

Guide for Thesis and Dissertation Committees

Qualifications for Directors and Readers

The Graduate College stipulates that only full members of the graduate faculty may direct Ph.D. dissertations or M.A. theses. The director should be a specialist in the area of interest. Degree candidates invariably work closely with their thesis or dissertation directors, so the director should be someone from whom the student can take constructive criticism and with whom he or she can get along. Directors should require nothing less than students' best work.

Thesis committees must have a director from within the English department and at least one other faculty reader; dissertation committees must have a director from within the English department and at least two other readers, at least one from within the area of specialization (or a closely related area) and perhaps one from outside of the specialization or outside of the department or university. Upon request of the student and approval of the director, dissertation committees can have a maximum of five members (a director and four readers). If the thesis or dissertation draws significantly upon another discipline (such as history, for example) then a student may consider selecting a qualified reader from that discipline. Readers (including those from other departments or institutions) must be members of the graduate faculty, but may be members at any level.

Beginning the Process

In the *Handbook for Graduate Students*, students are advised always to approach a professor in person rather than by e-mail or note to inquire about directing or reading a thesis or dissertation. (Alternative instructions for approaching professors via e-mail have been added to acknowledge COVID-19 conditions.) They are also advised that the members of the committee are being asked to make a commitment that will require a significant investment of their time for which they are not significantly recompensed by the university. Students are also advised that agreeing to serve as a director or reader for a thesis or dissertation does not obligate the professor to stick with the project to the end. The student should approach the potential director at least one semester prior to registering for thesis or dissertation hours.

Changing a Topic, Director, or Readers

Students may consult the Graduate Advisor when initially assessing the need for a change of topic, director, or reader(s).

In order to change the thesis or dissertation topic, a student must first discuss the change with the director of the thesis or dissertation. Since a major change in the topic may require changes in the committee, perhaps even a change of director, it is important to discuss all of the ramifications of the change before committing to it. Depending on the kind of change, new forms may need to be filed with the graduate college.

A student may need to change his or her director for any number of legitimate reasons. The student should speak in person or by phone/video meeting to the former director and then to the potential new director concerning the reasons for the change. It may be necessary for the student to file new forms with the graduate college.

A student may need to change readers during the writing of the thesis or dissertation, and such a change should be made in consultation with the director. The student should speak in person to the former reader(s) as well as to the potential new reader(s) concerning the reasons for the change. As with the change of director, it may be necessary to file new forms with the Graduate College.

Under the conditions imposed by the response to **COVID-19**, in-person approaches to potential directors or readers may not be practical. Instead of requesting an in-person meeting, students making changes should request a phone or video meeting appointment.

How Students Register Directed Portfolio, Thesis, or Dissertation Hours

Individual sections of Directed Portfolio, Thesis, or Dissertation hours must be created by the program secretary before students may enroll for portfolio, thesis, or dissertation hours. In order to receive approval to register, the following must be submitted by the portfolio, thesis, or dissertation *director* to the Director of Graduate Studies (cc the program secretary):

- Proposal or Statement of Intent for the project: The proposal or statement should be an informal preliminary overview of the student's proposed portfolio or research interest, 1-2 pages in length, plus a selective bibliography. It should address the purpose and rationale for portfolio or the research and comment on the significance of the study to the field.
- Directed Portfolio Committee Form (if appropriate)

Steps in Directing a Thesis or Dissertation

The *Graduate Catalog* refers to a Pre-dissertation Advisory Committee, whose purpose is to advise the Ph.D. student in selecting courses that will be of most use or benefit in the student's major area of study. In the English Department, the Graduate Advisor, the Graduate Program Director, and, especially, the potential dissertation director fulfill this same function. The student should consult these professors as early as possible in the Ph.D. program. There is no need for the student to fill out the Pre-dissertation Advisory Committee form as this committee is not employed by this program.

Each thesis or dissertation is unique, and the preparedness of each student also differs widely, so the following list of steps is provisional, not absolute. The director may ask the writer of the thesis or dissertation to follow a different set of steps from those listed here, but this list provides a general idea of what to expect. Many students, particularly those planning to write M.A. theses may ask to set up a course of directed reading under their prospective thesis director prior to registering for thesis hours.

1. **Statement of Intent:** The Statement of Intent is an informal preliminary overview of the student's research interest, 1-2 pages in length, plus a selective bibliography. It should address the purpose and rationale for the research and comment on the significance of the study to the field. Students would be well advised to bring this statement when approaching the potential director and readers. The statement should be approved by the director of graduate studies before the student enrolls in ENGL 6640 (Thesis Research) or 7640 (Dissertation Research).
2. **Advancement to Candidacy:** According to the *Graduate Catalog*, students who have not advanced to candidacy (filed an Advancement to Candidacy form with the College of

Graduate Studies certifying passage of the Ph.D. preliminary examination) are not permitted to present the prospectus for their dissertations.

