

**HARVARD UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
GUIDELINES (& SOME ADVICE) FOR SENIOR THESIS WRITERS AND ADVISORS  
2025-2026**

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This is a document for senior thesis writers and their allies. The first three parts should help thesis writers write theses; the fourth says how the thesis gets evaluated (i.e. graded), and the last part says what happens after that.

**1. IMPORTANT DATES 2025-26**

October 3, 2025, 4pm

*Annotated bibliography and optional thesis prospectus due to your advisor (critical only)*

You will complete a substantial annotated bibliography to help guide your research, which will be reviewed by your advisor. They will make suggestions or direct you to other faculty who can help you fill in gaps. Depending on where you are in the conception of your thesis project, your advisor may also require that you write a prospectus. Submit these documents directly to your advisor(s).

December 5, 2025, 4pm

*First chapter or equivalent (about 20pp.) due to your advisor (critical & creative)*

Your advisor must confirm that you have turned this work in in order to submit a grade for English 99r; it will not be evaluated by others. Many thesis writers have completed a first chapter or equivalent earlier in the term; if this is the case and your advisor has read it, you need not submit another chapter at this point.

February 19, 2026, 4pm

*Thesis titles, abstract, format, and page count estimate due to Lauren (creative)*

Your CREATIVE THESIS ABSTRACT should tell people who might want to read your thesis, or might consider reading your thesis, what your thesis is about, what texts you've been inspired by during its writing, and what formal strategies you've adopted.

"Format" can be a play, collection of poems, novella, etc.

*Thesis titles and abstract due to Lauren (critical)*

Your CRITICAL THESIS ABSTRACT should tell people who might want to read your thesis, or might consider reading your thesis, what you claim and what your thesis is about. It should likely contain a thesis statement, a capsule or nut version of your argument, along with a sentence or two making clear what works you address, what methods you use, what kind of argument you make, or what existing debates you expect to address (e.g. eighteenth century novels, queer theory, English-and-Classics, phenomenology, the history of poetry). It should be no more than 200 words long. Many are shorter.

\*Note: it is okay if your thesis titles change a bit between 2/19 and 3/9. We use this requested information to determine appropriate faculty readers for your project.

March 9 2026, 4pm

*Final senior thesis due* (critical and creative)

Submit the final product (!) to the English Department; please follow the format standards described below (for a critical thesis) or whatever format standards the work requires, keeping in mind the standards below as norms (for a creative thesis). The *Senior Reception* follows the thesis deadline, in the Thompson Room, Barker Center.

Reading Period 2026, May 4-6

*Oral examinations scheduled* for those thesis writers who might be candidates for the *summa cum laude* degree.

\*Note for **JOINT CONCENTRATORS**: you must follow the deadlines and formatting/style guidelines of your primary concentration. If English is your allied concentration, please obtain the thesis deadlines and guidelines of your primary concentration and share them with Lauren Bimmler, via email.

## 2. FORMAT AND LENGTH

We require that all critical theses come to us in a uniform format; this format helps us treat them fairly and equally, helps us keep track of them, and might help you proofread and otherwise put the thesis into final form.

We also have a **length requirement**. Please take it seriously. **Critical** theses will normally be in the range of 12,000-15,000 words, not including appendices, footnotes, bibliography etc. If your critical thesis is nearing 20,000 words, we ask that your advisor include a brief note confirming his/her approval of the longer-than-normal length. **Critical theses longer than 20,000 words will not be accepted.**

For **creative** theses, the department requires approximately 35-50 pages for poetry, 70-100 pages for fiction and nonfiction, 60-90 pages for a play, 90-120 pages for a screenplay, and 60 script pages (comprised of either 1 one-hour pilot or 2 half-hour episodes) plus a 5-7 page treatment for TV/episodic theses. Permission of the department is required for theses that will be significantly shorter or longer than these guidelines. Students who are submitting a novel excerpt: please include a paragraph that gives a basic plot summary and places the excerpt in context. You do not need to include a detailed outline or synopsis. Your readers just need a sense of the world they're entering into and where the excerpt falls within the larger project (Are these the first 70-80 pages? Or is the excerpt starting a few chapters in?)

On the deadline, submit your final thesis **electronically** in two ways: (1) email a Word version (critical) or Word/PDF version (creative) of your thesis to the department c/o Lauren Bimmler, [lbimmler@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:lbimmler@fas.harvard.edu); and (2) use the provided link [to be emailed] to submit directly to our electronic database. When submitting this form, you will also be asked to attest to the Harvard College Honor Code and indicate whether you'll allow the department to use your thesis in the future for advising and reference purposes for other concentrators. To access this submission form, you will need to be logged into your Harvard credentials. For best results, we recommend opening the forms in Google Chrome and Microsoft Edge browsers. **Please be sure to submit your thesis through both of these avenues; it allows us to do an important cross-check of receipt of your final projects.**

We do not require hard-copy submissions of your final thesis. We do, however, have a limited supply of the famous black thesis binders in the department, and you are welcome to borrow one for the traditional “I just finished my thesis!” photo on the Widener steps or in front of Barker.

