

MA Creative Writing Thesis Checklist

All English graduate students must complete a thesis or capstone project for the M.A. degree. This document gives you all the necessary information. (The capstone information is at the very end.)

Consult the English Department website and the thesis website from the USA Graduate School for more specific information and forms:

<http://www.southalabama.edu/colleges/artsandsci/english/grad/index.html>

<http://www.southalabama.edu/graduatemajors/graduateschool/thesis.html>

Creative Thesis option

Students in the Creative Writing concentration may choose to write a thesis. The creative thesis is a substantial body of work of fiction (including screenwriting), creative non-fiction, poetry or a combination:

1. Creative Manuscript (Required Core)

- ☐ Manuscript is complete and submission-ready (not workshop draft quality)
- ☐ Meets program length requirements (typically first 60-65 pages for fiction and creative nonfiction with a 500-word summary of the entire work; 40-45 pages for poetry; 120-130 pages for a feature-length script; 60 pages for a one-hour TV show or the first two 30-minute episodes with a series bible that consists of 10-12 pages detailing the main characters and the narrative arc of the next seasons)
- ☐ Fully revised for clarity, structure, and coherence
- ☐ Consistent point of view, tense, tone, and style throughout
- ☐ Clear structural organization (chapters, stories, sections, or sequences)
- ☐ No unresolved fragments, orphaned sections, or missing transitions
- ☐ Final draft reflects intentional artistic choices rather than exploratory drafting

2. Thesis Abstract

- ☐ 1 page maximum in length (Please see the graduate college thesis formatting template.)
- ☐ Clearly describes the creative manuscript and identifies genre, form, and structural approach
- ☐ States central themes or concerns
- ☐ Written in formal, professional academic language (not promotional or evaluative)
- ☐ Free of plot summary overload; concise and conceptual rather than exhaustive

3. Critical Essay / Craft Reflection (with Revision Component)

- ☐ 15–20 pages double-spaced

Critical/Craft Component

- ☐ Situates the work in relevant literary or artistic context (authors, traditions, influences)
- ☐ Demonstrates awareness of craft decisions (structure, voice, POV, form, style)
- ☐ Engages seriously with creative writing discourse (not purely personal reflection)
- ☐ Shows understanding of genre conventions and/or how the work conforms to or resists them

Revision Component (integrated into this essay)

- ☐ Clearly explains how the manuscript evolved from earlier drafts
- ☐ Identifies specific revisions and why they were made
- ☐ Demonstrates decision-making process (what was changed and what was preserved)
- ☐ Shows development of artistic judgment over time
- ☐ Connects revision choices to craft principles, not just intuition

4. Works Cited / Bibliography (12-15 sources)

- ☐ Includes all critical, theoretical, or literary sources referenced in the essay
- ☐ Formatted consistently in MLA style
- ☐ All in-text citations correctly match bibliography entries

5. Formatting & Submission Standards

- ☐ 12-point readable font (e.g., Times New Roman)
- ☐ Double-spaced prose (single-spacing only where appropriate, e.g., poetry formatting)
- ☐ 1-inch margins on all sides
- ☐ Consistent page numbering throughout document
- ☐ Your work should be formatted to the graduate college requirements for your defense using the available template

Further examples of how you can approach your critical essay, with genre specifics:

NOVEL

1. A one-page description of the novel's main character(s) and central conflict.
2. Description of the structure of the novel.
3. Reasoning for the point-of-view of the novel.
4. Explanation of why you chose this particular subject.
5. Craft analysis of two to three works within your genre, and how they have specifically contributed to this novel.
6. Was additional research required? If so, describe the research process. What sources were used?
7. Which elements of craft are most important to this particular project? Discuss at least three (e.g., Imagery, Voice, Character, Setting, Story etc.).

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

- Same as novel with this additional question: How did the facts influence how you wrote this work (e.g., the structure)?

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

1. How do you see the stories as connected? In what way do they belong together in this single manuscript?
2. Describe some of the structural decisions within a few of the individual stories and the reasoning behind them.
3. Explain why certain themes emerge more than others and why the writer chose these particular stories to tell.
4. Craft analysis of two to three seminal works within your genre, and how they have specifically contributed to your stories.
5. Was additional research required? If so, describe the research process. What sources were used?
6. Which elements of craft were most important to you as you drafted these stories? Choose at least three (e.g., Imagery, Voice, Character, Setting, Story etc.).

SCREENWRITING

1. A one or two sentence description (logline) followed by a description of the story's main characters and central conflict.
2. A two-page outline of the story structure, identifying all of the primary action points and act breaks.
3. An explanation of the primary character arc(s). What does the main character want? What is s/he up against? How does s/he change throughout the story?
4. Explanation of why you chose this particular story to tell.
5. Craft analysis of two-three seminal works within your genre, and how they have specifically contributed to your stories.
6. Was additional research required? If so, describe the research process. What sources were used?
7. Which elements of technique were most important to you as you drafted this screen play? Choose at least three (e.g., Imagery, Voice, Character, Setting, Story etc.).

