MFA Thesis Guidelines: Prose

The following pages contain the materials an MFA student (writing a Capstone in prose) in The Creative Writing Programs at Hamline (CWP) needs in order to complete the steps toward thesis completion and graduation. Please read all the way through to Step 15 as you start the capstone and degree completion process. Note: This information, updated September 2011, supersedes all previous capstone guidelines. Always check the website for most current information.

What is Thesis

Thesis (also called Capstone) is the major creative project all MFA students complete after concluding their coursework. The thesis also includes the Artist Statement (see Step 9). Thesis requires two semesters to complete (Thesis 1 and Thesis 2). The finished project should illustrate the student’s mastery of the craft in his/her chosen genre. Thesis 1 and 2 cannot be taken concurrently. Students in prose have two options for Thesis:

- The Standard Option is a manuscript that is 80-100 pages in length (24,000-30,000 words). Students are required to have written a substantial body of work (e.g., 50 pages/15,000 words) before registering for Thesis 1. These pages may be part of a novel or memoir; a novella; a collection of short stories; a collection of essays; a novella-length essay; multi-genre work, etc.
- The second option is a Book-Length Manuscript. Because it takes so long to revise a whole book, students are required to begin Thesis 1 with a full draft of the manuscript. (Note: this does not need to be a polished draft, but the book must be written through to the end.) Students who choose this option in Thesis 2 will be expected to spend both thesis semesters in deep revision of the Book-Length Manuscript. (If students have finished their coursework and do not have a complete draft done, they are encouraged to take an independent study or take a semester off to write.)
- Students must choose one of these options when they register for Thesis 1.

When Is a Student Ready to Register for Thesis?

As a general rule, students must complete all coursework before registering for Thesis 1. On occasion, with the approval of their primary thesis advisor, students may take their last class in the same term as Thesis 1. All students are required to take both “Groundings in the Craft” and “Advanced” in their thesis genre prior to registration for Thesis 1. In the case of a multi-genre thesis, students are required to take “Groundings in the Craft” in all genres represented and “Advanced” in at least one genre. It is recommended (but not required) that these students take “Advanced” in the other genre as well.

What is the Timeline for Thesis?

**15 Steps! Please read them all carefully**

Step 1: Choose a Primary Thesis Advisor

Deadline: As soon as possible, at the latest the semester before thesis registration. The Creative
Writing Programs (CWP) faculty can only sit on a limited number of committees, so it is important that you secure your advisor early in the process.

The primary advisor is a member of the faculty of The CWP who has expertise in your thesis genre and works with you throughout the thesis process. The primary thesis advisor is not your academic advisor, although it’s possible for your academic advisor also to serve as your primary thesis advisor. (See list below of approved primary thesis advisors.)

The primary thesis advisor will read one full draft of your project in Thesis 1 and will meet with you to provide substantive feedback to guide your revision in Thesis 2. S/he also will read a full draft in Thesis 2 in preparation for the Capstone Conference. During each semester, the primary thesis advisor will be available for meetings and/or consultation in accordance with an agreed-upon schedule discussed at the Prospectus meeting (see below). Depending on whether you choose the Book-Length Option or the Standard Option, the primary thesis advisor will read the draft at the beginning, end, or during the semester.

**The Creative Writing Programs-Approved Primary Thesis Advisors**

(See list above of approved primary thesis advisors.)

Patricia Weaver Francisco  
Deborah Keenan  
Mary Logue  
Jim Moore  
Sheila O'Connor  
Juliet Patterson  
Susan Power  
Mary Rockcastle  
Katrina Vandenberg

**Step Two: Turn in a Prospectus and Schedule a Prospectus Meeting**

**Deadline:** Before registering for Thesis 1

The Prospectus is a written statement describing the scope of your intended thesis and the way in which it will be pursued. Please use the **Prospectus Guidelines** in preparing your Prospectus. *(Attachment 1)*

Once you have prepared your Prospectus, you should schedule a Prospectus meeting with your primary thesis advisor. This meeting must take place *before* you register for Thesis 1 so your advisor can sign your registration form. You should provide a copy of your Prospectus document by email at least one week prior to the meeting. At the Prospectus meeting, you and your primary thesis advisor will discuss the subject, methodology, and process for your thesis, and s/he may make suggestions for improvement or expansion. You and your advisor also will develop a plan of action for the semester. The Prospectus document will then be signed by your
primary thesis advisor and placed in your MFA file.

If the student has chosen the Book-Length Option, the student must bring a full draft of the manuscript to the Prospectus meeting. The student and primary thesis advisor will discuss at that meeting how and when feedback on the work will be given.

