read *A Room of One’s Own*.

(5) how the issue you identify (#3) plays out in the text. You’re intrigued by how the character of Lily, the artist, is a hanger-on in the bourgeois world of the vacationing Ramsay family. Could we say she has found her own room?

(6) concepts or recurring “ironies” running through all of the above. For instance, how does Woolf throw into question our presumptions about identity by highlighting passivity, leisure, notions of belonging? Does she challenge class-specific ideas about the artist? Or, consider the metaphorical “nugget of truth” and the fish swimming in water, two specific images from *To the Lighthouse*. How do those images work together, or against one another, in articulating an idea of women’s intellectual activity?

Once you’ve sat down and thought through steps 1–6, try to formulate a problem question. In our example, that might be: What does Woolf contribute to the fictional representation of women as cultural producers in the early twentieth-century? What does it mean for her female artist-figures to be withdrawn from, or on the borders of, other forms of production — such as industry? Your problem question should try to answer the following questions: Why does this project matter not just to you but to a general reader? How does it allow your critical perspective and reading of this text to enter an ongoing conversation among scholars and citizens about a larger set of issues?

Your problem question is where you would like to conclude your exercise. Although it will develop out of a narrowing of your interests, it will also begin to open your project and provides a point where your thesis advisor may suggest ways of expanding your project. For instance, in our example, your thesis advisor might suggest you research women in the British economy and consider how that historical vantage frames other women writers’ address of cultural and literary production as an economic phenomenon. Like Woolf, the poet Mina Loy wrote a lot about the role of women in Edwardian British society, but she had a much different view. To get a sense of the historical and aesthetic lay of the land, you might look at Loy’s manifestoes and her poems about women’s sexuality and how reproductive liberties create economic and aesthetic freedoms that level the ground between men and women.
General Timeline for Students Writing Their Theses

Note that actual dates will vary from year to year, and fixed deadlines may be set by the Honors Director or the Director of Undergraduate Studies that vary from the timeline below. This schedule, though, is intended to provide prospective and incoming English Honors students with a rough idea of the process and timeline of thesis writing. The plan below represents a fairly conventional “four-chapter, plus introduction” thesis structure.

Fall (while registered for English 498)
September  Development, refinement, and proposal of an original thesis topic

Early October  Send an abstract about your project to at least two faculty members, a prospective faculty advisor and prospective second reader (Note that second readers may be very involved with your project from the start, but often they will not give much feedback until the final draft.)

October  Intensive research on your topic

Early Nov  A brief prospectus that gives a chapter-by-chapter “plan” for your project as a whole

Nov and Dec  Draft your first chapter and continue research on your other chapters

December  Turn in to the Honors Director your first chapter and a progress report from your thesis advisor

At the end of the Fall semester, you will be notified if you receive an “S” or “U” for English 498. Only students who have successfully finished all of the requirements for English 498 and have been judged by their advisors as making sufficient progress on their theses will be permitted to register for English 499 in the Spring. Students who receive a “U” are responsible for all the requirements of English major in order to graduate.

The Winter Holiday
Dec – Jan  Complete your second chapter, and start drafting your third chapter

Spring (while registered for English 499)
February  Draft and revise a third chapter

March  Draft and revise a fourth chapter
Note that if graduating Honors students wish to be considered for the Presidential Award, their honors theses must be completed and revised by the end of March. If your project is eligible for any of the other departmental awards, you should tell your thesis advisor that you are interested in her nomination for that award, based on a specific and completed portion of your thesis.

**Early April**  
Write your introduction, complete your revisions, and finish all textual apparatuses (footnotes, works cited, table of contents, images, charts, etc.)

**Mid-April**  
Submit your finished thesis to your advisor and your second reader

**Late April**  
Opportunity to present your thesis in a public forum, such as a conference panel or an Honors reception or an English Studies roundtable (The venue will vary from year to year)

**Last class**  
Submit the finished thesis, with any minor revisions (typos, formatting, etc.) requested of you by your advisor and/or your second reader, to the Honors Director

**Checklist for the Final Draft**

All finished versions of Honors Theses should:

1. be clean, unmarked copies;
2. be laser printed on acid-free 8½ x 11 paper;
3. be written in an appropriate academic font with appropriate margins (usually 1½ inch on the left side to leave room for the binding, and then 1 inch on top, bottom, and right sides)
4. consistently use MLA format for all citations and for the works cited list. (If your advisor prefers another format, such as Chicago, you can use that one.)
5. spiral bound or press-bound (as can be done at a professional print shop like Kinko’s or Shipmates).
6. have a cover page with the following information (include verbatim what’s written in bold, and fill in the info where the brackets are):
   - [Thesis Title]
   - [Your Name]
   - Submitted for Honors in English
All finished theses will become part of the library in the Honors Resource Room. Although it is not required, you should consider making copies of your thesis for your primary advisor and your second reader, who have helped you develop your project.

In order to receive a grade for English 499 and graduate, you must turn in the final version of your thesis project by the date specified by the Honors Director.