

Carleton University
Communication and Media Studies

COMS 4908: Honours Research Essay Guidelines for Students 2025-26

HRE Coordinator

Dr. Susana Vargas Cervantes

Email

Susana.vargascervantes@carleton.ca

Overview

The Honours Research Essay provides students in the fourth year of the Communication and Media Studies Honours program with an opportunity to undertake independent and original research under the supervision of a faculty member in Communication and Media Studies. The Honours Research Essay is to be analytical rather than descriptive. It does not simply describe a topic area, but rather states and then systematically derives and defends a particular thesis. It does this with reference to a theoretical framework, i.e. a set of concepts and assumptions that are used to interpret or explain evidence drawn from historical or current case studies, primary field research, or other sources approved by the faculty supervisor. While the length of the essay will depend upon the chosen topic area, thesis, and framework, it should be approximately 40-50 double-spaced pages. It should not exceed 60 pages including references and appendices.

Registration

Students will normally enroll in COMS 4908-A for two consecutive terms beginning in the Fall term. Students who do not successfully complete their HRE after two consecutive terms may enroll for a third consecutive term with permission of their supervisor and the HRE coordinator and/or undergraduate supervisor. Those who do not complete the HRE within a maximum of three terms will receive a grade of F for the course. Students may withdraw from COMS 4908 up to the last date for withdrawal from full courses.

Key Dates

September 17, 2025	Group meeting of HRE students and HRE coordinator
September 29, 2025	Deadline for student to submit supervision consent form to HRE coordinator
November 24, 2025	Deadline for student to submit research proposal to supervisor
February 9, 2025	Deadline for student to submit progress report to supervisor
April 6, 2026	Deadline for student to submit completed thesis to supervisor

Selection of topic

You'll have likely given some preliminary thought to a topic area prior to the beginning of the Fall term. This should be an area of Communication and Media Studies that you would like to explore in greater depth. In some instances, your ideas might come from an assigned reading or an essay you wrote in

another course. In other instances, they might come from an article that you read in a newspaper or journal, or from your personal experiences of media and communication.

Group meeting of HRE students and HRE coordinator

Within the first two weeks of the Fall term, all HRE students will meet, as a group, with the HRE coordinator. The purpose of this meeting is to:

- (1) introduce HRE students to the HRE coordinator (Dr. Susana Vargas Cervantes)
- (2) introduce HRE students to one another
- (3) discuss issues related to selection of supervisor (see below)
- (4) discuss, in general terms, the opportunities and challenges associated with completing a research-oriented project of this scope.

You are encouraged to come to this meeting with an idea of the essay you wish to write and with ideas of possible faculty member(s) that you think would be a good fit to supervise your project. Please prepare and send a 1-page “Statement of Research Interest” to the HRE coordinator 48 hours before this meeting. This should include a concise statement of the topic area you have in mind. The purpose of this statement is not to present a perfect and finished version of your topic, thesis, or framework, but rather to put some ideas to the page and show evidence of your preliminary thinking. This document will not only help us find you a supervisor, it will also provide a jumping off point for the development of your project.

Selection of Supervisor

Please note that faculty members can only supervise a limited number of students, so your first choice of supervisor may not be available. In addition to the regular faculty members listed on the COMS website, adjunct professors and cross-appointed faculty to COMS are eligible to supervise your research if it falls in their areas of expertise. You are encouraged to talk to Dr. Vargas Cervantes in advance to discuss whether they are ideally suited for this role.

The Supervisors’ Guidelines for COMS 4908 will provide your supervisor with an understanding of the responsibilities associated with supervision. By providing a faculty member with clear, concise material you will be allowing them to best respond with helpful comments and advice.

You and your supervisor will come to an agreement on topic area, thesis statement, work schedule, and frequency of meetings. Remember that the essay is an exercise in **independent research**; it is not your supervisor’s task to police your work habits or discipline you into making deadlines or meeting with them. You are responsible for driving this process. If you don’t think you are able to undertake this level of self-directed research, you should reconsider whether the HRE is appropriate for you.

Once a faculty member agrees to be your supervisor, the two of you will complete and sign the attached Honours Essay Supervision Consent form. The **completed and signed form** is to be returned to the HRE coordinator no later than **September 29, 2025**. Please email a copy of the signed form to Dr. Vargas Cervantes.

Research proposal

You are to submit a formal research proposal to your supervisor by no later than **November 24, 2025**. The grade assigned to this proposal accounts for **10 per cent of your final course grade**. Keep in mind that this will be graded as a proposal, not a finished thesis. In other words: the proposal grade will reflect the degree to which you have conducted serious and systematic preparatory work for the eventual essay.

