

# Graduate English Guidelines: Supervisory Committee, Special Fields Examination, and Thesis (from Topic to Submission)

**Graduate English Department  
University of Toronto**

*(This document was produced using the SGS Thesis MS Word Template available here:  
<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/academic-progress/program-completion/formatting/> )*

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# 1 Introduction

The purpose of this document is to familiarize PhD candidates, supervisors, and committee members with current practices adopted by the English Department. These practices are reviewed frequently and must remain adaptable to the demands of particular thesis projects. Accordingly, this document will be modified as necessary, and to this end we invite suggestions from its users.

## 2 The Thesis Topic

The choice of topic is critical for the candidate.

Choose a subject that excites your curiosity and engages your interests and developing expertise. All students, including those who enter the program with ideas about a thesis topic, are advised to test their ideas further against the current state of scholarship and available resources. Before making the intense commitment that a thesis demands, give careful consideration to the following:

- the feasibility and viability of the project, including time constraints on your candidacy and funding (see section 9 below);
- the kinds of scholarly and intellectual resources that research for the thesis is likely to develop and demand;
- the long-lasting effects of the topic on opportunities for teaching, publication, and further research.

## 3 Finding a Supervisor

The Graduate English faculty is large in number and extraordinarily wide-ranging in its scholarship. Students are advised to investigate just how extensive the range of potential supervisors is. Every PhD student is assigned a mentor, who is one source for information about potential thesis supervisors. Coursework offers the chance to explore intellectual affinities with potential supervisors, and the Associate Director, PhD of the graduate program can provide

useful advice. Members of the Graduate Faculty are always willing to discuss thesis topics and supervision with candidates, and asking a faculty member to read and comment on a fellowship proposal is an excellent way to begin to gauge the potential of a supervisory relationship. Students should initiate discussion of a thesis topic with potential supervisors no later than the winter/second term of the first year of the PhD program (second year for Direct Entry students).

## 4 Submission and Approval of a Thesis Proposal

After securing a thesis supervisor and developing a thesis topic in consultation with that supervisor, the student completes a “Preliminary Thesis Proposal and Committee Request List” (Form A), outlining the focus and approach of the proposed thesis, and submits it to the Department by May 15 of Year 1 (Year 2 for Direct Entry students). The student must consult with at least three and ideally four further members of the graduate faculty (in addition to the supervisor) to gain additional perspectives on the design and viability of the project. The student lists the names of the faculty members consulted and suggests the names of up to four faculty members to be considered as potential members of the supervisory committee.

The Preliminary Thesis Proposal is a statement of approximately 1-2 single-spaced pages that outlines the focus and approach of the proposed program of research. Students who have recently written a fellowship (SSHRC or OGS) application may adapt the Plan/Program of Study if it reflects the thesis project, but students are strongly advised to make sure that the Preliminary Thesis Proposal represents their *current* thinking about the project, informed by coursework and intellectual growth.

Successful proposals will be written in clear, concise prose and will include the following:

- an overview of the current state of scholarship in the area;
- the goals of the proposed research;
- the questions to be investigated;
- the anticipated contribution to the field.

On Form A, the student also indicates any library resources and languages that the project demands.

The Preliminary Thesis Proposal, in short, demonstrates thoroughness in the preliminary investigation of a thesis topic and assures the Department about its feasibility.

## 5 PhD Supervisory Committees

After Form A has been received, the Director of Graduate Studies and the Associate Director, PhD will determine the composition of the supervisory committee (the supervisor plus two additional members), a process that may (if necessary) involve consultation with the student.

During the next two months (normally June and July), the candidate should meet with the supervisory committee as a group to discuss the proposal and the Special Fields Reading List, to decide on an initial 40-50 texts for that list, and to plan a schedule of work. The student spends the rest of the summer reading those initial texts and developing their ideas about the remaining 40-50 titles on the list. Working closely with the thesis committee, the student then completes Form B, the Special Fields Reading List, and submits it to the Department on October 1 of Year 2 (Year 3 for Direct Entry).