You must, of course, **document your sources properly**; you can find guides to documentation in Harvard’s Handbook for Students, in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Footnotes, endnotes, appendices, bibliography, etc. should consistently follow either MLA or Chicago standards. Please proofread. Don’t spoil your brilliant ideas with typos.

[Note: Both MLA and Chicago exist in multiple editions that can be quite different from each other, so it is important to ask your advisor early on which edition to use, and to be aware of the distinctions when you use citation-generating tools. For more questions on citation style, contact our library liaison, Rita Soenksen, [rita\\_soenksen@harvard.edu](mailto:rita_soenksen@harvard.edu).]

Please do remember that even where a source is noted, concealed quotations and extended paraphrases that read as though the ideas were your own are considered plagiarism. Discuss this issue thoroughly with your advisor and make every effort to avoid even the appearance of an undocumented borrowing.

If you wish to include an acknowledgments page—you don’t need one; we don’t expect one—place it at the end.

### 3. ADVICE FOR WRITERS AND ADVISORS

The senior thesis will be, for most of you, the longest and most ambitious critical, scholarly or creative work you have done so far; plan early, set aside time, and save your energy so as to get the most out of it.

**Meet regularly** with your advisor(s) throughout the fall term, as well as in early spring. If you have a graduate student advisor (critical thesis writers only) as well as a faculty advisor, you should meet with them both. In general, you should meet with your advisor **at least every two weeks** throughout the fall; you will meet more frequently as the deadline approaches. Many advisors meet **every week** throughout the year. Do not let frequent meetings become a substitute for reading and writing, however; you should be able to show, at each meeting, what you’ve done—in research or writing—since the last one.

**Write frequently and save everything.** All critical thesis writers have research still to do; you’ll be researching as you work—but you must not postpone writing till late in the fall, much less till “all” your research is done (it will never feel “done”). Make notes, save the notes, start drafting your preliminary ideas, and start outlining potential arguments or paragraph-length thoughts, in October at the latest. That way you’ll have time to revise. Many thesis writers try to write something thesis-related every single day: at the least, you should try to find time every day to do *something* thesis-related, even if it’s “only” reading a book or an article and making notes. Don’t wait to feel “inspired” before sitting down to write, revise or read. Sometimes you *become inspired* only after you begin working.

**Make yourself a calendar and stick to it. Create smaller, even weekly, deadlines with your advisor.** What are you going to read when? When will you give up on topic A and move on to topic B, which your thesis also requires? You may find your ideas changing as you work—most writers do—but you should be able to compare your progress to a calendar anyway: **don’t wait till**

**everything's perfect.** It never will be. Remember that having a chapter drafted isn't the same as having it perfected; **leave time to revise**, and **save time late** for proofreading, and for rewriting, either to make your sentences better or to reflect changes in what you want to argue, changes in what you believe. Writing a thesis is never quite linear; arguments made in Chapter 2 can—and should—make you rethink, change or hone claims in Chapter 1. The earlier you draft your chapters, the more time you'll have to fix them if you catch mistakes, or if you change your mind.

**Make sure your thesis has a thesis** (if it is a critical thesis): a one-sentence argument that unifies your claims. If someone—faculty, student, reptile, amphibian—asks you “what are you writing about? what's your argument?” you should be able to answer with confidence. That argument may change as your work changes, but you should know as soon as possible—ideally, at the prospectus stage—what you expect that argument to be.

**Know your fields.** Within reason. If you have a topic or an author that has been studied often (Virginia Woolf, *King Lear*, etc.) figure out what the most important critical works on them are and read those works early; do not knock yourself out trying to read absolutely everything that has been written about them. If, on the other hand, you have a topic or an author that has not been studied often (sonnets about the Crimean War), you may well want to read everything about it. You might start by reading the most recent critics (do an MLA database search) and then seeing what those critics cite; you can and should also simply ask your advisor(s). You might also get used to using the Harvard Library's starting point for research in English:  
<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/literature>

Literary theory, by definition, can apply to many texts and authors; you should have a sense early on of what theorists or models or texts about literature-in-general, or texts from history, philosophy, neurology, etc., can help you make your argument. Again, ask your advisor, and **seek other faculty advice**: we are all here to help, especially if and when your advisor cannot. The proposal and prospectus are ways for you to get that advice.

