THE RESEARCH-BASED THESIS PROJECT

OVERVIEW

One of your options for writing a thesis is to produce a critical study of literature or literary culture. This is the work you will use as primary evidence of your abilities and your achievement in your master’s program.

A research-based thesis might address one or more works by a particular author; a set of writings (literary, critical, pedagogical, etc.) by two or more authors bound by a common focus (question, issue, etc.) or common aesthetic or aesthetic concern; or works that represent or reflect a particular literary/cultural moment, either historical or contemporary. Other kinds of critical studies that relate to the field of English Studies may also be proposed.

Most theses are 60-90 pages in length, although the topic and scope of the project will determine the appropriate length for each individual thesis. That said, a Master’s-level research-based thesis should be 50+ pages at the very least, and anything over 100 pages is starting to approach a Ph.D. dissertation.

If you are interested in selecting the research-based thesis project, you must begin by proposing a project to a potential thesis director. In doing so, you should present him or her with a 2-3 page typed proposal that includes a brief description of your thinking thus far about the project, the research you have done to ground your thinking, and a timeline that seems feasible to you for the project.

Important: Think carefully about your timeline. If you plan to undertake ENG 6700 or EN6800 in the summer, know that you need to begin your work in May, immediately after the spring semester ends. The summer term is short and compressed, and it is well-nigh impossible to do during June-July what you would usually do in a four-month semester. Heed also the fact that drafts have to be submitted in advance so readers have time to process your work before the formal meetings. Also, since even during a regular semester, you have only about 10-12 weeks of work before it is due to your committee, you might consider taking ENG 6700, then taking a summer semester off or taking one final class so you can begin the thesis writing process before you enroll in ENG 6800, during which you will finish writing the thesis. If you do not complete your thesis during ENG 6800, you will be required to enroll in a one-credit ENG 6801 (and pay another credit hour of tuition) to complete the project. (If you don’t finish it in ENG 6801, then you have to take a one-credit ENG 6802, etc.—but that rarely if ever happens.)

PRIOR TO THESIS RESEARCH / PROSPECTUS (ENG 6700)

To help you work with a thoughtful timetable, students must select a thesis mentor early the term before they enroll for ENG 6700 (or even earlier if possible). Prior to meeting with their mentors, they should bring a typed proposal for their project including a brief description of research and structured timeline. Students will work with the thesis mentor to sharpen this proposal and timeline. Prior to enrolling in Thesis Research (ENG 6700), students are required to turn in a final schedule
for ENG 6700 and 6800 to both their thesis mentor and the graduate director. It is understood that your actual work may deviate from this calendar, but the calendar will help you thoughtfully consider your timeline and manage your work throughout the process.

THESIS RESEARCH / PROSPECTUS (ENG 6700)

Once you, in consultation with your thesis director, have discussed, defined, and developed your idea for your thesis project, you will describe and explore your thesis topic in a written formal thesis prospectus. In this prospectus, you will clarify the work you will do for this project and describe your thesis' focus and scope, as well as the theoretical lens(es) you will employ and the relevant critical conversations you will engage.

Your thesis advisor will provide examples of previous successful prospectuses for you to consult as models; you will discover there is a range of viable approaches to this task.

Your prospectus must be followed by a working bibliography of appropriate, relevant sources; your director may ask you to create an annotated bibliography as well, although this is not absolutely required. The prospectus must also include a proposed outline of the thesis (draft of “table of contents,” chapter by chapter) and an expected timeline for completion of the project.

The prospectus (usually 10-15 pages)—along with the bibliography, chapter outline, and timeline—will then be sent to the members of your thesis committee at least a week in advance of the thesis prospectus meeting, at which time your committee will approve the prospectus if it is deemed a workable project that is appropriately framed. Typically you will receive at this meeting affirmation of your project as well as coaching and advice from your committee members—helpful insights to take into account and input to use as you move forward with the writing of the thesis.