## 6 Procedures for the Special Fields Examination

The Special Fields Examination allows the student to demonstrate mastery of the *field* to which the dissertation will make an original contribution and in which (should the student intend to pursue an academic career) the student hopes to be hired. The exam has three components: 1) a written examination focused on a reading list; this is a take-home exam, which the student has one week to complete, and in which the student selects three questions to answer from a list of nine; 2) a Position Paper (3,000 words maximum), which articulates the student's most recent thinking about the thesis topic and sets out the argument and stakes of the thesis in light of the preparation of the texts on the reading list; and 3) an oral examination, approximately two hours long, focused in part on the written examination, in part on the Position Paper, and in part on the Special Fields Reading List as a whole.

The Special Fields Reading List, which forms the basis for the examination, is not a preliminary

bibliography for the dissertation; instead, it should comprise between 80 and 100 titles, roughly two-thirds (55-65) of which are central and important texts within a major field and roughly one-third (25-35) of which are central and important texts within a minor field. The list is drawn up in close consultation with the supervisor and other members of the committee. It must be received by the Department in the form of a completed and signed Form B by October 1 of Year 2 (Year 3 for Direct Entry). At least three months must elapse between that date and the sitting of the exam.

A single grade of Fail, Pass, or Distinction is awarded for the entire examination considered as a whole (written take-home answers, Position Paper, and oral component). In the event of a mark of Fail, a second attempt at the Special Fields Examination (in three parts, as before) is allowed. It must be made within four months or, if the summer intervenes, in the following September.

For a fuller account of the Special Fields Examination and Reading List, including definitions and examples of major and minor fields, students should consult the [“Description of Special Fields Exam and Timeline for Thesis Proposals Reading Lists and Special Fields Exam”](#)

(Revised December 2021).

## Arranging the Special Fields Examination

In consultation with the student, the supervisor will arrange a time and place for the oral component of the examination. Note that it is the student’s responsibility to ensure that this date does not conflict with any significant TA responsibilities. The Graduate Administrator requires a minimum of three weeks’ notice to set up the examination.

## 7 Beginning the Thesis/Prospectus/Annual Meetings

The position paper will give the committee a basis on which to decide what the student’s next step following the examination should be. Some committees may recommend that the position paper be converted into a prospectus complete with a chapter-by-chapter outline; others may recommend that the student immediately begin drafting a chapter.

The candidate meets with the supervisor and individual committee members according to the

schedule they have established, but the candidate must meet with the full supervisory committee at least once every year in order to fulfill SGS registration requirements. At that meeting the supervisor will complete an Annual Supervisory Committee Report; after the student is provided with the opportunity to add comments to the Report, it is to be signed by student and supervisor and submitted to the Department.

Supervisors have the responsibility to inform their supervisees about research leaves or other absences that might interrupt supervision, and to make arrangements with the candidate, the Department, and a temporary supervisor if necessary. It is generally understood that a supervisor will offer support not only in the thesis research and writing but also with applications for funding; the supervisor usually also offers advice on such professional concerns as publication and job applications.

## 8 Supervision: Candidate, Supervisor, Supervisory Committee

### a) The Candidate

The thesis proposal is an undertaking to produce an original contribution to scholarship. Candidacy for the PhD of this University also implies that the research and dissertation will conform to the scholarly and stylistic requirements of the Department and the University, and that it will be completed in a timely fashion. In all respects the primary responsibility rests with the candidate. The supervisor, the Supervisory Committee, and the Department also have definite obligations.

In particular, the candidate is responsible for maintaining contact with the supervisor and, as necessary, the Supervisory Committee and the Department. The faculty concerned must know how to reach the candidate by email and telephone, and the candidate and the supervisor should come to an agreement about how, how often, and under what conditions they intend to consult.

It is important that the candidate and supervisor establish at the outset their expectations about consultation, about the kind and amount of direction that will be given, and about the mechanics

of it: whether or not it is to be based on draft chapters or sections submitted by the candidate, for instance, or whether progress is to be gauged by reference to a plan or timetable for the work. Expectations about frequency of consultation should be well understood from the start.

Draft work should usually be sent electronically: consult with your committee members to ask whether they would prefer hard copy; if they prefer electronic, confirm which file format (many prefer MS Word for the sake of editing whereas others may prefer PDF). Finished copy is always the responsibility of the candidate: the supervisor and Supervisory Committee should not be expected to proofread at the final, or any, stage of the work.

