

CMSW  
THESIS MANUAL  
For Undergraduate Writing Majors

September 2019

## CMSW THESIS MANUAL FOR UNDERGRADUATE WRITING MAJORS

### WHAT IS A WRITING THESIS?

A Writing thesis can take several forms. Some Writing theses – most often those submitted by students whose majors are in the general area of Exposition and Rhetoric, Digital Writing, or Science Writing – may conform to the pattern prescribed for most other humanities fields. Such theses are sustained pieces of expository prose, usually at least 40 pages in length (see Mechanics section for further details), presenting the results of substantial independent work in research or criticism. They are longer, more complex, and considerably more ambitious than the usual term paper. Assertions are supported rigorously, and evidence is precisely documented by means of notes and bibliography. Such theses are not, however, supposed to be Ph.D. dissertations, and they require neither the absolute originality of topic nor the high degree of specialization that are characteristic of doctoral research.

Students whose area of concentration is in Creative Writing may submit theses composed primarily of fiction (either a collection of short stories or a sustained piece of longer fiction) or poetry. Such theses may also include a discussion of some important technical issue (concerning plot, character, or style, for example) that arose in the course of the composition of the work. This discussion may, although it need not, include reference to the treatment of similar issues in canonical literary works. It may appear as an introduction or an afterword.

Students majoring in Nonfiction Writing or Science Writing may also submit theses composed primarily of their work in one of these genres. If they choose this option, they must include a substantial discussion of technical or contextual issues that arose in the course of composition. Like the analogous discussions appended to creative writing theses, this discussion must be around ten pages long, and may appear as an introduction or an afterword.

Although theses may be extensions of work done before the beginning of the senior year, they must also represent fresh enterprises, clearly distinguishable from similar work undertaken previously. Students should not expect to receive units of thesis credit for work that has already earned credit (or is simultaneously earning credit) in classes, UROPs, or Special Topics.

Before committing themselves to specific thesis projects, students should discuss their plans carefully with their thesis advisors. In addition, a thesis proposal must be submitted to the thesis advisor and undergraduate academic administrator early in the student's penultimate semester.

## WHO WRITES A THESIS?

Every Writing major, whether 21W (full major), or 21E or 21S (joint major), must write a thesis.

## WHO IS THE THESIS ADVISOR?

The Thesis Advisor is usually a faculty member who aids in the development of the thesis and who eventually judges the completed work. Special permission is required if a student wishes to work with a thesis advisor from another faculty.

The thesis advisor is the student's mentor on the thesis project in regularly scheduled weekly or biweekly meetings. Early in the second term of the thesis project, the thesis advisor receives a draft of the thesis and makes suggestions for final revisions.

## WHAT IS THE SCHEDULE FOR COMPLETING A WRITING THESIS?

Work on a senior thesis in Writing occupies an entire academic year: the fall and spring terms for June graduates, spring and fall terms for February graduates. In very unusual cases, work done during the summer may be counted as the equivalent of a semester's effort.

The CMSW faculty regard revision as a crucially important part of preparation of a finished document. Therefore, the first draft of the thesis is due to the advisor no later than one month into the second term. Two months are reserved for revision under the guidance of the thesis advisor.

In the first term, students register for Pre-Thesis Tutorial, 21W.ThT, for 6 units. During the semester, a student works under the guidance of the thesis advisor to define the topic and to complete a substantial part of the preparation (research and preliminary draft) for the finished version of the project. Advisors assign regular letter grades for Pre-Thesis Tutorial. With a grade of C or higher, students may register for the second term of the project.

In the second term the student registers for Thesis, 21W.ThU, for 12 units. The completed first draft is due to the thesis advisor no later than one month into the term. Revision continues to completion under the guidance of the advisor. Note that the student receives two distinct grades for the thesis project, one for the Pre-Thesis Tutorial in the first term, and one for the Thesis in the second term.

The schedule for the year's work on the thesis is as follows:

### FIRST TERM SCHEDULE

June grad.:	September	mid-October	mid-December (last day of classes)
Feb grad.:	Jan.-Feb.	mid-March	mid-May (last day of classes)
<hr/>			
	register for first term – pre-Thesis	proposal form deadline	advisor's Pre-Thesis grade

**PROPOSAL FORM DEADLINE:** The completed Proposal Form (at the end of this manual) should demonstrate a solid preliminary idea of the thesis project – its dimensions, limits, parts, availability of resources, schedule, and working relationship with the advisor. A student whose thesis requires a prefatory or concluding discussion must include preliminary plans for this part of the thesis in the proposal. After the Proposal Form has been approved and signed by the thesis advisor, it should be submitted to the Undergraduate Academic Administrator, 14N-336.

