

Guidelines for Senior Capstone & Honors Thesis in Theatre *(effective 21-22)*

Senior Capstone Opportunities

Rising seniors are encouraged to register for **TRDA 4599: “Honors Thesis”** if eligible or for **4597: “Senior Project.”** Both can be taken for 3 credits in the fall or spring semester of the senior year. Both offer the opportunity for an advanced capstone project that may be writing (research paper or playwriting), performance (acting, dance, directing, choreography), design, or another aspect of theatre studies or practice. The capstone may include work in the mainstage subscription season or an independent project created by the student. Students are encouraged to define their own questions and goals, beginning their first year and using course projects and co-curricular mainstage opportunities throughout their career as occasions to strategize and experiment toward a culminating project. The Music Program’s Fridays at Five offers “open mic” venues to try out material. Funding such as the [Luther Rice Undergraduate Research Fellowship](#) is available. Completed projects can be featured at [University Research Showcase](#) and [Corcoran NEXT 180](#).

NEXT Stages

The Corcoran’s [NEXT exhibitions and performances](#) feature the work of graduating seniors and graduate students. Qualifying projects are featured on the Corcoran webpage, in mailings and publicity to thousands of Corcoran followers, in opening events, and in a series of programs. **NEXT Stages** showcases performance work in Theatre, Dance, and Music.

Capstone Support

Theatre capstone projects in **NEXT Stages** may utilize non-disposable TRDA materials (properties, existing scenic elements, and costumes); rep light & sound plots; photocopying directly associated with the project; approved expenses up to \$200 (inclusive of any royalty payments); notice of performances in mainstage programs; priority scheduling of rehearsal space after regularly scheduled classes and mainstage productions; and two performance slots in the XX Studio Theater, Flagg’s Hammer Auditorium, or another spaces arranged by the student. (Other “site specific” locations may offer no support, leaving student producers on their own. XX offers moderate design and technology support including a rep plot. Hammer has restricted wing space, no fly space, and a minimal tech package. Spaces and plots must be returned to their original condition after the performance is struck.) NOTE: The \$200 provided by the department IS PROVIDED FOR TANGIBLE MATERIAL PRODUCTION OR PROMOTION COSTS ONLY. IT MAY NOT BE USED TO REIMBURSE CREW, DESIGNERS, OR PERFORMERS OR NON-PRODUCTION COSTS (E.G. CREW FOOD OR OPENING NIGHT PARTY SUPPLIES). Performances must be open to the public with FREE admission.

Criteria for TRDA 4599: “Honors Thesis”

Both the TRDA 4597: “Senior Project” and the TRDA 4599: “Honors Thesis” afford the opportunity to undertake a capstone under the mentorship of a faculty advisor who is equipped to evaluate the research area or creative endeavor. Students wishing to graduate with Honors and complete a **TRDA 4599: “Honors Thesis”** must meet additional criteria:

- (1) An Honors Thesis represents the culmination of curricular and co-curricular work IN THE PROGRAM
- (2) Student must Major in Theatre, Dance, or an interdisciplinary major whose principal advisor is in TRDA
- (3) Must have a grade point average IN THE MAJOR of 3.4; Must have a 3.0 overall
- (4) Must complete TRDA 4599 with a grade of “A.” (“A-” or below will convert to “Independent Study” credits.)
- (5) One-half of the courses required for the degree must have been completed at GW
- (6) 50% of ALL courses taken at GW must have grades of A or B
- (7) All theses, including performance/design theses, must have a written component (~10-20pp) articulating the research questions, methodologies, and work process (keep a journal!), as well as a critical self-evaluation of results.
- (8) Any project involving “human subject research” (including interviews) must comply with GWU [IRB policies](#).

Honors Thesis Proposals

Due April 15 for Fall Semester and September 15 for Spring Semester.

Proposals should follow the form below, completed with advisor’s signature. The Thesis Advisor will be your main point of contact and mentorship throughout the process and will offer the graded evaluation upon completion. The Second Respondent(s) will offer feedback and mentorship as the project takes shape and additional evaluation upon completion. The Second Respondent(s) will also be the first recourse should questions arise in working with the primary Thesis Advisor.

CORCORAN SCHOOL OF THE ARTS & DESIGN
NEXT Honors Thesis Proposal Form in Theatre

Please submit completed form to the Program Head.

