

Guidelines for Thesis Option Master of Arts in English

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I. General Description of the M.A. Thesis

The thesis should be a polished intellectual accomplishment, a written product that aims to achieve the same standards as material published in the field of the thesis topic. The thesis should indicate that the student has mastered the body of primary material on the subject at hand, and demonstrate an awareness and engagement with the current critical conversation in the field. In doing so, the student should strive to make an original contribution to this scholarly discourse.

The target length of the thesis should be 60 to 80 pages (not including bibliographical material).

Theses should follow the guidelines in the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* and the formatting guidelines set forth by the Graduate Studies office.

Work on the thesis is guided principally by the student's chosen Thesis Director. A student should formulate his or her thesis project early and discuss it with potential Directors. If the student does not know who to ask to direct a chosen topic, he or she may ask the graduate or department chairperson, who can direct them to the faculty member best suited to help. Students are strongly advised to begin thinking about the thesis project early in their graduate curriculum, because researching and composing a quality thesis demands advanced preparation and timely execution.

II. Guide for Choosing a Topic and Submitting a Proposal

The Thesis Topic

As mentioned, the thesis should be between 60 and 80 pages in length (not including bibliographical material). Thus, the topic selected must be both rich enough to provide substantive material, and focused enough to be executable within these parameters. The thesis question, or research issue, should concentrate on a primary text, or a selection of primary texts, and should offer a substantial interpretive or theoretical position.

Some suggestions for generating ideas:

- Keep a notebook or journal with potential thesis ideas as they occur to you during your coursework. Draw connections between ideas that might provide material for a broader theoretical approach. Be aware of the connections between ideas and theories in various classes.
- Run your ideas by professors and classmates to determine whether or not the concept is viable and fertile for a larger project. It is a good idea to meet with a few different faculty members to discuss your ideas.
- Keep your seminar papers and explore them for more “room to grow.” Look for ways to expand the approach, to incorporate more texts, or to connect related ideas from more than one paper.
- If you arrive at a potential topic early, try to explore it in a subsequent seminar paper to see if it has traction. You might even find that it is possible to write what can become a section of your thesis as a seminar paper, getting a jump on the process.

Submitting a Thesis Proposal

Before any substantial writing is undertaken on the thesis itself, the student will submit a thesis proposal to the Director for approval. This should be completed within the first 2-3 weeks of the semester in which the student first takes thesis credits (if not *before* the beginning of that semester). This document will be used to not only guide the work of the student as an outline, but to provide material for potential Thesis Readers to review.

The proposal should consist of the following components:

1. **Title:** Your thesis needs a title that suggests the topic. Conventional Thesis titles often have a short “metaphorical” or “abstract” title followed by a colon and a subtitle that offers more concrete information, e.g. “The Outlaw vs. the Lawyer: The Role of the Medieval Outlaw Hero as Champion of Justice in the Face of Rising Legal Literacy.”
2. **Abstract:** An abstract is an essay of approximately 1000 words that outlines the subject and purpose of the thesis. State clearly and concisely what ideas you will explore, what you seek to prove, and your overall theoretical or interpretive position on the subject. In other words, indicate as best as you can at this early stage, what you are writing about, what you want to say about it, and why.
3. **Approach:** This is a tentative topical outline. Show how your selection and arrangement of material fulfills your overall purpose. A working title, chapter headings, or outline may be presented in this section.
4. **Review of Scholarship:** Offer a brief overview of the present state of research relating to your topic. Discuss what you know about your topic at this point, and your familiarity with relevant secondary resources. Describe what you consider to be original about your topic in light of what you know has already been written about it.
5. **Bibliography:** Provide a preliminary selective bibliography. Be as thorough at this point as possible, understanding that some works will be dropped from the final bibliography and some will be added.

Formatting

The Office of Graduate Studies sets forth formatting rules for theses; these rules supercede any others. The student should acquire these rules from the Office of Graduate Studies at the beginning of the writing process. Otherwise, students in English should follow MLA style, with the following exceptions:

- All quotes 4 lines or longer should be presented in block style, indented from both margins and single-spaced.
- Any footnotes that appear in the text for explanatory reasons should be single-spaced.

III. Selecting a Thesis Director

Work on the thesis is directed principally by the student's chosen Thesis Director. Ideally, this professor should be the member of the faculty with the greatest expertise in the subject area of the student's thesis project. The Director can play a variety of roles in your work on the thesis. As an expert in the area, the Director can provide valuable bibliographic references and offer insight into how your topic fits into the larger body of scholarship. Also, your Director's intuition may allow you to discern which of your ideas are potentially productive—and which are not. Your Director can offer constant challenges to your ideas, in an attempt to encourage you to think through every detail of your

argument. His or her critical perspective can help you to determine the extent of your progress, and keep you motivated and on schedule.