3. **Masters or Doctoral Readings:** The Masters (ENGL 6909) and Doctoral Readings (ENGL 7909) courses should be taken in the semester before initial enrollment in thesis or dissertation hours. These courses are designed to allow the student to conduct preliminary research and study in the topic of the thesis or dissertation, establish a thesis or dissertation committee, and write an introductory chapter (M.A.) or prospectus (Ph.D.), thus reserving actual thesis or dissertation hours for focused writing. The 6909/7909 course may count as elective coursework toward the degree and may be taken only once.
4. **Prospectus:** The prospectus should outline the background, research question, argumentative thesis, and planned methodology for addressing the topic, and it should discuss the potential contribution that the work will make to advancing scholarship and/or pedagogy. Before completing their first semester of ENGL 6640 (Thesis Research) or 7640 (Dissertation Research), students are required to submit completed prospectuses to all the members of their thesis or dissertation committees and to the director of graduate studies. If the proposed concept is weak or there are flaws in the proposed methodology, the director may require revision—perhaps multiple revisions—before the prospectus is accepted. This step may generate a written outline of further requirements from the committee. The completed prospectus will be presented publicly and circulated to all graduate students and to all graduate faculty members.
5. **Provisional Working Timeline for Completion:** Students are advised to agree on a timeline for completing the thesis or dissertation with their directors. The timeline for completion will almost always change as the student gets into the actual writing (it almost always takes longer than originally planned), but students should try to be as realistic and as honest as possible.
5. **Reading, Research, and Drafts of Chapters:** This process makes up the bulk of the time and is often cyclical. The director should see some sort of progress on drafts of chapters each semester before he or she turns in the requisite grade of S or U for that semester. The student should discuss with the director and readers when to send the drafts to the reader: some want to see the chapters as they are completed; others prefer to wait until a draft of the entire thesis or dissertation is complete.
6. **Revision:** Directors should make clear to students that they should expect to have to make several revisions of each chapter, and that they are expected to address the directors' and readers' comments on previous drafts in their revisions. Directors may require revision according to their comments on a chapter before sending it on to the reader, whose comments will probably require another revision. If there are conflicts, the director's responsibility is to guide the student in negotiating with other committee members about which comments are most important to address and why. The director and all committee members must approve all revisions before the student produces the completed draft.

7. **Completed Draft:** The entire committee should be able to read the whole, revised text at least a couple of weeks before the defense. If there are any doubts about the quality of scholarship or argument at this point, the oral defense may be delayed until the student addresses the concerns of the committee. Completion of a draft does not automatically mean that the draft will be approved by the committee.
8. **Final Copy:** The argument should be sound and the text should provide ample proof supporting the argument. The writing should be sophisticated and clear and should present the ideas in an interesting, orderly, and persuasive manner. The thesis or dissertation should be carefully proofread and polished and should conform to all of the formatting requirements of the Graduate College. In short, it should be a polished, professional work. Students have been advised that theses and dissertations are automatically made available online through ProQuest.
9. **Oral Defense:** The oral defense is an examination conducted by the committee on the material covered by the thesis or dissertation and its contribution to the field of study. College of Graduate Studies requires notification through submission of the [Defense Announcement Request Form](#) two weeks ahead of the scheduled defense. The defense is open to anyone who cares to attend. The student and all members of the committee must be present at the defense. Generally the oral defense will generate further “fine tuning” revisions necessary before the student turns in the polished copy to the Graduate College. Depending on the nature of such revisions, the director may or may not want to see this copy before submission.
10. **Final Submission Process:** Since several individuals must read and approve graduate theses and dissertations, the submission process involves several steps and several deadlines which occur fairly early in the semester in which a student graduates. The relevant dates are posted by the College of Graduate Studies on the [Graduate Studies Calendar](#) and by the graduate program each semester.

Thesis: The thesis must be submitted to the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies by the date indicated on the [Graduate Studies Calendar](#). **This is a hard deadline**—no extensions will be permitted. [Note: The Graduate Program in English requires submission of a finished draft of the thesis to the Director of Graduate Studies two weeks prior to the College of Graduate Studies deadlines.] The student must submit an electronic copy of the thesis to the thesis director, who must assess the originality through TurnItIn. Once results have been obtained, the director sends an electronic copy to the Graduate Program Director, and the student submits an electronic file of the thesis to ProQuest and a signature page form with the required signatures to the College of Graduate Studies. (These details are provided in the guidelines located at mtsu.edu/graduate/student/thesis.php.) Any thesis not meeting the standards of the College of Graduate Studies may be rejected by the dean, delaying graduation.

