FAQs

Should I do an honors thesis?

Deciding to do an honors thesis a personal decision. An honors thesis is a great way to experience the scientific process and have ownership of a project. However, collection of quality data and preparation of a thesis are time consuming processes that might interfere with your ability to commit time to academics and other activities. Keep in mind that the thesis is due just after spring break when many students are applying for jobs or interviewing. Consider your academic goals and plans for after graduation, then evaluate what is the best use for your time.

What is the difference between doing an honors thesis and getting research credit?

The honors thesis should capture the full range of the scientific process, from selecting a research question and designing a study through analysis and presentation of the results. In addition, the honors thesis should represent original research done by the student. Working in a lab for credit or pay might include part or all of this process, but the honors program requires it.

Can I do research off campus for an honors thesis?

The research must be carried out under the direct supervision of a faculty member on Cornell’s Ithaca campus. If a student plans to do research off campus, it must first be approved by the Honors Committee, and a faculty member on the Ithaca campus must be a co-mentor who is actively engaged in the research. Surrogate mentors, i.e. Cornell Ithaca campus faculty who are mentors in name only and are not directly involved in a student’s research, are not allowed. Contact Dr. Laura Schoenle to discuss further.

Does my research need to be publishable in a scientific journal to be eligible for honors?

Ideally, one goal of an honors thesis is to present results that are publishable in a scientific journal, not necessarily independently but integrated with other work to flesh out the story. However, given the time limits inherent in undergraduate research, this goal in many cases is not achievable. If the results are not publishable, to be acceptable a thesis should describe the design and implementation of the experiments undertaken, the analysis of the data that were obtained, and any future modifications of the design that in principle might lead to publishable results. The initial decision on what comprises a suitable project for an honors thesis is made by the research mentor and the student. If there is some disagreement or uncertainty in this decision, the mentor and student (together or separately) should consult with the leader of the appropriate honors group. The Honors Committee, comprising all of the honors group leaders, has the final say in whether the thesis is acceptable. The committee relies heavily on the reviews by other faculty to make this decision. The most important factors considered in evaluating the thesis are the quality and rigor of the scientific work, feedback from the thesis mentor, and the thesis presentation itself.

Can I study abroad/off campus while completing an honors thesis?
The honors program has no explicit requirements that you study on the Ithaca campus while writing an honors thesis. However, honors theses do require substantial time investments some of which might need to be in the lab. Discuss your plans with your research mentor and together, you can determine whether working on an honors thesis while away from Cornell is a viable option for you.

**Do I need to spend a summer on campus to do an honors thesis?**

Many students spend a summer at Cornell working on the honors thesis, but this is not a requirement of the honors program. The nature of research in some labs can require large blocks of time, seasonal data collection, or have other requirements that result in the need to work in the lab over the summer. Consult with your research mentor to determine if research during the summer will be necessary for your project.

**What are the consequences for leaving the honors program?**

There are no consequences for deciding to leave the honors program. We understand that sometimes research takes more time than anticipated, unexpected challenges arise, or your priorities can change. Completing an honors thesis is completely optional and you can leave the program at any time.

**How long should an honors thesis or X section be?**

Except for the abstract (250 words), there are no length requirements for any part of the thesis. The length of any given section will depend entirely on the content of the specific thesis and the standards for that field of biological sciences. See journal articles in your field to get a sense of how to structure each section of the thesis.