POETRY

1. Provide a detailed statement about your subject matter and why you chose to write about these subjects.
2. Discuss the poetic forms you employ and how form relates to content.
3. Which other craft choices, such as persona, metaphor, and associative play are featured in your thesis? Why did you make these choices?
4. How is the thesis structured and unified (theme, form, craft, language)? What organizational choices were made in the ordering and sectioning of the poems?
5. Craft analysis of two to three seminal works within your genre, and how they have specifically contributed to your poems.
6. Put your writing in conversation with at least two secondary texts on craft or writing theory.

PROCESS

<http://www.southalabama.edu/colleges/artsandsci/english/grad/creativewriting.html>

As soon as you enter the program: meet with the Graduate Coordinator, Dr. John Halbrooks, and the Director of Creative Writing, Dr. Jocelyn Cullity, to discuss your plans in graduate school.

Attend our mandatory fall thesis workshop.

Thesis Overview

Students must successfully complete an oral thesis defense and submit the final thesis by the Graduate School deadline to graduate in a given semester. For Creative Writing students, the thesis defense serves as the Comprehensive Examination.

Please note that at South, your final semester may feel very short, given the need to submit your work to your thesis committee by late February / early March. Students are often also completing course work in their final semester. You may thus want to consider the following:

Instead of defending in March, you do have the option of defending closer to the end of April and graduating in the summer. You can still walk in May but you will be processed as graduating in the summer. Speak to Dr. Cullity if you'd like more information about this. This option buys you more time!

Getting Started: Your Thesis Committee

The thesis is typically undertaken after most coursework has been completed.

1. Select a thesis chair from the English Department in your second semester.

Develop a schedule and general plan for completing the thesis with your chosen thesis chair. Thesis projects often grow out of coursework, independent reading, or ongoing creative work. Students should discuss potential projects with faculty as early as possible.

Meet with the Graduate Coordinator to review requirements, deadlines, and potential mentors.

Plan for the thesis to require at least two semesters of work. Students wishing to graduate on schedule should begin planning after completing approximately **18 credit hours of coursework at the latest**. If you are full-time, you should be planning your committee in the second semester of your time with us.

2. In consultation with the chair, form a thesis committee consisting of:

- the thesis chair (guides the project, reviews drafts before they are shared with the committee, and evaluates thesis progress)
- two additional English graduate faculty members (can provide feedback throughout the process)
- one Graduate Faculty member, an outside reader, from a department outside English who participates in the review process and/or defense

After all committee members have agreed to serve, submit the Thesis Committee Form to the Graduate Coordinator

Submit the EH 599 Form and Thesis Committee Form. These are available forms on our English site. Once you have approval, you must register for thesis hours through PAWS in the normal registration period.) Give these forms to Shawn Ash's successor and keep copies for yourself.

Please note that you should also follow the requirements for the thesis that are explained in the Graduate School guidelines:

<http://www.southalabama.edu/graduatemajors/graduateschool/thesis.html>

3. Students are encouraged to begin developing thesis projects in creative writing courses and workshops well before their final year.

Thesis Hours

Creative Writing students **complete three credit hours** of thesis work during their final semester of coursework.

Students who do not finish the thesis as planned may enroll in additional thesis hours, though those hours do not count toward the degree. Thesis credit expires after two years. Students must be registered for at least one credit hour during the semester in which they defend the thesis.

During fall term / two semesters prior to graduation:

- Develop a thesis prospectus with the guidance of the chair and committee. On a traditional academic schedule, it's best to meet with your chair before the summer to discuss the prospectus so that you are ready to meet with your committee in the first weeks of fall (two semesters before you graduate). Work on your prospectus over the summer break.
- Complete prospectus and hold prospectus meeting during the very first weeks of the semester. Submit approved prospectus with signature sheet.
- Ask your thesis chair for the thesis template form which will provide you with the correct formatting for your thesis which should be complete for the defense.
- Schedule defense with the agreement of your chair and committee.
- Follow directions online to submit the EH 599 Form to enroll in thesis hours for final term.
- Follow the schedule you've set up with your thesis chair to submit the full versions of your creative work and critical introduction. You will decide upon a deadline or deadlines to submit the work to your Chair first and receive feedback. Then you will submit the complete draft, formatted for the graduate college, to your committee two weeks before the defense. At this time, your chair will complete the requirement to turn your thesis into turnitin.com.

Your final semester:

- Apply for graduation.
- Complete thesis revisions by the end of February unless you will graduate over the summer (you can still walk in May).
- Defend thesis successfully, and complete revisions.
- Meet Graduate School submission deadlines.
- Make sure you bring the two forms, the “signature page” and the “thesis/dissertation submission” form (available at the Graduate School site) for signatures to the defense.

Creative Writing Thesis Defense and Deadlines

The defense usually consists of a brief presentation on or discussion of the project by the student, a question & answer period with the public present, a closed session with only the student and the committee present, and a closed meeting of the committee in which the outcome is determined as each committee member votes on the thesis. Generally, the thesis director will not allow a student to schedule the defense if the project is not in an acceptable state to complete the degree.

