Senior Thesis Program in Language and Linguistics: Guidelines and Regulations

As you think about whether to apply for the thesis program and write a senior thesis, keep in mind that most students do not write theses. The senior thesis program is for the student particularly motivated to work in depth, intensely and in a very self-directed way, for a year or more on a specific topic.

The student must therefore be highly disciplined, organized, motivated, and self-directed. The project is the student’s own, and this means that all work to find a suitable topic prior to completing a thesis proposal—and then to develop the thesis' focus(es), content, and main proposals over the course of a year or more—is done by the student, and not the supervisor.

Some students decide that an independent study is a preferable option to doing a thesis. And so a major factor to consider as you contemplate doing a thesis is whether you are in fact wanting to take on all that it will involve, or instead whether you would prefer to (a) take a course such as e.g. LING 105–Phonetics, LING 121–Syntax II, or LING 140–Discourse and Pragmatics, that involves doing original research for credit, and/or (b) do an independent study course.

1. What is the thesis program?

The thesis program is a two-semester sequence (LING 99d, “Senior Research”, in fall and spring), during which select senior Linguistics majors carry out independent research and writing of a senior thesis. Only majors in the thesis program can graduate with Honors, High Honors, or Highest Honors in Linguistics.

2. What happens during the program, and what does a thesis consist of?

Thesis students, under the supervision of the faculty advisor, carry out independent research and the writing of a thesis. Students in the program enroll in LING 99d in fall and spring. (Note that only the fall LING 99d can be used for course credit toward the major requirement of four elective courses.) Students and advisors will establish a clear understanding about the number of meetings and the schedule for completing various stages of the project.

The thesis itself is a polished piece of writing that discusses and gives a formal analysis for a substantial set of data. It should describe the project undertaken, detail the research carried out, address well-conceived questions with well-substantiated and analytically sophisticated answers, and discuss relevant literature. Suitable projects can involve data obtained from fieldwork, corpus analysis, the extant literature, experimental work using psycholinguistic or computational methodology, or a combination of these.

Theses are typically between roughly 50 and 70 double-spaced pages, and are prepared in the format of professional linguistic writing in the linguistic subfield (as stipulated by the advisor). Toward the end of the spring semester, the advisor will schedule an oral defense of the thesis.
before a defense committee (see below). The committee will determine whether the thesis passes and whether the student receives any honors in Linguistics, and, if appropriate, will make a recommendation about the student’s level of honors, based on the written thesis and oral defense.

3. **Who is eligible?**

All academically qualified Linguistics majors are eligible to apply for the departmental thesis program. At the end of the junior year, in order to be in an adequate position to take on all that a thesis involves, students need to have completed all or nearly all of the Linguistics major (including all core courses), and ideally taken all or nearly all of the LING courses that are offered.

Students must have a grade point average of 3.75 or better in Linguistics courses (and generally also at least a 3.75 overall cumulative Brandeis GPA) to be admitted to the program. Those students who have successfully completed Linguistics senior honors theses in the past have typically gotten all or nearly all As in all of their linguistics courses, and typically earned nearly all A-range grades (As and A-s) in all Brandeis courses. Thus, requirement involves not merely the fact of being strictly at 3.75—but being overall among the top students in the major.

The Undergraduate Advisor and proposed thesis advisor must agree that the student has completed enough core and elective linguistics coursework to prepare for writing a thesis.

4. **What do I need to know in my junior year to help facilitate my senior thesis process?**

   a. **Get started early in conceiving of your project and seeking a potential advisor.**

      It is in your interest to conceive of a research project and seek out a potential advisor by the end of your junior year and/or during the following summer, so that you can be ready to start actual work on the thesis at the start of your senior year (or even before that, e.g. over the preceding summer). The entire Linguistics faculty will then decide collectively whether or not to accept you to the thesis program at the beginning of your senior year (see below).

      If your proposal is not accepted, you still have the option of writing up your research and ideas in a one-semester independent study (LING 98a/98b), under the guidance of a faculty advisor.

   b. **Be sure to apply for IRB permission (where required) well in advance, so that you can use your data toward a thesis.**

      It is your responsibility to determine, in consultation with your faculty advisor, whether or not you need to obtain IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval for the data which you will collect, in order to be able to use the data in your thesis. This is typically necessary for projects which involve data gathered from human subjects, e.g. through interviews, participant observation, databases, etc.
If such approval is necessary in your case, IRB approval needs to be obtained before any experiments or other data collection begins. Some students in this category apply for IRB permission in or at the end of their junior year; others apply first thing in their senior year.

