

**HARVARD UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GUIDELINES (& SOME ADVICE) FOR SENIOR THESIS WRITERS AND ADVISERS
Fall 2016**

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This is a document for senior thesis writers and their allies. The first three parts should help thesis writers write theses; the fourth says how the thesis gets evaluated (i.e. graded), and the last part says what happens after that.

1. IMPORTANT DATES 2016-17

September 9, 2016

Location: Child Library (in Widener)

10am - *Information session on the thesis prospectus.* (Critical Thesis Writers)

11am - *Get to Know Your Fellow Thesis Writers!* (Creative & Critical)

October 5, 2016

Thesis prospectus and annotated bibliography due (critical thesis writers only)

Please turn them in by 4pm to the English Department office. We do need print copies (not emailed documents). They will be evaluated by others, and returned to you for more work if not satisfactory.

December 6, 2016

First chapter or equivalent (about 20pp.) due to your adviser (critical and creative).

Your adviser must confirm that you have turned this work in in order to submit a grade for English 99r; it will not be evaluated by others. Many thesis writers have completed a first chapter or equivalent earlier in the term; if this is the case and your adviser has read it, you need not submit another chapter at this point.

February 8, 2017

Thesis titles due to Lauren

March 6, 2017

Final senior thesis due (critical and creative)

Please turn it in by 4pm to the English Department office; please follow the format standards described below (for a critical thesis) or whatever format standards the work requires, keeping in mind the standards below as norms (for a creative thesis).

March 6, 2017

Senior champagne reception following the thesis deadline, at 4:00pm in the Thompson Room, Barker Center.

April 27, 28, and May 1, 2017

Oral examinations scheduled for those thesis writers who might be candidates for the *summa cum laude* degree.

2. FORMAT AND LENGTH

We require that all critical theses come to us in a uniform format; this format helps us treat them fairly and equally, helps us keep track of them, helps libraries preserve them, and might help you proofread and otherwise put the thesis into final form.

We also have a **length requirement**. Please take it seriously. **Critical** theses will normally be in the range of 12,000-15,000 words, not including appendices, footnotes, bibliography etc. If your critical thesis is nearing 20,000 words, we ask that your adviser include a brief note confirming his/her approval of the longer-than-normal length. **Critical theses longer than 20,000 words will not be accepted.**

Creative theses in some genres, notably poetry, are often shorter; creative theses in other genres, especially novel, may be longer with the permission of the department. Generally, the department requires at least 35-50 pages for poetry, 70-100 pages for fiction and nonfiction, 60-90 pages for a play, and 90-120 pages for a screenplay.

You should submit **two copies** of your thesis on the due date in February. Each copy of the thesis should be submitted in a **black springboard binder**: we give those out in the English Department office. Only **one copy** needs to be printed on **library-approved archival paper**. The second copy can be printed on standard copy paper. Your name and the title of your thesis should appear on a label attached to the front cover of each binder. The left margin of your thesis should be spaced at 1.5" to accommodate the binder. You should also send an **electronic copy of your thesis** to the department c/o Lauren Bimmler, lbimmler@fas.harvard.edu; we strongly prefer it in some form of Microsoft Word.

You must, of course, **document your sources properly**; you can find guides to documentation in Harvard's Handbook for Students, in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Footnotes, endnotes, appendices, bibliography, etc. should consistently follow either MLA or Chicago standards. Please proofread. Don't spoil your brilliant ideas with typos.

[Note: Both MLA and Chicago exist in multiple editions that can be quite different from each other, so it is important to ask your adviser early on which edition to use, and to be aware of the distinctions when you use citation-generating tools. For more questions on citation style, contact our library liaison, Odile Harter, oharter@fas.harvard.edu.]

Please do remember that even where a source is noted, concealed quotations and extended paraphrases that read as though the ideas were your own are considered plagiarism. Discuss this issue thoroughly with your adviser and make every effort to avoid even the appearance of an undocumented borrowing.

If you wish to include an acknowledgments page—you don't need one; we don't expect one—place it at the end.