Dissertation: The original dissertation in electronic format must be submitted electronically through ProQuest and the signature page form containing signatures from the committee and graduate program director should be submitted to the College of Graduate Studies by the deadline found in the [Graduate Studies Calendar](#) and the current semester’s schedule of classes. Any dissertation not meeting the standards of the

College of Graduate Studies may be rejected by the dean, delaying graduation. **Note:** The Graduate Program in English requires submission of a finished draft of the dissertation to the Director of Graduate Studies two weeks prior to the College of Graduate Studies deadlines.

The Role of Readers other than the Director

Directors of theses and dissertations have primary responsibility for instructing students to proofread and edit drafts of the work in progress before passing them on, in whole or in part, to the other members of the candidate's committee. Readers may (and should) offer constructive feedback about the quality of the writing, the content, and the research and documentation of the thesis or dissertation, but they should not be expected to do line-by-line editing of the manuscript. Directors of theses and dissertations should establish, in agreement with the committee, a procedure for review of the thesis or dissertation in progress. Procedures may vary. For example, the committee may choose to share each chapter as it is completed or decide not to circulate the draft until it is complete. In each case, however, the director should inform the other members of the committee of the process and schedule being followed. Directors of theses and dissertations should always endeavor to allow readers adequate turn-around time, negotiated in advance, for responding to chapters or entire drafts, while realistically accommodating, whenever possible, such exigencies as deadlines and the personal circumstances of both committee members and the candidate.

Deadlines

Under no circumstances can the steps to completing a thesis or dissertation be shortened or amended to meet a student's need to graduate by a certain date. Whenever possible, the director and readers may make all due efforts to accommodate external time constraints (e.g., necessity to complete the degree in order to obtain a job), but they are under no obligation or constraint to approve substandard work in order to accommodate a student's plans.

The deadlines for defending theses and dissertations and for submitting the final, polished copies come early in the semester of completion and are published in the [Graduate Studies Calendar](#) and announced by the graduate director each semester. Students are responsible for knowing the deadlines they must meet in order to graduate and to make sure they complete their work in good time to meet those deadlines.

The director of the thesis or dissertation is not required to issue reminders about approaching deadlines, though the director should be involved in planning the timeline for completion. However, professors are advised to keep track of these deadlines.

What Writers of Theses and Dissertations Should Expect

The thesis or dissertation director should provide guidance to students as they develop their prospectus, plan their research, and construct their argument. The director should guide the process by suggesting avenues of research, questioning the writer's assumptions, requiring a demonstration of competence in areas such as languages, etc., and making editorial suggestions, including expansion of the text. However, the ideas and argument must be the student's own original contribution to scholarship. The director is expected to read and comment upon drafts within a reasonable amount of time (two to three weeks).

The reader(s) are expected to read and comment on the drafts, to assess the strength of the argument or proofs offered, and sometimes to suggest additional sources or avenues of research and

to recommend that the student address additional issues. In short, the readers can be as involved as if they were directing the thesis, though the degree of involvement may vary from professor to professor and should be a topic of discussion between the student, the director, and the readers very early in the process. The readers may make recommendations and suggestions and may require additional work. The readers should read and comment upon the drafts in a reasonable amount of time, as should the director.

The committee should generally expect the following from the student:

1. Quality. The committee members should expect students' best possible work. Whether at the M.A. or the Ph.D. level, the thesis or dissertation director (and probably the readers) will be the primary source of letters of recommendation for Ph.D. programs, grants, fellowships, assistantships, and jobs, so students are advised to work to ensure that the committee can give their highest, unqualified recommendations. For further guidance, see the list of "Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Dissertations and Theses" below.
2. Responsibility. The committee will expect the student to recognize that writing a thesis or dissertation is a major investment of time and energy requiring extensive reading, research, writing, and revising.
3. Honesty. Students should not promise more than can be delivered and should always deliver what is promised. This applies to everything from showing up for appointments to meeting deadlines to being realistic about one's expectations of oneself and the committee. It goes without saying that the committee will expect each student to abide by the standards of academic integrity.
4. Foreign-language competency. The committee may reasonably expect the student to have (or have a plan to acquire) the knowledge of any foreign languages necessary to deal with texts in the original language. This is a *must* at the Ph.D. level and highly recommended at the M.A. level.

