

MA English Program

Guide to the Culminating  
Thesis Essay  
(ENGL 791)

Spring 2014

The culminating thesis essay should represent your strongest scholarly work in the English MA Program. It is to consist of an essay totaling about 7,000 words (i.e., 20-25 pages) with an up-to-date and extensive bibliography of secondary resources. In all but the most exceptional of cases, your essay will be a revision of a paper you wrote for an earlier class during your time in the program.

### **A. Signing up for ENGL 791/Finding a Faculty Advisor**

Your culminating thesis essay is written under the supervision of a department faculty member within the context of a required three-credit essay writing course: ENGL 791. Most students register for ENGL 791 during their final semester as a matriculated student. It is possible to register during another semester provided you have already taken ENGL 636 and ENGL 701, the two required courses that are also prerequisites for ENGL 791.

Please note: ENGL 791 is only offered during the fall and spring semesters, not during the summer. If you plan to graduate in September you must register for ENGL 791 during the spring semester.

The Director of Graduate Studies will register you for ENGL 791 once you have:

#### **Found a full-time faculty member who has agreed to serve as your essay advisor**

Your essay advisor should be a full-time member of the English faculty and a scholar in the field in which your essay topic falls. Because you're likely revising a paper you wrote for a class earlier in the program, it's a good idea to ask the class instructor whether he or she might be willing to work with you.

Contact information and profiles of all full-time English faculty with their fields of interest may be found on the English Department's website:

<http://www.qc.cuny.edu/Academics/Degrees/DAH/English/FacultyStaff/Pages/FullTimeFaculty.aspx>

You should approach your potential advisor the semester before you plan to register for ENGL 791. If you're having difficulty finding an advisor that meets your essay's field of interest, contact the Director of Graduate Studies.

#### **Submitted a thesis sign-up form to the Director of Graduate Studies (a copy of this form is included at the end of this guide)**

The thesis sign-up form asks you for your contact information, the name of your advisor and reader, a working title, and a 250-300 word topic description of your essay. All information should be typed and proof-read carefully.

You will be asked to revise and resubmit your form if your topic description contains mechanical or formatting errors, or (especially) if the ideas are too broad or vague to be workable as a 20-25 page essay. It's always a good idea to send a draft version of your topic description to your thesis advisor before submitting your form to the Director of Graduate Studies.

A copy of your approved thesis sign-up form is retained by the department. You should also keep a copy of this form for your own records.

## B. Recent Culminating Essay Titles

These titles represent a sampling of recent culminating thesis essays submitted for the MA degree.

Curious Creatures: The Animal Other in the Menagerie of Elizabeth Bishop.

A Path Denied: Spenser's Treatment of Lesbianism in *The Faerie Queene*.

The Power of the Unbound Vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*

Disruptive Temporality in Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues*.

'Inward' and 'Outward' Readings of International Hip-Hop Movements

Affective Laboring in *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*

Mosaic of Illumination: The Parataxis of Insurrection in the Works of Walter Benjamin

The Victorian Poetess Unveiled in Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

## C. ENGL 791 – Department Deadlines/Recommended Schedule

Since English 791 largely takes the form of an independent study, there is no fixed schedule and each student makes individual arrangements with their faculty advisor. Nonetheless, you're advised to keep the following guidelines and procedures in mind as you plan out your semester:

**NOTE:** All department and college deadlines are marked in bold type. These are fixed and cannot be changed unless exceptional circumstances intervene.

### Preliminary Advising Meeting

Make sure to schedule your first meeting with your advisor during the first weeks of the semester. It doesn't matter if you haven't made much concerted progress on your essay as yet; the important thing is to start the conversation, establish a schedule for meetings (these should take place approximately every 3-4 weeks over the course of the semester), and agree upon deadlines. This may well be the first time you've worked on an essay of this magnitude or had the benefit of working closely and independently with a faculty advisor. Establishing regularly meeting times and agreeing in advance upon the work to be completed for each meeting will ensure that you do not leave your reading, writing and ruminating until the last minute.

### Your Thesis Timeline

While every writer's process is different, every writer has to have a process, and should be able to describe its stages. At the top of the next page is a standard process for writing your thesis essay, adapted from the one that Professor Kevin Ferguson uses with his 791 students.