**Remember your audience.** Successful senior theses (critical and creative) regularly turn into published articles or books, but as long as your thesis is a thesis, it's going to be read and evaluated by professors of English at Harvard. We are conversant with well-known literary works; we may need you to introduce lesser-known authors or texts. We recognize technical terms but might appreciate explanations. A thesis on George Herbert might be evaluated by one professor who wrote a book on that poet, and by another who writes primarily about Victorian novelists. Do not take up a lot of space introducing ideas that are not yours and that we will probably regard as familiar; do, however, show that you know what they mean. Again, your advisor can help.

**Choose the structure.** Many critical theses have an introduction, two or three chapters, and a conclusion. Yours might, or might not. Choose the structure that fits your argument. You might have six short chapters, or none at all.

**Use your friends (or make new ones); use other help (within reason).** You are not the only person writing a thesis; you may not even be the only person writing a thesis in your field, in English, this year. Get beta readers; show your friends your work in progress, and use the department's opportunities to meet and get feedback from other students. Seek tutors, seniors from other departments, and other people who can keep you on track or read (small parts of) drafts. Some students organize small groups of thesis-writers to help one another keep commitments, or to answer questions.



*Magna cum laude minus*

A *magna* thesis should show the qualities of the *summa* thesis at a lower level: faultless writing, reasonably thorough coverage of scholarship; knowledge of the field beyond the subject of the thesis; and an argument that is lucid, carefully constructed, and strikingly original.

*Cum laude plus*

B+ to B-

*Cum laude*

*Cum laude minus*

Theses at this level are respectable achievements, deserving of “praise,” *laus*. Although they are at the lowest level of honors, they nevertheless exhibit work that is serious and sustained and that reflects passion for the subject. Such theses should be well written; they should show good coverage of the scholarship; they should display at least some knowledge beyond their immediate subject; and they should advance an argument that is at least interesting.

Not worthy of honors

Merely writing a thesis does not entitle a student to a *cum laude minus* grade. If a thesis is evidently written in haste, or carelessly written; if it shows little or no knowledge of relevant scholarship; if it does not display knowledge of context beyond the work it addresses; and if its argument is incoherent or trivial, it should not receive honors. The student will receive credit for the work but will not be awarded honors.

## 5. ORAL EXAMS; DEPARTMENTAL AND COLLEGE HONORS

At the end of the year the English Department considers all graduating concentrators and recommends those eligible for appropriate honors. These honors in your concentration\* (sometimes called “honors in field”) are not the same as the grades you receive on your thesis, but your thesis grades affect them. (For double concentrators, the concentration you choose as your “honors field” is the entity responsible for this process and this designation.

If the Latin grades on your thesis and your concentration GPA make you eligible for a recommendation of highest honors from the concentration, you will be asked to take an **oral exam**. (You may refuse, but then you can’t graduate with highest honors in English.) To be eligible a senior must have 1) a concentration GPA of 3.80 or higher and 2) an average of thesis readings of *magna plus* or higher.

If you are taking an oral exam, we will ask you to submit, two weeks beforehand if at all possible, a **list** of the works you have read in your English classes, along with other literary works that you’d like to discuss, and a separate list of papers you have written. We will ask you about these works, about these papers, and about the connections among them; we want, not total recall, but wide knowledge of some literary fields, as well as evidence of acuity about some things that were *not* part of your thesis.

The examination is graded with the same Latin designations as the thesis and will be used by the faculty, in conjunction with the concentration GPA and thesis grades, to arrive at a final departmental degree recommendation.

In May of each year the full department faculty meets to determine departmental honors, also referred to as “honors in field.” There are four categories: no honors, honors, high honors, and highest honors. (These honors go to the student, not to the thesis.) A further purpose of this meeting is to provide recommendations to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, which decides the level

of Latin honors (*cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude*) on the basis of the student's departmental recommendation and overall academic record.

The determination of Latin honors at the College level is limited to a percentage of the graduating class, roughly as follows: 4-5% *summa cum laude*, 15% *magna cum laude*, and 30% *cum laude*, such that the total of all three types of degrees represents slightly less than 50% of the graduating class.

New cumulative GPA cutoffs will be determined for each graduating class. For students receiving a November or a March degree, the college applies the cutoffs established for the previous May degrees. For details on this process, you should review the FAS Handbook for Students. Questions should be directed to the Registrar's Office or to a student's Resident Dean.

Prepared on Sept 16 2013 by Stephanie Burt and Lauren Bimmler with the assistance of the department, from an earlier version by Katherine Boutry. Minor revisions were made by Andrew Warren on August 25, 2016 and on September 1, 2017.