

# CMS/W THESIS MANUAL

For Undergraduates Majoring in Writing (21W) and  
21E or 21S with a Writing Humanities Component

## WHAT IS A WRITING THESIS?

A Writing thesis is an independent project, spanning a full academic year, which the student initiates and develops. It represents the culmination of a student's formal undergraduate writing studies, affording extensive time for planning, writing, revision, and reworking. The completed document can take many forms.

Some writing theses are non-fiction, based on research; such theses could consist of science journalism, like a biography of a scientist or collection of substantial journalistic articles meant to communicate science to the public, or another form such as a memoir, biography, or creative non-fiction. Such theses will go beyond the usual term paper, but do not require the absolute originality of topic nor the high degree of specialization that are characteristic of doctoral research.

Students may also undertake creative writing projects for their theses. These may be in more traditional or emerging genres. For instance, a student may submit a thesis composed primarily of fiction or poetry, or may submit a stage play or screenplay. Creative writing done in digital forms is also suitable, although documentation of the project submitted in the form of a PDF is still a requirement.

Any type of writing represented in the 21W curriculum is appropriate for a thesis. Regardless of genre or subject matter, the thesis should include some discussion of how the main writing was developed; this could be several pages long and may appear as an introduction or an afterword.

There is no specific requirement pertaining to the total length of the thesis, but most submitted theses are between 40 and 80 pages.

Although theses may have a basis in work done earlier in the student's academic career, they must also represent fresh enterprises, clearly distinguishable from similar work undertaken previously. Students should not expect to receive units of thesis credit for work that has already earned credit (or is simultaneously earning credit) in classes, UROPs, or Special Topics.

Before committing to specific thesis projects, students should discuss their plans carefully with their thesis advisor or prospective thesis advisors. In addition, a thesis proposal must be submitted to the thesis advisor and academic administrator during the semester in which the student is registered for 21W.THT.

## WHO WRITES A THESIS?

Every undergraduate majoring in Writing (21W) or 21E or 21S (with 21W as the humanities component) must write a thesis.

## WHO IS THE THESIS ADVISOR?

The Thesis Advisor is a CMS/W faculty member (or, if approved, another CMS/W instructor) who aids in the development of the thesis and who eventually evaluates the completed work.

The thesis advisor is the student's mentor on the thesis project in regularly scheduled weekly or biweekly meetings. Advisors may establish a schedule of due dates for drafts and revisions such that students have time to rework and rethink their work extensively.

It is the student's responsibility to find a Thesis Advisor by contacting a member of the faculty (an assistant, associate, or full professor, senior lecturer, or professor of the practice) and asking the faculty member to serve in this role. The student's major advisor and the Academic Administrator can help with this process and can suggest faculty to contact, given the student's interests and the trajectory of their work in the Writing major.

## WHAT IS THE SCHEDULE FOR COMPLETING A WRITING THESIS?

Work on a thesis in Writing occupies an entire academic year: the fall and spring terms for May/June graduates, spring and fall terms for February graduates. In some exceptional circumstances, it is possible to undertake the two thesis subjects on a different timeline; this is subject to approval by the thesis advisor and the Academic Administrator.

The CMS/W faculty regard revision as a crucially important part of preparation of a finished document. Therefore, the first draft of the thesis is due to the advisor no later than one month into the second term of the project. Two months are reserved for revision under the guidance of the thesis advisor.

In the first term, students register for Pre-Thesis Tutorial, 21W.THT, for at least 6 units. In consultation with the Thesis Advisor, students can take this subject for 9 or even 12 units, to allow intensive research and work on drafting the document. Despite the subject title "Pre-Thesis Tutorial," this first subject should be when the main phase of thesis *writing* happens. Whatever number of units are allocated to 21W.THT, the total units of the two thesis subjects must sum to 18.

