

Humane Letters IV: *The Senior Thesis*

Course Description

The senior thesis is a capstone project for all Thales Academy twelfth-graders, requiring them to write and defend a 13–20-page paper (excluding addenda, bibliography, and endnotes) based on an analysis of at least three works from the Western literary canon.

This project aims to teach students how to thoughtfully examine and articulate ideas of truth, goodness, and beauty using their understanding of the [First Principles](#) within the context of the 'Great Conversation' that has ennobled mankind throughout the ages. In employing all the skills of scholarship attained during a student's time at Thales, the senior thesis transitions students from pupils to fellow academics. The process is broken down into four quarters: proposal and reading, drafting, revising, and defense.

Process of the Senior Thesis

Quarter 1 | Formation of Thesis & Initial Reading

- The Senior Thesis helps students understand the interconnectedness of academic disciplines—humanities, mathematics, science, and philosophy—by requiring them to select a topic of **perennial significance** from the Western Tradition.
- Students should choose subjects that align with Thales Academy's curriculum and foundational principles, avoiding modern, politicized, or divisive issues.
- A good topic should help them explore **Truth, Goodness, or Beauty**.
 - Examples: love, justice, revenge, just war, revolution, rule of law, absolutism, civil disobedience, epistemology, morality, ethics, art, the role of the artist, etc.
- Topics related to tabloid news, pop culture, or contentious issues like abortion are forbidden.
- The Senior Thesis should meaningfully incorporate at least one, if not more, of the Thales Outcomes.
- **Forbidden Topics:** Anything related to tabloid news and pop culture.
 - Students should not write on divisive contemporary issues, cultural, political, or otherwise.
 - Teachers should use their best judgment when it comes to paper topic selection in regards to anything that should or should not be the subject of a research paper.

- No paper topics on abortion, the legalization of drugs, euthanasia, etc.
- See [Thales' Statement on Contemporary Issues](#) for more information.

- In this initial step, students must also consider how their work appeals to one of the four “first principles” of Thales Academy: Human Dignity, Natural Order, Moral Philosophy, and Intellectual Inheritance.
- After isolating a topic of interest, students should select **at least one work** from within the Thales curriculum that examines that idea.
 - This can be a literary, philosophical, or historical text read during a student’s time at Thales. This counts as a student’s required “curricular text.”
 - For example, if looking at the nature of sacrificial love, one might naturally look at Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. If looking at the nature of civil disobedience, consider the *Apology of Socrates*. If looking at the nature of revolution, read Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution*.
- After isolating a topic and at least one curricular text, students will work with both the senior thesis teacher and their advisors to select **two additional texts** that speak to the topic. These works will be drawn from the larger canon of Western thought, the so-called “Great Books.”
 - These are texts that are commonly accepted as significant contributions to the intellectual world. See section below for a note on the Western Canon.
 - The third work can be shorter and from within or outside the curriculum. Still, the requirement remains that a work is conversant with major ideas of the West. Depending on the reading load, it could be a portion of a text, a collection of poems, a classic essay, a Platonic dialogue, etc. Some students may opt to use a full book.
- Note: Websites (with the exception of those digitizing more print material) **do not** satisfy this requirement. The goal is to engage with the books themselves (and not what others have said about them).
- The appropriateness of a set of books is at the discretion of the senior thesis teacher. When in doubt, a teacher should reach out to the senior administrators in their curricular area.
- After selecting appropriate texts, students will begin reading, annotating, and discussing these works. Students should keep a journal as they read, isolating key quotations and ideas and recording page numbers for easy reference. As they read, students ought to consider how these three voices “speak” to one another. This process will likely take the entirety of quarter 1. Throughout the process, students will be asked to consult their advisors frequently. **See note below on senior thesis advisors.**
- In the first few weeks of this process, students will craft a **senior thesis proposal**, stating a specific topic, guiding question, and a preliminary book list. An **example** is appended below.

- Note: Students should absolutely avoid the temptation to create a thesis before finishing their reading.
 - To develop a thesis first would amount to forcing one's interpretation on the texts instead of engaging with them.
 - The point is to be receptive and open to new ideas and complications as presented in the text.
- **Best Practice:** Students should have their thesis approved by a committee of teachers and administrators.

