

Stanford University Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education		URP Home		Contacts	
Undergraduate Research Programs					
Intro to Research & Advice for Students	Student Grant Programs	Departmental Research Opportunities	Honors at Stanford	Research Opportunities Listings	Fellowships and Graduate School Applications Services
Summer Research College	Awards	Preparation for Field Work	Information for Faculty	Undergraduate Research and Public Service Symposium	Library of Printer-Friendly Advice Documents

Honors at Stanford

- Advantages of Honors
- Who offers Honors?
- How to decide?

Honors Programs

- Program Descriptions
- Interdisciplinary Honors Programs for Non-majors
- Public Service Scholars Program

Resources and Tools for Honors

- Consultation Services
- Workshops
- Writing Your Thesis: Advice
- Library
- Working with Faculty Honors Advisors
- Documentation Systems

Honors College

- Faculty Talks at HC

Resources for Faculty

-
-
-
-
-

Faculty Talks at Honors College

Honors College Opening Address by Michael Tomz,
Assistant Professor of Political Science
September 7, 2005

Good evening, and welcome to Summer Honors College . It's a pleasure to be here.

No doubt you are all at various stages in the research process. Some of you may be close to completing your honors theses. You ended summer vacation early for one simple reason: you missed the Stanford dining hall! But I suspect that most of you are not quite ready to dot the last "i" and cross the last "t" of your thesis. You returned to The Farm this month to find a topic, or gather data, or start writing.

If you're in that position, I have to be brutally honest: completing a senior honors thesis is one of the hardest things you'll do at Stanford. To quote the distinguished teacher Jack Black (a.k.a. Mr. Schneebly) from the film *School of Rock*, this project "will test your head, and your mind, and your brain."

It's time to start hunting for path-breaking ideas that will impress your friends and wow your advisors. Prepare to search all corners of Stanford library for elusive quotes and numeric data. Get ready to slave under a florescent desk lamp, with little more than a Coke and a bag of Cheetos to keep you going at 2 am . And brace yourself for periods of self-doubt, when you'll wonder how you'll ever complete the project and whether it will make a difference.

What could possibly prepare you for the monumental task that lies ahead? The answer, in part, is ... kindergarten!

There's a popular saying: "all I *really* need to know I learned in kindergarten." I definitely won't go that far. After all, I wouldn't want President Hennessy to fire the faculty and close the university. Moreover, I recognize that you can't write an outstanding honors thesis without deep knowledge of the humanities or the sciences—the kind of knowledge one can acquire only through years of university-level training.

Nevertheless, I believe that your thesis will go easier if you follow three rules often taught in kindergarten: (1) share; (2) don't hit; and (3) practice writing.

Before elaborating on these points, though, let me assure you that I am indeed qualified to speak about both kindergarten and honors theses. I don't

Please check back for student info, Departments and Faculty, and Contact Info.

HC September 2005

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
28	29	30	31	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	1

Sofia Martos, '01, attended the International Relations program of Honors College in September 2000:

"What struck me most about the experience was the variety of resources available to me. Time and time again I was told about people who could guide me through the thesis process, and that all I had to do was ask for help. I could work with people who specialized in writing and revising, statistical methods, who knew the ins and outs of the libraries, etc."

mean to brag, but I have three impressive credentials. First and most importantly, I myself am a kindergarten graduate, class of 1976. Second, my daughter Emily is a kindergartener. And third, I lived through the process you are about to begin. I wrote an undergraduate thesis, a master's thesis, and a Ph.D. dissertation, and I perform and supervise academic research every day.

As I've reflected on my experiences as a student, a teacher, and now a kindergarten parent, I've come to see how kindergarten lays the foundation for advanced scholarship. Let me explain what I mean.

An important rule of kindergarten, and of effective thesis-writing, is to share. In kindergarten, your teacher encouraged you to share almost everything. You shared toys, crayons, and books. You shared tips about how to walk the balance beam, scale the climbing fort, and build sand castles. And during show-and-tell, you shared pictures you had painted and things you had written. In short, you played and learned as a community.

