

Early in the term you will be required to submit an idea for your honors thesis. This handout is designed to help you with that decision and to give you a better idea of what the honors thesis is all about.

What makes for a good honors thesis topic?

A good honors thesis topic has four basic attributes. It is

- Narrow
- Interesting
- Original
- Feasible.

Let's consider these, one at a time.

What do you mean, "narrow"?

Narrowness is the most important attribute of a good honors thesis. It is easiest to see the virtue of a narrow topic by first looking at its opposite, an overly broad topic. Here's an example:

"How do environmental factors influence a person's behavior?"

This topic is so broad and diffuse that it hardly qualifies as a topic at all. It's more like a general topic area. The main reason why it is such a bad topic for an honors thesis is that, in that short a space, you could hardly scratch the surface of such a vast issue. Jared Diamond had to devote the equivalent of 1,000 term paper pages to this vast problem. If you tried to address such a huge subject your allotted pages, you would wind up with something that was impossibly watered down, uninformative, and dull.

So let's consider an example of a narrow topic then, to see why it is so much better:

"How does the output of jazz recordings by male jazz artists vary with their age? And how does the pattern for men compare with that of women?"

It's easy to see that this question is much more specific than the first. Basically, it boils down to plotting one or two simple graphs, or maybe a spreadsheet. A person working on this topic might, for example, get the names of the top-selling jazz albums produced in the past couple of years. He or she could use a source, such as *The Essential Jazz Companion*, to get the information about each artist's age and sex for each recording. Then it's a matter of writing down the information on a spreadsheet. For example:

<u>Album</u>	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1. Groovy Sounds	Bill Wackencracker	Male	24
2. Super Vibes	Mary Warbler	Female	60
3. Funky Fusion	Matt Patheny	Male	47

etc.

You might, for example, have quite a large sample of recordings. You might also have to make some decisions about how to treat bands. Maybe you would ignore them, and just concentrate on single artists. Maybe you could just write down the information for the person fronting the band.

This leads to a potentially interesting set of data, which you could then display in various forms, to give some idea of what's going on. You might find, for example, that most jazz albums are recorded by males who are their early 20's. You might find that male jazz artists produce most of their work early in life, and then produce almost nothing later. Your information would probably show that men dominate the jazz field, and that women artists produce albums much more consistently throughout their careers, instead of bunching their output early in their lives.

This evidence is interesting, because it relates to Geoffrey Miller's sexual display hypothesis. Miller's idea is that artistic displays are used to attract mates. And, since it is mainly males who need to display, it is no surprise that they would tend to produce the most. In addition, the age pattern is also consistent with Miller's hypothesis—displays pay off the most during the prime mating years.

In fact, this example comes from something very similar to a study that Geoffrey Miller actually did. And what he found was similar to the patterns described above.

What's interesting?

The example above shows that narrowness and interestingness can be tied together, but not always. The guiding principle is this: Something narrow is interesting if it provides a window through which we can get insight into the "big picture." In the case of the jazz musician study, the big picture was Miller's sexual display hypothesis. That big picture is important, because if it is really true that males have an incentive to show off their fitness in various ways, it has several implications about how we interpret peoples' behavior—everything from binge drinking to the pursuit of science and engineering.

So, while the question itself is narrow—involving, for example, something as specialized as counting jazz albums—that question should fit into the broader scheme of things.

Just because something is narrow, does that mean that it is automatically good?

No. Here's an example. Suppose someone starts off with a very broad topic, like "The Impact of Environment on Behavior." To make it more narrow, they try an artificial approach: they might focus just on men, or just on people living in Boston, or just on male students living in Boston in the 1960's.

True, this topic is narrower than before, but it is still hopelessly vague. Why do we care about male students in Boston in the '60's? No reason is given. Maybe there is one, but it needs to be provided. We need to know how that narrow topic fits into the broader scheme of things, in order to see why it is important.