THESISWRITING (ENG 6800)

Once you have written and presented a prospectus and successfully passed ENG 6700, you will very likely do further research and begin to write your research-based thesis in ENG 6800, Thesis Writing, which is taken during the last semester of your graduate studies.

Every thesis project is different. The process through which a thesis is written depends greatly on you and your director, as well as on your topic and your background and familiarity with the material.

That said, there are some commonalities among our graduate students’ thesis processes that you should expect and should bear in mind:

- With this thesis, you are becoming a scholar. There is no way to become a scholar without immersing yourself in scholarship—secondary sources—on your subject.

- Your thesis must be well-researched and thus explicitly connected to the critical conversation(s) related to your thesis ideas. At the same time, you, as the writer of this thesis
and thus something of an expert in this particular field, should be engaging those who are part of the relevant critical conversations; you should use them to help you make your case, yes, but you should also critique their perspectives or sharpen and refine their insights as you take on a confident voice within that conversation, offering your own perspectives in response to those critics you have cited and also for the consideration of future researchers on this subject.

- The value of creating an annotated bibliography while you are in the thesis prospectus phase of this project (and continuing it as you read further scholarship throughout the project, even as you are drafting the thesis) is because it helps you keep in mind the overview of the argument in each source, helps you keep your sources straight, identifies their most salient points for your own argument, and allows you more easily to compare the similarities and differences among these critical commentaries.

- Familiarity with the criticism does not, of course, substitute for your careful reading and thorough grasp of the primary texts you are addressing. Do not lean too hard on the critics to do your essential work for you.

- You don’t necessarily have to begin with the Introduction; sometimes Introductions are easier to write after the body chapters have been drafted and you have fully discovered where your argument has taken you. Even so, some students and directors find that beginning with the Introduction makes the best sense.

- Know that although you have planned out your thesis—from the nuances of the argument, to the shape and structure of the chapters—your thesis may evolve in the process of its writing. Often this does occur, and it is normal; it is part of the organic nature of developing an argument, for new insights and challenges arise that you could not have anticipated in advance. Know also that this does not mean that beginning with a plan is not useful; it is quite essential. Without a plan, you may have difficulty launching at all, and even if you do get launched, chances are what you produce will be unfocused and thus less effective than it might have been because it is too unsure of the direction it is pursuing.

- Know that you will revise and revise and revise—and then revise again. What’s more, you should expect to continue drafting new sections or chapters of your thesis while your director is reading and critiquing what you have already submitted. You must be able to write new material while already written material is still “in process.” In other words, you will be dancing back and forth between continual revision and generation of new text throughout the project; it is usually a messy, not neat, process—but if you can’t multi-task your way through the untidiness, the thesis will probably take you longer to finish than you expected.

- You should not assume that your thesis director is your personal editor. Once the director begins to point out changes that need to be made in the thesis—whether the changes are structural and organizational, or stylistic, or grammatical, or related to how you incorporate theory or secondary criticism—you should begin to apply that feedback and advice to new sections of writing by yourself. Your director should not have to point the same thing out to you over and over. Also, when your thesis director gives you direct feedback about changes
that need to be made, and then the revision comes back to him without the changes being incorporated, most directors feel (whether or not they say so) that this is disrespectful of their time and efforts. Of course your director expects to read all of your work carefully, provide you with feedback about the text you are producing, encourage you in the process, make helpful suggestions about further reading, future writing, and so forth—and they are happy to do this. Because your director’s work with you on your thesis is a significant investment of her time, be sure that you use it wisely.

• Your committee members may or may not wish to read your thesis as it is being drafted. Every committee and project are different. Just because Professor X did not want to read each chapter when she was a reader on your friend’s thesis does not necessarily mean that she will not want to read your chapters as you produce them. You need to ask and then respect the wishes of each committee member. Still, many times committee members do not ask to read the thesis until they receive it as a completed draft; that is also the prerogative of your readers.

• You may always make an appointment to talk with your readers if you feel that you need some particular guidance or input from them that your director cannot supply. That is part of the understanding when professors agree to serve as readers on a committee.