

# Thesis Guidelines

SDSU Department of English and Comparative Literature

## *Description:*

A thesis is an extended scholarly study of a specifically-defined topic. A good thesis should offer a clear argument, identify where that argument fits in the scholarly conversation, and prove that argument with a judicious combination of primary and secondary sources. A thesis is not a series of observations or a broad discussion of some issues of interest to you. It should make a specific argument and explain how that argument fits into the current scholarly conversation. It should also identify why it is important to focus on this aspect of the field and make a strong case for your take (i.e. your argument, position, and methodology) on the subject. Theses in the department are usually 60–75 pages in length.

## *Process:*

In general, students in the MA program should aim to commence work on their thesis in their third semester of study. In other words, if you intend to graduate in May, you should begin work on the thesis in the preceding Fall semester. The process, including publication through Montezuma Publishing, usually takes two semesters to complete. You will need to be enrolled in thesis units ENGL 799A or ENGL 799B in order to submit your thesis to Montezuma.

Please note: you must be Advanced to Candidacy before you can enroll in ENGL 790 or ENGL 799A.

## *Committee:*

Your thesis will be reviewed by three members of the faculty: the chair of your committee, the second reader, and an outside reader. This third reader, as the name suggests, must be from outside the Department of English and Comparative Literature. Consult with the chair of your thesis and the graduate adviser on the appointment of your committee.

In general, you should have a good idea of what you want to study in your thesis before you approach a faculty member to serve as the chair of your committee. You are pitching an idea to that faculty member and asking them to supervise it, a substantial commitment of time and energy. It is therefore incumbent on you to do some preparatory work and research.

## *Proposal:*

In your proposal (i.e. the outline you provide to your proposed chair), you should look to include the following:

1. A short, one-paragraph account of the kind of study you are proposing. What issues are you focusing on in the thesis and how will you be approaching these issues? What do you anticipate will be the overarching argument of the thesis; in other words, what research question are you planning to answer in the thesis? This account should be as specific as possible.
2. A breakdown of the individual chapters (2–3) that will make up the thesis. What is the focus of each chapter? Which particular issue in the scholarship is it addressing? Which primary works will be drawn upon in this chapter to prove your argument? How does your thesis plan to participate in contemporary scholarship on the subject? How will the focus of this particular chapter fit into the overall argument outlined above?
3. An 8–10 item annotated bibliography that identifies the major scholarly sources you plan to draw on in the thesis. The majority of these works should, in almost all cases, have been published in the last decade, with several in the past 5 years. This will allow you to identify the

specific gap in the current scholarship that you are addressing. Please note that an annotated bibliography is not the same as a list of works consulted or a general bibliography; instead, it allows you to explain (in your annotations) how your work fits in with and builds upon that of other scholars. For more on the genre of annotated bibliography, see the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL):

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/common\\_writing\\_assignments/annotated\\_bibliographies/annotated\\_bibliography\\_samples.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/common_writing_assignments/annotated_bibliographies/annotated_bibliography_samples.html)

Once a faculty member has agreed to serve as your chair, consult with them on the rest of the committee and approach those faculty members with a copy of your proposal. Once your committee has been established, complete the “Thesis Prospectus” with the help of your chair and submit it and the “Thesis Committee Approval Form” to the graduate adviser.

#### *Thesis Prospectus*

The thesis prospectus builds on the outline you provided to your proposed thesis chair and sets out the scope and structure of your project. It must be approved by the graduate director before the paperwork for ENGL 799A can be completed and you can be enrolled in thesis credit hours. Do not simply throw something together before the add/ drop deadline. A thesis is a serious and sustained piece of work and should be approached thoughtfully and with an appreciation of the hard work involved. The prospectus should be approximately 3-4 single-spaced pages in length and should include the following:

1. **Title of Thesis**
2. **Description of Thesis** (approx. 1 page): this is where you set out your proposed study. What question is the thesis answering? What are the goals of the study? What works will be explored? What is the central argument that you envisage will tie the different chapters together? What kind of scholarly approach will you be taking (archival, historicist, feminist, comparative, etc.)?
3. **Literature Review** (1/2 – 2/3 page): this is where you set out the scholarship you will be engaging with in the course of the thesis, explaining what work has been done in the field and what remains unanswered. In this section you should also explain why it matters that you address the topic (i.e. it is not simply that no one else has looked at it; why should we look at it now?).
4. **Thesis Overview** (2/3 page): what will the focus of the individual chapters be? Which works will you draw on? Which scholars will be focused on specifically in this chapter?
5. **Thesis Timeline**: when do you expect to complete the thesis? What deadlines have you and your chair set for the completion of specific chapters?
6. **Annotated Bibliography**: an 8-10 item annotated bibliography indicating the major secondary sources you will be using. The works should be correctly cited—since this will be an important component of Montezuma Publishing’s review—and the annotations should make it clear how you intend to use the pieces (i.e. do you see a particular study as supportive of your position or in opposition to it? If supportive, how does your argument develop the insights in the study rather than simply repeating them?)

#### *Further information*

Additional information about preparing a thesis (as well as important deadlines) is available on the [Graduate Division](#) website.

Information about the required formatting of theses is available from [Montezuma Publishing](#).

**June 9, 2022**