You should expect to receive feedback after each of these steps, so consider your thesis advisor's schedule when planning out your semester.

Steps	How long will it take you?	Your dates
<b>Coming up with an idea</b>	long time	Before end of Fall 2013 semester
<b>Topic Description for 791 sign-up sheet</b>	2 weeks	Before end of Fall 2013 semester
<b>Redrafted description</b>	2-3 weeks	
<b>Annotated Bibliography</b>	2-3 weeks	
<b>Messy Draft</b>	2 week	
<b>Second Draft</b>	3-4 weeks	
<b>Final Draft</b>	3-4 weeks	Before Friday May 16

## 791 Workshops

You'll see that 791 has a scheduled meeting time of Wednesday 6:30-8:20 for the spring 2014 semester. Although we won't be meeting as a group every week, we will be meeting on the following dates. Your attendance is expected so please make sure to keep them free:

Wednesday February 5

Wednesday March 5

Wednesday April 2

We'll be using these seminar sessions to discuss the expectations for your thesis essay and, especially, to workshop your work-in-progress. The workshops are designed to help you feel part of a community of writers, offering you peer feedback and support and enabling you to share your work-in-progress with readers (both students and faculty) other than your immediate advisor.

## The Reader's Role

Your reader receives the final version of your culminating essay once it has been approved by your advisor. Some readers provide written feedback or return a marked-up copy of your essay to you; most, however, offer their critiques and comments in person during the culminating essay conference.

Your reader should ideally be a full time member of the English faculty (although part-time faculty members are sometimes willing to perform this service) and a scholar in the field or a closely related field in which your essay topic falls. You should have already listed your reader on your thesis sign-up form, but if you haven't yet found one then plan to do so as soon as the semester begins: by the end of September for the fall; the end of February for the spring. Your advisor is not responsible for finding a second reader for your essay, but you should certainly discuss with him/her who it would make most sense to ask. You can also schedule an advising meeting and discuss possible choices with the Director of Graduate Studies.

## Formatting and Proof-reading

It's important that the final version of your culminating essay be professionally presented; that is, free from typographical and mechanical errors, and formatted according to MLA or Chicago guidelines. Essays that don't meet these standards will be rejected by your advisor and reader who will ask you to revise and resubmit your work. Accurate editing and proof-reading can be a slow business, so be sure to leave yourself enough time to do a thorough job. If you're unclear about how to format your essay correctly, you should consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: The Modern Language Association, 2009). If you don't already own a copy of this handbook, it's important that you buy one. You can also review the MLA Formatting and Style Guide online at the Purdue OWL (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>).

## Cover Sheet

Your essay should have a cover sheet that follows the format set forth below.

Format for the cover (foreshortened):

Title of Paper

Student's Name  
Student's ID

Advisor:  
Reader:

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
English in the Graduate Division of Queens College of the City University of New York,  
(date)

## Culminating Essay Conference/Oral Exam

The culminating essay conference, often commonly referred to as the oral exam, typically lasts between 30-45 minutes. It takes the form of a relaxed but lively conversation among your advisor, reader(s), and yourself. Your advisor and reader(s) will likely ask you why you chose to work on your essay topic; push you to expand or clarify your essay's central arguments; ask you to summarize the whole of your project or its parts; invite you to situate your arguments in larger discourses and/or critical conversations; propose new ways of approaching your topic that may not have occurred to you; and suggest ways of strengthening or extending the scope of your claims. The conference is intended to be a constructive, enjoyable experience. It is less about demonstrating your knowledge than being willing, as a scholar talking with other scholars, to modify, explain, and expand your ideas.

The time and date of your conference is arranged to suit the schedules of your advisor, second reader, and yourself. **You must schedule your conference on or before Friday May 23 in order to graduate at the end of the Spring 2014 semester.**

**You will need to give the final version of your essay to your reader at least one week before the scheduled date of your conference. This means submitting your essay to your reader by**

**Friday May 16 at the latest.** This is so that your reader has the time carefully to read and reflect on your ideas before discussing them with you. Your reader may ask that the conference be rescheduled if he/she has not been given sufficient preparation time.

