

The MFA Thesis

Frequently Asked Questions

MFA Program in Creative Writing and Environment
Iowa State University

Below are answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ) about the planning, process, and completion of the MFA thesis. This document is meant as a supplement to the formal guidelines available in the most recent version of the English Department's *Graduate Program of Study Manual* as well as those required by the Graduate College.

General Issues

What role does my thesis play in my MFA degree?

The thesis is submitted in *partial* fulfillment of the requirements of the MFA degree. It carries a great deal of weight, of course, and serves as a culminating project demonstrating your mastery, in the same way that a dissertation is the defining project for doctoral work. You must also complete all other requirements of the degree to earn your MFA.

What does “publishable” mean?

The MFA is a terminal degree, so the thesis, or at least a significant portion of the thesis, should be a significant work *worthy* of not just any kind of publication but *distinctive* publication (or production in the case of scripts) in high-quality literary journals and magazines or with reputable commercial, university, and/or independent presses. Your adviser and major professor—along with the other committee members—will help you understand more specifically what “publishable” means in the genre in which you are writing. Essentially, we expect your thesis to demonstrate professional control over technique, as well as a complex understanding of the traditions in which you are writing, and the contribution your own work makes to that tradition.

What is the Thesis Project Description?

The Thesis Project Description is a brief, well-crafted project description (2-3 paragraphs) that you will write in your third semester and submit to the CWE program coordinator. This description will be reviewed by the MFA faculty, who will use it to help you refine your ideas and choose an appropriate major professor and committee.

May work written prior to entering the program be considered for the thesis?

The thesis should be an original book-length manuscript written while you are a student in the program. At your major professor's discretion, some prior work, if significantly revised, may be considered for the thesis. You can include material in your thesis that you wrote in MFA workshops and other POS (Program of Study) courses, but this work, too, should be significantly revised.

Am I required to write my thesis in the genre in which I was accepted?

One of the unique features of our program is the latitude we give you to explore other genres. While most students focus primarily on the genre in which they were accepted into the program, you are not required to write your thesis in that genre. If you wish to switch genres for your thesis, however, you should make sure you have effectively and rigorously prepared yourself prior to the thesis—through discussions with

your adviser, through graduate-level workshops and intensive reading in the genre, and by building a portfolio of excellent work that demonstrates your readiness for the thesis project. The threshold for a successful thesis is “publishable quality,” so the thesis is not the place where you should simply “explore” an unfamiliar genre.

What genres may I consider for my thesis?

We use the word “genre” in its classic sense, to distinguish between fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and scriptwriting (plays and screenplays). We understand that there are subgenres within each of these classic genres, some of them carrying more literary weight than others. While we do not encourage the formulaic use of popular genre (e.g., romance, science fiction, horror, thriller, etc.), we do support writers who wish to create cross-over works that combine the energy of popular genre traditions with the greater ambition and more nuanced techniques of classic literary traditions. We also support writers who wish to experiment with new media genres (such as visual essays or hypertext stories), so long as the quality of writing remains the central focus of the project.

Is a multi-genre thesis acceptable?

Yes, you may write a multi-genre thesis, assuming your project has been approved by your major professor and the MFA faculty. A mixed-genre thesis should be intentional, as well as thematically and formally unified, not simply a “best of” selection of your work.

What does “book-length” mean?

Although there is no rigid prescription for what constitutes a book-length thesis, below we offer general length guidelines, in keeping with guidelines for other MFA programs and the publishing industry. It is also important to keep in mind the demands you place on your committee members, especially your major professor. It is better to have a shorter, more polished thesis than a longer, rougher one.

- Poetry Collection: 35-60 pages.
- Story, Novella, and Essay Collections: 120-200 pages.
- Long-Narrative Forms (Novel/Creative Nonfiction): 150-250 pages.
- Short Plays and Short Screenplays: 3-6 scripts (75-150 pages).
- Full-length Play or Screenplay: 75-120 pages.
- Young Adult Manuscripts: 100-200 pages.
- Multi-genre Manuscripts: 75-150 pages, including a mix of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and/or scripts.

What role should “environment” play in my thesis?

Our program has a special environmental mission. We are unique in that we allow significant room in the POS for students’ graduate-level examination of environment, place, community, and science. While your creative works should not be aimed at an audience of specialists, we do expect you to cultivate—and demonstrate in your thesis—an understanding of the imprint of place, the natural world, community, and/or the environmental imagination on the poems, stories, scripts, essays, novels, and memoirs you create. You should be prepared to address this component of your work at every phase of the project.

Does my thesis require a formal introduction?

Your thesis is not just a creative manuscript; it is also a scholarly manuscript, written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a terminal degree. We encourage you to include an introduction to your thesis (approximately 1500-3000 words), in which you offer an artistic and/or scholarly context for your project. The goal here is to articulate your influences and traditions, as well as the way your project extends or challenges those influences and traditions. The introduction may combine both analytic and reflective language. This introduction serves many purposes. First, it provides an opportunity for you to write an artist statement that articulates the role of the thesis in your development and future ambitions as a writer.