## b) The Supervisor

It is critical to the success of the working relationship between supervisor and candidate to develop an initial agreement about the method and scope of the research, and to clarify the expectations of supervisor and candidate: about the kind and amount of advice that the candidate wants and the supervisor is able and willing to offer; about the involvement of the members of the Supervisory Committee; about the frequency, regularity and contents of consultations; about an appropriate time scheme for the completion of the thesis; and about the way draft work is to be submitted. Clear and open communication throughout, and especially at the outset, is crucial.

## c) The Supervisory Committee

As above, the Supervisory Committee typically comprises the supervisor and two additional committee members, sometimes called “readers.” Their role is to offer advice on particular areas of the research, the method and presentation, and on particular chapters. The Supervisory Committee is also required to monitor the candidate’s progress. All members of the Supervisory Committee act as examiners for the thesis defense.

The School of Graduate Studies publication, “Graduate Supervision Guidelines,” is available on the SGS Website:

[https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/253/2019/06/Graduate-Supervision-Guidelines\\_Students.pdf](https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/253/2019/06/Graduate-Supervision-Guidelines_Students.pdf)

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/resources-supports/supervision/supervision-guidelines/>



## d) Forms of Support Regarding the Supervisory Committee

If you have concerns regarding your supervisory committee or one of your graduate course instructors, you're welcome to contact either the Graduate Chair or the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). If you'd prefer to seek support beyond the Department, consider contacting the [Centre for Graduate Mentorship & Supervision \(CGMS\)](#).

The university also offers these supports for students with concerns:

- [Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office \(ARCDO\)](#): support regarding harassment and discrimination.
- [Community Safety Office](#): support for those who have experienced personal safety concerns.
- [Graduate Students' Union \(GSU\)](#): advocacy services.
- [Institutional Equity Office](#): supports regarding harassment and discrimination.
- [School of Graduate Studies \(SGS\)](#): resources for addressing conflicts in graduate studies.
- [Sexual & Gender Diversity Office \(SGDO\)](#): support with respect to 2SLGBTQ+ issues.
- [Sexual Violence Prevention & Support Centre](#): support for those affected by sexual violence or sexual harassment.
- [University Ombudsperson](#): support regarding a range of concerns.

## 9 Time Constraints and Funding

The University of Toronto (like most Canadian granting agencies, such as OGS and SSHRC) expects that the PhD thesis will be submitted within five years of first registration in a PhD program. Consequently, fellowships are not renewable after this period, and candidates still working on their thesis in the sixth year are often much distracted by financial exigencies. These timing expectations create important constraints on the scope of a thesis project and should be considered seriously during the early stages of topic formation. We urgently advise candidates to undertake research and writing of a scope that can be completed within the last three years of a five-year program.

## 10 Presentation: the Form and Style of the Thesis

The School of Graduate Studies Website publishes on-line guidelines for the production of PhD theses under *Producing Your Thesis*:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/academic-progress/program-completion/producing-your-thesis/>.

Please note that thesis templates, along with detailed specifications, are available under *Formatting*:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/current-students/program-completion/formatting/>

The Department recommends slightly larger than minimum margins: left-hand 38mm (1.5”); other three margins 26mm (1”).

Candidates are advised to regard the normal length of a PhD thesis as 75,000 words. The Department imposes a minimum limit of 50,000 words and a maximum limit of 100,000 words (inclusive of prefatory matter, appendices, bibliography, and all), and these limits may be exceeded only with special permission from the Department (in the case of editions, for instance). The length is expressed in words not pages; the number of pages is immaterial in this respect. (Please note that any deviation from these norms will require special permission from the Department.)

Theses are normally divided into chapters and sometimes further sub-divided into parts. These may be titled or otherwise but should be listed, with pagination, on a “Contents” page. There is no rule regarding the number of thesis chapters, but be aware that it can be difficult to manage an argument successfully if chapters are over-long. Most theses benefit from a conclusion – even a short one – and this is especially the case when chapters deal with discrete topics (e.g., different authors or works).