Quarter 2 | Rough Draft

- In quarter 2, students will begin composing a rough draft of their paper. This paper will weave together elements of the texts to present one unique synthesis, answering a central question about the topic under consideration. It is very important that students isolate a specific question in order to present an analytical, argumentative thesis. This paper is supposed to make an argument. It is not supposed to merely summarize three separate books.
 - As such, students will avoid an organizational schema that breaks the paper into sections about each book. Rather, students will develop an argument using the wealth of information from all three works to support their thinking. **Example papers can be found in course files.**
- Students should have frequent one-on-one conversations with the teacher during this process.
- A complete first draft should present a unified, logical claim. It will not be written as a document only superficially linking books together. At the end of quarter 2, students should submit their papers for comments from both the senior thesis teacher and the advisor. The final due date for this draft may be adjusted according to teacher discretion.
 - Students' rough drafts should be written as clearly and correctly as possible. This draft should for all intents and purposes be the student's best work. It is only "rough" because students will refine their **thinking** in the third quarter. As such, papers with significant errors of style and grammar will risk earning a lower grade.
- **Best Practice: Paper drafting**
 - Students should not use AI tools to draft their paper. Teachers may have students draft on paper during class. There could be designated times for students to type their work during which teachers can actively monitor.

Quarter 3 | Editing/Refining and Preparing a Defense

- In quarter 3, students dedicate most of their time to editing and refining their work based upon feedback from advisors and the senior thesis teacher. This is not a passive process nor is it one that requires only superficial modification. Students should expect to make significant changes based upon feedback. The final draft is due at some point in the quarter according to teacher discretion.
 - The rubric grades students on whether or not they have accepted and incorporated this feedback accordingly. No student should merely submit the same work they did in quarter two under the impression that their first grade was “good enough.”
 - This final draft is to be the **most polished prose ever composed** in high school. As such, expectations will be strict when it comes to clarity, grammar, and style (including limiting the use of the verb “to be”). Senior thesis teachers should be very demanding in terms of accuracy and style.
- The process of revision need not take the whole quarter. Teachers can start having students prepare for the presentation/defense. This will allow more flexibility in quarter 4.

Quarter 4 | Defending Your Thesis

- In quarter 4, students prepare to defend their original thinking with an oral defense of their paper.
 - The first step in this process is to create an abstract that summarizes the student’s work. These should be perfect bits of prose able to be shared with all staff.
 - Students should also create a slideshow to use during their presentation. Minimum expectations can vary by campus. However, at a minimum, the slides should include key quotations that are used to execute an argument.
- After a presentation of their argument, students will face a panel of at least three teachers who are tasked with asking challenging questions to stimulate thoughtful analysis of a paper. **This requires that teachers read and are familiar with a student’s work.** If this proves difficult, the senior thesis teacher should be

prepared to offer questions to the panel. These questions must strive to do more than clarify and summarize.

- The overall time for the presentation and the defense are flexible given local schedules and time constraints. However, the following times can be used as a baseline:
 - **Standard:** 10-12 minutes of presentation followed by 7-10 minutes of defense
 - **Honors:** 13-15 minutes of presentation followed by 7-10 minutes of defense.
- **Students should approach the defense with confidence**, seeing themselves as the authority on their unique analysis. The panel's questions are not meant to criticize but to refine the paper's argument, pushing the student's thinking to the "next level" and embodying the ongoing nature of scholarship. No paper and no presentation is perfect. The life of scholarship is one that requires continued academic humility and a willingness to sharpen one's thinking.

Note: With spare time that remains in quarter four, teachers may consider seminar-ing over some significant work of philosophy or literature not currently taught at Thales. Do this in consultation with heads of department and classical leaders.

Requirements of the Senior Thesis

Elements of the Senior Thesis

- **Required Works:** Students must use **three works** in total: one from the Thales curriculum, one from outside the curriculum, and a third from either source. All works must be from the Western tradition and should not be contemporary or from pop culture. Websites are not allowed.
- **Content:** The thesis must explicitly engage with at least one of the **Thales Outcomes**.
- **Oral Defense:** A successful defense before a faculty panel is required for graduation. The defense is a condition of graduation. The presentation and defense times are:
 - **Standard:** 10–12 minute presentation, 7–10 minute defense.
 - **Honors:** 13–15 minute presentation, 7–10 minute defense.

