THESIS QUICK SHEET #1:
GETTING STARTED WITH THE THESIS

THESIS OVERVIEW

The CHC thesis is the culmination of work in a major—a natural outgrowth from and expression of the ideas, problems, and approaches taught in that discipline. It creatively applies the methods of the discipline and tests students' power and limits, reflecting dialogue, common work, and apprenticeship with faculty members in their specialized fields of interest.

Students can write on whatever they want for their theses. But finding a thesis topic does not mean brainstorming whatever happens to appeal at a given moment. Instead, consider that the thesis is:

- the culmination of work in a major, i.e., a natural outgrowth from and expression of the ideas, problems, and approaches taught in their discipline, a creative application of the methods of the discipline, and an interrogation of their power and limits; and
- a reflection of dialogue, common work, and apprenticeship with faculty members in their specialized field of interest.

FINDING A PRIMARY THESIS ADVISOR

The best theses usually begin as term papers; the best advising relationships usually begin in the classroom. Working with an advisor with whom one has taken a class already means beginning with a shared bibliography, a shared understanding of relevant questions and disciplinary standards, and a shared experience of work and personal relationship that facilitates communication during the thesis process.

Choosing a thesis advisor with whom one has not previously studied should be an exception. Students are well advised to choose coursework with professors whom they think they might want to work with on a thesis. Moreover, it is never too early to begin discussing possible extended research projects with faculty with whom one gets on well.

THESIS TYPES

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES THESES

Thesis projects in the humanities and social sciences take the form of an extended exploration of a research question that is informed by focused inquiry into a topic, the review of relevant literature, and original analysis and argumentation. The contours of this type of thesis, as well as the methodological approach(es) employed, will vary according to discipline.

SCIENCE AND MATH THESES

Thesis projects in math and in the natural and physical sciences generally have a different structure from theses in humanities and social sciences. Such theses fall into two general categories: theoretical and empirical.

Theoretical theses
Theoretical theses are common in mathematics, and are also sometimes appropriate to physics, biology, computer sciences, and occasionally other sciences. This type of thesis should investigate and analyze some new problem, or approach a problem in a novel way. Examples include proofs, novel series of calculations, or mathematical and computer-based models of natural phenomena. It should not, however, be simply a review of the work of others; it's not a term paper or a book report, but a piece of original analysis that improves in some way on what was previously done. The degree of originality may vary from one field to another; in some cases, it is most important to assemble an understanding of a higher level problem that is original to the student more than it would be to practitioners in the field of study.

Empirical theses
Empirical theses are common in all fields of science. This type of thesis is based on original research and data collection to address an original scientific question. This is not a simple literature review; however, the data collected can be experimental (collected in a controlled laboratory setting), historical, or literature-based surveys of data from the results of others' research. Meta-analyses, based on the results of others, are acceptable, but must be pursued with a novel question in mind.

Writing a thesis in the sciences
Regardless of the type of science or math thesis, the writing process and structure is essentially the same. It is hoped that the "meat" of the thesis will be an essentially publishable document, or the equivalent. The paper should be written in an appropriate scientific voice, and structured like a scientific journal article. This doesn't mean, however, that it shouldn't be written in a clear, concise, readable style. Excessive use of passive voice is unnecessary, even in original scientific research publications.

Because this is a thesis for the Clark Honors College, however, we have some unique requirements. In order to facilitate reading by a general audience, the critical background concepts should be presented in a <u>non-technical introduction and supplemented by a glossary</u>. Students should refrain from using bold or italic font to emphasize words in the glossary; rather, those terms should be made available in the glossary to enable readers unfamiliar with the jargon to understand the more technical sections.

PERFORMANCE/PORTFOLIO THESES
Performance/portfolio theses are characteristic of disciplines such as theater, music, creative writing, art and architecture, and in some journalism and business areas.

Performance/portfolio theses also provide a place for cross-disciplinary work, such as a math major preparing to write a play, or a history major preparing to write a thesis of historical fiction.

In the case of cross-disciplinary work, the honors college requires students to have taken **two** courses in the relevant discipline outside of the student's major **before** the student pre-registers for HC 477: Thesis Prospectus. For example, the math major who wants to write a play would have completed at least two theatre courses; the history major who wants to write a historical fiction novel would have completed at least two courses in creative writing. Moreover, the honors college requires that a faculty member from the appropriate department (theatre for the math major example; creative writing for the history major example) be actively involved in supervising the thesis.

While the performance/portfolio itself comprises much of the work of the thesis, a critical introduction is mandatory for all such theses, be they in theater, music, creative writing, art and architecture, journalism, or business.

The critical introduction includes much more than "how I came to this topic" and "what I would do next time." Without knowledge about how other artists/scholars/critics have reflected on the problems the student wants to address, the thesis becomes another attempt to reinvent the wheel. Instead, the critical introduction to a performance/portfolio thesis demonstrates knowledge of prior work in the discipline and the general discourse about the issues the thesis confronts. The critical introduction includes:

- An analysis of what other artists, architects, etc. have thought about the problems the student seeks to address.
- A serious discussion of method and of the critical significance of related work in the field.
- A clear discussion of how the student has developed the project through a critical confrontation with the ideas of others in that area.
- An articulation of how the details of the work itself sought to implement the student's own ideas and in so doing attempted also to solve problems that predecessors had not.

Your disciplinary faculty and honors college advisors are best suited to providing you help as you work to shape such a project.

THESIS LENGTH
There is no absolute minimum, nor no absolute maximum, for a CHC thesis. A shorter thesis—perhaps a performance/portfolio thesis derived from a senior recital and including the necessary critical introduction—would weigh in at about thirty pages.

Perusing the shelves of the CHC library vividly demonstrates the varied lengths of CHC theses.

What's the rule of thumb? Consider your discipline, consider your topic, consider your audience, and deliver a comprehensive, disciplinarily-rigorous, readable thesis that demonstrates your best abilities and the independent path you've charted. Remember that your thesis should meet and exceed the standards of your discipline, as well as express clearly the concept, procedure, and implications of your work for a general reader.