Department of Psychology – Bachelor's Thesis

(updated November 2026)

The Bachelor's Thesis is a formal scientific manuscript that serves as the culmination of a student's independent, faculty-supervised research. Students who are majors in Psychology or Brain and Cognitive Science (BCOG) are eligible to submit a thesis. The thesis must be completed as part of a student's participation in the Psychology Honors Program, the Psychology/BCOG Capstone Program, or through at least three semesters of faculty-supervised research (with enrollment in PSYC 290 and PSYC 494). All students submitting a thesis to the department for consideration of Distinction at graduation must be enrolled in PSYC 494 during the semester they intend to graduate and submit the thesis. The thesis, along with a Letter of Support from the student's faculty research advisor, is submitted to the department's Undergraduate Studies Committee. The committee determines if the thesis meets the requirements for earning a bachelor's degree with Distinction in Psychology.

Faculty Advisor Requirements

Faculty supervising a Bachelor's Thesis must be either:

- A Department of Psychology faculty member. These individuals are listed in our Faculty Directory.
- An Illinois faculty member with a 0% Appointment affiliation in Psychology; or
- An Illinois faculty member with a Research Instructor affiliation in Psychology

Student Responsibilities

If your faculty advisor is not listed on the Department of Psychology directory, you should contact them to verify their departmental affiliation as a 0% Appointment or Research Instructor in Psychology.

NOTE: if your advisor is not a Department of Psychology faculty member, and you are not participating in the Honor's or Capstone programs, your thesis project must be approved in advance by the Director of Undergraduate Studies. This process is initiated by submitting an Intention to Submit a Bachelor's Thesis form. This form should be submitted as early as possible, but no later than the 10th day of the semester when the student intends to deposit their thesis and graduate. If after receiving approval there is a significant change in the scope of your thesis project, you should seek re-approval of the project by submitting a revised version of the form wherein you explain the change to your project.

Distinction in Psychology

A Psychology or BCOG major whose thesis is approved by the Undergraduate Studies Committee is eligible for one of the following categories of distinction:

Highest Distinction – awarded to students who complete the Psychology Honors Program and have an overall GPA at graduation of at least 3.5.

High Distinction – awarded to students who complete the Psychology Honors Program and have an overall GPA at graduation of at least 3.0.

Distinction – awarded to students who complete the Psychology Capstone Program (or complete a thesis independently) and have an overall GPA at graduation of at least 3.0

NOTE: Distinction eligibility also requires completion of three semesters of faculty-supervised research and enrollment in PSYC 494 during the student's final semester.

Deadlines for thesis submission

Month of Graduation	Submission deadline*
December	November 15
May	April 15
August	June 15

*Please note – Submissions must be emailed by 5pm on the deadline date. These are firm deadlines; no extensions will be granted.

Submission process

The thesis document and a Letter of Support from the student's research advisor (both in pdf format) must be submitted by the posted deadline (see above). Please submit via email attachment sent to: psych-thesis@illinois.edu. Faculty advisors may submit their letters directly to this email address. ***Any thesis received after the deadline, or without a Letter of Support, will not be reviewed by the Undergraduate Studies Committee and therefore will not be eligible for Distinction***.

Within three weeks of a complete submission (thesis and letter of support), students will be notified via email if the Undergraduate Studies Committee has made the determination that the thesis meets the requirements for graduating with Distinction in Psychology. This email will contain information about the process for finalizing the submission with LAS via the Thesis & Capstone Projects Submission System. The deadline for submission to LAS is the last day of the final examination period in the semester when the student will graduate.

The final submission of a department-approved thesis to LAS requires the inclusion of a Thesis Certification Form. The form can be downloaded here: Psychology Bachelors Thesis Information. This form requires signatures (ink or digital signatures are accepted) from the student's faculty advisor and an executive officer in the Psychology Department (usually the Department Head or the Director of Undergraduate Studies). To facilitate timely submission of these documents to LAS, it is recommended that students obtain their advisor's signature around the time of thesis submission to the Department. Once approval of the thesis from the Undergraduate Studies Committee has been confirmed via email, students will take the form to the Undergraduate Studies office to secure the remaining signature needed for submission to LAS.