I encourage you to approach your honors thesis the same way: by sharing ideas not only with your thesis advisor but also with your peers. Take a minute to look around the dining hall. The students on your right, on your left, across the table and throughout the room: they are *your* scholarly community. Bounce ideas off them. Brainstorm with them. Ask them—even beg or bribe them if necessary—for detailed comments on your research plan, analysis and writing. And, in turn, help them in any way that you can.

This kind of sharing has benefited me. Believe it or not, I joined the Stanford faculty because I wanted to continue my education. I anticipated that professors and students on campus would help me develop ideas, learn methodologies, and make discoveries. Fortunately, that's just what has happened. My research has gone in new and exciting directions, due largely to intellectual exchange with other members of the Stanford community.

I think sharing will benefit you, as well. The phrase "academic research" sometimes conjures images of solitary scholars working in the bowels of the library or the confines of a lab. Break that stereotype. Before you leave dinner tonight, set an appointment with at least one friend to discuss your thesis research. And during Honors College, form a discussion and support group that will meet regularly throughout the year. You can achieve a lot by working independently, of course, but you'll accomplish more—and have more fun—with help from your peers.

My second piece of advice is: "don't hit other people." This, too, comes straight from kindergarten, and it's highly relevant to your senior thesis. As you've probably noticed, researchers sometimes go on the offensive. They attack—punch other scholars in the nose, figuratively if not physically—by claiming that previous research is totally and completely wrong. I, too, have succumbed to this temptation at times, which may reflect my training as a high school and college debater. But it's not the best way to proceed. When we adopt an adversarial stance, we turn potential colleagues into enemies, and we overlook the merit in previous research.

Am I saying that researchers should be "lovers, not fighters?" Not quite. Often the best way to advance knowledge is to point out, and then correct, the flaws in existing research. But even in those cases, kindergarten rules apply. Rather than kick and hit and bite, we should treat other scholars—ones here at Stanford, and ones we've never met—with respect. In my view, we advance knowledge by standing on the shoulders of previous researchers, not by knocking them to the ground.

My final tip is to practice writing. When my daughter Emily started kindergarten last month, the teacher passed out empty journals. Each student is supposed to write something in their journal at least once per week. At this stage, it doesn't matter what they write or how many spelling errors they make. A typical entry by Emily goes something like this: "Dear Dad, please please pleeeeee (with 23 e's) take me to Chucky Cheese!" (OK, don't write that in *your* journal.) The main point, I think, is to develop a writing habit: to get in the practice of putting ideas on paper regularly, rather than in fits and starts.

Consider approaching your honors thesis the same way: by writing regularly, rather than letting weeks or months pass without putting pen to paper. One of the colleagues I admire the most sets aside at least 2 hours per day for writing. Some days the pages pour from his head. Other days he struggles to eek out a few sentences. But every day he reserves time to let writing happen, and he won't permit anything to interfere with those sacred hours. Evidently it works. This colleague has published 8 books and more than 30 articles. Many have received nationwide awards from the American Political Science Association. When I asked how he manages to be so productive, the answer was simple: the discipline of daily writing.

If you think his approach might work for you, try it during summer Honors College. During the next two weeks, you have a unique opportunity to work intensively on your honors thesis, without the responsibilities and the distractions of the normal academic year. Take full advantage of this chance. Carve out some special writing time and stick to it. If you are not yet ready to draft a chapter, then summarize the literature, sketch possible arguments, or describe data. The key is to start writing on time and to continue until the bell rings. If you keep this daily habit, not only during Honors College but also during the academic year, you'll soon have paragraphs, and then a chapter, and eventually the entire thesis.

There is fourth kindergarten rule—well, maybe a tradition—which I hesitate to mention now, because it is *so* important that it deserves a speech all its own. The tradition involves bringing your teacher a thoughtful gift: typically an apple or, in Silicon Valley, an Apple iPod. If you are enthusiastic about this tradition *and* in need of a thesis advisor, please see me later this evening!

In sum, if you feel anything like I did at age 20, you're not only excited but also nervous about your thesis. Have faith! Things should go smoothly if you remember three important rules from kindergarten: share, don't hit, and write often. In fact, *almost* everything you needed to know about writing an honors thesis you learned in kindergarten. Everything else you can pick up at Stanford!

I wish you the best of luck with Honors College and your senior theses. Thank you.