

Thesis Readiness for Prose Writers

What is thesis?

Your thesis, the culmination of your MFA experience, will be a prose book-length manuscript that represents your best work over the past few years. Writing a quality manuscript also serves as proof that you can work independently and, therefore, are positioned to produce future works of equal or higher quality after graduation. Here in academia, “thesis” also refers to the process of producing the manuscript, and so enrolling in “thesis” means that you are taking credit for the independent process of writing a novel, memoir, collection of personal essays or short story collections. Some students do opt for a mixed genre thesis. If you choose to include more than one genre within your thesis, keep in mind that the collection needs to be cohesive and not a hodgepodge of disjointed works. Also, don’t forget that “book-length” means a wide variety of pages.

Am I ready for thesis?

You are ready for thesis if you have a preponderance of pages—a minimum of 50—that are publishable and would not benefit significantly from further workshops. You are also ready if you have hit your aesthetic stride and can continue to produce work in which you are confident without the benefit of a workshop. Typically, this means you have already taken a number of writing workshops, which is why the department mandates that you have at least 24 credits under your belt before enrolling in thesis.

Who should my advisor be?

If you’re confident of your body of work, your next step is to seek out an advisor. Your advisor should be a faculty member who knows your work. Make a list of potential advisors and contact them, starting with your first choice. Be prepared to explain why you are ready for thesis, what you hope your manuscript to be in terms of both length and aesthetic, and how long you think you’ll need to complete it to your satisfaction. Faculty members are not required to take you on as an advisee, so make the case for why you want to work with that person in particular.

What does my advisor do?

Once you embark on thesis, you will no longer be receiving the kind of line-by-line edits you enjoyed in workshops. Rather, you will be focusing on the challenge of completing and shaping a novel, memoir, collection of personal essays or short story collection. Your advisor helps you with that aspect. Plan to meet with your advisor twice per semester to apprise him or her of your progress toward a completed manuscript.

How should I structure my time while taking thesis credits?

As an independent project, the structure of thesis preparation is entirely up to you. However, here are a few tips:

- Don’t start taking thesis credits until you are ready.
- Do create a schedule working backward from your anticipated graduation date. Set that date for the semester AFTER you think you’ll be done writing and revising your thesis. The semester in which you graduate will be spent mostly on making sure you’re meeting all of the Stony Brook requirements, but you still have to be enrolled, so...

- Do hoard your 6 thesis credits if you can, so that you don't run out of them before you finish your collection. Your credit load doesn't have to correlate with your workload. For example, you could do the heavy lifting of producing half of a rough draft during the spring and summer terms while taking only 1 credit of thesis. Then you could take 2 credits during the fall, while you're completing the first draft and revising, saving the final 3 credits for the following spring, when you anticipate graduating, even though your workload in the spring term will consist mostly of formatting page numbers and getting forms signed. The reason for this hoarding is that you may decide to make a major overhaul of your manuscript at the last minute, in which case you won't be able to graduate in the spring after all. A stash of credits gives you flexibility. Once you're sure your manuscript is completed, you can use up all the remaining credits on your graduating semester.
- Do meet with your advisor when you have substantial progress to show or if you're really stuck. Thesis is an independent project, not a weekly course.

Here's a sample schedule for a theoretical student planning to graduate in Spring 2012:

- Spring 2011:
 - January: fill out thesis planning form;
 - February: meet advisor to review it and get permission to enroll in 1 credit of thesis; leave advisor with the 50 pages you feel are thesis-ready.
 - Feb-May: continue generating work.
 - May: meet advisor with first half of your first draft. Discuss shape of manuscript, themes and goals.
- Summer 2011: continue writing; figure out sections and overall structure of ms.
- Fall 2011:
 - September: meet to review first draft.
 - Sep-Dec: continue revising ms. Complete 2nd draft.
 - November: Deliver 3rd draft by Thanksgiving break; prepare lists of potential second and third thesis readers.
 - December: meet to review 3rd draft and decide on graduation readiness; report status on contacting thesis readers; prepare manuscript and signature page to send to outside reader.
- Spring 2012:
 - January: manuscript to readers
 - February: declare that you are graduating; readers' reports returned; enroll in any remaining thesis credits
 - March: tweak ms.; format thesis and meet with graduate school to review any problems
 - April: submit thesis

Keep in mind that if you adhere to this plan and miss the deadline for successfully submitting your thesis, you'll have to postpone graduation until the summer session...and you will have to enroll in zero credits for the summer. If you miss a summer deadline, you will have to buy a 7th thesis credit that fall, in order to stay enrolled.

Most important of all, remember that the thesis is a challenging, but ultimately fulfilling project.
“The desire to write grows with writing.” –Erasmus