MA English
Guide to ENGL 791 / Thesis Essay

Fall 2015
The culminating thesis essay should represent your strongest scholarly work in the English MA Program. It is to consist of an essay totaling about 7,000–8,000 words (i.e., 25–30 pages) including an up-to-date and extensive bibliography of secondary sources. In all but the most exceptional of cases, your essay will be a revision of a paper, or combination of papers, you have written for an earlier class during your time in the program.

**Signing up for ENGL 791 / Finding a Faculty Advisor**

Your culminating thesis essay is written and revised under the supervision of a full-time faculty member, within the context of a required 3-credit essay-writing course: ENGL 791. Most students register for ENGL 791 during their final semester as a matriculated student. In rare cases, it is possible to register during another semester as long as you have already taken ENGL 636 and ENGL 701, the two required courses that are also prerequisites for ENGL 791.

Please note: ENGL 791 is only offered during the fall and spring semesters, not during the summer. If you plan to graduate in September you must register for ENGL 791 during the spring semester.

**The final deadline to register for ENGL 791 for Fall 2015 is Friday, August 28.**

The Director of Graduate Studies will register you for ENGL 791 only once you have

a. **Found a full-time faculty member who has agreed to serve as your thesis advisor**

Your thesis advisor should be a full-time faculty member of the English Department and a scholar in the field(s) in which the main topic or text(s) of your essay falls. Because you’re likely revising a paper you wrote for a course earlier in the program, it’s a good idea to ask the same course instructor whether they might be willing to work with you again on your thesis essay.

Contact information and profiles of all full-time English faculty can be found on the English Department website at [http://english.qc.cuny.edu/people/](http://english.qc.cuny.edu/people/) (be sure to click full-time faculty). You should approach your potential advisor the semester before you plan to register for ENGL 791. If you’re having difficulty finding an advisor, contact the Director of Graduate Studies.

b. **Submitted a thesis sign-up form to the Director of Graduate Studies**

(see copy at the end of this guide)

The thesis sign-up form asks for your contact information, the names of your advisor and second reader, a working title, and a brief proposal for the thesis essay (about 250 words). All information should be typed and proofread carefully.

When drafting your proposal it’s a good idea to ask yourself how and why this topic and text(s) engage you, and what you imagine the stakes of your project to be. Think about who you are talking to/with and what kinds of critical interventions you are hoping to make. You will be asked to revise and resubmit your sign-up form if your proposal contains ideas that are too broad or vague to be workable as a 25–30 page essay. And be sure to send a draft of your proposal to your advisor for feedback before submitting the final version to the Director of Graduate Studies.
A copy of your approved thesis sign-up form is retained by the department. You should also keep a copy of this form for your own records.

**Recent Culminating Essays**

These titles represent a sample of recent culminating thesis essays for the English MA:

* Affective Laboring in *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*
* Blood Suckers, Demon Lovers, and the Transcendently Queer Child: The Evolution of Vampiric Gender and Sexuality from *Dracula* to *Let The Right One In*
* Conflict Rape: An Ecofeminist Evaluation of the American Portrayal of Rape in African Conflict Regions
* Curious Creatures: The Animal Other in the Menagerie of Elizabeth Bishop
* Forged Letters in Shakespeare’s Tragedies
* Ghosts of the Medieval: Race in Contemporary Fantasy Novels
* A Path Denied: Spenser’s Treatment of Lesbianism in *The Faerie Queene*
* Sex, Bravado, and Biblical Criticism: Moloch’s Role in *Paradise Lost*
* (Un)Happy Mediums: Spiegelman’s *Maus I & II* and the Holocaust Photograph
* The Victorian Poetess Unveiled in Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*
* Playing with Your Food: Constructing and Performing Identities in Food Memoirs

**Managing Your Time Effectively**

Since ENGL 791 largely takes the form of an independent study, there is no prescribed schedule and each student makes individual arrangements with their faculty advisor. Nonetheless, you’re advised to keep the following guidelines and procedures in mind as you plan out your semester.