Structure of the Senior Thesis

Students should include these sections in their essay:

- **Introduction:** Must include an argumentative thesis statement that synthesizes the source material.
- **Body:** Multiple paragraphs that logically support the thesis using cited evidence from the books.
 - Each argument should be logically parallel to others within the text.
 - Papers do not have to employ a format of argument, counter-argument, and rebuttal. Though this is acceptable in some situations, it may only be employed with consultation from the advisor and approval from the senior thesis teacher. Counter-arguments usually amount to “straw man” tactics. The goal is to become an expert in analyzing one theme (not arguing against it).
- **Conclusion:** Explain the thesis's importance and its relevance to **Truth, Goodness, or Beauty**. Modern parallels or anecdotes may be used here in a restrained, academic manner.

Formatting and Length

- Format: standard MLA in size 12 font
- Length: Minimum of 13-15 (standard), 17-20 pages (for honors) of double-spaced text. L.I.T. students may reduce the length requirement to 13-15 pages.
- All papers must include a Works Cited page done according to MLA expectations.

A Note on the Western Canon

- Arguments should be inspired by or be a continuation of the Western Tradition and the canon of intellectual inheritance considered at Thales. This is not something to add to your work as an afterthought. Your unique engagement with the Western Canon is the central feature of your paper.
 - Note: Mortimer Adler’s encyclopedic catalog of Western thought recorded in the *Syntopicon* is a great resource for examining the canon via subject. PDFs of this text are available in the resources folder.
 - Other helpful lists can be found hosted by “Great Book” Colleges like St. John’s and Thomas Aquinas. See:
<https://www.sjc.edu/academic-programs/undergraduate/great-books-reading-list> and
<https://www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/syllabus>

- Adler also created a “reading list” of Great Books that can be found here: <https://www.mpc.edu/academics/academic-divisions/humanities-division/programs-centers/about-the-great-books-program/great-books-list>
- Harold Bloom’s text, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, may also be a good resource. A text should be purchased as a reference on each campus if possible.
- This engagement will look different for different questions. For example, your engagement with the Western Canon might take a more evolutionary approach, as you consider the development of an idea over time. Others might consider the works in aggregate, considering how each thinker/perspective adds to and contradicts the central theme.
- Modern research into science, psychology, and medical topics should not be attempted. This paper is not based on research but on a unique synthesis of ideas within the Western tradition. Students interested in STEM fields ought to note this in particular. There are ways to explore these fields via the great books, and this should be the goal.
 - It may be fruitful for teachers to see some of the book lists for STEM subjects used at St. John’s College (a “Great Books” School) to get a sense of what texts might be fruitfully read: <https://www.sjc.edu/academic-programs/undergraduate/senior-essays>
- That said, there are also ways to make one’s engagement with the Western Tradition pertinent to modern issues (these ideas are timeless, after all). Students will work with advisors and the teachers to make these larger connections
- Any question as to whether a given work “counts” or not will be determined by the senior thesis teacher and/or the senior thesis committee. Theirs is the final say.

Topic Selection Advice

When advising students about topic selection, experience suggests the following good practices and pitfalls to avoid.

- Students should think of books or documents that they have enjoyed reading, that are thought-provoking or memorable. What questions do these works prompt? Example: Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* raises interesting questions about the role of tradition in a stable government. If true, this would mean that governments seeking unregulated progress jeopardize stability. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* examines the issue of motherhood in childbirth in an interesting way that is perpetuated in the science fiction genre.

