

**The William Paterson University of New Jersey  
College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Department of English**

**Master of Fine Arts in Creative & Professional Writing  
Thesis Guidelines**

Students pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in writing are required to complete a substantial manuscript of professional quality in fiction, poetry, or nonfiction. This thesis project is completed over two semesters, first in ENG 7900 MFA Thesis Seminar and then in ENG 7950 MFA Thesis Project, in consultation with one or more faculty advisors. The thesis should demonstrate the candidate's consummate writing ability in the selected genre—fiction, poetry, nonfiction. Subgenres include short stories or short-shorts, novels or novellas, prose poems, creative non-fiction, memoir, travel writing, literary biography, critical reviews, technical writing, screenplays and drama scripts. In particular, the thesis should accomplish the following:

- Show creativity /originality in the context of contemporary writing and thought
- Demonstrate professional facility with genre, style and manuscript conventions
- Adhere to the guidelines for approximate length
  - Fiction or Nonfictional Prose: 150-225 pages
  - Poetry: 48-60 pages
  - Screenplays: 120 pages

**Declaration of Intent:** One year prior to taking ENG 7900, the MFA candidate must submit a [Declaration of Intent](#) that briefly describes the intended area of thesis study and indicates possible advisors with whom he/she might work. Students are encouraged to consult the Director of the Graduate Program in English or the MFA Program Coordinator for advice on which faculty members to contact. Note that students may have two different thesis advisors for ENG 7900 and ENG 7950.

**Thesis Proposal:** One semester before beginning ENG 7900, the student must submit a proposal describing the thesis project to the Graduate Committee, which will evaluate the quality of the proposal, make recommendations, and grant approval. The proposal due dates are:

- April 15<sup>th</sup> for Fall ENG 7900 MFA Thesis Seminar enrollment
- November 15<sup>th</sup> for Spring ENG 7900 Thesis Seminar enrollment

Hour-long thesis proposal workshops—designed to help students prepare proposals—are held each semester; check your email for announcements.

The MFA thesis proposal consists of the following:

- I. A cover sheet, with the advisor's signature;
- II. An essay of 3-5 pages (double-spaced, approx. 750-1000 words) that explains the thesis project;
- III. A bibliography (approximately 18 titles);
- IV. A writing sample of approximately 7-12 pages in the same genre as the proposed thesis.

**I. Cover Sheet**

- II. Essay:** Students should write the essay portion of the proposal in consultation with the thesis advisor. The purpose of the essay is to provide an overview of the project—its content, style, and ideas, as well as its overall structure and intent—to an academic audience. Though the thesis project may evolve as the work progresses, the thesis proposal should convince the Graduate Committee that the student is prepared to take on the demands of a large, long-range writing project and to complete it according to the assigned timeframe. Each of the following sections should be at least one well-developed paragraph in length:

Essay Section 1: Introduction

- Provide an overview of your project, explicitly stating its specific genre and, if appropriate, the broad arc of its narrative;
- Describe the themes or issues the thesis will address. What is particularly interesting or exciting these themes/issues? If your project is a thesis in professional writing, consider beginning with an introductory paragraph that introduces questions that will be explored throughout.

Essay Section 2: Genre and Influences

- Explain the choice of genre. What specifically about the chosen genre or subgenre resonates with you?
- Cite a handful of texts from your bibliography and explain how these will influence your writing (for example, you may cite narrative voice, style, form, themes, characters, language, etc.). Be sure to contextualize your work in relation to the texts from your bibliography.

Essay Section 3: Elaborate on the project

- Outline a possible trajectory for your project. For creative prose projects, provide a plot summary and discuss thematic concerns, characters, and/or form. For poetry projects, discuss forms, subjects, voice, and/or thematic concerns. For professional writing projects, provide a tentative thesis and an overview of your intended research.

#### Essay Section 4: Plan of Action

- In consultation with your advisor, construct a timeline for drafting, revising and finalizing your project. If applicable, explain how much of your thesis project you have already drafted and whether the material originated in a graduate class.

#### Essay Section 5: Conclusion

- Include any other information that you think will help the graduate committee in their decision to accept the thesis proposal.

### **III. Bibliography**

- Include approximately twelve primary works and six craft works, about half of which are new to the student.
- Provide a brief annotation (an explanatory phrase or sentence) for roughly half the books in the bibliography.

### **IV. Writing Sample**

- Submit 7-12 pages in the genre, formatted professionally.

Submit the entire proposal to the advisor for his/her signature, then make seven copies of all the materials and submit these to the Graduate Program Director or MFA Coordinator. Once you have received a letter from the graduate committee approving your proposal, begin working on your thesis. Approval of your thesis grants you permission to enroll in ENG 7900, which you must do as soon as possible. *Keep in regular contact with your faculty thesis advisor and come to a mutual agreement on meetings, feedback, and correspondence.*

Any questions or concerns should be directed to the English Graduate Program Director or MFA Coordinator.