

IWU Undergraduate Thesis in Psychology
Psychology 400/401 Frequently Asked Questions

So – What is a thesis? It’s just a big paper, right?

Well, yes – a thesis is a big paper. But to call it “just” a big paper is like saying that Michael Jordan is “just” a good basketball player. The thesis is an original, year-long research project that you complete under the supervision of your project advisor. The magnitude and scope of the project is probably well-beyond what you have completed for any of your other classes. There is no length requirement, but a typical thesis will be 30-40 pages long, including dozens of references.

Doing a thesis is the same thing as getting research honors, right?

Wrong. The Psychology thesis (Psych 400/401) is completely separate from the university’s “research honors” program. It is true that many students in Psychology 400/401 also use the thesis project for university research honors. However, you are not required to do research honors just because you are in Psychology 400/401. You could do research honors without being in Psychology 400/401, although the psychology department strongly recommends against doing this.

But it’s still an honors class, right?

No. Traditionally the “best and brightest” psychology students have enrolled in Psychology 400/401. However, the course is for all students in psychology – not just those students with a high GPA. We still prefer that students have at least a 3.00 overall GPA – but if you don’t have that, you can still take the course with permission of the department chair. Regardless of the gradepoint, all psychology students should get something very important out of the course.

Does that mean I must be a Psychology major if I want to do a thesis?

No. Many non-Psychology majors have taken Psychology 400/401 in the past. Typically, such students have a related major (such as Biology or Sociology) and have done a thesis in Psychology because the opportunity was not available in their major department. Such students often go on to graduate studies in Psychology-related fields.

I am not going to grad school (or at least not right now) – does that mean I can’t do a thesis?

Absolutely not! Most students who take the Psychology 400/401 course are planning to attend graduate school at some time. However, the thesis should be a valuable experience for all students, regardless of future plans.

OK – just what are those “valuable” experiences? Why should I take this course?

Let’s see...the thesis experience, and the skills developed in completing the thesis, will have an important impact on your future regardless of what you plan to do.

Ideally, the process of completing a thesis will:

- 1) Help you fine-tune the critical thinking skills which you have (hopefully) been developing throughout your Wesleyan career. By now, you are probably sick of hearing about “critical thinking.” Unfortunately, that is what a liberal arts education is all about. There is, perhaps, no better way to hone such skills than to complete an original, analytical research project.

2) Provide you with a “capstone” experience. A “capstone” experience is one which organizes, reviews, and summarizes your experiences at the university. Psychology 400/401 is designed to provide such an experience.

3) Help you to further develop professional, analytical writing skills. Psychology 400/401 is a “writing intensive” course in which you will draft and re-draft your thesis several times over the course of the year. Good analytical writing skills are extremely important regardless of your future plans.

4) Enable you to experience the joys and frustrations of doing such an original and independent project. It may sound silly, but this is perhaps the most important goal- to personally experience the research process. Such an experience will probably have a profound effect on your future plans. Suppose you find you don’t like research? Then perhaps you should reconsider going to graduate school, or maybe you will find that you love research. Again, that may impact your plans.

5) Help you demonstrate your ability to carry out independent work, both to yourself and to future employers. Not long after graduation, you will probably be expected to work on an independent basis. Although college provides some degree of independence, it is nothing like what will be expected in the “real world” outside the Wesleyan bubble. Psychology 400/401 can serve as a bridge, helping you move from the supervised setting of college to the independent setting of the future. Not only does this increase your self-confidence, but completing a thesis will impress future employers (and/or graduate admissions committees) who are looking for evidence of independent work.

Does that mean I have to do a thesis if I want to get into grad school?

No. It is true that most graduate schools (at least in Psychology) do require applicants to have some research experience at the undergraduate level. However, a thesis is not the only way to obtain such experience. The thesis is, however, a very good way to obtain that experience because graduate programs will recognize it as a “high level” involvement in research. The thesis has the additional advantage of showing up on your transcript, so graduate schools and potential employers will not miss it.

But if I do a thesis, then I will have a “ticket” into graduate school, right?

Unfortunately, no. You will still need to have good grades, good GRE scores, and good letters of recommendation. Doing a thesis can help you a lot - but it can’t make up for major deficiencies in other important areas.

I haven’t done research before - does this mean I can’t do a thesis?

Of course not. Many students taking the thesis course are having their first formal research experience. If you don’t have previous research experience, you will probably have to work a bit harder than those students with extensive experience, but the task is by no means impossible. You will just need to work a bit more closely with your thesis advisor, and you will need to develop your project a bit more quickly.

I hear I need to get a thesis advisor – but I already have an advisor. You know – the person who signs my schedule form...

A common misconception! A thesis advisor is not the same thing as an academic advisor (the person who signs your schedule). The thesis advisor is responsible for supervising your work on the thesis. This might be the same person as your academic advisor, and it might not. In most cases, you will be working on a project in your advisor’s laboratory and/or working within your advisor’s established research group. Usually, your project will be directly related to your advisor’s area of expertise.