- Students are well-trained for thematic analysis in history, literature, and humane letters and should be encouraged to extend these skills to answer big questions informed by a multitude of sources or a multidisciplinary approach. Use examples like this in class to help students see how books can “speak” to one another: *The Inferno*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Macbeth* all demonstrate that acting in self-interest leads to destruction but selflessness leads to prosperity.
- Argumentative claims must prompt disagreement. Topics that just reinforce consensus or common sense ideas, e.g. good things are good, bad things are bad, healthy living is better, sickness needs treatment, etc. are not fitting claims for this project and give the students little space to develop an argument or mount a defense.
- Ask yourself: If presenting this paper in a seminar, would others be able to disagree with me?
- That said, topics should not be too divisive in nature in a contemporary fashion
 - Topics may, however, meaningfully integrate present-day challenges with classical wisdom so that it is the ongoing, active dialogue between the present and the great authors, writers, and thinkers of the past that are influencing how we approach the present and shape the future.

A Particular Note on Prohibited Topic Selection

- Topics should not be too divisive in nature or too contemporary.
 - Topics may meaningfully integrate present-day challenges with classical wisdom so that it is the ongoing, active dialogue between the present and the great authors, writers, and thinkers of the past that are influencing how we approach the present and shape the future.
 - Ideally, students would not write on divisive contemporary issues, cultural, political, or otherwise.
 - Teachers should use their best judgment when it comes to paper topic selection in regard to anything that should or should not be the subject of a research paper.
 - At times, students may be interested in learning more about these issues and utilizing the Great Books of the Western canon in their analysis of such issues.
 - Such topics may be permissible under these circumstances.

Course Outline/Major Assignments

- Teachers should ensure that the course follows this pacing in terms of deadlines per track:
 - Track 1: Initial proposal due. Read/Annotate and gather perspectives from all books. Students should be able to present evidence of their progress in this regard, including discussion notes with advisors after finishing each text.
 - Track 2: Rough draft of paper due (test grade). Partial work toward this draft should count as quizzes.
 - Track 3: Rewriting in response to edits and feedback. Final draft due (test grade). In most cases, students are expected to substantially rewrite their essays based upon feedback.
 - Track 4: Thesis Presentation and defense
- **Note:** Since this is not a traditional course, major assignments should count as tests, other significant assignments should count as quizzes, and the rest will count as coursework.
 - Students **do not** take a midterm or final exam
 - In 2024-25, leadership at Rolesville allowed a grade distribution of 50% tests, 40% quizzes, and 10% classwork to put the strongest possible emphasis on the final products of this course, the thesis and the presentation.

Statement Concerning ChatGPT/AI Use

Note: All teachers must ensure that expectations set by Thales regarding the use of AI are clear at all times. See the following statement on AI.

Students are strongly discouraged from using ChatGPT to complete academic work, as doing so undermines the purpose of their education. First, using AI to write essays constitutes plagiarism. Second, relying on ChatGPT to answer questions or conduct research prevents students from engaging with material deeply and developing essential thinking skills. Third, such shortcuts hinder the broader goals of education: genuine learning and the formation of character. While AI tools may serve a purpose later in life, students at Thales Academy are expected to do their own work, building the habits and abilities that lead to lasting academic and personal growth.

Supplementary Documents

- Thales [Writing Standards](#)

- [Course Standards](#): The course standards learning objectives and skills students should have developed by the end of this year. This document is intended to provide more information for beginning teachers about the scope and sequence of our program, as well as resources to assist in teaching.
- [Sample PowerPoint Lectures](#): Feel free to copy, adapt, use, and re-use whatever powerpoints are available in this folder regarding logic.

Important Webinars from Thales Press

We host approximately two webinars a quarter with content experts or members of our own faculty to try and spread great ideas across the Thales network. Please consider subscribing to our channel to support our program.

Some webinars were recorded specifically to watch with students. Please budget time to watch these accordingly. However, other videos may be helpful for teachers or students to watch.

Required Webinars on Writing and Editing

- Artificial Intelligence: Another Hurdle for Students and Educators, Joe Davidson, Matt Ogle, Chelsea Wagoneer, and Winston Brady.
 - Given the widespread use of artificial intelligence-chatbots for paper writing and homework, we want every students in trivium classes grade 8 through 12 to watch this webinar and complete the following discussion questions.
 - [Video on YouTube](#)
 - [Discussion Questions](#)

Suggested Webinars on Writing and Editing

- Great Books, Great Teaching, Winston Brady & Josh Herring. [Link here](#)
- Thinking with a Pencil: The Art of Annotating, Morgan Warfield. [Link here](#)
- Begin at the Beginning: Teaching Writing for Junior High Students: Elizabeth Jetton. [Link here](#)
- Making It Stick: The Keys to Successful Learning, Winston Brady & Matt Ogle: [Link here](#)
- What is the West? Josh Herring. [Link here](#).
- Writing is Rewriting with Zachary Palmer. [Link here](#).

