

# Macquarie University

## Division of Environmental and Life Sciences

### *Department of Physical Geography*

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#### **Honours Grades - A Guide for Examiners**

In the Department of Physical Geography at Macquarie University, Honours is a one year full-time (or two year part-time) program. The thesis represents two thirds of the total assessable work as the student also undertakes two separate units. The research reported in the thesis represents about nine months of supervised (but not directed) research by an undergraduate student.

A number of thesis attributes are important. These include the quality of the research topic and the experimental design, the quality/quantity of data collection (fieldwork, and/or labwork and/or computer modelling, etc) as well as the understanding of the broader context within which the research lies, the quality of the writing up and conclusions drawn from the study and the presentation of the thesis. Each of these attributes will have differing importance to examiners. We do not try to "weigh" each of these attributes but to provide a general assessment.

Each thesis will be examined by at least two internal examiners and at least one external examiner. Each thesis will also be read by as many members of Physical Geography staff as possible.

#### **First Class Honours**

The thesis shows at least some insight, flair or originality. It will display a well developed capacity and/or potential for independent research. The thesis represents a worthwhile contribution to scholarship but it does not have to be perfect - it has to be as good as could reasonably be expected by an undergraduate student in nine months. A First Class thesis might include the following qualities:

1. The problem for investigation has been well chosen. The aims and conclusions are clearly stated within the context of a range of relevant literature.
2. The research design and investigation procedures are appropriate to the problem selected.
3. The execution of the research design via fieldwork, laboratory and/or computer modelling shows sound and efficient judgement.
4. The analyses of data are appropriate, accurate and concise.
5. The thesis is effective in communicating the research.

Perhaps the key component of a First Class thesis is the Discussion chapter. Students are expected to discuss their results in the context of their experimental design and in the context of existing literature. A First Class Honours student will show some insight and originality in the Discussion. There may be a "lightness of touch" illustrating that the student is comfortable and confident with the material and not struggling to separate core from non-core issues.

In assessing a thesis as a First Class thesis, we encourage the examiner to use the full range of percentages available from 85% to 100%. If the thesis is as good as could be expected of a First Class Honours student, 100% is an appropriate mark, provided the comments in the report explain this decision.

Many Honours theses contain publishable material, but the fact that the data may be publishable does not of itself make a First Class grade appropriate.

### **Second Class, Division I**

The thesis is a very competent piece of work showing strong capacity for independent research. The thesis demonstrates that the author has the capacity to embark on a Postgraduate degree. There may be potential to publish from the thesis, but it is likely that more insight and development will be needed before that material is publishable.

The thesis has the attributes of a First Class degree, however the examiner feels that insight, originality or flair may be lacking at a level which could reasonably be expected from a First Class student in nine months (full-time) study.

### **Second Class, Division II**

The thesis is a competent report illustrating some capacity for independent inquiry, but not showing high promise for higher degree work by research. There will be significant deficiencies in terms of research design, analysis, presentation, conclusion and/or subject choice, but there will be useful empirical observations and a high degree of reliability in their presentation, if not in the sophistication of their interpretation.

### **Third Class**

The thesis has significant deficiencies in a range of the following: subject choice, grasp of literature, research design, methods of analysis, format of presentation, discussion and conclusions. The thesis does not suggest that the author will make a reliable independent researcher.

### **Fail**

The thesis is unsatisfactory in a range of the following: grasp of the subject and literature, design of the research project, methods of analysis, format of presentation, discussion and conclusions.

### **Honours assessment**

Examiners are asked to provide two written reports on the thesis:

- Report A is confidential and will *not* be shown to the candidate (although it may be made available via the Freedom of Information Act). This report should indicate the grade recommended and any other comments that the examiner wishes to remain confidential. Normally about a page of comments would be provided justifying the evaluation made.
- Report B *will* be handed to the candidate *after* the completion of the examination process. This report should contain honest assessments and comments designed to assist the candidate with publication of results, etc. This report should *not* mention the recommended grade.

Each examiner is requested to provide a grade for the thesis (as above) and a mark out of 66.6%. (The thesis comprises 66.6% of the final assessment. Each of the coursework units comprise 16.7%.) In reaching a grade and mark, we ask the examiner to bear in mind the time available for the work and that Honours is an undergraduate degree.

<b>Thesis Grade</b>	<b>%</b>
First	85.0 - 100%
Second Class, Division I	75.0 - 84.9
Second Class, Division II	65.0 - 74.9
Third	46.0 - 64.9
Fail	< 45.9

The final grade for Honours will be based on the percentage grades above. We do not blindly use an arithmetic average since the circumstances affecting the candidate may be taken into account by Departmental staff. We use our judgement in borderline decisions based on internal assessments, the external examiner's report, other staff comment on the thesis, and a significant range of other issues which may have influenced the student's performance. Individual examiners' reports may be discounted if their written comments do not match the grade provided, or the report is deficient in detail or substance, or raises criticisms that the other examiners or the supervisor demonstrate are unfair, or if an unreasonable level of expectation of an undergraduate thesis is demonstrated. No account is taken of performance by the student prior to beginning Honours.

We strive via a rigorous process of examination to fairly assess the students' performance in comparison to previous grading at Macquarie and grading of Honours at other Universities - the latter is achieved by the requirement of all Honours theses being examined by an external academic.

Most students will undertake two four-credit point units as part of their Honours program. These units would not normally be assessed by the thesis supervisor. However, when they are, another member of staff is involved in the assessment of the unit grades.

Units undertaken by Honours candidates are graded to the following standards:

<b>Unit Grade</b>	<b>%</b>
HD	85 - 100
D	75 - 84.9
Cr	65.0 - 74.9
P	50.0 - 64.9
PC	45-49
F	0 - 44.9