Guidelines for the Bachelor's Thesis

1. Formatting requirements
    a. Use 12-point Times New Roman, 1-inch margins and double-spaced text.
    b. Pages should be numbered at the center of the top or bottom of each page, or at the upper right-hand side at the beginning of the margin of each page. The Title Page should not be numbered; the Table of Contents begins numbering as page 2.
    c. There may be additional formatting norms for your subarea of psychology. Consult with your research advisor(s) for guidance (current APA standard is always acceptable).

2. There is no specific minimum length for the thesis, but it should be a comprehensive document; most are more than 20 double-spaced pages in length. The style should follow accepted professional standards for the student's subdiscipline of psychology/BCOG. The thesis must be written so that it is understandable by any Professor in Psychology or related field.

3. The topic of the thesis research must have relevance to psychological science, and this must be conveyed in the thesis document. For example, the Introduction section of your thesis must have a literature review that is rooted in the psychology/BCOG literature and it should frame your study hypotheses around psychological concepts and theory. Your Discussion section should interpret your findings and discuss your results in the context of the broader psychology/BCOG-related literature and address what the findings mean for the field of psychology. Note that narrative or systematic reviews and philosophical or theoretical essays are not acceptable.

4. The thesis must contain the following elements, in a single document, presented in the order given below. Examples of thesis submissions that earned Distinction are available for review at Psychology Bachelors Thesis Information

Title page

The title should describe your thesis clearly, capture the reader's attention, and do this in as few words as possible. You must follow the LAS formatting requirements, which can be found in the thesis template file here: Psychology Bachelors Thesis Information

Table of Contents

The Table of Contents provides the page numbers where different sections of the thesis can be found. It should appear on its own page and be labeled at the top of the page.

Abstract

The abstract should appear on its own page, with a label on the first line of the page. It should present a short synopsis of the thesis that includes these elements: (a) background and purpose of the research, (b) methods used in the study, (c) summary of key results, and (d) conclusions. The abstract should be 300 words or less. At the end of the abstract, provide a list of 3-5 keywords (separated by commas) that describe the main themes of the thesis.

Acknowledgments

This page follows the Abstract page and should be labeled Acknowledgements. It can be used to acknowledge others who have influenced you in the completion of the thesis. Some suggestions for writing this section (copied from Scribber): (a) Write in first-person, professional language; (b) Thank your professional contacts first. Include full names, titles, and roles of professional acknowledgements; (c) Include personal or intangible supporters, like friends, family, or even pets; (d) Mention grant funding bodies that supported any aspect of the thesis.

Introduction

This section begins on a new page right after the Acknowledgments and should be labeled Introduction. It describes the topic and psychological questions that your thesis addresses, reviews the relevant scientific literature, and describes the objectives of the research. In essence, the introduction should make clear to the reader what hypothesis or question your research addresses, why it is important, and how your research will provide an answer.

Methods

This section follows immediately after the Introduction (no page break) and should be labeled Methods (or Materials and Methods). It conveys how the research was conducted so that others can evaluate, and potentially replicate, what was done. It should include a description of the study design, details on how the study was conducted, what data was collected, and details of what statistical or qualitative analyses were performed on the data.

Results

This section follows immediately after the Methods (no page break) and should be labeled Results. It describes in detail the findings from the research study. Experimental data should be shown in graphs, figures and/or tables. Tables and figures are often included in-line with the text of the Results section but may also appear after the References section. Students should check with their advisor(s) to determine the preferred approach for their thesis.

If the experimental results are quantitative, then the appropriate statistical analyses must be used. For qualitative research, the Results section must provide support (e.g. verbatim; narrative; interpretation) for warranted conclusions and describe the efforts employed to ensure rigor through attention to both the specific approach and qualitative standards. Research that consists of an individual case study is ordinarily not acceptable.

You must have data that is described in the Results section, with computational work or systematic meta-analysis also constituting data in this context. Only in rare cases will the Undergraduate Studies Committee consider a thesis for Distinction if it has no data. In these cases, a letter from the faculty

mentor must explain the challenges that prevented the student from collecting data, and the Results section must include how you would have analyzed the data and what you predicted the data would show.

Discussion

This section follows immediately after the Results (no page break) and should be labeled Discussion. It provides your evaluation of the results of your study. You should discuss what the results mean, what their implications are in the context of the available scientific literature, what the limitations and/or unanswered questions are, and what the future directions of the research might be. The findings and their importance should be put in context for your field and clearly convey the contributions of your work to your field of study. You should show that you have carefully thought about the results and their implications, and that you have done so with some independence.