### SECOND TERM SCHEDULE

June grad.:	Jan-Feb	March 1	May 1	~last day of classes
Feb grad.:	September	October 1	December 1	~last day of classes
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	register for second term – Thesis	first draft of thesis due	final thesis due	brief oral presentation to assembled faculty

**FINAL DEADLINE:** The revised and finished thesis is due May 1 (December 1). It is delivered to the Undergraduate Academic Administrator and to the advisor.

**FINAL PRESENTATION:** On a single day in early May (early December) all thesis students will make a brief oral presentation of their theses to the assembled Writing faculty.

## MECHANICS

Thesis writers should use the *Modern Language Association (MLA) Handbook* as the guide for thesis format.

**LENGTH:** Thesis length can vary considerably. Most Writing theses have been at least 40 double-spaced pages. In special cases, as where a substantial portion of the thesis findings are recorded not in expository prose but in symbolic or tabular form, the total length may be shortened accordingly. Thesis projects in creative writing – particularly those in drama – may go well beyond eighty pages. Extreme brevity, like extreme length, will need to be justified by the writer and the thesis advisor.

**TITLE PAGE:** Follow the sample form at the end of this document.

**COPYRIGHT:** Notice of copyright should appear on the title page. The author holds the copyright unless the thesis research is performed wholly or in part using funding, facilities or equipment provided by or to the Institute, under conditions that specifically impose copyright restrictions.

**ABSTRACT:** Every thesis must contain a one-page abstract (two or three paragraphs, single-spaced). See sample at the end of this document.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:** The table of contents should identify the principal parts of the thesis, with appropriate page numbers. The table of contents is not a highly detailed outline.

**COPIES:** At the final deadline a student must submit two finished copies of the thesis to the Undergraduate Academic Administrator (14N-336).

## PRODUCTION

The *Specifications for Thesis Preparation* document (<http://libraries.mit.edu/archives/thesis-specs/>) is MIT's official standard for thesis production. If there is any discrepancy between the Archive document and this manual, the Archives publication must be followed.

The copies should be printed double-sided, if possible.

**MARGINS:** Margins must be an inch-and-a-quarter on the left-hand (binding) side (more if the binding method necessitates it), and an inch on all other sides.

**SPACING:** The body of the text should be double-spaced. The abstract, footnotes, block-form quotations, and bibliographical entries should be single-spaced.

**PAGINATION:** All of the pages of the thesis, starting with the title page, should be numbered in one continuous series in the same place on each page.

**SIGNATURES:** The title page requires three signatures: the author's, the thesis advisor's, and that of the Head of the Program. Before the thesis goes on permanent file, these signatures must be in place. Each copy must be signed separately. Photocopies of a signed page are not acceptable.

## OTHER MATTERS

**USE OF HUMANS AS EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECTS:** Authors of thesis projects that might in any way be construed as involving the use of people as experimental subjects, must secure clearance from MIT's Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES). <https://couhes.mit.edu/>

**MEETING THESIS RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION COSTS:** Students are responsible for meeting all costs involved in the research and physical production of the thesis. In extraordinary cases, where special circumstances or the scope and institutional value of the project warrant, it may be possible to arrange some support, through other limited sources of funds, for necessary travel, special materials and equipment, etc. Students who think they have a valid claim for such funding should contact the Undergraduate Academic Administrator, Becky Shepardson, [bshep@mit.edu](mailto:bshep@mit.edu).

MIT CMSW Writing Major  
SENIOR THESIS PROPOSAL

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Thesis Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Working Title of Thesis:

Describe your thesis topic as fully and exactly as possible, indicating dimensions, limits, parts, specific major sources and anticipated schedule. Outline your topic selection process and intended approach to material (what questions you will deal with and how you intend to cover them). The more detail you provide the better.

If the thesis requires a prefatory or concluding discussion, you must include preliminary plans for this part of it.

(continue over)

[Student's description of thesis topic, continued]

In the space below, the thesis advisor should assess the thesis topic as proposed, evaluate the student's engagement with the project, and note any problems perceived with its feasibility.

Thesis Advisor's signature of approval:

Date of Approval:

PLEASE RETURN TO THE UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATOR, 14N-336

[sample title page]

[The Title of the Thesis]

by

[Author]

SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES / WRITING IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN WRITING  
AT THE  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

[{June, September or February} YEAR]

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electronic copies of this thesis document in whole or in part in any medium now known or  
hereafter created.

Signature of Author: \_\_\_\_\_  
Program in Comparative Media Studies / Writing  
[Thesis completion date]

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
[Thesis supervisor name]  
[Thesis supervisor title]  
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Edward Schiappa  
John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities  
Head, Comparative Media Studies / Writing

[sample abstract page]

[The Title]

by

[author]

Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies / Writing on [Date] in Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science in Writing

## ABSTRACT

[The abstract should go here. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.]

Thesis Supervisor: [Supervisor's name]

Title: [Supervisor's title]