

Senior Thesis

As the capstone of a classical education, the Senior Thesis course provides a final opportunity for students to reflect on the wisdom and practice the skills their education has fostered. While the specifics of this course have been tested and developed by Hillsdale-affiliated schools for a number of years, one common feature is its essential role in a student's education. Established schools have approached the senior thesis course as a separate semester or year-long course, or have embedded it in the senior literature class.

Below are suggestions related to the prompt and booklist for a successful senior thesis program. Additional considerations for the senior thesis—including timelines, sample assignments, staff responsibilities, oral defense considerations, and more—can be found in the “BCSI Senior Thesis Handbook,” available on The K-12 Library.

1. The Senior Thesis Prompt

Every senior thesis prompt should be formulated in a way that encourages students to engage with the greatest ideas, works, and minds while wrestling with real problems concerning human nature, the human good, and the natural order. The prompt should not direct students to write research papers, to report on things they have already mastered, or to develop arguments based on personal belief or opinion. Instead, the prompt should lead students to employ all their skills of reading, reasoning, and rhetoric in pursuit of universally accessible truths that are worth knowing for their own sake.

There are three categories of senior theses that a good prompt should encourage:

Great Ideas

Theses that focus on great ideas can facilitate a direct encounter between students and what is true, good, and beautiful. In addition, they encourage students to put great minds and texts in dialogue with one another. The danger of such theses is that undisciplined students will have a greater tendency to develop unfocused arguments that are based on opinion and belief. Additionally, these ideas must be grounded in a

maximum of one or two main sources lest the ideas only be given a superficial treatment.

Great Works

Theses that focus on great works encourage students to think deeply, rather than broadly, and to submit themselves to the wisdom of a chosen author. The limitation of such theses is that students have little opportunity to bring great minds and works into dialogue with one another.

Great Minds

Theses that focus on great minds offer opportunities for real discipleship in which students can imitate and gain the best habits of thought from the best thinkers. The common deficiency of such theses is that they focus on the understanding of great minds rather than an understanding of truth.

Sample Prompts

Below are three sample thesis prompts (corresponding, respectively, to the three categories listed above) that have been used successfully at Hillsdale-affiliated schools, plus some observations about the potential shortcomings of each prompt.

A. What is the good life?

This question directs students to reflect upon the central theme of classical education and to prepare themselves for a life in society outside of their school communities. By taking time to ponder the qualities and characteristics of a life properly lived, students respond to Socrates' famous dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living." The drawbacks of this question are that students tend to answer it on the basis of personal belief and opinion, and that some students will interpret the project as a summative assessment rather than as an opportunity for formation.

B. Choose one work (or author) and explain what it (he/she) teaches about human nature, the human good, and/or the natural order.

This prompt directs students to submit themselves to the authority of a text or author and, in addition, allows students to explore the realms of science, mathematics, and aesthetics, rather than limiting them to the ethical and political disciplines. The prompt, however, does not necessarily direct students toward the highest truths, the greatest goods, and the most beautiful things.

C. Choose one work (or author) and explain what wisdom it (he/she) teaches.

Because “wisdom” can be either practical or speculative, this prompt directs students toward the highest elements in all disciplines that are worth studying for their own sake. Many students, however, interpret this prompt as asking about what they have learned, rather than what an author or work has to teach. Such an interpretation leads students to impose their own opinions upon texts, rather than listening to what the texts have to teach.

The shortcomings listed here are not necessarily a reason to avoid a particular prompt, but rather an opportunity to consider how a particular group of seniors might misunderstand it and how the senior thesis teacher can help to direct students.

2. The Booklist

Hillsdale College recommends that schools provide a booklist for students to draw from as they choose their authors and texts. The list of books used in the BCSI's middle- and upper-school curriculum provides a good beginning, though this list is necessarily incomplete and not all books in the curriculum are suitable texts for the senior thesis project. There are two criteria that schools should consider when choosing texts for the senior thesis booklist: 1.) The school's curriculum should prepare students to read and reason about every chosen work; and 2.) Every work on the booklist should contain a widely acknowledged contribution to the “great conversation of great ideas” that is central to the Western Tradition.