Most directors and readers will communicate their expectations to students verbally in a face-to-face meeting. Students should go to this meeting prepared to take notes on their expectations and they should not be afraid to ask for clarification about any of the expectations.

The director or readers may withdraw from the committee if the student does not meet their expectations.

Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Dissertations, Theses, and Graduate Exams

These criteria are derived from an AAUP study, Barbara E. Lovitt's "How to Grade a Dissertation" *Academe* 91.6 (Nov-Dec 2005). In this study, Lovitt asked 276 faculty members in 74 departments across 10 disciplines at 9 research universities "to characterize dissertations and their components (the problem statement, the literature review, theory, methods, analysis, and discussion or conclusion) at four different quality levels—outstanding, very good, acceptable, and unacceptable." Based on the responses, Lovitt compiled a list of criteria for each of the four evaluative categories. Lovitt, however, did not organize the criteria, even though most fall into traditional categories (e.g., criteria regarding presentation of the research problem, literature review, approach). The method of assessment used in the present report provides more structure by placing Lovitt's criteria into the seven categories listed below in Section A: Assessment of Ph.D. dissertations. The criteria have been extended with appropriate alterations to assess the quality of M.A. theses and graduate examinations as well.

A. Assessment of Ph.D. dissertations

1. **Research Problem**: Ability to formulate a research problem based on knowledge of secondary literature.
 - Outstanding*: Contains a clearly stated problem and argues effectively that it raises new and consequential questions in the area of study.
 - Very Good*: Contains a clearly stated problem and, though the problem is smaller and traditional, argues effectively for its significance.
 - Acceptable*: Contains a clearly stated problem but is less successful in arguing its significance.
 - Unacceptable*: Fails to show that it addresses a central problem or question.
2. **Literature Review**: Ability to analyze and synthesize a large amount of complicated literature, including the ability to analyze, assess, and compare arguments.
 - Outstanding*: Demonstrates command of the literature by exhibiting a thorough and critical understanding of the problems, claims, and arguments of the secondary literature.
 - Very Good*: Demonstrates strong knowledge of the literature, though is not as successful in exhibiting a critical understanding of arguments.
 - Acceptable*: Demonstrates knowledge of basic positions, or claims found in the literature, though without a strong understanding of the arguments.
 - Unacceptable*: Limited or otherwise weak knowledge of claims and arguments.
3. **Approach**: Ability to understand and apply a particular methodology or theoretical approach.
 - Outstanding*: Sophisticated or nuanced understanding of methodology and theory; uses new methods or theoretical approaches.
 - Very Good*: Uses standard methodology or theoretical approach.
 - Acceptable*: Minimal understanding of methodology or theoretical approach, competently applied to the problem.
 - Unacceptable*: Understanding and application of methodology or theory is inappropriate or otherwise wrong.
4. **Research**: Ability to conduct research methodically, including the ability to select apposite sources from a wide range of literature, the ability to judge the reliability of information, and the ability to

present evidence accurately outside of its original context.

Outstanding: Exhibits thorough and meticulous research, drawing on multiple sources.

Very Good: Exhibits well-executed research, though not completely thorough or meticulous.

Acceptable: Exhibits an ability to conduct research

Unacceptable: Fails to use pertinent sources of information.

5. Argument: Ability to compose a complex and coherent set of arguments, including clear presentation of claims and reasons, appropriate use of evidence, and logical organization.

Outstanding: Presents a complex response to its research problem, with arguments that are focused, logical, rigorous, and sustained.

Very Good: Presents a complex response to its research problem, with a strong, comprehensive, and coherent argument.

Acceptable: Exhibits ability to conduct a sustained argument, but is not as complex or convincing.

Unacceptable: Exhibits weak, unconvincing, inconsistent, or invalid arguments.

6. Conclusion: Summary of the study, including discussion of the study's strengths and weaknesses, discussion of possible applications and other implications for the discipline, and discussion of future directions for research.

Outstanding: Summary ties together the entire study, reflects on the study's strengths and weaknesses, and discusses implications and directions for future research.

Very Good: Summary ties together the study, but misses opportunities to identify strengths and weakness or to identify implications and directions for future research.

Acceptable: Attempts to tie study together, but lacks reflection on strengths and weaknesses, or lacks discussion of implications and directions for future research.

Unacceptable: Fails to tie study together.

7. Quality of Writing: Sentence and paragraph structure, logical connections from one paragraph to the next, and credible ethos.