Students who have chosen the Standard Option should have at least 50 pages of rough draft completed before the Prospectus meeting, but they do not need to submit it at the meeting, nor will the primary thesis advisor necessarily read it at the beginning of Thesis 1.

**Step Three: Register for Thesis 1**

**Deadline:** Same as other Special Registration courses as listed on the academic calendar (listed as “last day to register” on the academic calendar). This is usually two weeks after the semester has started.

Students should have their primary advisor sign the Thesis 1 Registration Form (*Attachment 2-i*) at the end of the Prospectus meeting.

**Step Four: Choose an Optional Outside Reader**

**Deadline:** As soon as possible. The CWP faculty can only sit on a limited number of committees, so it is important that you secure your outside advisor early in the process.

Students may choose to have an outside reader as part of their committee. The outside reader offers a fresh pair of eyes and new insights on the manuscript. S/he will read your Thesis 2 draft and will participate in the Capstone Conference with your primary thesis advisor at the end of Thesis 2. If you wish to have an outside reader, you should discuss this with your primary thesis advisor at the Prospectus meeting.

You must choose from the list of available outside readers, posted on the web site, or receive approval from the primary thesis advisor for someone not on the list. All outside readers—available faculty and writers in the community, including alums who have published widely in literary journals and/or received significant literary recognition—receive a stipend for serving on the thesis committee.

**Step Five: Statement of Intention to Graduate**

**Deadline:** First business day in November

Students must submit their **Intent to Graduate & Degree Completion Form** (*Attachment 3*).

**Step Six: Turn in a Complete Draft to Your Primary Thesis Advisor**

**Deadline:** A hard copy of the Thesis 1 manuscript must be delivered to your primary thesis advisor by December 1 (fall registration) or April 15 (spring registration).
The draft must be complete (the full arc of the project drafted), readable, and proofread. Any manuscript that contains significant grammatical errors will be returned to the student unread and will need to be revised. (If the revision cannot be done and the manuscript read by your advisor within the semester timeline, you will have to register for another semester of Thesis 1.) The student is responsible for arranging the delivery of the hard copy to the primary thesis advisor.

Students are welcome to turn in their thesis manuscript before Dec. 1 or April 15.

Step Seven: Schedule a Meeting with Your Primary Thesis Advisor

Deadline: This meeting should take place after December 15 or April 30.

At this meeting you and your primary thesis advisor will discuss the Thesis 1 manuscript. Your primary thesis advisor will identify strengths and weaknesses in the work and will provide substantive feedback for revision.

Step Eight: Register for Thesis 2

Deadline: Same as other Special Registration courses as listed on the academic calendar.

Students can register for Thesis 2 after receiving a passing grade for Thesis 1. Students should fill out a Capstone Registration Form for Thesis 2 (Attachment 2-ii). Those who chose the Book-Length Manuscript option in Thesis 1 may choose to revise the entire manuscript, with primary thesis advisor permission, or 80-100 pages (24,000-30,000 words). However, expectations for quality will focus on the first 80-100 pages of Book-Length manuscripts. Students and primary thesis advisors will work out their process for communication, including meetings if needed, at the beginning of Thesis 2.

Step Nine: The Artist Statement

Deadline: At least one week prior to your Capstone Conference

The Artist Statement is an essay of 10-20 pages required of all graduating MFA students. Think of this essay as “The Conscious Artist Statement” in which the writer deeply explores and conscientiously conveys what s/he has learned as an artist in the process of completing the thesis manuscript. This can include reference to texts or other literary influences that helped to guide or shape the project. The Statement serves as a kind of self-recognition and closure in which insights and lessons are arrived at that can benefit future writers. The Artist Statement should not be essential to the reader’s comprehension of the thesis. It is a separate document (though it will reside as a preface to the final, bound copy of your thesis.) While the essay may take the form of a traditional essay or a more experimental lyric essay, it must be a well-written, unified piece of writing. You should give a hard copy of your Artist Statement to your primary thesis advisor and your outside reader at least one week prior to your Capstone Conference.

Step Ten: Turn in Final Draft to Primary Thesis Advisor (and Optional Outside Reader)

Deadline: A hard copy of your Thesis 2 draft must be delivered to your primary thesis advisor
by November 1 for fall registration or March 1 for spring registration.