Contact Information

Name _____

Email _____

Phone _____

Address _____

City _____ State ____ Zip Code _____

Please indicate the semester you will be enrolled in **TRDA 4599, Honors Thesis** (3 credit hours)

Semester _____ **FALL** _____ **SPRING** _____

Thesis Advisor _____

Second Respondent(s) _____

Project Title _____

Please attach to this cover page a typed description of your proposed project. Include:

1. Thesis (*your goal for the project*)
2. The methods you will use to accomplish your goal (*including timeline*)
3. What the final result of the project will be (*result/performance, approx. length.*)
4. How you intend to assess your own success with the project
(*by what concrete criteria will you measure your success?*)
5. Preliminary, annotated bibliography of at least 6 sources (*academic, critical, multimedia, recordings, archives, etc.*) you will use toward research for the project.
6. Space and human resources (*where will the project be presented? How many performers? How many students in support roles?*)
7. Budget (*what expenses do you anticipate?*)**
(2-3 double-spaced pages may be sufficient for the description of the project.)

**TRDA can provide up to \$200 per student in financial support. For more extensive support, see the Columbian College's Luther Rice Undergraduate Research Fellowship.

Student's Signature _____ Date _____

Thesis Advisor Approval _____ Date _____

Program Head Approval _____ **Date** _____

What is Research?

Your theatre training embraces modes of learning for your mind but also for physical practice (*embodied learning*). While some classes include traditional research and writing in the form of articles, books, and papers, most classes also include *practice-as-research (PaR)* approaches to generating knowledge. If you learn to perform a skill, that is research! If you develop your own process for working, that's research! If you create work in the form of performance, script, design, etc., those things are research! Creativity, collaboration, planning, and execution are all aspects of *creative scholarship*. That's research! In short, you may write a conventional paper, BUT...you are also permitted (encouraged, even) to engage in creative scholarship through experience, practice, and creation. That project, be it a costume you fabricated, a show you directed, a song you sang, or any other work of art or technology—that is a piece of *research*.

As you plan for your senior project, consider various modes of human inquiry, expression, learning, and communication and ask what kind of final project (a show, a design, a podcast, a film, a script, a management proposal, or more are all valid answers—including, yes, the possibility of a formal paper on history, literature, theory, criticism, or autoethnography.) Also, ask how you plan to develop the form and the content of the piece. What do you need to know (in theory or in practice) in order to make the piece, and what are possible ways to learn? Your research will include using the library to find books, articles, images, sound files, or videos. It can also include (1) interviews or surveys with experts or with members of the general population,* (2) workshops, courses, or personal experiments with learning new skills or techniques, (3) interning or assisting faculty or industry professionals in the kind of work you want to do, (4) trying out your ideas at open mic nights, events like Fridays @ Five, or through a series of experiments and drafts, (5) going to performance events or falling down rabbit holes on YouTube, social media, podcasts, or webpages to see what your favorite artists are up to or what the general public is saying about a hot topic, and (6) using theatre to tackle subjects of interest from your other major, minor, study abroad program, internships, or hobbies. Anything that helps you understand or acquire skills for something new that you want to accomplish in your project—all of those things are research.

What is a Research Question?

Your thesis proposal, [Luther Rice Fellowship](#) application, and [GW Research Showcase](#) and [NEXT 180](#) submissions will all ask for your “research question.” This is not a new or daunting inquisition because artists are engaged in research questions *all the time*. Tasks like developing a character backstory, finding vocal or physical characterization, collecting images or sounds to use for design inspiration, sketching or drafting, writing a script outline, moderating a talkback, or creating community engagement—these are all creative scholarship guided by a research question, which means you already know how to do this work! As examples, here are a few research questions that guided successful projects for some of your predecessors: “How do I accurately embody the history, voice, physicality, and mentality of [historical character], to perform their [key quality] effectively for a contemporary audience?” “How do I design lighting to showcase the specifics of a contemporary found space while also converting it to an expressive venue for [director’s concept on a specific classical theatre piece]?” “How do I use performance styles, set order, and storytelling/banter to craft a whole singer-songwriter-storyteller performance that engages the audience as an event?” “How do I bring [time, place, theme, director’s concept] to life in designing and fabricating costumes for [fill in the blank show].” “How can the Kennedy Center recruit, train, and involve younger volunteers for their audience services?” “How do I responsibly and accurately write and perform stories of Black women’s interactions with medical professionals to shed light on a health care crisis?” “How can I use theatre production, techniques, and training as intervention for incarcerated people in the criminal justice system?” A good research question is specific, actionable, and inspiring...but it does not have to be overwhelming!