3. ADVICE FOR WRITERS AND ADVISERS

The senior thesis will be, for most of you, the longest and most ambitious critical, scholarly or creative work you have done so far; plan early, set aside time, and save your energy so as to get the most out of it.

Meet regularly with your adviser(s) throughout the fall term, as well as in early spring. If you have a graduate student adviser as well as a faculty adviser, you should meet with them both (most likely not at the same time). In general, you should meet with your adviser **at least every two weeks** throughout the fall; you will meet more frequently as the deadline approaches. Many advisers meet **every week** throughout the year. Do not let frequent meetings become a substitute for reading and writing, however; you should be able to show, at each meeting, what you've done—in research or writing—since the last one.

Write frequently and save everything. All critical thesis writers have research still to do; you'll be researching as you work—but you must not postpone writing till late in the fall, much less till “all” your research is done (it will never feel “done”). Make notes, save the notes, start drafting your preliminary ideas, and start outlining potential arguments or paragraph-length thoughts, in October at the latest. That way you'll have time to revise. Many thesis writers try to write something thesis-related every single day: at the least, you should try to find time every day to do *something* thesis-related, even if it's “only” reading a book or an article and making notes. Don't wait to feel “inspired” before sitting down to write, revise or read. Sometimes you *become inspired* only after you begin working.

Make yourself a calendar and stick to it. Create smaller, even weekly, deadlines with your adviser. What are you going to read when? When will you give up on topic A and move on to topic B, which your thesis also requires? You may find your ideas changing as you work—most writers do—but you should be able to compare your progress to a calendar anyway: **don't wait till everything's perfect.** It never will be. Remember that having a chapter drafted isn't the same as having it perfected; **leave time to revise,** and **save time late** for proofreading, and for rewriting, either to make your sentences better or to reflect changes in what you want to argue, changes in what you believe. Writing a thesis is never quite linear; arguments made in Chapter 2 can—and should—make you rethink, change or hone claims in Chapter 1. The earlier you draft your chapters, the more time you'll have to fix them if you catch mistakes, or if you change your mind.

Make sure your thesis has a thesis (if it is a critical thesis): a one-sentence argument that unifies your claims. If someone—faculty, student, reptile, amphibian—asks you “what are you writing about? what's your argument?” you should be able to answer with confidence. That argument may change as your work changes, but you should know as soon as possible—ideally, in the prospectus—what you expect that argument to be.

Know your fields. Within reason. If you have a topic or an author that has been studied often (Virginia Woolf, *King Lear*, etc.) figure out what the most important critical works on them are and read those works early; do not knock yourself out trying to read absolutely everything that has been written about them. If, on the other hand, you have a topic or an author that has not been studied often (sonnets about the Crimean War), you may well want to read everything about it. You might start by reading the most recent critics (do an MLA database search) and then seeing what those critics cite; you can and should also simply ask your adviser(s). You might also get used to using the Harvard Library's starting point for research in English:

<http://guides.library.harvard.edu/friendly.php?s=english&gid=4877>

Literary theory, by definition, can apply to many texts and authors; you should have a sense early on of what theorists or models or texts about literature-in-general, or texts from history, philosophy, neurology, etc., can help you make your argument. Again, ask your adviser, and **seek other faculty advice:** Professor Warren likes very few things in life more than recommending books about literary theory. Seriously. We are all here to help, especially if and when your adviser cannot. The proposal and prospectus are ways for you to get that advice.

Remember your audience. Successful senior theses (critical and creative) regularly turn into published articles or books, but as long as your thesis is a thesis, it's going to be read and evaluated by professors of English at Harvard. We are conversant with well-known literary works; we may need you to introduce lesser-known authors or texts. We recognize technical terms but might appreciate explanations. A thesis on George Herbert might be evaluated by one professor who wrote a book on that poet, and by another who writes primarily about Victorian novelists. Do not take up a lot of space introducing ideas that are not yours and that we will probably regard as familiar; do, however, show that you know what they mean. Again, your adviser can help.

Choose the structure. Many critical theses have an introduction, two or three chapters, and a conclusion. Yours might, or might not. Choose the structure that fits your argument. You might have six short chapters, or none at all.