The Thesis 2 draft should be a complete body of revised material that demonstrates a solid understanding of the elements of craft within the genre and is at a level that is ready to be submitted for contests, grants, agents, or editors. It should address the craft issues raised by the primary thesis advisor in Thesis 1. The draft must be in hard copy, carefully edited and proofread, and must meet standard MLA guidelines. Any manuscript that contains significant grammatical errors will be returned to the student unread and will need to be revised. (If the revision cannot be done and the manuscript read by your primary thesis advisor within the semester timeline, you will have to register for another semester of Thesis 2.) The student is responsible for arranging the delivery of the hard copy to the primary thesis advisor and outside reader, if applicable.

**Step Eleven: Submit a Capstone Conference Notification Form (Attachment 4)**

**Deadline:** At least two weeks prior to the Capstone Conference

It is the student’s responsibility to coordinate a day and time for the meeting with The CWP office, his/her primary thesis advisor, and outside reader (if applicable). The CWP office staff will reserve a conference room or another suitable location on campus after the Capstone Conference Notification Form has arrived.

**Step Twelve: The Capstone Conference**

**Deadline:** Prior to April 15 for spring registration. Prior to January 1 for fall registration.

At the end of the thesis process, MFA students participate in a Capstone Conference attended by the primary thesis advisor and the outside reader, if applicable. At the conference, students should be prepared to make a formal presentation (approximately 15 minutes) about their thesis. This could include discussion of influential books or writers, instructors or courses, process, turning points, obstacles, goals for the future, etc. The presentation may cover topics addressed in the Artist Statement. After this presentation, both advisors will address the strengths of the thesis project, may pose questions, may ask for mandatory revisions, and may make suggestions for future revision.

**Step Thirteen: Final Formatted Copies**

**Deadline:** Two weeks after your Capstone Conference

Three final, revised, unbound copies (in correct format) of your thesis (with any revisions required by your primary synthesis advisor) are due in The CWP office two weeks after your Capstone Conference. Format your title page according to the MFA Capstone Title Page Template (Attachment 5). See the MFA Capstone Writing Guidelines for style and format information (Attachment 6).

**Step Fourteen: The CWP and MALS Graduation Revels**
The Graduation Revels, which usually occur on the Tuesday evening before graduation, students, faculty, and staff of The Creative Writing Programs and MALS gather to celebrate the work of that year’s graduates. This annual reception and dinner is a highlight of the academic year, and all graduates are encouraged to attend.

**Step Fifteen: Graduation**

Once all steps have been successfully completed, the student is ready to graduate! Information on graduation will be sent to students closer to the date, including information about The CWP Graduation Revels, Commencement, gown ordering, etc. Hamline University holds one commencement ceremony, in May, each year. Students who complete their degrees in summer or fall will have their transcripts updated, and a diploma will be ordered in accordance with the Registrar's time line. Summer and fall grads are welcome to participate in the May graduation ceremony and will be listed in the program.

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Is it possible to begin thesis in either fall or spring semester?**

Yes. Students may begin Thesis 1 in fall or spring; the only requirement is that they complete Thesis 1 and 2 in consecutive semesters.

**Is it possible to register for Thesis 1 or 2 in the summer?**

Yes, in rare circumstances, with permission from the primary thesis advisor. Since Thesis is meant to be a full-semester project, however, students should not expect to complete Thesis 1 or 2 during the summer.

**Are there exceptions to these rules?**

No.

**What are the expectations for the final Thesis 1 manuscript?**

In order to pass Thesis 1, the full arc and vision of the project must be visible in the manuscript, it must demonstrate a basic understanding of the elements of craft within the genre, and it must meet the length requirement. Necessary revision work must be possible within the framework of Thesis 2. The draft must be proofed carefully for correctness and readable as a draft. Manuscripts that require more than minimal copy editing will be returned. Students whose work does not meet these requirements will be required to register for a second semester of Thesis 1.

**How do I know whom I can choose as an outside reader?**

Each semester The CWP will post a list of outside readers on The CWP web site. The list includes available faculty and writers in the community, including alums who’ve published
widely in literary journals and/or received significant literary recognition.

**What are the expectations for the Thesis 2 manuscript?**

The goal of Thesis 2 is to complete a body of revised material (e.g., 80-100 pages/ 24,000-30,000 words) that demonstrates a solid understanding of the elements of craft within the genre and is at a level ready to be submitted for contests, grants, agents, or editors. The Thesis 2 manuscript should address the craft issues raised by the primary thesis advisor during Thesis 1. Manuscripts must be carefully edited and proofread and must meet university guidelines. (See all posted guidelines on The CWP web site.) Manuscripts that require more than minimal copy editing will be returned. Note: if a student who chooses the Book-Length Manuscript wants to revise the entire manuscript, s/he may do so with permission of the primary thesis advisor. However, expectations for quality will focus on the first 80-100 pages.