Timeline

First and Second Year: Look for “hot topics” in your theatre classes; what conversations inspire you to learn more...or to join in with your own ideas? If you were producing a show, developing a project, or writing a paper in conversation with your course materials, what would you want to focus on? Your intro acting classes (1214 or 1215) will introduce you to

the philosophies of different acting teachers from the last 150 years; which of these pique your interest or help focus your work? Basics of Production Design (1330) will acquaint you with current protocols for professional theatre, including areas where there is debate about the “best” approach or ways in which the points of view of various designers differ; where can you join in the conversation about how to make theatre, and what do you want to know about the differences and similarities in current approaches? Acting, design, playwriting, dramaturgy, and directing classes will all highlight key ideas or practices worth exploring further. History, literature, and theory courses will contextualize your work. Is there a movement or artist from the past who inspires you today? Are the questions still left unanswered in the present moment that you could step in and engage? In short, in every class you take, ask yourself what you want to learn more about or how content from that class can provide a basis for a project you want to pursue. If someone gave you \$200 and rehearsal/performance space (which we will give you!) to do *anything you want*, what would you use those resources to develop?

Second and Third Year: Apply for the [Luther Rice Fellowship](#) or other internships or research opportunities. Take classes toward your goals. Continue looking for inspiration or provocation. What excites you or bugs you in the work? Consider tie-ins with your second major, study abroad, or summer job—is there an interesting cross-disciplinary project? Keep asking yourself, “How can I join in the work of the industry?”—either by examining the ways theatre is made, the ways theatre affects audiences, or the big social questions that theatre can explore.

Third Year: Talk to faculty members about the questions you still have—What skills do you want to hone? What concepts do you want to learn more about? Where do you think others are wrong? Ask yourself big questions, like, “What can I do to carve out a spot for myself as a theatre maker (director, writer, designer, technologist, actor, dramaturg, or choreographer)?” “Why do I think theatre matters, and how can I make it matter more?” “What hot topics in society, theory, or history, would make good content for theatre, and how can I use theatre to explore or address these issues?” You only need to answer *one* of these questions: that’s the focus of your thesis/capstone. Ask one full-time faculty member if they will be your project advisor and begin working with them on a rationale, plan, and timeline for the project.* Ask another full-time faculty member if they will serve as second respondent on the project, and begin discussing it with them to get their advice on resources or approaches. Begin working on your thesis proposal (the attached form)—your advisor should see a preliminary draft of this form before the end of your junior year.

Beginning of the semester *before* your project will be complete: In the first month of the semester *before* you intend to complete your project, you should have completed and submitted all the requirements of the attached form. This thesis proposal form is your **contract**. It tells the advisor and second reader what you plan to do and how you expect to be graded/evaluated. It’s fine to change your mind as you go along, but each alteration from this form needs to be communicated in writing and approved by your two faculty mentors. This protects YOU as written documentation that your faculty members affirm your approach and progress. They should not be surprised by anything when your final project is ready, and they are available to help and support you at every step of the way. Stay in regular contact with them, schedule meetings, and send them updated materials as your drafts, designs, or plans are taking shape. They are not there to police your process or act as a task master; they are there to help facilitate your work and, especially, to advocate for your needs and to champion your project.

Senior year: Apply to present about your work at the [GW Research Showcase](#) and [NEXT 180](#). Schedule delivery/presentation for the thesis on your timeline in either the fall or spring. If you need rehearsal or performance space, work that out with Ann, Carl, and your advisor *before* the year starts to ensure that you have access to what you need. You may schedule public presentations whenever you like in either semester, but be advised that most of the

* Note that if your work includes interviews, surveys, or experiments with others, then you are engaged in “human subject research.” That’s a great approach, but universities have procedures in place to make sure that the people you work with are not harmed by your research. This includes oversight on sensitive issues, including asking people personal questions and using data about them in your work. Talk with your faculty project advisor about the GW Institutional Review Board and any forms or waivers you will need to submit. There are guidelines about student-initiated research and about waivers of IRB approval on [this page](#).