Because no booklist can be complete, Hillsdale College recommends that schools develop a standard procedure for making additions and exceptions on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, schools should be sure to include great works in which a member of the faculty has particular expertise.

Recommended Senior Thesis Reading List

- Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, *The Eumenides*, *The Libation Bearers*, *Prometheus Bound*
- Apollonius, *On Conic Sections*
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *On the Soul*, *Organon*, *Physics*, *Poetics*, *Politics*
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*
- Augustine, *Confessions*
- Austen, *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*
- Bacon, *The New Organon*
- Beowulf
- The Bible (selected books)
- Blake (selected poems)
- Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*
- Bohr, *Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature*
- Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
- Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *My Ántonia*
- Cervantes, *Don Quixote*
- Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*
- Cicero (selected short stories)
- Cicero, *On Duties*
- Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*
- Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
- Constitution of the United States
- Copernicus, *Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*
- Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*
- Dante, *The Divine Comedy*
- Darwin, *The Origin of Species*
- de Broglie, *Matter and Light: The New Physics*
- Declaration of Independence

- Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Geometry, Meditations on First Philosophy*
- Dickens, *David Copperfield, Great Expectations, A Tale of Two Cities*
- Dickinson (selected poems)
- Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
- Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov*
- Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*
- Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The Waste Land*
- Emerson, *Essays*
- Epictetus, *Manual*
- Euclid, *Elements*
- Euripides, *Bacchae, Medea, Hippolytus*
- Fabre, *Souvenirs Entomologiques*
- Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*
- Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
- Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*
- Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*
- Frost (selected poems)
- Galileo, *Two New Sciences*
- Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*
- Goethe, *Faust*
- Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*
- Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*
- Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*
- Lectures on the Philosophy of History
- Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*
- Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea, The Sun Also Rises*
- Herodotus, *Histories*
- Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days*
- Hobbes, *Leviathan*
- Homer, *The Iliad, The Odyssey*
- Hopkins (selected poems)
- Huxley, *Brave New World*
- Ibsen, *A Doll's House*
- Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*
- James, *The Portrait of a Lady, Washington Square*

- Joyce, *Dubliners*, *Ulysses*
- Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*
- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- Keats (selected poems)
- Kepler, *Astronomia Nova*
- Lavoisier, *Elements of Chemistry*
- Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*
- Lincoln-Douglas Debates
- Livy, *Books from the Foundation of the City*
- Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, *Second Treatise of Government*
- Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*
- Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- Magna Carta
- Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*
- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*
- Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*
- Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*
- Maupassant (selected short stories)
- Melville, *Moby-Dick*
- Milton, *Paradise Lost*
- Montaigne, *Essays*
- Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*
- More, *Utopia*
- Newton, *Principia*
- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
- O'Connor (selected short stories)
- Orwell, *1984*
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
- Pascal, *Pensées*
- Plato, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*, *Timaeus*
- Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*
- Poe (selected short stories)
- Polybius, *Histories*

- Pre-Socratics (Fragments)
- Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*
- Ptolemy, *Almagest*
- Racine, *Phèdre*
- Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*
- Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts, On the Social Contract*
- Schrödinger, *What Is Life?*
- Shakespeare, *Coriolanus, Hamlet, Henry V, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, Twelfth Night, sonnets*
- Shelley, *Mary Frankenstein*
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe (selected poems)
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
- Smith, *Wealth of Nations*
- Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*
- *Song of Roland*
- Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*
- Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
- Stevens (selected poems)
- Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*
- Tacitus, *Annals*
- Tennyson (selected poems)
- Thoreau, *Walden*
- Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*
- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*
- Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*
- Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, War and Peace*
- Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*
- Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- Virgil, *The Aeneid*
- Warren, *All the King's Men*
- Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*
- Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*
- Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

- Wiesel, *Night*
- Wordsworth (selected poems)