Appendix 1: The Thesis Advisor

- Each student should be paired with a faculty member to serve as his/her senior thesis advisor. The logistics of how these pairs are assigned are at the discretion of each campus. The reason for this pairing is threefold:
 - First, this brings more faculty members into the senior thesis process. As a faculty, we ought to model our commitment to being lifelong learners willing to contribute to a greater academic community.
 - Second, this pairing may allow students to work with someone more interested in (or better equipped to speak into) a given topic. This is certainly not a requirement however. That said, there is no expectation that an advisor will be an expert in (or even have read) the books. See point three.
 - Third, more than anything the thesis advisor is there to be another set of eyes on a given student's work. They are there to help answer questions, read over papers, advise students on best practices, etc. The senior thesis teacher cannot possibly give all students the one-on-one attention they might need. The advisor, then, is a helpmate in this process. As an educated adult who has read and written academic papers, all employees at Thales are equipped to help in this process.
- Though students should feel free to meet with their advisor as often as possible (and advisors should feel free to request "check-ins"), here is a list of minimum recommended meetings to require throughout the year:
 - Track 1:
 - Discuss senior thesis proposal (tentative thesis and book list).
 - Meet after completing the reading of each book to discuss how the ideas might start forming a cohesive picture.
 - Track 2
 - Meet half way through the process of writing the draft.
 - Meet once a draft is completed.
 - Track 3
 - Meet to discuss comments/suggestions made on the first draft and how to improve the work overall.
 - Track 4
 - At a minimum, students should do a practice presentation with their advisors, receiving feedback on poise, visuals, and clarity.

- The senior thesis teacher **should coach** the students in how to treat their advisor with appropriate respect. This means reaching out to them with sufficient time to set up meetings before due dates, coming prepared, taking advice, ect. It is the **student's responsibility** to set up and follow through with commitments.
- The senior thesis teacher should also keep all advisors informed of major due dates and expectations placed on them.

Appendix 2: Thesis Statement

The hallmark of strong writing and strong writers is the ability to write a strong thesis statement, which in turn is the central claim, the core argument, expressed in a paper from which all other elements in that paper derive.

- What is a thesis statement? A thesis is the central claim, the core argument, of a paper from which all other elements in that paper derive.
- What should a thesis do? A thesis statement should introduce the topic, indicate the author's purpose in writing and take a position, as well as provide the two to three main points of the essay.
- What should a thesis statement include? A thesis statement should convey the position taken in the paper, use specific language, assert the point of view of the author, and emphasize the link between pieces of evidence.
- The senior thesis should encompass the steps of the research process of going from topics, research formulas, research questions, and then to a working hypothesis to a thesis statement. In other words, **students should not begin with a thesis.** They should read and discover one.

Appendix 3: Thesis Proposal Details and Example

- Initial Proposal: This important first step is due within the first two weeks of the return to school.
- The goal of this assignment is to explain the plan for a student's thesis. What topic are they considering? With what books? What is their tentative guiding question? Note that it will likely develop further as students go.
- Note that this is not a place to offer a tentative thesis (because they haven't yet read the books).
- Rather, the goal is to prove to both your advisor and the senior thesis teacher that your project is a) doable, b) satisfies minimum requirements, and c) has a clear direction.

- This will serve as the foundation for the work this year. Your guiding topic will be the anchor around which you read, take notes, and develop a paper. See the example proposal below for format and content.
- It is a good idea in the first quarter to require an **initial proposal** and a **complete proposal**. The initial one would be a bit shorter and lay out in the simplest of terms the student's curricular text and the question that inspires them. The complete proposal would be drawn up once a student has had the time to talk to advisors about their other books and refine their question.
- **Examples:** See an example of the initial proposal and the complete proposal in the Shared Google Drive. Note that they deliberately center around a non-curricular text (C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*) so as to not influence student thinking too much.