Corcoran School will have [NEXT Exhibition & Performance Events](#) at the end of April and beginning of May. By the deadline agreed to in your proposal form, you should produce any public component and hand in any written/built component of your work to your advisor and second respondent. At the end of the semester, the advisor and second respondent (perhaps joined by other faculty) will schedule a “thesis defense” with you in which you will answer questions about the choices you made, the justifications for your choices, and the things you learned along the way. Your grade will be determined by the project advisor in consultation with the second reader, and it will be based on your own methods for evaluating success as you articulated them in your thesis proposal form: Did you achieve what you set out to do? (Reminder that an honors thesis project must earn a full ‘A’ in order to qualify for departmental honors. If the project earns less than an ‘A,’ it will simply be converted from a 4599 Honors Thesis to a 4597 Senior Capstone Project. The project still earns the same credit hours and enjoys the same support, but the student will not graduate with honors. This is an unlikely situation if you have followed the steps outlined above. Again, there should be no surprises as the project defense because you should have been working closely with your faculty advisor and respondent all along.)

Deliverables

Your project will take whatever shape you and your advisor agree to. In general...

- Each project should be accompanied by at least 8-12 written pages explaining the goals, justification, process, and final results. You may reuse some of the written material from your proposal, adding a journal-style recounting of the process, and concluding with your own evaluation of how it went, what you learned, and what you would do differently if you encountered this kind of project again in the future.
- If your final project is solely a scholarly paper, it should be approximately 20-pages long, thoroughly researched, and following conventional scholarly guidelines. (If your project is primarily performance- or practice-based, your paper does not need to be as rigorous.)
- If your project is a mainstage design, your work on the show is your main deliverable, in consultation with your advisor.
- If your project is an independent act of creation, you set the parameters for what you want to create and outline those in your proposal. In general...
 - A new script may or may not be fully produced, but it should have at least a public reading. Scripts may be full-length or a substantial one-act.
 - A short film should be roughly 15 minutes or less in length. If it contains particularly complicated production values, a 3-5 minute film may be sufficient.
 - A live performance (for directors, writers, actors, designers, etc.) should be less than one hour in length and, if it is booked in a GW space, will likely be scheduled in repertory or on the same bill as another performance. Design and technology elements will therefore need to be flexible.
 - A social practice or management project will be developed in consultation with your advisor and may include an internship or practical component, such as a community event, arts education initiative, or thought experiment for a program a theatre could implement.
 - Or you can propose anything else you dream up!
- Remember that your project may interface with other coursework in other departments, so you may be able to receive course credit, mentorship, or funding from the area of your second major or minor.
- Remember that there are funding opportunities available for you to take classes, travel, earn a small stipend while interning, or put resources into production. The [Luther Rice Fellowship](#) is one option, but there are plenty more within and outside the university!
- The learning goals for this capstone experience include, not only the ability to create a project, but also the ability to talk persuasively about your work. Whatever you do after college, you will have to apply for funding, to pitch proposals, to generate press, and to communicate your goals and ideas. These are skills you work on by completing the thesis proposal and by presenting your work at the [GW Research Showcase](#) and [NEXT 180](#) or by applying for funding opportunities. Rather than seeing these applications as a bureaucratic distraction from your project, view them as opportunities to engage others in work that is meaningful to you.

Final Tips

When PhD dissertation projects get too big or too digressive, good dissertation advisors can often be heard to say, “Nope, save that for your *second* book.” The point being that you have of LOTS of time in life to create and explore and pursue other passions; you do not need to do it ALL in your senior project. You do not need to pick the *best* or *most important* idea. You do not need to revolutionize the field. You only need to identify a project that you will keep you engaged for the year, that speaks to something *you* care about, and that you know you can knock out of the park on a limited timeline. Set yourself up for success. Be specific. Have fun. Stay on track. And stay in communication with your advisor. We are here to help you realize your goals.

After you graduate with honors...then you can move on to the next project. And the next after that, and the next after that, and the next after that. Keep learning all your life.

But...what's one thing you are excited to bring to fruition *now*? That's your thesis project.