The IRB's purpose is to make sure that you do not take advantage of your research subjects, and that the research benefits outweigh the risks. IRB approval takes time, and you need approval before beginning your study, so submit your proposal as soon as you have a topic in hand to avoid any unnecessary delays in your research.

An explanation of the forms you need to submit can be found at:

www.brandeis.edu/ora/compliance/irb.

Before starting, you should review the very useful IRB Application Guide and Checklist. You should print out and complete the two necessary forms which are available on the IRB website at:

www.brandeis.edu/ora/compliance/irb/forms/pdfs/IRBResearchReviewForm20121214.pdf
www.brandeis.edu/ora/compliance/irb/forms/pdfs/IRBFacStudentAssurance.pdf.

Note that the review form requires a description of your research, including a detailed description of methodology, attached to the form.

If you’re applying for an exempt or expedited review, put your completed application into a pdf document and submit it electronically. If you’re applying for the full review, you should additionally hand deliver the completed application to the Office of Research Administration in Bernstein-Marcus 121. If you’re applying for a full review, pay attention to application submission deadlines, since all the committee members must read a very large volume of applications. Take care of this in September if at all possible or you may lose valuable time in your research. Students must also participate in a training session through the CITI program (see the Training page on the IRB website).

* Tip: sometimes applications aren't approved and no notification goes out to you. Be sure you follow up on the status after the meeting in case you have more work to do.

5. How do I apply to the thesis program?

   a. Eligible students must, on their own initiative, conceive of a research project and seek out a Linguistics faculty supervisor who agrees to advise the project.

To be accepted as an advisee, the student should already have formulated a topic, research questions, and a methodology. A student may contact an Undergraduate Advisor for help in selecting and approaching a possible faculty advisor.
b. Students must submit a proposal of at least 5-10 pages double spaced (note that in some cases an appropriate proposal may need to be longer) to the Linguistics faculty by one week after the first day of classes during the fall term (or whatever the first term of this year is, so that this would be spring term for mid-year students) of the senior year.

The proposal should include a bibliography, plus explicit descriptions of:

• what your thesis topic is
• why the topic is interesting and important
• what the central question(s) to be examined are
• how your topic speaks to issues in the linguistics literature
• your methodology/sources of data

C. The proposal will be reviewed by the linguistics faculty.

Students will be notified shortly afterward whether or not they have been admitted to the Linguistics Senior Thesis Program.

d. If you are admitted to the program, you will register with your advisor’s signature for LING 99d (Senior Research) in fall.

In spring, provided that you are progressing according to plan, you will register for LING 99d again.

6. What is a typical time line for senior thesis progress over the year?

First Semester

a. In September, the seniors who have been accepted to the thesis program should meet with their advisors to discuss logistics.

b. By the end of the first semester, you should in general have completed the following, though note that the specifics can vary by subfield, and by the nature and quantity of data collection involved:

• the bulk of the research for your thesis (note that this means IRB approval will need to have been obtained early in the fall semester, at the latest)

• a rough but detailed outline for the full contents of the thesis

• a piece of written work, such as a thesis chapter, the thesis introduction, or a detailed thesis prospectus, to be decided in consultation with your advisor
c. The above work must be completed satisfactorily by the end of the fall semester, in order to move forward to the second semester of the thesis program and register for LING 99b for the spring. At the end of the first semester, the student and/or advisor may decide that the student should not continue in the thesis program. In this case, the advisor will attempt to work out with the student a way to receive credit and a grade for the fall in LING 99d, perhaps by completing a smaller research paper on the thesis topic.

**Second Semester**

During the second semester, the student and advisor will establish a clear schedule for submitting thesis chapters.

a. By the middle of your second semester, you should have a discussion with your advisor about the other members of your defense committee, and in general about defense details and requirements. Generally the defense committee will just be the Linguistics faculty. However, additional readers from other departments or outside Brandeis may be appropriate. While you and your advisor will collaborate on choosing additional readers, your advisor will approach these outside faculty members with a formal invitation to serve on your committee. It is generally advisable that you be in touch with your other committee members about the intellectual content of the thesis prior to oral defense. It can also be useful to meet with other linguistics faculty about the research, depending on its subfield.

b. The due date for the complete thesis will be arranged with the advisor. The date will be no later than the last day of classes, and at least one week before the scheduled oral defense. You must provide copies of the complete thesis to each of your readers at that time.

c. Toward the end of the spring semester, the advisor will schedule an oral defense of the thesis. Generally, a single defense event is scheduled during the last week of classes or during the final examination period, which will include all students defending linguistics theses that year.

d. Before departing campus at the end of the year, the student is required to submit a copy of the final, post-defense thesis, including any final revisions required, to the University Library (including a signed release form), and another copy with the advisor for the program archive, for future students and scholars to read.

