

Thesis Guidelines for MA Literature Students

1. Where do these ideas come from?

From your study of literature and your special interests. Ideally, the thesis ought to, though not necessarily, develop out of a seminar paper or an independent study. Your papers and/or the suggestions of professors may help you frame and develop your topic. You may consult bound copies of theses in the Library. You should undertake considerable primary and secondary reading in order to convince yourself that your project has worth. The range of possibilities for an M.A. thesis is immense; areas include (but are not limited to) literary theory, literary criticism, literary history, biography, textual studies and editions, and translations.

2. What should the structure of thesis be?

The thesis should develop in detail a focused and structured literary argument. It can be single chapter of publishable quality or a multi-chapter work. It should extend in scope and conception beyond the range of a seminar paper and be more concise than a dissertation or book-length study. The number of pages depends entirely upon the individual project, but, generally speaking, the range is between 40 and 60 pages.

3. How do I find my readers?

You will choose a first and second reader for your thesis project at the beginning of the semester *before* you begin your thesis project. Your thesis committee must include a first and second reader from the English department faculty. Depending on your topic, you may wish to have third reader from outside the department. Initially, you must find a first reader who is interested in your general topic and responsive to you and your approach. Your first reader should have some specialization, or at least interested experience, in one or more of the areas of your topic. (For a list of faculty interests and specializations, see the department website, or the list in the main office.) To find such a reader, you must appear with a fairly clear idea and some enthusiasm as well as flexibility. Bring a short description of your project to present to prospective readers. This description should articulate your research questions, list some of the texts you wish to examine, and what you think you might find. Once you have found a first reader, you should discuss who might serve as second reader on the committee. If, for any reason, you experience difficulty finding readers, you should consult the Program Coordinator for advice.

4. What's the difference between the proposal and the prospectus?

The "Proposal" is the paragraph summary of your project that you submit on the "Proposal for Culminating Experience Form." This form is due, with your ATC form, the semester before you plan to graduate (see #8 below). The prospectus is not a form but a written statement that establishes the main lines of argument and organization for the thesis. As part of your prospectus, you must submit a timetable, developed with your advisor, demonstrating that the thesis will be completed within two semesters. The prospectus is also the basis for the Prospectus (or "Oral") Exam. The prospectus should be written in consultation with your committee. As described in the department's Blue Handout, the prospectus presents "the controlling purpose of the thesis; the selection of literary sources; an overview of relevant scholarship and criticism; and the value and interest of the study." The format might well look like this (but there is no absolute standard for organization):

- Statement of controlling idea and its significance
- Chapter outline
- Working bibliography of major primary and secondary sources
- A finished prospectus tends to be about 15 pp. in length (including bibliography)

See the "**Prospectus Guidelines for MA Literature Students**" (available online and in the department office) for more information.

Consult with your committee members well in advance of your Prospectus Exam. Plan on sharing your prospectus with your committee at least two weeks before the meeting. (A draft is usually submitted to your first reader for commentary and revision before going to the full committee.) Some faculty members may ask to see materials earlier or later.

5. What is the Prospectus (Oral) Exam?

The Prospectus Exam is less an "exam" per se than it is a conference with your committee discussing your project (based upon the completed prospectus) and evaluating your readiness to start writing. The exam should be scheduled at the end of the semester *before* you intend to begin writing. Upon successful completion of the exam, your committee members will sign a "Prospectus Form" for your file. Expect the prospectus exam to last about an hour. First, you'll be given a chance to explain how you chose your topic and your approach to it. You must be prepared to present and argue the case for a well-delineated plan of research. You will defend or modify your plan of study in response to questions and suggestions from your readers. Take copious notes during the exam! This is the only time you will have all of your committee members together in a room, so it is also your opportunity to ask them as many questions about the project as you like.

Be sure to print out and bring the Prospectus Form to the exam.

6. May I change my mind?

Yes, if you mean that your thesis takes different twists and turns as you write. If you simply wish to change the title (but not the content) of your thesis, you simply need to fill out a new CE form and have it signed by your first reader. But, if you

move completely away from the original proposed topic—say, from women in Shakespeare to Melville’s short fiction—you must write a new proposal, develop a new prospectus, and take a new oral exam. (Not to worry, this is a rarity.)