The trouble with the title, despite the apparent narrowness, is that the words "environment" and "behavior" are far too vague. Here's how the situation can be improved. Substitute something specific for "environment." One critical part of the environment of male students during the 1960's was the draft. Men were subject to be drafted into the armed forces to fight in Vietnam. One critical part of their "behavior" was going to school. So one narrow topic is, "What Impact Did the Draft Have on Men's Decisions to Go to College?"

How are we supposed to come up with something original? Hasn't everything that matters already been researched?

You would be amazed at how little we know about so many topics, especially those related to what we are discussing in this course. There are new sources of information coming out all the time: mostly in the form of data sets that you can pull off the Internet. And there are old sources of information, like the jazz encyclopedia used by Miller, which can be put to new and interesting uses.

But what if I'm exploring a question and I can't come up with any useful information about it?

This can happen, but it's easy to spot the danger signs so you can avoid this problem. The problem has to do with the *feasibility* of your topic. Before exploring ways to make sure your topic is feasible, let's look at one that flunks the feasibility test even though it scores well in other ways.

Consider the question, "Is There Life on Other Planets?" It's definitely narrow, original, and could well be the most interesting and important question there is. But it's just not feasible. Carl Sagan's graduate students wasted a better part of their careers listening for radio signals from other planets when they could have been spending their research time more productively.

You can avoid this problem by checking in advance that the information you need is indeed available. For example, if your topic has to do with the way attitudes toward drugs have changed over time, you should make sure that such information is available, and the best place to start is the web.

So before you propose a research topic you should be able to *prove* that the required information for settling the question is indeed available.

To make sure that your topic does indeed have the desired characteristics, I provide a form that has questions about your project. To give you an idea of how to fill it out, consider the example provided on the next page.

Imagine that Geoffrey Miller filled it out before doing his project.

Honors Thesis Topic--The Big 4: *Narrow, Interesting, Original, Feasible*

1. In one short sentence, describe exactly the **narrow** question that you will investigate:

How does the output of jazz recordings by male jazz artists vary with their age? And how does the pattern for men compare with that of women?

2. In one or two sentences, tell why your narrow topic is **interesting**. That is, how does your narrow question fit into the larger scheme of things?

The pattern could tell us something about the relationship between art and fitness displays, as predicted by sexual selection theory. We might expect, for example, that if jazz music is a fitness display, young males would be disproportionately involved in the field.

3. What has already been done by others on your topic? Exact references?

I have located some promising background material related to my topic:

Buss, David, and D. P. Schmitt (1993) "Sexual Strategies Theory: An Evolutionary Perspective on Human Mating," Psychological Review, 100:204-32.

Clutton-Brock, T. H., and A.C.J. Vincent (1991) "Sexual Selection and the Potential Reproductive Rates of Males and Females," Nature, 351:58-60.

Orians, Gordon H. (1969) "On the Evolution of Mating Systems in Birds and Mammals," American Naturalist, 103:589-603.

etc...perhaps there are more references...

4. What are you going to do on the topic that is different and/or better than what's been done before? Why is your study **original**?

Most existing studies of fitness displays have to do with non-human species, especially birds. I will explore the analogy between music performance and fitness displays such as peacock feathers.

5. What information do you need to resolve the topic you propose? Are you sure such information is available? Prove that your topic is **feasible** by citing the sources of information you have at your disposal.

I need information about the number of jazz recordings, whether the performer was male or female, and the performer's age. All of this information is contained in Carr, I. Fairweather, D., and Priestley, B., The Essential Jazz Companion, Washington DC: Quagmire Press, 1988.

Note: sources of information come from all over. Perhaps your sources come from survey data, or information that you plan to collect yourself, or from published sources, or other places.

The next page contains a blank form for you to fill out, once you have gathered the necessary information pertinent to your proposed topic.

4. What are you going to do on the topic that is different and/or better than what's been done before? Why is your study **original**?

5. What information do you need to resolve the topic you propose? Are you sure such information is available? Prove that your topic is **feasible** by citing the sources of information you have at your disposal.