During this first semester, the student works under the guidance of the thesis advisor to define the topic and to complete a substantial part of the preparation (research, if appropriate, and a preliminary draft) for the finished version of the project. Advisors assign regular letter grades for Pre-Thesis Tutorial. With a grade of C or higher, students may register for the second term of the project.

In the second term, the student registers for Thesis, 21W.THU, for the appropriate number of units (12 units if 21W.THT was taken for 6 units). A completed full draft, if it was not delivered during 21W.THT, is due to the thesis advisor no later than one month into the term. Rethinking, reworking, and revision continues to completion under the guidance of the advisor.

Note that the student receives two distinct grades for the thesis project, one for the Pre-Thesis Tutorial in the first term, and one for the Thesis in the second term.

The schedule for the year’s work on the thesis is as follows:

## FIRST TERM SCHEDULE

May/Jun grad.:	Sep	Mid-Oct	mid-Dec (last day of classes)
Feb grad.:	Jan–Feb	mid-Mar	mid-May (last day of classes)
	register for 21W.THT	proposal form due	advisor’s Pre-Thesis grade

**PROPOSAL FORM DEADLINE:** The completed Proposal Form (at the end of this manual) should demonstrate a solid preliminary idea of the thesis project – its dimensions, limits, parts, availability of resources, schedule, and working relationship with the advisor. In almost all cases, students will include a prefatory or concluding discussion of some sort. The preliminary plans for this part of the thesis must be included in the proposal. After the Proposal Form has been approved and signed by the thesis advisor, it should be submitted to the Academic Administrator in 14N-338, Danna Solomon, | [dsolomon@mit.edu](mailto:dsolomon@mit.edu).

## SECOND TERM SCHEDULE

May/Jun grad.:	Jan-Feb	Mar 1	May 1	~last day of classes
Feb grad.:	Sep	Oct 1	Dec 1	~last day of classes
	register for 21W.THU	first draft of thesis due	final thesis due	brief oral presentation

**FINAL DEADLINE:** The revised and finished thesis is due May 1 (December 1). It is delivered digitally to the Academic Administrator and to the advisor in PDF/A-1 form along with the signature page.

**FINAL PRESENTATION:** On a single day in early May (and sometimes in early December, if there are February graduates) all thesis students will make a brief oral presentation of their theses to members of the CMS/W faculty. Thesis presentations are open the public and friends and family of Writing majors regularly attend.

## MECHANICS

Thesis writers should use appropriate means of indicating their sources. For instance, they should follow journalistic norms, if their work is journalistic, or use the Modern Language Association (MLA) Handbook as the guide in cases where that style of citation is appropriate.

**LENGTH:** Thesis length can vary considerably. Most Writing theses have been at least 40 double-spaced pages. Thesis projects in creative writing — particularly those that are stage plays — may go well beyond eighty pages. Extreme brevity, or extreme length, will need to be justified by the writer and the thesis advisor.

**SIGNATURE PAGE:** Follow the sample form at the end of this document.

**TITLE PAGE:** Follow the sample form at the end of this document.

**COPYRIGHT:** Notice of copyright (in the student's name) and the student's license to MIT should appear on the title page.

**ABSTRACT:** Every thesis must contain a one-page abstract (two or three paragraphs, single-spaced). This applies to creative writing theses as well as those based on research. In the case of a creative writing thesis, rather than summarizing the work, the abstract should be a very brief descriptive text explaining important aspects of the project.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:** The table of contents should identify the principal parts of the thesis, with appropriate page numbers. The table of contents is not a highly detailed outline.

## PRODUCTION

The Specifications for Thesis Preparation document (<http://libraries.mit.edu/archives/thesis-specs/>) is MIT's official standard for thesis production. If there is any discrepancy between the Archive document and this manual, the Archives publication must be followed.

**MARGINS:** Margins must be an inch-and-a-quarter on the left-hand (binding) side (more if the binding method necessitates it), and an inch on all other sides.