### **Thesis Approval**

**(a copy of the thesis approval form is included at the end of this guide)**

Once the conference has ended, your advisor and reader will ask that you briefly leave the room so that they can confer about your essay and assign a letter grade. Your grade is based on your essay alone and not on your performance during the essay conference which is pass/fail. It is recorded on a thesis approval form which your advisor and reader will both sign. Copies of your thesis approval form will be kept on file in the English Department and in the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies. You may also request your own copy for your records. After receiving your thesis approval form, the Director of Graduate Studies will enter your essay grade as your ENGL 791 course grade on CUNYFirst.

When your advisor and reader invite you back into the room, they may wish to discuss with you revisions that you will need to make in order for your essay to be of at least B quality and acceptable for the degree. Be sure you understand the nature and extent of the revisions you are being asked to make and establish a time frame for completing them with your advisor and reader. Your essay will not be approved and your thesis form submitted to the Dean's Office until any stipulated revisions have been made.

### **Filing for Graduation**

If this is the semester in which you plan to graduate, be aware that you must submit an application via your student record on CUNYFirst before the Registrar's deadline.

For fall 2013, the deadline is **November 1** for a February 1 degree conferral

For spring 2014, the deadline is **March 1** for a May 30 degree conferral

For the summer, the deadline is **July 1** for a September 1 degree conferral

Further information about graduation policies are available on the Registrar's webpage:

<http://www.qc.cuny.edu/registrar/graduation/Pages/GraduationPolicies.aspx>

## **D. Related Information**

### **Thesis Project**

Each year one or two students undertake a longer thesis project of around 60 pages. You need a GPA of 3.7 or higher and the consent of both the Director of Graduate Studies and your faculty adviser to pursue this option. Permission is rare and should not be taken for granted. Please set up an advising meeting with the Director of Graduate Studies if you are considering this possibility.

### **Nancy Comley Essay Prize**

Named for the long-standing Chair of the English Department, the Nancy Comley Prize was established in 2011-12 to honor the best essay produced by a graduate student in either the MA or MS. Ed/English programs. The prize is co-sponsored by English Department Faculty and by the

English Department Alumni Fund. All currently matriculated MA and MS. Ed students as well as those who had degrees conferred on February 1, 2013 are eligible to compete for the prize in 2014. Submission guidelines will be distributed in April.

### **Taking an INC**

Students who do not complete their thesis work in the semester during which they are registered for ENGL 791 will receive an incomplete (INC), a temporary grade which will be replaced by a letter grade as soon as they have submitted their essay and sat the oral exam. **If you intend to take an incomplete, please make sure to inform both your advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies of your plans.** Please also be aware that, in certain situations, it may not be possible for your advisor to continue working with you for an additional semester.

### **Filing for MAM (Maintenance of Matriculation)**

CUNY requires all graduate students to be registered in the semester in which their MA degree is awarded. If you have completed your coursework, as is typically the case when students have only their culminating thesis essay to finish from a previous semester and don't plan to register for additional classes, then you will need to file for what is known as Maintenance of Matriculation (MAM) with the Registrar's Office. For further information about MAM, please consult the Registrar's webpage:

<http://www.qc.cuny.edu/registrar/graduation/Pages/GraduationPolicies.aspx>

**ENGLISH 791**  
**SIGN-UP FORM - CULMINATING ESSAY****Student Information**

Name:

CUNY ID (8-digit):

Contact email address:

**Committee Information**

Advisor:

Reader:

**Culminating Essay**

Title of Essay:

Please offer a short (250-300 word) description of your culminating essay. Make this description as specific and focused as you can. Remember that your essay must address a literary topic, which means that it must focus on text(s) or theoretical question(s) having centrally to do with Anglophone literature or cultural studies. Without this description, your sign-up form is not complete and you will not be permitted to register for English 791.

You can type your description in the space below, or you can attach a separate page.

**Thesis Approval Form**

*All information should be typed.*

*Please send two copies of this form to the Director of Graduate Studies in English. Please also make an electronic copy and email it to the department administrator.*

**Data**

Name of candidate: \_\_\_\_\_

ID # of candidate: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of MA thesis: \_\_\_\_\_

OR title of culminating essay:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date of oral exam: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate whether the student has passed or failed oral exam:

Pass

Fail

If revisions are necessary, please specify what corrections are required:

**Signatures**

Adviser's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Adviser's name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Second reader's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Second reader's name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

(Optional) third reader's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

(Optional) third reader's name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_