

A Brief Guide to Getting Started on a Thesis

The capstone project in the MA program in American Studies customarily takes the form of a written thesis. However, because of the range of professional goals of students in the program and the range of disciplines on which they draw varies so widely, we have made the guidelines for the thesis process as flexible as possible.

Customarily, students submit a document the length of a publishable academic article (10-12,000 words), but some have done work in other formats, like documentary films or comics, for instance.

The thesis advisor and the program director will decide whether the work is passable, and so students should address these questions of format early in the process of conceptualizing the thesis.

What follows is a guide to the thesis process, roughly laid out temporally in the sequence that the work should take place.

Finding an advisor:

The majority of students find their advisors from among the professors who have taught them in class. It is much easier for the faculty to agree to take on this (additional, uncompensated) work if they have already begun communicating to the student their expectations and goals as an instructor. So students should be thinking about each of their instructors as potential mentors throughout their coursework, and should be thinking about matching potential projects to potential advisors throughout their coursework. (IMPORTANT: adjunct faculty cannot advise graduate student MA theses; your professor's faculty page should say "assistant, associate, or full professor," if you're confused about this, please consult the director).

Students should approach potential thesis advisors in the semester before they plan to write the thesis. They should also prepare a proposal and calendar for the work of the thesis for when they approach faculty as potential advisors (see below the shape and content of these materials).

Enrollment for CSER 4999:

Credit for the thesis takes the form of a course, CSER 4999 "Supervised Individual Research." This course is functionally an independent study—a mark on students' transcripts of an agreement between the student and the faculty mentor and the place where the advisor will mark the grade on the final thesis. Once students have made an agreement with an advisor, they should notify the program director, giving the advisor's name and the number of points (1-4) they need to reach the required 30 to graduate. The program director will then contact the registrar to have the course generated.

It is important to note that there are no formal stipulations about meeting times attached to CSER 4999. Some students meet their faculty advisors very frequently throughout the semester, others infrequently. Mentoring relationships of

this kind take a number of different forms, and faculty have variable ideas about what works best for them.

Proposal and Calendar:

Students should assemble a proposal and a calendar to bring to faculty who they hope will advise their work. The proposal should be no longer than 1000 words. It should outline the argument, intervention, methods, and archives the project will employ with as much specificity and efficiency as possible. It should project the claims and supporting evidence that justify the originality of the thesis in economic, clear, and purposive language. A proposal might but does not have to include a short bibliography (perhaps separating primary and secondary sources if that distinction is meaningful for the project).

The calendar for the thesis should work backwards from the date grades are due for graduating students (see registrar's website), allowing time for the advisor to do the grading. It should include a schedule for rough drafts, and other smaller tasks related to the project; these might include the formal components of any research paper (an outline, an annotated bibliography, a literature review, etc.) and or it might include tasks related to the research specifically (interviews, readings of particularly important and difficult books, etc.). The more effectively you can break the project into tasks and distribute those tasks across a calendar, the more manageable the project will be.

Originality:

Whatever form it takes, an MA thesis project should strive for originality. But this quality is elusive. One might find it located in the subject matter of the thesis; a thesis might examine a cultural artifact or set of artifacts that have not received much scholarly attention. One might find it in the approach to a more studied over archive; perhaps a number of people have written about a novel or a historical event, but they haven't noticed its susceptibility to some new method. You should be able to identify and clearly delineate the originality of a research project (both at the outset and at the end, even if your sense of the project's originality has changed significantly since you started it!).

In the context of interdisciplinary work, originality often has a combinatory dimension. Beyond the question of whether the object of the inquiry has received significant attention or not, the originality of American and Ethnic Studies projects often rests on the juxtaposition of approaches and methods. For instance, Dr. Vanessa Díaz (Chicano/a Studies, Loyola Marymount) has done research on undocumented workers among the paparazzi photographers of Los Angeles, suggesting that the production of Hollywood celebrity rests on the labor of precarious Latino migrants. This project involves thinking across studies of immigration and studies of the visual culture of celebrity. It tells an interesting story, but also illuminates a connection between two seemingly disconnected areas of inquiry.