- In order to graduate on time, you must provide committee members with the final version of the thesis at least TWO WEEKS prior to the defense date. Please be sure to also check the Graduate School’s deadlines while deciding upon your defense date.
- To schedule a defense, you must contact all committee members to set up a one-hour period when they can attend. You must then contact the English department staff to reserve a room during that time. You must also contact the graduate coordinator with your scheduling information, so the defense can be announced to the Graduate School and the department.
- At the defense, faculty must sign an approval form to record their votes, and the Chair and student must sign to attest that the thesis is not plagiarized. The student is responsible for bringing a prepared copy of this form to the defense. These two forms (the “signature page” and the “thesis/dissertation submission” form) are available at the Graduate School site.
- You may also get signatures on a properly formatted title page (to be bound in the document) at this time. Please include the Graduate Director and the Dean of the Graduate School on your signature page and paperwork.
- After you successfully defend your thesis, make all needed revisions completed prior to the Graduate School’s First Submission deadline. Students should allow a minimum of 1-2 weeks before the First Submission Deadline to complete these changes. This is a “first submission” only in the sense that the Graduate School is checking formatting; **otherwise, it is a FINAL copy**. Graduate School thesis deadlines:

<http://www.southalabama.edu/graduatemajors/graduateschool/resources/calendar.pdf>

- Plan to meet with the Graduate Director who must approve the thesis by signing the “signature page” and the “thesis/dissertation submission” form **before** submission to the Graduate School on the First Submission Deadline. Meeting with the Graduate Director will be your last step before you submit the thesis to the Graduate School. Submit the Signature page signed by committee, your thesis with changes made and formatting correct, as per our template, and the Graduate School Thesis / Dissertation Submission Form signed by Committee Chair and Department Chair. All of this should be submitted together. Please note that the Dean of the Graduate School will sign your “signature page” after you have submitted everything to the Graduate School.
- After submitting the thesis to the Graduate School, you must make any formatting changes required by the Graduate School and meet the university deadlines and fee schedule.
- Please be careful to attend to the Graduate School’s deadlines. Thank you!

University of South Alabama
Creative Writing Capstone Option

Differences between a thesis and capstone project for the MA in English, concentration in Creative Writing:

Thesis

The more traditional graduate culminating project. It includes:

- A substantial manuscript of original creative work:
 - a novel or novella excerpt
 - a collection of short stories
 - a poetry manuscript
 - a creative nonfiction manuscript
 - A film or TV script
- A critical introduction explaining the work's context, influences, craft choices, and research.

Other Characteristics:

- Generally longer and more substantial
- Requires a formal thesis committee
- Includes an oral defense
- Is filed with the graduate school and becomes part of the university's official record
- Serves as the program's comprehensive examination

Capstone Project

Our capstone is designed to be broader and more flexible. The collection of work presented must meet the comprehensive objectives of the creative writing concentration under the supervision of a capstone mentor.

A creative writing capstone might include (depending on the students' goals):

- A smaller creative manuscript. The capstone can be a smaller collection of fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, or other genres, which grows out of graduate coursework at South
- A public reading or performance
- An editing, publishing, or literary arts project
- Syllabi that illustrate the student's pedagogies (useful for teachers)
- A literary journal project
- A community-engagement or arts-administration project
- A combination of creative work and reflective writing

Other Characteristics:

- Usually emphasizes application and synthesis rather than producing a thesis-length manuscript
- Does not require submission to the graduate school as a formal thesis
- Involves a presentation rather than a traditional defense
- Allows students interested in publishing, teaching, editing, arts administration, or community writing to demonstrate professional skills
- Students who choose the capstone option must take an additional course in order to complete the program requirement of 36 hours
- In their last semester of graduate study, students take three semester hours of Directed Study credit toward the capstone requirement, leaving a minimum of thirty-three hours of credit to be accomplished in course work
- Each capstone must include an annotated bibliography, a collection of creative work, and a presentation in the department. In order to qualify for graduation, all capstone work must be completed by April 15 (spring) or November 15 (fall) and receive the approval of the capstone mentor and the Graduate Committee. Departmental presentations will be scheduled between the deadline and the end of semester

Procedures for the capstone

Students must submit a [capstone form](#) to the Graduate Coordinator for approval by the Graduate Committee by October 15 or May 15 the semester before the capstone. Capstone classes are conducted in fall and spring. Upon approval, students will register for one semester of EH 598: Directed Study—Capstone (3 cr.) with a mentor. The English Graduate Committee must approve the final project.

1. Collection of Creative Work

For this option, the student selects successful creative writings from their graduate classes and, working with a mentor, revises and polishes the work toward publication (25-30 pages)

Fall/Spring Schedule:

- The student must meet with the approved mentor during the first week of the semester
- Bibliography of influential writers is discussed and approved at this time

September 1/February 1:

- Annotated Bibliography (6-7 pages) due to mentor
- Proposal for revisions due to mentor

October 1/March 1:

- Revisions due to mentor for feedback

November 1/April 1:

- Final collection submitted to mentor
- Student works with mentor on formal presentation

November 15/April 15:

- Completed capstone submitted to Graduate Coordinator for approval by Graduate Committee
- Student makes a 15-minute formal presentation at a scheduled department forum