7. **What do I need to know about the oral defense?**

a. A typical oral defense lasts between 30-45 minutes. The questions asked are generally confined to the thesis specifically, as opposed to testing general linguistic knowledge.

b. Students begin the defense by giving an oral presentation of their thesis work, using either a photocopied handout made available to all defense attendees, or projected slides, as appropriate to the individual thesis' content and the conventions in the linguistic subfield in which it was written.
c. The student's presentation typically begins by presenting the central research topic or question of the thesis, giving some rationale and/or larger linguistic context which motivates the thesis' line of investigation. The central arguments of the thesis are then presented, along with illustrative empirical examples, derivations, or charts, as appropriate to the linguistic subfield. The presentation typically ends with a summary of the thesis' main empirical findings and theoretical proposals, along with questions left open for future research.

d. The student's presentation is followed by questions from each member of the defense committee (and from other members of the audience, per the advisor's discretion) about the written thesis and the oral presentation, to which the student responds as honestly and thoughtfully as possible. This discussion can be a wonderful opportunity to showcase the depth of thinking that went into your project, as well as a very helpful source of thoughtful feedback on it.

8. How will the work be evaluated, and by whom?

There are several points in the thesis process at which evaluations are made.

a. Grades for LING 99d.

At the end of spring semester, the student's advisor will assign the same grade for both the fall and spring semesters of work in LING 99d. This grade reflects an evaluation of the entire process of researching and writing the senior thesis, including both fall and spring semesters.

If, at the end of the fall semester, the advisor decides that the project is not being successfully carried out, a grade will be assigned for fall LING 99d, and the student will not continue in the thesis program, and thus will not enroll in LING 99d for spring.

b. Grades for LING 99b versus receiving Latin honors at graduation.

- Grades for LING 99d are independent from the issue of graduating with Latin honors, for which cum laude and magna cum laude are based just on the university-wide grade point averages of 3.5 and 3.7, respectively.

- For summa cum laude, the University requires not only a cumulative university-wide GPA of 3.8, but also the award of departmental "honors" or above (see below for the distinction between thesis and departmental honors).

- If a student has completed more than one major, departmental honors are necessary from just one department or program to be eligible for summa cum laude.

- Students with a cumulative GPA of 3.8 or higher without departmental honors graduate magna cum laude.

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c. Honors awarded to the thesis/oral defense.

The defense committee, made up of the advisor and other linguistics faculty members, determines a recommendation for whether the thesis should receive honors (and, if so, what level of honors) after the defense. This recommendation is based upon both the written thesis and the oral defense.

d. Awarding of departmental honors.

Departmental honors (distinct from honors awarded to the individual thesis) are based on the level of honors recommended by the thesis committee, along with the grade point average in the major. For this reason, the final decision regarding departmental honors cannot be made until the grades for the final semester have been turned in and the linguistics faculty members hold their last meeting of the year, just a few days before commencement.

This means that the level of honors awarded to the thesis by the thesis committee might not be the same as the final level of honors awarded at graduation: the level can go up or down, depending on your Language and Linguistics GPA. The possible levels of honors for both thesis and departmental honors are: no honors, honors, high honors, and highest honors.

Note that the grade in LING 99d is determined by the thesis advisor only, and is distinct from any level of thesis or departmental honors.

9. Can I receive honors in more than one department? Can I use my thesis to fulfill requirements in other departments or programs?

a. Linguistics does not exclude seniors from working on two different theses in distinct disciplines (and thus enrolling in two 99-level courses) at the same time. However, a plan to do this should be undertaken only after careful thought and discussion between the student, the linguistics faculty advisor and Undergraduate Advisor, and the appropriate faculty members of the second discipline, if the second discipline permits writing two senior theses. (Note that not all Brandeis programs and departments do permit this.)

b. In the situation in which two theses are written, the decision of whether to bestow some level of honors in the Language and Linguistics major on a student for his or her senior thesis in linguistics will depend only on the linguistics thesis, and not on any other thesis written (which the linguistics faculty will not evaluate). Receiving some level of honors in linguistics occurs entirely independently of whether the other program or department for which the second thesis was written decides to bestow a level of honors or not.

c. Only a thesis written in linguistics and with a linguistics faculty advisor may be used as a thesis for the Language and Linguistics major. However, linguistics does not prohibit using a linguistics thesis additionally to satisfy requirements of some other program or department, if the other program or department permits this.