All department and college deadlines included in this guide are **underlined and marked in bold type**. These are fixed and cannot be changed unless exceptional circumstances intervene.

**Working with Your Advisor**

It’s important that you meet regularly with your advisor throughout the semester, and especially at the beginning when your project is just starting to take shape. This may well be the first time you’ve worked on an essay of this magnitude or had the benefit of working closely and independently with a faculty advisor. Establishing regular meeting times and agreeing in advance on the work to be completed for each meeting will ensure that you do not leave your reading, writing, and revising until the last minute.

**Creating Structure and Writing in Stages**

Writing the thesis essay involves many stages (that sometimes overlap)—research, outlining, drafting, revising, revising again, and editing. So it’s important that you set up a series of
manageable deadlines with your advisor. These deadlines will enable you to finish your essay in stages, prevent procrastination, and give you a sense of accomplishment as you’re working. Below you’ll find two templates for planning your writing process/thesis essay timeline. You should expect to receive some form of written feedback after each of these steps, so be considerate of your advisor’s schedule when planning out your semester.

*Sample “Contract” for English 791 (from Professor Talia Schaffer)*

First draft due to advisor:
Revised draft due to advisor:
Final draft due to advisor and reader:
Oral exam (approximate date):

*Sample Thesis Essay Timeline (from Professor Kevin Ferguson)*

While every writer’s process is different, every writer has to have a process and should be able to describe its stages. Here’s a standard process for academic writing I’d like you to follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>How long will it take?</th>
<th>Your dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coming up with an idea</td>
<td>long time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Proposal</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>2–3 weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messy Draft</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Outline</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Draft</td>
<td>3–4 weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Draft</td>
<td>3–4 weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The more time you spend on the earlier parts of the process, the easier the later parts will be!

### ENGL 791 Workshops

Good writing is not often solely the result of an isolated process; rather it emerges from a writer’s thinking about their work in relation to its potential readers, so even the most skilled writers try to find real readers willing to listen to plans or read drafts. To that end, the Director of Graduate Studies will schedule regular meetings to discuss the process of working on the essay and to workshop your writing-in-progress. The workshops are designed to help you feel part of a community of writers, offering you peer feedback and support, and enabling you to share your work with readers outside of the relationship you’ve established with your advisor.
The Reader’s Role

Your reader (often referred to as a “second reader” since your advisor is technically your “first reader”) receives the final version of your culminating thesis essay once it has been approved by your advisor. Your reader may provide written feedback or return a marked-up copy of your essay to you in advance of your essay conference; most, however, offer their comments and suggestions during the conference itself.

Your reader should ideally be a full-time member of the English faculty (although part-time faculty members are sometimes willing to perform this service) and a scholar in the field(s) or a closely related field in which your essay falls. You should have already listed your reader on your thesis sign-up form, but if you haven’t yet found one then plan to do so as soon as the semester begins: by the end of September for the fall; the end of February for the spring. Your advisor is not responsible for finding a reader for your essay, but you should certainly discuss with them who it would make most sense to ask. You can also schedule an advising meeting and discuss possible choices with the Director of Graduate Studies.

Sometimes a reader is willing to become more involved in the mentoring and advising process, agreeing to read an earlier draft of your essay, for example, or offering you help with your research in a particular area. Although you shouldn’t assume this level of involvement on the part of your reader, it never hurts to ask, and you should certainly take advantage of your reader’s expertise and suggestions whenever you can.

Formatting and Proofreading

It’s important that the final version of your culminating thesis essay be professionally presented: that is, free from typographical and mechanical errors, and formatted according to MLA style guidelines. Essays that don’t meet these standards may be rejected by your advisor and reader, who are entitled to ask you to revise and resubmit your essay.

Accurate editing and proofreading can be a slow business, so be sure to leave yourself enough time to do a thorough job. If you’re unclear about how to format your essay correctly, you should consult the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th edition (2009). You can also review the MLA Formatting and Style Guide online at the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab): http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/.