Second, it orients your committee—some of whom may be unfamiliar with the role of creative writing in academia—to the intellectual underpinnings of your work. Third, if a thesis is nominated for a Research Excellence Award (which carries not only prestige but a financial honorarium), the student is required to write a scholarly preface as well as compile a Works Cited page to accompany the nominated thesis. Fourth, writing an introduction will help you in the future as you attempt to communicate the value of your work to agents and editors, grant and fellowship judges, and a general audience.

Thesis Committee Issues

Who should be my major professor, and how are major professors paired with students?

The MFA faculty will collectively decide who should be paired with whom, based on not only your expressed preference, but also on the project, and the need for equitable distribution of workload for the faculty. Every effort will be made to pair you with your first or second choice, and to provide you with a second program committee member of your choice. Ideally, you should work with a faculty member who has artistic and/or academic expertise that will help you successfully complete your project. You can also consult the English Department's *Graduate Program of Study Manual* for more details about the major professor selection process.

What should I expect in terms of mentorship from my major professor?

Every faculty member works differently in terms of year-long mentorship of theses. You should have a candid conversation with your major professor about his or her expectations, and agree on a reasonable timeline, including deadlines, for successful completion of your work. For some projects, the major professor will ask to see an entire draft before beginning discussion of the book, while others may ask you to break the project up into manageable parts. The primary responsibility of the major professor is to shepherd you through the project in a way that will result in not only an excellent artistic product but will also encourage you to refine a process for completing major projects throughout your artistic career.

How do I form my thesis committee?

After you receive your major professor and second committee member appointments, you should discuss the composition of the remainder of your thesis committee with your major professor. For your third committee member, you will select a faculty member from the English Department who is not in creative writing, and your fourth committee member will be a faculty member from outside the department who can provide insight into the project. All four committee members must have graduate faculty status. Ideally, you will have already worked with the professors you request. We realize that this is not always possible. Regardless, you should contact potential committee members and ask them if they would be willing to serve on your committee. Professors may decline the request, depending on their current or future workloads, sabbatical plans, or suitability for the project. In your initial email to the prospective committee member, introduce yourself, briefly describe the thesis project, and explain why you believe the faculty member is a suitable choice. Then explain a timeline (projected semester of graduation) and the work and time commitment expected.

What should I expect from the other members of my thesis committee?

The primary responsibility of the other members of your committee, including the second MFA faculty member, is to read your defense draft (given to them two-three weeks in advance of the defense) and to come prepared for discussion during the defense. No written feedback from committee members, other than the major professor, is required, nor should it be expected. A committee member, at his or her discretion, may ask to see a preliminary draft of the thesis or to meet with you prior to the defense in order to discuss issues, questions, or concerns.

Can I change my thesis project during my year of work with my major professor?

Only at the discretion of the major professor, who may advise you, for a variety of reasons, to prepare a different project that can be successfully completed, given academic time constraints. In some cases, such a major change may necessitate consultation with (and approval from) your other committee members and the MFA faculty.

When should I take my thesis credits?

In most instances, students take their thesis credits after completing two full years in the program. Thesis credits are designed to give you time to do independent research, writing, and revision. Most students spread their thesis credits over their final two semesters or take all of them during one of those semesters, depending on other POS demands (e.g., courses, field work, teaching responsibilities, major professor availability, etc.). Some students take thesis hours during the summer, as a way to be registered for classes for ongoing assistantship purposes. (Do keep in mind, however, that faculty members devote time to their own creative and scholarly projects during the summer, so you should not expect your major professor or other committee members to work with you during that time, even if you signed up for thesis credits.) Depending on program and departmental policies, your thesis credits may initially be evaluated as “Incomplete,” but will then be retroactively assigned a grade once the thesis is completed.

Can I take more than six thesis credits?

Some MFA students may want to take more than the required six credits of 699. This is especially true for students who have completed the other requirements and simply wish to block out extra time in their schedules for more thesis work. You may enroll for additional thesis credits, up to twelve hours total. However, only six credits of 699 will count toward your POS. You do not want to short-change the rigor of your program, but some theses may require additional time and energy to successfully complete.

How clean should the thesis be? Should I rely on my major professor for copyediting?

The defense draft will be read by the entire committee, so it should be polished and carefully edited. While the major professor may assist you with stylistic and even surface-level edits, the primary role of the major professor is to help you better understand your work and encourage more complex forms of macro-revision. The ultimate responsibility for a clean, proofread copy of your manuscript rests with you. A manuscript littered with careless errors, grammatical mistakes, and syntax problems will be rejected by the thesis committee. Because you are training to be a professional creative writer, you should expect to be held to a high standard of stylistic professionalism. If proofreading is a challenge for you, you should plan to seek assistance well in advance of your defense draft deadline.