References

This section starts on a new page after the Discussion and should be labeled References. It lists all the citations referenced in the text of the thesis (and should not include literature not cited in the text of the thesis). These citations should be formatted in the style used by a well-accepted scientific journal in your area of psychology (current APA standard is always acceptable).

Tables (if included) and Figures (if included)

As noted above (see *Results*), tables and/or figures may appear within the text of the Results section or following the References section. Each table or figure should be labeled appropriately and in sequential order; they should also include a caption (table) or legend (figure) that provides sufficient information to the reader so they can understand what is shown.

If the tables and/or figures are provided after the References section, tables should appear first followed by figures. Each table or figure should appear on its own page. Figure legends can appear just beneath the figure, or figure legends for all figures can appear on a page before the individual figures.

5. Students completing a thesis through participation in the Psychology Department's Honors or Capstone programs may have different guidelines for some aspects of the thesis document. In these instances, the student must follow the syllabus for the program they are participating in.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic and scientific integrity when conducting research and preparing their thesis. The thesis you submit should be your own work, not the work of others (including Generative AI) that you are portraying as your own. Please be mindful of the Academic Integrity sections of the Student Code, as well as the University of Illinois system-wide AI Guidelines on Safe Use. The latter resource contains important information about AI use with sensitive, regulated, or high-risk data.

The goal of the Bachelor's thesis is to offer you an opportunity to learn to conduct, write, and defend an in-depth research project. Use of Generative AI in your thesis should be considered within the lens of these goals, and its use should be reserved for instances where it would promote your learning of how to conduct, write, and defend your work. It should be considered with caution given evidence that incorporating Generative AI during one's academic training can have adverse consequences. You will be ultimately responsible for all components of your thesis and should be prepared to explain the thesis and the decisions made within it to outside evaluators.

If a student desires to use Generative AI tools as part of the thesis project, this must be explicitly discussed with, and approved by, the faculty research advisor prior to that use occurring. Note that while some Generative AI use is permissible in the context of the thesis project, it should be limited. For example, AI tools must not be used to generate raw experimental data, generate literature citations, or to compose writing that is used in the thesis document. The student remains fully responsible for the scientific validity, factual accuracy, and originality of the entire thesis. Students are also responsible for following our campus' AI Guidelines on Safe Use.

Any use of Generative AI tools during the conceptualization of the research, execution of the study, or preparation of the thesis, must be documented in two places. First, a brief declaration of AI use, including the name(s) of the tool(s) used and a general description of how AI was applied, should be included in the Acknowledgments section of the thesis. Second, an Appendix section should be added to the thesis that provides a detailed description of the following for each instance of AI tool use: (a) the name of the AI tool that was used; and (b) the purpose of use or specific task performed. Please also note the faculty advisor's letter of support should address their approval of the AI use that is described in the Acknowledgments and Appendix sections of the thesis.

Evaluation criteria for approval of a Bachelor's Thesis

The Undergraduate Studies Committee will use the following criteria in determining whether a thesis submission meets the standards for earning a bachelor's degree with Distinction in Psychology. A thesis needs to substantially satisfy these standards to be approved for Distinction.

- Does the Introduction sufficiently address the currently available psychological science literature, put the current study in the context of that literature, and motivate the research question(s) and/or hypotheses that are being addressed?
- Does the Methods section describe the procedures in sufficient detail for the reader to understand exactly what the research entailed and how the study was designed to address the research hypotheses/questions?
- Are the data described and analyzed appropriately with statistical and/or qualitative methods that are generally accepted by the relevant subarea(s) of Psychology?
- Does the Discussion section describe how the results do, or do not, support the hypotheses and does it explain how the findings fit into the broader psychology/BCOG-relevant literature?
- Is the interpretation and discussion of the results and analyses consistent with what the research results show, and does the thesis convey the limitations of those results and their interpretation?
- Is the thesis well written and carefully proofread?
- Does the faculty advisor's Letter of Support convey the student's independent role in the project, their level of contribution to the data collection and/or analysis, and the advisor's support of the student earning Distinction? If the student includes information about AI use in the thesis, does the letter acknowledge and approve of that use?