

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

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.

**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 facult

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