Am I expected to revise the thesis after my thesis defense?

Most MFA thesis defenses take place during the last month and a half of the final semester, so there is little time, after the defense, for substantial revision. However, the major professor and thesis committee may require revision and editing in order to make sure the thesis meets required standards of excellence, consistent with the demands of a terminal degree. Most MFA theses, like doctoral dissertations, require substantial revision and expansion after completion of the degree in order to make the project publishable in a highly competitive literary market.

Other Process and Strategy Issues**What are the pros and cons of writing a long-form project (such as a novel) as opposed to a collection of shorter works?**

Most MFA theses (nationwide) consist of collections of shorter works. There is a good reason for this. Short works allow you to develop and hone a wider variety of technical skills, to explore material (and ways of handling that material) that may serve you for a lifetime, and to create a portfolio of distinctive,

publishable work that you can market while working on demanding, time-consuming longer projects. Publication (or production, in the case of scripts) of shorter works also can make you eligible for anthology consideration, grants, prizes, fellowships, artist colonies, and jobs.

Long-form projects, while potentially more commercially lucrative and aesthetically satisfying, require a great deal of technical mastery, discipline, stamina, and openness to radical revision. While it is possible to write many publishable short works during one's time in the program, it can be challenging to write even a decent first draft of a novel or other book-length narrative work in a year or two, especially if the form is new to you as a writer. A collection of shorter works also allows you to develop multiple techniques and aesthetic strategies, while a longer, more unified book teaches you how to write that *particular* work, but doesn't necessarily give you training in, and practice with, other strategies and techniques.

On the other hand, you may see yourself primarily writing, in the future, long-form projects. Those forms require different processes and techniques that may not be adequately honed in the writing of shorter forms. Poems, essays, stories, and short plays demand skills of compression, distillation, and precision, whereas long-form projects require a more complex architectural design, as well as a fuller understanding and mastery of dramatic construction, character development, and thematic elaboration. Perhaps most importantly, long-form projects demand patience, discipline, stamina, and an ability to delay the kind of gratification that comes with continually sending out and publishing short works. A marathon runner has a different training regimen—and runs a different kind of race—than a sprinter.

We encourage you to take advantage of the length of this program (three years rather than two) to work on multiple projects, including an ambitious long-form manuscript. But that project doesn't necessarily need the added deadlines, pressure, and rigorous evaluation that a thesis demands. If you are considering a long-form manuscript as your thesis, you should, in consultation with the MFA faculty (especially your adviser and major professor), determine if such a project is achievable, given the time constraints, and serves your ultimate goals and fosters your sustainability as a writer and artist.

What role does the Master Workshop (English 551) play in the development of my thesis?

The Master Workshop is designed to give you time to complete the first major draft of your thesis. Although you will have met with your major professor to chart a plan for your thesis, you will work with the Master Workshop instructor and other students in a workshop environment that encourages disciplined and consistent production of pages throughout the semester.

Can I work on a different project in Master Workshop than my thesis?

English 551 is specifically designed to prepare you for your thesis. With the permission of your major professor, the Master Workshop instructor, and the MFA faculty, however, you may work on a different long project for Master Workshop. However, you are still required to meet all requirements for the thesis, including high standards of excellence, without unduly burdening your major professor and committee members. The Master Workshop is designed not just for your benefit; it also enables your major professor to engage you in more nuanced issues of craft and aesthetics that can only emerge in mature drafts of your work.

Should I seek publication of the thesis (or parts of it) during my thesis year?

Ultimately, this is your decision. We want to encourage your ambition, and learning how to prepare and submit your work for publication is a necessary part of your professional practice. For those students working on collections of stories, essays, poems, or short scripts, it may be appropriate to seek publication of parts of the thesis that have gone through an intensive composition, workshop, and revision process. Keep in mind, however, that a piece which has been published may still require substantial, even radical revision. The thesis process ideally will result in a stronger, more sophisticated and polished

manuscript that will increase the chances of *distinctive* publication for individual pieces and the work as a whole.

Is the final thesis document considered officially published, and if so, will it jeopardize my chances for publication of the book, or parts of the book, after completion of my MFA?

No. While the Graduate College will require you to upload your thesis as the final document for your degree, and while it may be publically accessible, just as doctoral dissertations are, this academic version of your book is not considered the official published version and will not prevent you from publishing parts or all of it in literary journals and magazines or with commercial, university, or independent presses. You retain all rights, and agents, editors, and publishers know this.

What should I do with the thesis after I graduate?

Revise and publish it—the whole book (if you can) and the individual parts (if you can). Keep in mind that an MFA in creative writing is a terminal degree that carries with it the expectation that you will become a practicing writer and artist. The ultimate goal, therefore, is not just to write a publishable-quality manuscript but to actually try to find a good home for it.