Cover Sheet

Your essay should have a cover sheet that follows the format set forth below (foreshortened).

Title of Paper
Student’s Name
Student’s CUNYfirst ID#
Advisor:
Reader:

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English in the Graduate Division of Queens College of the City University of New York,
[Date]
Essay Conference/Oral Exam

The essay conference, commonly referred to as the oral exam, typically lasts between 30–45 minutes. It takes the form of a relaxed but lively conversation among your advisor, reader, and yourself.

Your advisor and reader will likely ask you why you chose to work on your essay topic; push you to expand or clarify your essay’s central arguments; ask you to summarize the whole of your project or its parts; invite you to situate your arguments within larger discourses and/or critical conversations; propose new ways of approaching your topic that may not have occurred to you; and suggest ways of strengthening or extending the scope of your claims. The conference is intended to be a constructive, enjoyable experience. It is less about demonstrating your knowledge then being willing, as a scholar talking with other scholars, to modify, explain, and expand your ideas.

Sample Questions for the Conference/Oral Exam

General questions

- Tell us how you came to this project. Why did you choose this topic and these texts?
- Can you summarize your overall argument and its trajectory?
- Can you talk about the kinds of research you did? How would you situate your project within a broader critical or scholarly conversation (about your text[s] and/or within a field)? What kind of interventions are you making?
- What have you learned from this project that you want to take with you or pursue beyond the MA?

Questions re: a thesis essay on Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home and Art Spiegelman’s Maus (from Professor Caroline Hong)

- What do you mean when you say Bechdel and Spiegelman “assist memory” (1)?
- What is the difference between Bechdel’s “legibility” (4) and Spiegelman’s “calibration” (34)? Can you unpack those terms a bit?
- For Bechdel, how are you thinking about the term “archive” (13)?
- What’s the difference in Bechdel’s and Spiegelman’s relationships to the notion of being “witness” (32)?
- Can you elaborate on the different ways that photographs function in the two texts?
- Is Spiegelman really just engaging in “mere observation” (51)?
- Can you say more about how “Bechdel sensitizes and Spiegelman desensitizes” (52)?
- You cite Hillary Chute’s work on several occasions. How are you using and expanding on her work to make your own argument?

The time and date of your conference is arranged to suit the schedules of your advisor, reader, and yourself. Keep in mind that you will need to give the final version of your essay to your reader at least one week before the scheduled date of your conference. This is so your reader has time to carefully read and reflect on your ideas before discussing them with you. Your
reader may ask that the conference be rescheduled if they are not given adequate notice of the oral exam or preparation time.

To complete ENGL 791 during Fall 2015, you must schedule your conference on or before Wednesday, December 23.

Thesis Approval Form (see copy at the end of this guide)

Once the conference has ended, your advisor and reader will ask that you briefly leave the room so that they can confer about your essay and assign a letter grade. Your grade is based on your essay alone and not on your performance during the essay conference, which is pass/fail. It is recorded on a thesis approval form, which your advisor and reader will both sign. Copies of your thesis approval form will be kept on file in the English Department and submitted to the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies. You may also request a copy for your own records. After receiving your thesis approval form, the Director of Graduate Studies will enter your essay grade as your ENGL 791 course grade on CUNYfirst.

When your advisor and reader invite you back into the room, they may wish to discuss revisions that you will need to make in order for your essay to be of at least B quality and acceptable for the degree. Be sure you understand the nature and extent of the revisions you are being asked to make and establish a time frame for completing them with your advisor and reader. Your essay will not be approved and your thesis approval form will not be submitted to the Dean of Graduate Studies until any stipulated revisions have been made.

Binding Your Thesis

The Library will bind 3 copies of an MA thesis (one each for the student, the Department, and the Reserve Library) for $25. Each additional copy is $15. Theses should be deposited in Bibliographic Access, Rosenthal Library, Room 201, Monday through Friday 9AM–4PM.