**SPACING:** The body of the text should be double-spaced unless a particular genre of writing has other conventions for spacing — poems, for example, will not be double-spaced. The abstract, footnotes, block-form quotations, and bibliographical entries should be single-spaced.

**PAGINATION:** All of the pages of the thesis, starting with the title page, should be numbered in one continuous series in the same place on each page.

**SIGNATURES:** The separate signature page requires three signatures: the author's, the thesis advisor's, and that of the Head of CMS/W. There should be NO SIGNATURES on the title page as per Archives guidelines.

### TO SUBMIT:

At the final deadline the student must electronically submit the following to the Academic Administrator:

- A PDF/A-1 of your final thesis document (with no signatures)
- A signed signature page

**FILE NAMING:** Files must be named according to this scheme:  
authorLastName-kerberosID-degree-dept-year-type.ext

Examples:

Thesis PDF: macdonald-mssimon-sb-cmsw-2024-thesis.pdf

Signature Page: macdonald-mssimon-sb-cmsw-2024-sig.pdf

**LIBRARIES:** This form must be completed by the day of graduation: <https://thesis-submit.mit.edu/>. The information you provide must match the title page and abstract of your thesis.

## **OTHER MATTERS**

**USE OF HUMANS AS EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECTS:** Authors of thesis projects that might in any way be construed as involving the use of people as experimental subjects must secure clearance from MIT's Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES). <https://couhes.mit.edu/>

**MEETING THESIS RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION COSTS:** Students are responsible for meeting all costs involved in the research and physical production of the thesis. In extraordinary cases, where special circumstances or the scope and institutional value of the project warrant, it may be possible to arrange some support, through other limited sources of funds, for necessary travel, special materials and equipment, etc. Students who think they have a valid claim for such funding should contact the Academic Administrator, Danna Solomon, [dsolomon@mit.edu](mailto:dsolomon@mit.edu).

**MIT CMS/W Writing Major**  
**SENIOR THESIS PROPOSAL**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Thesis Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Working Title of Thesis: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your thesis topic as fully and exactly as possible, indicating dimensions, limits, parts, specific major sources and anticipated schedule. Outline your topic selection process and intended approach to material (what questions you will deal with and how you intend to cover them). The more detail you provide the better.

If the thesis requires a prefatory or concluding discussion, you must include preliminary plans for this part of it.

(continue over)

[Student's description of thesis topic, continued]

In the space below, the thesis advisor should assess the thesis topic as proposed, evaluate the student's engagement with the project, and note any problems perceived with its feasibility.

Thesis Advisor's signature of approval:

Date of Approval:

PLEASE RETURN TO THE ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATOR, 14N-338 | dsolomon@mit.edu



[sample signature page]

**[The Title of the Thesis]**

by

**[Author]**

SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES / WRITING IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN WRITING AT  
THE  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

[[May or June, September, or February] YEAR]

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Signature of Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Program in Comparative Media Studies / Writing

[Thesis completion date]

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_

[Thesis advisor name]

[Thesis advisor title]

Thesis Advisor

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_

Eric Klopfer

Head, Comparative Media Studies / Writing

[sample title page]

**[Thesis title as submitted to registrar]**

by

**[Author]**

SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES / WRITING IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN WRITING AT  
THE  
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[{May or June, September, or February} YEAR]

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Authored By: [Author's name]

[Author's department name] (align with the beginning of the author's name from the previous line)

[Date thesis is to be presented to the department] (align with the beginning of the author's name from the first line)

Certified by: [Thesis Advisor's full name as it appears in the MIT catalog]

[Thesis Advisor's department as it appears in the MIT catalog] (align with the beginning of the advisor's name from the previous line), Thesis advisor

Accepted by: Eric Klopfer

Head, Comparative Media Studies / Writing

[sample abstract page]

***[The Title]***

by

[author]

Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies / Writing on [Date] in Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science in Writing

**ABSTRACT**

[The abstract should go here. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.]

Thesis Advisor: [Advisor's name]

Title: [Advisor's title]