

The M.A. Thesis in English

The Master's Thesis is one of the English M.A. program's two capstone options, the other being the Comprehensive Exam. While the exam emphasizes historical and generic breadth of knowledge, the thesis offers the opportunity for in-depth study of a particular author, text, or idea, or small group thereof. The thesis option is therefore recommended for students with an established interest in pursuing such a topic as well as the research, reading and writing skills to do so, and especially for students interested in pursuing additional advanced education. To write a thesis, a student must have a GPA of at least 3.00 and a minimum of 15 credits of graduate coursework in English at the time the prospectus is approved.

An English Master's Thesis is typically a work of 50-100 pages, and usually takes from one to two semesters to complete after the approval of the prospectus. Thesis topics should be chosen with these general guidelines in mind, and should be neither too broad to be manageable nor too narrow to support sustained research and writing. While a thesis need not be an entirely original contribution to the discipline, it should be more than a compendium of familiar ideas: a thesis should bring the student's own interests into contact with the current state of the discipline and contribute to an ongoing scholarly discussion. Theses will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- A thesis should have an appropriate topic: one that engages with texts, authors, and issues associated with (or capable of association with) the concerns of the discipline, and one that is neither too broad to be adequately addressed in, nor too narrow to sustain, a project of this scope.
- A thesis should have a clear and consistent argument - that is, it should be more than a collation of others' arguments - and should make clear the relevance and value of that argument for the discipline's understanding of the texts, authors, or ideas in question.
- A thesis should have a coherent and sufficiently scholarly methodology, which may but need not be indebted to or in dialogue with one or more contemporary modes of literary criticism or critical theory. A thesis should make its methodology clear explicitly in a section on method and/or implicitly through clear discussion and consistent application of the methodology and citation of appropriate critical texts in the body of the thesis.
- A thesis should have a clear and effective structure appropriate to its subject, usually divided into chapters or sections.
- A thesis should demonstrate familiarity with the primary and secondary literature appropriate to its subject, both through a bibliography and through engagement with that literature in the body of the thesis.

- A thesis should be written at the appropriate level, should be free of compositional errors and awkwardness, and should be written, formatted, and documented in accordance with MLA format.

Students wishing to write a thesis should proceed through the following steps:

1. Identify and develop a topic and method of inquiry. Generally a student should have an interest he or she wishes to pursue before deciding to write a thesis, rather than the reverse. Often, the thesis grows out of a paper written for a particular class, or out of the research undertaken for that project. It can be helpful to avoid taking all of the allowed 400-level courses early in one's graduate career (students may count a maximum of three such courses toward the degree) in order to "save" one or two for later; as you begin to develop an area of interest, you may find a 400-level course in a literature, a period, topic, or theory relevant to your possible thesis topic.

2. Find a director and second reader for the thesis. Generally the director is a faculty member in the department with whom the student has worked before, who has confidence in the student's ability to write a thesis, and who has some expertise in the topic of the thesis. A faculty member is not obliged to accept a student as a thesis advisee, and will generally only do so when convinced that both the thesis project and the director-student match are good ones. The second reader should also be chosen, usually in consultation with the director, for his or her knowledge of or interest in the topic of the thesis.

3. In consultation with the director, develop a prospectus for the thesis to be approved by the director and second reader and submitted for additional approval to the department's Graduate Committee. A student can expect the drafting of the prospectus to take considerable time, though a focused and organized prospectus will speed the actual drafting of the thesis. The prospectus is designed to assure that the student's plan for the thesis is appropriate, and the student may not proceed with writing the thesis until the prospectus is fully approved; submitting the prospectus after completing substantial work on the thesis may result in much of that work having to be discarded and re-done. The Graduate Committee will read and approve prospectuses during the fall and spring terms; the Committee can also read and approve over the summer term, but students should check with their advisors to plan summer submission and revision.

Students must have completed at least 15 credits of work toward their degree and ideally more before a prospectus can be approved.

A prospectus is generally five to seven pages in length (exclusive of bibliography), should accomplish all of the following goals, and will be evaluated by the Committee in terms of these requirements:

- Clearly identify the topic of the thesis, which should be appropriate in the ways described above
- Set out the argument of the thesis, making clear its appropriateness to the topic and its relevance and value to the discipline
- Identify an appropriate critical methodology and describe how it will be applied to the topic in order to support the argument
- Describe the structure of the thesis, including its division into chapters or sections

- Demonstrate knowledge of the current state of the discipline with regard to the topic of the thesis, including familiarity and engagement with relevant primary texts and scholarship at a level appropriate to this stage of the thesis project
- Include a bibliography of appropriate and up-to-date primary and secondary materials consulted and to be consulted, usually comprising at least 20-30 items

Please note that it is not uncommon for an advisor to ask for multiple drafts, with substantial revision, of a prospectus. Frequently, the Graduate Committee asks for additional revision and elucidation: the argument must be clear to informed readers who are not necessarily specialists in the field. It is in a student's best interest to write as focused and organized a prospectus as possible, and to move on to the actual drafting of the thesis only after the prospectus is completed and approved. Upon approval, the student, the thesis director, and Director of Graduate Studies (speaking for the committee) will complete the Thesis Prospectus Approval Form and submit it to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

4. After formal acceptance of the prospectus, students register for ENG 599, which requires permission of the chair of the department. The form requires the signatures of the student, the thesis director, and the department chair.
5. Write the thesis, typically over a period of one to two semesters, in regular consultation with the director. Such consultation typically involves the regular submission of chapter drafts, discussion of and feedback on these, revision and resubmission. Students should expect the writing process to involve considerable additional research, reading, and revision; first drafts are rarely acceptable. The thesis, including documentation, should be formatted according to the current MLA style guidelines.
6. When the thesis is complete, prepare an abstract of no more than 500 words.
7. Submit the thesis and abstract to the director and second reader for approval. The student should submit the thesis at a date which allows adequate time"—as defined by the director and second reader"—for the thesis to be carefully read and, if necessary, revised or corrected, before the School of Graduate Studies' final submission deadline. Students planning to graduate in May should plan to submit the thesis to its readers no later than April 30, and no later than November 30 for December graduation.
8. After approval by the director and second reader, submit two copies of the thesis, accompanied by five copies of the abstract, to the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies. Additional formatting and submission guidelines should be consulted in the Masters Thesis Handbook. At this point, one copy of both thesis and abstract should be submitted to the English Department as well. The submission deadlines for inclusion in the Commencement Program are April 15 for May graduation and November 15 for December graduation.
9. The student must conduct a public presentation of the thesis, typically in the antepenultimate week of the semester in which the student plans to graduate. The

presentation is in general much like a conference paper, 15-20 minutes in length, in which the student presents the argument, chief evidence, and structure of the thesis. The presentation is open to the public, and is typically attended by faculty members and students who may ask questions concerning the thesis. Typically the presentation is made after submitting the thesis to the School of Graduate Studies, at a date determined by the Graduate Committee. Alternatively, the student may choose to make the presentation before final submission of the thesis to the director and second reader, in order to receive feedback from those in attendance. The presentation is factored into the student's grade for ENG 599, and no grade will be given until the presentation has been completed.