

**Bryn Mawr College Department of Psychology**  
**Senior Thesis Guidelines**  
**-in effect Fall 2022-**

### **What is a psychology thesis at Bryn Mawr?**

Bryn Mawr College psychology majors have two options for their senior capstone experience: senior seminar or senior thesis. The senior thesis provides students with the opportunity to conduct a research study over the course of two semesters during their senior year. Thesis students work closely with a faculty thesis advisor within a lab environment to conceptualize, design, and conduct an empirical research project. The activities of a senior thesis typically involve reading substantial scientific literature, conducting extensive statistical analyses, writing and revising multiple drafts, presenting findings orally, and participating in the faculty member's lab (e.g., collecting or cleaning data). The principal faculty advisor of a psychology thesis must be a Bryn Mawr College faculty member.

The project culminates in a paper that is equivalent to a publishable journal article in quality and length (i.e., about 30-50 pages, written in APA style with an abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion, relevant tables/figures, and references). Theses may be quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, or an empirical meta-analysis.

Each professor in the department has a distinct research program and each thesis experience is therefore unique. Thesis students will work with their thesis advisor to develop a research question and pursue it using appropriate methods. For example, students may:

- Collect data from human participants through the Bryn Mawr College psychology research pool, community samples (in the lab or in the field) or online samples (e.g., using online crowdsourcing websites), or from laboratory animals.
- Conduct primary or secondary analyses using existing datasets or publicly available datasets.

For all research projects including theses, student researchers must be informed and adhere to research ethics in psychology. All project interests are dependent on securing and abiding to ethical guidelines including the Bryn Mawr IACUC (animal participants) and the IRB (human participants) committees.

### **How do I find a thesis advisor?**

Faculty in the psychology department have varied research interests, methodologies, and expertise. Students are encouraged to thoughtfully consider how to align their interests with one of the faculty's established research programs. The best experiences occur when there is a good fit between the advisor's area of expertise and a student's thesis topic. There are several avenues to identify a potential thesis advisor:

- Students may approach faculty after learning about their research in the Psychology Colloquium.
- Students may approach faculty whose classes they have taken, particularly lab courses, based on their experience in the course and shared interest in a particular subfield. Laboratory courses are excellent preparation for a thesis and can help give students a sense of the techniques and approaches used by particular professors.

Note: These guidelines were partially adapted from psychology thesis guidelines at Dickinson College, Smith College, and Haverford College along with language from the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

- Students may begin by volunteering or conducting an independent study in a faculty member's research laboratory (typically during their second or third years at Bryn Mawr).
- Students may independently research faculty in the department (e.g., by visiting the department website, reading recent scholarship) to identify a professor whose research interests overlap with theirs.

When a student has identified a potential thesis advisor(s), then the student should request an appointment (via email) with the professor to discuss the possibility of pursuing a thesis with them. This meeting should take place, at the latest, **February 28** of the spring semester prior to the student's senior year.

### **How is thesis progress assessed?**

Thesis advisors will assess thesis coursework at the end of the first and second semester of the senior year. Across both semesters, the thesis advisor will assess the student's ongoing, active involvement in the laboratory and thesis process, as specified by the thesis advisor (following lab-specific criteria).

Written products are also part of thesis assessment. At the end of the first semester, thesis advisors will typically require a written product (e.g., introduction and method, preregistration document, project proposal and analysis plan, IRB application, analytic plan and code etc.). At the end of the second semester, students' complete, written thesis will be assessed. Thesis advisors may have other, more specified assessment requirements dependent on lab activities (e.g., leading lab journal clubs, lab management, etc.).

### **What is the difference between completing a senior thesis and pursuing departmental honors?**

Conducting a thesis is a huge undertaking and an accomplishment to be celebrated. All thesis writers are encouraged to present their thesis findings at the research symposium that is held annually during finals week. This event celebrates students' hard work and allows faculty and students to learn about the diversity of projects being conducted in the department.

Some students may additionally pursue honors. Departmental honors is the highest recognition given by the department to senior work and is considered only for students who complete a senior thesis. The requirements for honors consideration for senior theses include the following:

1. Student must have at least a 3.7 GPA in psychology classes prior to spring semester of the senior year.
2. Student must orally present their thesis at the year-end research symposium (typically held during the first few days of finals week in the spring).
3. The thesis advisor must assess the final written thesis as worthy of being submitted to the department for honors consideration (see honors expectations below).
4. The department as a whole must agree that the thesis is worthy of honors. This process involves faculty members other than the advisor reading the thesis and departmental deliberation about whether it is worthy of honors based on the following criteria.

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In the exceptional event that the thesis advisor and departmental colleagues assess a senior thesis as Honors reflects that the thesis successfully:

- Identifies a focused and manageable topic that addresses potentially significant yet previously less explored aspects of the topic.
- Synthesizes in-depth information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches.
- Reflects skillfully developed methodology or theoretical framework.
- Synthesizes appropriate methodology or theoretical frameworks from across disciplines or from relevant subdisciplines.
- Organizes and synthesizes evidence to reveal insightful patterns, differences, or similarities related to focus.
- States a conclusion that is a logical extrapolation from the inquiry findings.
- Insightfully discusses in detail relevant and supported limitations and implications.
- Achieves a clear voice and confident prose.

The deadline and procedures differ somewhat for thesis writers depending on whether the thesis is being considered for departmental honors or not (see below). If students are unsure about pursuing honors or pursuing the presentation, they are encouraged to have a discussion with their thesis advisor.

**When is everything due?:**

**Potential Honors Theses:** If students meet the GPA requirement and wish their advisor to evaluate the thesis for honors, students must submit the final version via email to the thesis advisor by 5 PM on the last day of classes.

**Senior Theses (non-honors):** If students are not eligible or do not wish to be considered for honors, the thesis is due at the end of Senior exam week via email to the advisor.

**Presentation Abstracts:** Students who are presenting at the end-of-year symposium (required for honors consideration) should send a title and abstract of the thesis to Ann Ogle (aogle@brynmawr.edu) via email by 5pm on the last day of classes. The presentation day is usually scheduled for Tuesday or Wednesday during the first week of finals and presentations are generally around 8 minutes (data blitz style), but vary based on the number of presenters.

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