

PHAA Definitions for an Honors Course

from Susan Richman

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Here's a question we've been fielding a lot lately: "Can homeschoolers call some courses HONORS classes on our high school transcript? What criteria should we use in determining this?" Usually this is brought on by seeing college or scholarship applications that specifically ask if any courses were considered Honors level or AP (Advanced Placement). In competitive admissions and scholarship applications, this can become especially important, as often extra "points" are awarded for honors level coursework-- homeschoolers shouldn't be left out of this option.

On the other hand, there is a worry that homeschoolers might just call any old course 'honors', and that the title could be meaningless. Many evaluators will agree with families that certain courses should indeed be listed as "Honors" on a transcript, and many evaluators may even suggest this even if the family has not thought of it. PHAA (Pennsylvania Homeschoolers Accreditation Agency) is now working to have an official policy written in by-laws about how to distinguish an honors course, and the following questions could serve as useful guidelines both for PHAA families and for all homeschoolers. I'm sure everyone understands that each specific course needs to be approached a bit differently, as goals and types of possible learning activities will vary by subject area, but these can form some basic guideposts to consider.

- **Has the student done significantly *more* than most students completing this type of course?** That is, has the student written more, done more experiments, completed more projects, read more, etc? Examples might be students who've read not just 3 classics, as required, but who read maybe 20 classics out of their 25 books for the year or who may have read 50 books. Or students who have 20 compositions of fine quality in their portfolio, and not just the one long paper and three shorter compositions required for earning an English credit through PHAA.
- **Has the student's work been of truly exceptional quality?** That is, quantity is not the only way to judge a course quality of thought demonstrated should certainly count in judging an honors course. Is the depth of thought and ability shown in writing projects, say, really unusually strong, quite beyond what "most" good students would be doing at this level? That could be grounds for an honors designation.
- **Does the student show special *initiative* in this course?** I'm thinking here of my daughter Molly when doing high school French. She not only did very well with her basic text studies, but she *also* took the initiative to find a French penpal who she eventually visited for 5 weeks in France (and she created a fabulous scrapbook afterwards about the trip, including extensive essay writings about specific outings and events, along with lots of photos and memorabilia). She also helped plan several *French Nights* with other homeschooling families, even compiling a booklet of French songs (with original illustrations), watched many French movies, did extra French readings, decided to take a non-credit French conversation course at a local university when in 10th grade, helped lead classes in a summer French day camp for homeschool kids, did extremely well in the National French Contest each year, and

more. Her older brother, Jacob, by contrast, did only the text work--while grumbling. But Jacob showed extraordinary initiative in creative computer programming-- every student will have their own areas of unique strength. Look for students developing their own original projects related to course content, demonstrating that they are going *beyond* just doing their "assigned work" and starting to develop their own research projects that really show deep interest and involvement, not just "following directions."

- **Does the student do very well in extra things like nationally sponsored competitions?** As mentioned above about our daughter Molly and French, there are national contests for most foreign languages that students can enter (and homeschoolers are always welcome) to try their skills against established standards. Some students do very well in math competitions, or regional/state/national science fair competitions, or history project and essay contests. A major win or just doing an exceptional job with an entry project in one of these types of competition programs could help establish an honors designation.
- **Is the student working with materials generally considered as "above grade level", or a curriculum that is especially demanding?** I know in the teacher's guide for the math text, *Discovering Geometry* by Key Curriculum Press, there is a plan for an honors course (basically doing everything in the text, including all the "extra special" things...) and a "regular" course (not so many extras), and a course for kids who really are artsy and not math-oriented (do all the artsy projects, skip some of the more conceptual work...). Using these curricular guidelines could be a way to demonstrate that a student deserves an Honors listing. Some co-op classes, or distance courses developed for homeschool students, may be considered as Honors by the teacher if certain extra criteria are met during the year-- these extra requirements should be clearly documented in the portfolio for the evaluator to see.

Whatever the specific criteria developed by a family for a given course, evaluators should describe in their letters why this course has earned an Honors designation. This will be a requirement for all future PHAA Honors credits, and just makes sense for all homeschoolers, as this will communicate with future colleges, or competitive summer programs, what the honors designation means for this student. The family may want to write up a clear summary for the portfolio also. I can imagine many students feeling an extra push of motivation to meet these higher standards, realizing they could earn an Honors title on their transcript.

Advanced Placement credit can only be awarded when a student actually takes an AP exam-- if a student completes an AP course and does well, but skips the exam, it might be labeled an Honors course instead. I feel many homeschoolers do deserve an honors designation for a number of their courses□ but just watch out that you don't overdo a good thing. Once we got a phone call from an admissions officer who was really confused, as the transcript he was looking at had every course listed as "Honors". And on top of that, there were simply so many courses (maybe 12-14 credits per year listed...). What did Family Life HONORS mean? What did Phys Ed HONORS mean? What did Home Economics HONORS mean? What did World History HONORS mean? Because the title seemed to be just used for everything on the transcript, it came to mean nothing, unfortunately. So, keep the honors designation for those areas where the student is truly excelling, and where the evaluator is ready to communicate why the title was given.