When depositing the theses in the Library, students are requested to do the following:

1. Have pages in the proper order;
2. Have an advisor’s original signature on the thesis cover sheet;
3. Bring copies of the Bursar’s receipt to cover the $25 binding fee.

It takes approximately 5 weeks for bound theses to arrive in the issuing department. Graduates should communicate with their departmental secretary after 6 weeks to arrange for pick-up at the academic department. For more info, visit http://library.qc.cuny.edu/services/binding.php.

Filing for Graduation

If this is the semester in which you plan to graduate, be aware that you must apply for graduation via your student record on CUNYfirst before the Registrar’s deadline.

For fall, the deadline is November 1 for a February 1 degree conferral
For spring, the deadline is March 1 for a May 30 degree conferral
For summer, the deadline is **July 1** for a September 1 degree conferral.

Further information about graduation policies are available on the Registrar’s website at http://www.qc.cuny.edu/registrar/graduation/Pages/GraduationPolicies.aspx.

**Taking an INC**

Students who do not complete their thesis work in the semester during which they are registered for ENGL 791 will receive an incomplete (INC), a temporary grade that will be replaced by a letter grade as soon as they have submitted their essay and had the oral exam. Students have two semesters to finish (so if you take an INC for Fall 2015, you have until the end of Fall 2016). **If you intend to take an INC, please make sure to inform both your advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies of your plans.** Please also be aware that, in certain situations, it may not be possible for your advisor to continue working with you for an additional semester.

**Filing for MAM (Maintenance of Matriculation)**

CUNY requires all graduate students to be registered in the semester in which their MA degree is awarded. If you have completed your coursework, as is typically the case when a student has only their culminating thesis essay to finish from a previous semester, and don’t plan to register for additional classes, then you will need to file for what is known as Maintenance of Matriculation (MAM) with the Registrar. The MAM form and current fees can be found at http://www.qc.cuny.edu/registrar/Documents/Maintenance%20of%20Matriculation%20Form.pdf. You will also need to reapply for graduation on CUNYfirst.

**Nancy Comley Prize**

Named for the long-standing Chair of the English Department, the Nancy Comley Prize was established in 2012 to honor the best essay written by a graduate student in either the MA or MS Ed/English programs. The prize is sponsored by the English Department Alumni Fund. All currently matriculated MA and MS Ed students, as well as those who had degrees conferred in the most recent summer and fall graduation cycles, are eligible to compete for the prize in 2016. Submission guidelines will be distributed in March. The prize winner is honored at a department prizes ceremony in May.
ENGLISH 791 SIGN-UP FORM
CULMINATING THESIS ESSAY

Submit this form via email to Caroline Hong, the Director of Graduate Studies, at caroline.hong@qc.cuny.edu. All information must be typed.

Student Information

Name:

CUNYfirst ID (8-digit):

Contact email address:

Committee Information

Advisor:

Reader:

Culminating Thesis Essay Project

Working Title:

Please provide a brief proposal for your culminating thesis essay (approx. 250 words). Make this description as specific and focused as you can. Without this description, your sign-up form is not complete and you will not be registered for ENGL 791.

You can type your proposal in the space below or attach it as a separate page.
ENGLISH MA THESIS APPROVAL FORM

All information MUST be typed.

Please make an electronic copy of this form and email it to Kim Smith and the Director of Graduate Studies in English. A hard copy should also be left in the DGS’s mailbox.

Name of candidate:

CUNYfirst ID# of candidate:

Title of MA thesis essay:

Date of oral exam:

Grade on MA thesis essay:

Please indicate whether the student has passed or failed the oral exam:

_____ Pass

_____ Fail

If revisions are necessary, please specify in detail what revisions are required, along with a deadline for completion:

Signatures

Adviser’s signature: _____________________________________________________________

Adviser’s name (typed):

Second reader’s signature: _____________________________________________________

Second reader’s name (typed):