7. How does the writing process work? What are the roles of the first and second readers?

Working backwards from your intended filing date, consult with your readers to develop a timeline with individual chapters or sections and due dates. As you develop this timeline, note that you are not obliged to write the chapters of your thesis in any particular order. Students often find it is helpful to write their introduction last. At some early stage—perhaps at the end of your oral—readers’ responsibilities will be clarified for your particular project. Often it is helpful for the first reader to proceed through the complete manuscript before submitting it to the second reader; sometimes the second reader will want to see drafts of chapters immediately after the first reader has perused them. Check with your committee to formulate the most appropriate plan of submission. It is important to allow sufficient time for your readers to read and respond to your chapters, and to apportion time for your revisions and modifications. Plan on giving your readers the full thesis, with all suggestions incorporated, at least four weeks before the Graduate Studies Deadline. (Some faculty members might ask for it earlier or later.) Readers need this time to read the full project and give feedback, and you need this time to make revisions, check formatting and printing requirements with Graduate Studies, and get signatures. What all this means is that in a sixteen-week semester, allowing for research and revision time, you will typically have only a few weeks to write each chapter of your project, allowing for research and revision time. Work with your committee to set a flexible but serious and realistic set of deadlines to guide you through your process.

If it is taking longer than you anticipated to complete your thesis, it is your responsibility to talk to your advisors about your situation and develop a new timeline for completion.

8. What is the schedule for the submission of various forms?

In the semester before your last 6 units in the program, complete the ATC form, have it signed by your graduate advisor, and submit to the graduate secretary by the announced deadline. This and other deadline dates can be found online at the Graduate Division website (www.sfsu.edu/~gradstdy), click on “Current Students” and open “Deadlines for Completing a Master’s Degree.” Complete the “Proposal for Culminating Experience” form and show it to your first and second readers for their approval and signature; submit by the announced deadline. Both forms are only available online through the Graduate Division’s website and should be submitted together. After your ATC and “Culminating Experience” forms have been filed, you may sign up for ENG 898 (Master’s Thesis) in the first two weeks of your final semester. You can only do so the old-fashioned way: by hand. Fill out the add form, have your first reader sign it, and return it to the English Office so that the graduate secretary can e-mail you the permit number. You will also need to apply for graduation in your final semester. The application form is available on the Graduate Studies website.

9. How do I submit my thesis?

Be sure you know the thesis submission deadline for the semester you intend to graduate (check Graduate Division website). As noted above, you will need to submit the final draft to your committee members with enough time for them to read it and for you to make any last minute changes (usually 4 weeks before the published deadline). English department Literature theses should follow the latest MLA Style Manual (available in the Library). Graduate Division guidelines for formatting and submission can be downloaded from their website (look for “Thesis Guidelines” under “Graduate Forms”). You will need to take the final approved copy of your thesis to both your first and second readers for signature; you are now ready to file it!

10. What if I don't make the deadline for completing thesis at the end of the semester that I signed up for ENG 898?

You will be issued a grade of “RP,” which indicates satisfactory progress. You have one “grace” semester to complete your thesis; you do not need to re-register or pay any extra fees during the grace semester. However, students who do not complete their thesis within two semesters must enroll in a zero-unit College of Extended Learning CE (“Cumulating Experience”) course every subsequent semester until your thesis is completed. You will also be subject to a fee (to be set annually and not to exceed the Open University laboratory unit fee). Students will be assumed to have withdrawn from their degree program if they fail to maintain continuous enrollment status after the grace semester. (For the purpose of this policy, only the fall and spring semesters are counted as semesters.) Please see the Culminating Experience Continuous Enrollment Policy for full details.

If you received an “RP” grade for Eng 898 in a previous semester, you will need to file a Grade Change Petition form and have it signed by your first reader to get a CR for the course.

11. If I don't finish, do I need to reapply for graduation?

If your graduate application was approved but you did not finish your thesis, you will need to re-apply for graduation in the semester that you complete the thesis.

12. How long do I have to complete the thesis?

The university has a 7-year limit for completing post-graduate programs: you should endeavor to complete the thesis within 7 years of the date of the earliest course work listed on your ATC form. As indicated above, students are subject to fees if they do not complete their thesis in two semesters.