Writing a research proposal is a formative stage in the development of a research project. In the context of COMS 4908, it is also the single most important form of communication between you and your supervisor. It requires you to plan your work schedule and make an early start on your research. It enables your supervisor to locate and inform you of the strong elements of your approach and thinking, and those elements which require more systematic reflection, and to do so at a relatively early stage. It also serves as an informal contract between the two of you by requiring your supervisor to identify the major changes that they believe to be necessary, and by requiring you to confirm the mutually agreed dates by which you will complete the various components of your work.

The proposal should be 10-12 double-spaced typewritten pages and should have the following format:

1. Introduction

Briefly describe the topic area of your essay, and explain why research in this area is needed (e.g. the gaps in existing research, the importance of the policy implications, the groups that could benefit, etc.)

2. Thesis

State the central proposition, argument, or conclusion that you will make in your essay. Clarify the key words used to state your thesis. Identify any subsidiary questions or points you plan to consider.

3. Theoretical Framework

Specify the set of assumptions and concepts and/or the analytical model that you will use in developing and supporting your argument and outline your reasons for adopting them.

4. Sources of Evidence

Specify the evidence you will use in deriving your thesis (e.g. historical or current case studies, polls, interviews, speeches).

5. Literature Review

Describe 3 to 5 examples of scholarly research in your topic area. Identify the limitations or gaps within this literature, and how your essay will attempt to overcome these.

6. Bibliography

Cite primary and secondary sources that you have consulted (including those mentioned under headings 4 and 5 above), as well as those you expect to consult.

7. Work Schedule (in consultation with your Supervisor)

Specify the agreed-upon frequency of your future meetings, and the dates by which you will complete various stages of your work (e.g. complete literature survey, collect data, conduct interviews, write preliminary portions of the essay, submit these, have them returned with your supervisor's comments, revise and resubmit).

Progress Report

Maintaining good communication with your supervisor is important. You are expected to provide them with a 3-page progress report by **February 9, 2026**. The report should provide a clear and detailed description of what you have completed up to that point, what remains to be done, and a revised schedule if appropriate. The report will constitute **10% of your final grade**.

Content and Format

The Honours Research Essay is to be analytical, not descriptive. It states and then systematically derives and defends a thesis with reference to a theoretical framework. In writing it, you will have to exercise original thought in coordinating and synthesizing ideas and information, and in constructing your arguments. Tables or diagrams or descriptions of events, institutions, practices or laws should be included only if they advance your thesis. Do not pad your essay - length does not imply excellence.

Confirm with your supervisor the preferred format for footnotes and bibliographical structure. The final draft must be carefully proofread; do not rely on spellcheck. Be sure to leave yourself time for revision and formatting – this stage almost always takes longer than anticipated. The style and clarity of writing will be considered in the determination of a grade. Errors in fact, spelling or grammar will also be considered, and may result in the essay not being accepted as written. For guidance, you may wish to consult writing manuals such as: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White; *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations* by Kate Turabian; or *The Broadview Guide to Writing* by Doug Babington and Don LePan.

The essay must be typewritten and double-spaced using 12-character-per-inch font. Use standard 1-inch (2.54cm) margins at the top, bottom and sides of the page. All pages, with the exception of the first page, must be numbered. There must be a Table of Contents page. In addition, your essay must have a title page, which is set up in the following format:

TITLE

By

AUTHOR

A research essay submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for COMS 4908 as credit towards the degree of Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies [Honours]

School of Journalism and Communication
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

April 2026

You are to submit two copies of your Honours Research Essay to your supervisor; one for the supervisor and one for the second reader. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the School of Journalism and Communication has a copy of the essay; you may be requested to submit a third copy. Please note that hard copies are required unless your supervisor, the second reader **both** agree to accept digital copies.

Deadlines

Students who have applied to graduate immediately after the term in which they are registered must submit their essay by the last day for submitting term assignments, as described under The Academic Year in the Undergraduate Calendar. Students who have not completed at the end of their second term will need to meet with their faculty supervisor and make an appointment with the HRE coordinator.

Evaluation

The final essay determines 80 per cent of the course grade for COMS 4908. The research proposal determines 10 per cent. The progress report determines an additional 10 per cent. All components of the HRE must be completed. Whereas the proposal and the progress report are marked by the supervisor alone, the final essay is marked by the supervisor in consultation with a second reader. If for some reason the supervisor and the second reader cannot agree upon a mark for the essay, the HRE coordinator will act as a third reader. The HRE coordinator will assign a final grade for the presentation and is responsible for posting final HRE grades to Carleton Central.



Carleton University
School of Journalism and Communication
COMS 4908 Honours Research Essay

Supervision Consent Form
Student Name: Student Number: Email Address:
Supervisor Name: Signature: Date: Email Address: Academic Position:
Proposed Topic Area
Draft Thesis Statement

Please complete and return this form to Susana Vargas Cervantes
Due: **September 29, 2025**