Outstanding: Consistent control over language evidenced in well-structured sentences and paragraphs; voice is authoritative yet not officious, engaging rather than affectedly academic.

Very Good: Less consistent control over language evidenced in sentence and paragraph structure; voice is less authoritative and engaging but without detracting from the writer's credibility.

Acceptable: Sentence and paragraph structure do not consistently hinder understanding; lack of control may appear as unnecessary repetition; lapses in voice may detract somewhat from credibility.

Unacceptable: Sentence structure consistently hinders understanding; lack of connections between paragraphs; frequent repetition reflects basic lack of organization; inappropriate tone.

B. Assessment of M.A. Theses

Unlike the AAUP study on the grading of dissertations, there appears to be no similar study on the grading of M.A. theses. Hence the present assessment is based on a modified version of the AAUP study. All four evaluative categories and all seven conceptual categories are used, but the seven conceptual categories have been adjusted to reflect the lower expectation of M.A.-level work:

1. Research Problem: Ability to formulate a research problem and justify its significance.

Outstanding: Thesis contains a clearly stated problem and effectively argues that experts on the topic would regard the problem as significant.

Very Good: Thesis contains a clearly stated problem but is less successful in arguing its significance.

Acceptable: Thesis displays some evidence that it addresses a central problem or question.

Unacceptable: Thesis fails to show that it addresses a central problem or question.

2. Literature Review: Ability to understand pertinent research, including the ability to read for the problems addressed by others, the ability to read the arguments of others, and the ability to read for evidence.

Outstanding: Thesis displays an excellent knowledge of pertinent research and is clearly situated in relationship to the problems and arguments of that research.

Very Good: Thesis displays good knowledge of pertinent research and is less clear situating itself in relationship to the problems and arguments of that research.

Acceptable: Thesis displays only an acceptable knowledge of pertinent research and attempts to situate itself in relationship to pertinent scholarship.

Unacceptable: Thesis displays inadequate knowledge of pertinent research.

3. Approach: Exhibits a self-reflective awareness of its particular approach to the study.

Outstanding: Thesis describes its approach, justifies it, and perhaps acknowledges its limitations.

Very Good: Thesis describes its approach without justifying it.

Acceptable: Thesis exhibits some awareness of a chosen perspective, theory, or methodology.

Unacceptable: Thesis exhibits no awareness of a chosen approach.

4. Research: Ability to conduct research methodically on a limited topic, including the ability to select apposite sources of information, the ability to judge the reliability of information, and the ability to present evidence accurately outside of its original context.

Outstanding: Thesis displays a *keen* ability to determine what information is needed to thoroughly address the research problem.

Very Good: Thesis displays an ability to determine what information is needed to address the research problem.

Acceptable: Thesis displays an ability to acquire pertinent information.

Unacceptable: Thesis omits pertinent sources of information.

5. Argument: Evidence of the ability to compose a complex and coherent set of arguments, including clear presentation of claims and reasons, appropriate use of evidence, and logical organization.

Outstanding: Thesis presents a complex response to its research problem, and clearly presents its arguments as an architectural whole, especially the relationship between primary

and supplemental arguments.

Very Good: Thesis presents a complex response to its research problem

Acceptable: Thesis provides an argued response to its research problem.

Unacceptable: Thesis fails to provide an adequate response to a research problem.

6. Conclusion: Summary of the study, including discussion of the study's strengths and weaknesses, discussion of possible applications and other implications for the discipline, and discussion of future directions for research.

Outstanding: Summary ties together the entire study, reflects on the study's strengths and weaknesses, discusses implications and directions for future research.

Very Good: Summary ties together the study, but misses opportunities to identify strengths and weakness or to identify implications and directions for future research.

Acceptable: Attempts to tie study together, but lacks reflection on strengths and weaknesses, or lacks discussion of implications and directions for future research.

Unacceptable: Fails to tie study together.

7. Quality of Writing, including sentence structure, paragraph structure, logical connections from one paragraph to the next, and credible ethos.

Outstanding: Consistent control over language evidenced in well-structured sentences and paragraphs; voice is authoritative yet not officious, engaging rather than affectedly academic.

Very Good: Less consistent control over language evidenced in sentence and paragraph structure; voice is less authoritative and engaging but without detracting from the writer's credibility.

Acceptable: Sentence and paragraph structure do not consistently hinder understanding; lack of control may appear as unnecessary repetition; lapses in voice may detract somewhat from credibility.

Unacceptable: Sentence structure consistently hinders understanding; lack of connections between paragraphs; frequent repetition reflects basic lack of organization; inappropriate tone.