OK-but I don't want to do research with any of the people who are teaching Psychology 400/401 this year. Now what do I do?

Getting confusing, isn't it? The instructors for Psychology 400/401 are responsible for organizing the 400/401 class, providing feedback on your written work, and providing general information about the research process. The 400/401 instructors *are not* responsible for supervising your research project (unless the 400/401 instructor also happens to be your thesis advisor).

I think I understand...but how do I get a thesis advisor?

The best method is to visit with each of the faculty in the department and ask them what type of research they are doing and what type of projects might be available for you to work on. You will find most faculty very willing to discuss this because they probably want you to work with them. In fact, the faculty often need to remind themselves that it is not a competition to see who can get the most students!

Remember, there will be times when the thesis advisor you want will be unable to work with you. Faculty can only accept a small number of students each year. If this happens, talk to another faculty member – chances are that they will have room for you.

But nobody in the department is working on something I am interested in. Can't I choose my own topic?

This can be a problem. Because our department is small, many students have interests which do not coincide with faculty expertise. On some occasions, a student has done a thesis project completely unrelated to areas of faculty expertise. Although it is possible to do such a project, it is discouraged. Faculty members cannot give their best advice when the project is outside their area of expertise. As a result, you will need to be much more independent in developing your research project.

If you still want to do a project which is unrelated to faculty expertise, you will need to convince a psychology faculty member to serve as your advisor. The advisor will be most convinced if you show a high level of motivation and have clearly thought about the project. A faculty member is unlikely to agree to such a project if you demonstrate low motivation or have only vague ideas about what you plan to do. A past history of...ahem...unreliability would probably also work against you.

I want an advisor from a different department. Is that OK?

Maybe no, maybe yes....Because the thesis is a course in the psychology department, the official advisor must be from the psychology department. This is because there are certain common research practices in psychology which might not be found in other disciplines. As a result, an advisor from another department cannot be expected to give you appropriate advice for a thesis in psychology.

Although the "official" advisor must be from the psychology department, you are certainly allowed (and, in fact, encouraged) to obtain advice from outside the department. In the past, faculty from outside the department have served as unofficial co-chairs for thesis projects.

The person I want as an advisor is an "adjunct" faculty member in the psychology department. Is that OK?

Certainly! Adjunct faculty have served as thesis advisors many times in the past. In fact, be sure to consider adjunct faculty when choosing an advisor, because adjunct faculty often have interest and expertise different from that of the "regular" faculty.

I still don't have any idea what I want to do for a project. Is that a problem?

It might be. If this is your junior year (or earlier), there is no problem. You have until the end of the spring semester of your junior year to choose an advisor and have at least a preliminary idea for the project. If it is your senior year, this is a problem. Students should be doing preliminary work on the project during the summer so they can “hit the ground running” when fall arrives. If this is your senior year and you still don't have a project, see the instructor for Psychology 400/401 immediately.

But I am a senior, and I have just decided I want to do a thesis. Does this mean I can't do it now?

There are always exceptions, and it is still possible to choose the “thesis” option as late as the Fall semester during your senior year. If this is the case, you need the approval of both your thesis advisor and the faculty member teaching Psychology 400/401. This needs to be done immediately. Remember, such cases are meant to be the exception and not the rule.

You said that I will probably be working in the advisor's laboratory. Can't I just do a “library” thesis?

No. Because Psychology is an empirical discipline, it is important for you to do a “data based” project – a project in which you collect and analyze data and come to conclusions based on the data. Other types of projects, while appropriate for other contexts, are not appropriate for the 400/401 experience.

I don't know how I got on your mailing list – I am just a freshman. I can just throw this stuff away, can't I?

Stop right there! Before you go any further...

You may just be a freshman, and you may have lots of time to “sleep on it” – but it is never too early to at least start thinking about a thesis. You don't have to know right now, but you can start thinking about what lab you want to work in, or who you want as your thesis advisor. You can start volunteering in the various labs in the department, just to get a feel for the research opportunities available. That way, you will really be ready to go when you get to be a senior.

When and how does all this get started?

First, you need to submit the thesis intent form. Once you've been matched you will work with your research advisor to develop a 1 – 2 page tentative plan for your research as well as a summer reading list. Submit a copy of this plan to Dr. Doran French, the psychology department chair, by Reading Day. If you need an extension until the end of May term, discuss this with Dr. French.

I want to know more. Who should I talk to?

You can talk to any faculty member in the Psychology department, really. Psychology 400/401 is a “shared” responsibility of our faculty, and all of us should be able to answer your questions (or direct you to someone who can). In fact, the responsibility for teaching the course rotates among the faculty, so the people teaching the course this year will not be the people teaching the course next year.