

Graduate Mentoring Workshop
Thinking About the Thesis...
A Bit of Advice

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This document is a very slightly modified version of a handout distributed in the graduate mentoring workshops sponsored by the Dept. of English Language & Literature.

Although I've focused on the thesis in this handout, much of this information can be tailored to the three-paper option as well.

Get started early

You want to start thinking about your project—which will likely stem from one of your classes—as early as possible. It's a good idea to identify a potential adviser in the Spring of the year before you want to defend and then to talk with her or him about your topic and develop an informal summer “reading list.” When you return in the Fall, you'll have a better sense of what shape you want the thesis to take and you'll have a nice start on your research.

An early start also gives you a sense of leisure in selecting and narrowing your topic, which is crucial. You want to be sure you've hit on something you love, something you want to read about, think about, and write about for several months!

Create your committee

Often your adviser and your committee members will be faculty with whom you've taken courses: they know you and your work and you are familiar with their teaching/mentoring styles. In filling out your three-member committee, though, you may find that it would be helpful to approach a faculty member with whom you've never worked but who is an expert in your area of study. Students sometimes find this awkward, but rest assured, this happens regularly and faculty are generally very happy to help you. (This is a good place to remind you that it is best to form your committee as early as possible: the reason most faculty members turn down a request to serve on a committee is that they already have a number of other MA committee obligations.)

After you've put your committee together, it's a good idea to send each member a 2-3 page (typed) prospectus that summarizes your project. This will encourage you to articulate the thesis's central questions for yourself, which can be tricky early in the process but will be enormously helpful down the road, and it will help give your committee a sense of where you're headed. (Make sure this is a polished document. Some students even include a brief annotated bibliography, which can be helpful as well.) While you'll be working most closely with your adviser, you want to stay in touch with

your entire committee throughout the process. Some members will want to see drafts of your work in progress; other may want to see a final rough draft, and it's your responsibility to understand their expectations.

Think in terms of chapters

Thinking about a 60 page paper can be overwhelming. Instead you want to think about three related chapters of about 20 pages each (or two longer chapters and a coda, or any of a number of other variations.)

Develop a schedule you can live with

Starting with your ideal defense date, work your way backwards, setting a deadline for a first draft of each chapter, and then giving yourself ample time for revision after you've received feedback. You'll need to get a polished copy of the thesis to your committee a few weeks before your defense as well, so be sure to factor this in. Your adviser will probably be able to help you construct this timeline—he or she has lots of experience in this—but it is your responsibility to meet your deadlines. Many students have trouble serving as their own taskmaster—a new experience for most MA students—and so you need to figure out a system in which you hold yourself accountable for your progress.

Make sure you are aware of all deadlines

There are a number forms you will need to file on time, including the graduation application and registration of thesis title. They are described in detail on our departmental website, and you can access a handy list of other critical dates there too.

<http://www.siue.edu/ENGLISH/Grad/thesis1.html>

Hit the books and Write, write, write...

This is really a handout itself. There are lots of strategies for taking on big research projects, but some of the most helpful are found in “Ms. Mentor’s” essay “Rumblings of a Dissertation Writer” on the *Chronicle of Higher Education* website. (She’ll point you to other resources if you’re really procrastinating.)

If you get “stuck” at some point—and most everyone does—talking to your adviser can be incredibly helpful.

...And then revise, revise, revise

This doesn't need a lot of discussion, but it's important, so I'm including it as a heading.

The defense

It sounds awful, doesn't it? But you're discussing your work more than you're actually defending it, and most MA students agree that the defense is a really rewarding conclusion to the thesis process. (Three-paperers, you're not off the hook: starting next year, we're asking you to participate in a defense too.) Your adviser will tell you what to expect, but generally you will meet in a room with your committee where you'll give a brief overview of your project (10 minutes or so) and then field questions from your committee, who are interested, informed readers who want to know more about your work (as opposed to rabid skeptics!) Thesis defenses are open to the public, and may be attended by the Director of Graduate Studies, the Department Chair, other interested faculty, as well as other graduate students. (You can sit in on friends' defenses to support them and to get a sense of the process, and they can sit in on yours as well.) Generally a defense lasts about an hour.

The technicalities

The end of the thesis process requires quite a bit of i-dotting and t-crossing: you've got two crucial forms that need to be completed—the "Summary of Completion" form and the "Thesis Approval Form"—and your thesis needs to be formatted properly, an exercise that should not be underestimated. See "Finishing Up The Thesis" on the Department's website for more information and important links:

<http://www.siue.edu/ENGLISH/Grad/thesis2.html>

Good luck!