Use your friends (or make new ones); use other help (within reason). You are not the only person writing a thesis; you may not even be the only person writing a thesis in your field, in English, this year. Get beta readers; show your friends your work in progress, and use the department's opportunities to meet and get feedback from other students. Seek tutors, seniors from other departments, and other people who can keep you on track or read (small parts of) drafts. Some students organize small groups of thesis-writers to help one another keep commitments, or to answer questions; we may even have funds available to help you eat and hold meetings if you want to organize those groups.

Use Child Library. It has nice sunlight, big open tables, permanent reference collections of important criticism and scholarly editions, helpful graduate students and, on **Fridays from 9am - 1pm Tea & Treats!**

Magna cum laude plus A to A-
Magna cum laude
Magna cum laude minus

A *magna* thesis should show the qualities of the *summa* thesis at a lower level: faultless writing, reasonably thorough coverage of scholarship; knowledge of the field beyond the subject of the thesis; and an argument that is lucid, carefully constructed, and strikingly original.

Cum laude plus B+ to B-
Cum laude
Cum laude minus

Theses at this level are respectable achievements, deserving of “praise,” *laus*. Although they are at the lowest level of honors, they nevertheless exhibit work that is serious and sustained and that reflects passion for the subject. Such theses should be well written; they should show good coverage of the scholarship; they should display at least some knowledge beyond their immediate subject; and they should advance an argument that is at least interesting.

Not worthy of honors

Merely writing a thesis does not entitle a student to a *cum laude minus* grade. If a thesis is evidently written in haste, or carelessly written; if it shows little or no knowledge of relevant scholarship; if it does not display knowledge of context beyond the work it addresses; and if its argument is incoherent or trivial, it should not receive honors. The student will receive credit for the work but will not be awarded honors.

5. ORAL EXAMS; DEPARTMENTAL AND COLLEGE HONORS

At the end of the year the English Department considers all graduating concentrators and recommends those eligible for appropriate honors. These honors in your concentration (sometimes called “honors in field”) are not the same as the grades you receive on your thesis, but your thesis grades affect them.

If the Latin grades on your thesis and your concentration GPA make you eligible for a recommendation of highest honors from the concentration, you will be asked to take an **oral exam**. (You may refuse, but then you can’t graduate with highest honors in English.) To be eligible a senior must have 1) a concentration GPA of 3.80 or higher and 2) an average of thesis readings of *magna plus* or higher.

If you are taking an oral exam, we will ask you to submit, two weeks beforehand if at all possible, a **list** of the works you have read in your English classes, along with other literary works that you’d like to discuss, and a separate list of papers you have written. We will ask you about these works, about these papers, and about the connections among them; we want, not total recall, but wide knowledge of some literary fields, as well as evidence of acuity about some things that were *not* part of your thesis.

The examination is graded with the same Latin designations as the thesis and will be used by the faculty, in conjunction with the concentration GPA and thesis grades, to arrive at a final departmental degree recommendation.

In May of each year the full department faculty meets to determine departmental honors, also referred to as “honors in field.” There are four categories: no honors, honors, high honors, and highest honors. (These honors go to the student, not to the thesis.) A further purpose of this meeting is to provide recommendations to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, which decides the level of Latin honors (*cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude*) on the basis of the student’s departmental recommendation and overall academic record.

The determination of Latin honors at the College level is limited to a percentage of the graduating class, roughly as follows: 4-5% summa cum laude , 15% magna cum laude , and 30% cum laude, such that the total of all three types of degrees represents slightly less than 50% of the graduating class.

New cumulative GPA cutoffs will be determined for each graduating class. For students receiving a November or a March degree, the college applies the cutoffs established for the previous June degrees. For details on this process, you should review the FAS Handbook for Students. Questions should be directed to the Registrar’s Office or to a student’s Resident Dean.

Prepared on Sept 16 2013 by Steph Burt and Lauren Bimmler with the assistance of the department, from an earlier version by Katherine Boutry. Minor revisions were made by Andrew Warren on August 25, 2016.