The semester *before* the thesis is written (before thesis credits are taken) the student should ask a member of the English Department graduate faculty under whose supervision they wish to write the thesis if he or she will serve as Director. The Director serves as first reader for the thesis and guides the student through the research and development process. It is imperative that the student talk to the Director and come to an agreement on a topic idea before signing up for thesis credits. Students should consult the graduate chairperson if they are uncertain about choosing a Thesis Director. After a Director is chosen, and the “Thesis Direction Arrangement” form is filed the student may register for thesis credits. At this time the student should file an “Intention to Complete Thesis” form with the English Department. This is a form that will be updated over the course of the thesis work.

Co-Directed Thesis

Students may elect to choose two Directors for the Thesis. However, this arrangement requires not only the consent and willingness of both faculty members (both of whom must be members of the English Dept. graduate faculty) but a high level of cooperation and additional paperwork. Any student wishing to have a co-directed thesis must write it over the course of two semesters (3 credits being assigned to one Director in the first semester, and the remaining 3 to the second Director during the second semester). The student must file a “Thesis Direction Arrangement” form prior to registering for each semester.

Selecting Thesis Readers

Once you have completed the Thesis Proposal, you and your Thesis Director will need to select two secondary readers for your Thesis. At least one of the Readers must be a member of the English graduate faculty. The Director will submit to the perspective Readers a copy of the Thesis Proposal and a letter (or verbal request) asking them to participate in the Thesis Review. The role of the Readers is primarily to review the Thesis after it has been completed for the purpose of determining successful graduation. Readers may, however, be involved in the drafting process to whatever extent you, your advisor and *the readers themselves* wish. Please bear in mind that the official role of these secondary readers is to review the final product and participate in the Thesis Review at completion. For any student choosing a co-Directors (see above) only one Reader is needed, as both Directors will serve on the Review committee.

Thesis Review

At the conclusion of the final semester of thesis work, after the completed draft has been submitted to the Thesis Director and the two additional readers, there will be a Thesis Review meeting between the student, the Thesis Director and the readers. This meeting will be one in which the readers pose any questions regarding the work itself, and make any suggestions they feel will assist the student in final revisions. The student may be asked to offer additional insight on primary and secondary material addressed in his or her thesis. The student may also be asked to offer additional support for any theoretical stances he or she has taken. Primarily, however, the Thesis Review is an opportunity for the readers to provide constructive criticism that will aid the student in this and further research endeavors.

IV. Timeline for Completing the Thesis

It is highly advisable that a student work on his or her thesis over the course of two semesters, taking 3 credits each semester. It is permissible to do the thesis in one semester (taking all 6 credits at once) but

it is unlikely that the project can be finished in one semester without a lot of advance research/writing. The following is a suggested timeline for a successful thesis:

1. The semester (or summer) prior to taking Thesis credits
 - a. Choose a topic
 - b. Select a Thesis Director and discuss/refine topic. Complete the “Thesis Direction Agreement” prior to registering for Thesis credits.
 - c. Begin and file an “Intention to Complete Thesis” form with the English Department.

2. First Semester of Thesis credits (3 c.h.)
 - a. Complete Thesis Proposal by the end of the 3rd week of the semester and approve Proposal with Thesis Director in a meeting
 - b. Discuss potential Readers with Director. Director will provide a copy of the Proposal to perspective Readers along with a letter asking them to participate on the Thesis committee.
 - c. Choose two Readers with the guidance of the Thesis Director by the end of the 8th week of the semester and add them to the “Intention to Complete Thesis” form.
 - d. Meet with Director several times to guide research and organize the structure of the Thesis
 - e. Complete all reading and research in the first semester and begin writing

3. Second Semester of Thesis credits (3 c.h.)
 - a. Submit all completed written material to Director at the beginning of the semester and discuss guidelines for completion
 - b. File “Intent to Graduate” form with the Graduate Studies office by the end of the 2nd week of the semester.
 - c. Complete writing of thesis draft by the 10th week of the term. Submit rough draft to Director and discuss revisions.
 - d. Set date for Thesis Review with Director
 - e. Submit edited draft of thesis to Readers no later than **two weeks prior** to the Thesis Review (so that readers can have time to read the material)

Conduct Thesis Review with Director and Readers prior to the end of the semester

V. Thesis Assessment Criteria

Theses will be assessed according to the following criteria. A thesis should:

- Possess a strong presence of voice in which the writer speaks with assurance and originality about the subject matter of the research;
- Present a cogent and controlled synthesis of primary, secondary, and theoretical materials relevant to the research project;
- Represent the writer’s awareness that she or he is entering into an ongoing conversation with other scholars on the subject of the writer’s research;
- Offer a clear, original, and purposeful interpretative critical perspective to the ongoing scholarly conversation;
- Represent a command of research and interpretive methodology.