With respect to style, it is important that *from the start* the candidate adopt one particular citation style (e.g. MLA style; Chicago style) and follow it consistently throughout the thesis. The question of which citation style is adopted should be determined through consultations between the candidate and the supervisor. The Department requires that the bibliography be of “Works Consulted” (not “Works Cited,” which is insufficient in this context). The Department also recommends the use of footnotes (located on the page to which they refer) rather than endnotes

and requires that quotations from non-English sources be given in the original language, with full translations in the notes. **In matters for which there is no readily available model, use discretion, be consistent, and, if necessary, consult with the supervisor.**

The Department has made Canadian English the standard for all PhD dissertations. Candidates should consult the Canadian Oxford English Dictionary and make sure that spellings are consistent throughout the dissertation.

“Acknowledgements” should include previous scholarship and material assistance (including funding) that has enabled the research; personal and supervisory acknowledgements should not be inserted until after the oral examination.

A current “Curriculum Vitae” should accompany each copy of the thesis. It should conform to the model appended to these guidelines below.

Templates for the thesis are available from the SGS website (see the link above). Although candidates must work with an editable version of their theses (e.g., in MSWord), note that unless otherwise instructed by the Graduate English Office, when sending a digital copy of a thesis to anyone including the Director, the Department, or a printer, the thesis should be emailed or shared in PDF format. A PDF will ensure the preservation of the original formatting, and provide each person receiving the file with an identical copy of the original. Every individual computer regardless of platform or brand may read a text document in a slightly different manner, altering your formatting, leading to potentially frustrating mistakes and costly reprinting.

## 11 Submission of the Thesis to the Department

Once the supervisor and other committee members agree that the thesis has been completed to their satisfaction, the supervisor emails the Director of Graduate Studies, stating that the thesis is ready for examination and suggesting names of four or five external examiners and two or three potential internal (typically departmental) examiners.

The candidate first emails draft copies of their Curriculum Vitae and Abstract (**in MS Word**) to the Director to review. The Director will often suggest revisions to both – to the Abstract in particular. When these are approved, the candidate emails final PDF copies of their Curriculum

Vitae and Abstract to the Director and the Graduate Assistant.

The Abstract must not exceed **350 words** (excluding title, name, etc.) and should *list the degree or date as “expected,”* until after the Oral Examination has been successfully completed and the candidate is submitting the dissertation to the School of Graduate Studies (see the SGS website under “Abstract”). The candidate’s Academic CV should include their prospective PhD degree, thesis title, supervisor, and committee members. The Abstract and CV are used to secure an external appraiser, and therefore the CV should include related academic activities.

The candidate must submit a **PDF copy of their dissertation** to the graduate assistant, who will then check it for formatting. *Please carefully consult the guidelines on the School of Graduate Studies [Producing Your Thesis](#) page.*

THE THESIS SHOULD BE CAREFULLY PROOFREAD AND CHECKED FOR COMPLETENESS BY THE CANDIDATE.

The graduate assistant does not proofread the dissertation but may return it to the candidate for formatting changes. A typical PDF copy of a dissertation tends to be between 1 MB and 10 MB in size, depending mostly upon compression and the inclusion of coloured images. The PDF should be formatted to be able to be easily emailed to the graduate assistant. Ideally, the final copy that is submitted in advance of a Final Oral Exam should be no larger than 4 or 5 MB.

In order to prepare for the Final Oral Examination, some faculty and external examiners may request a hard copy of the dissertation.

## 12 The Final Oral Examination

The Final Oral Examination takes place, under normal circumstances, **between ten and thirteen weeks after the submission of the thesis to the Department.** The summer months and the holiday break in December and January create major exceptions to this timing: note especially that oral examinations are not scheduled in July and August except for emergency situations.

Other factors may influence the timing of the oral examination, including delays in securing an external examiner, the external examiner's own schedule, and the availability of members of the Supervisory Committee. **Candidates are advised to speak with the Director of Graduate Studies 2-3 months before the planned submission date** so these and other factors may be discussed.

**The Final Oral Examination committee is appointed by the School of Graduate Studies on the advice of the Department, which makes arrangements for the examination.**

The Final Oral Examination Committee consists of the following:

- Chair: a member of the graduate faculty from another department; ensures that the rules are followed and that the candidate is treated fairly; is a **non-voting** member of the committee and generally does not ask questions.
- External Appraiser: an expert in the field from another university who writes a short appraisal of the thesis, often called the "external report": the appraisal will state whether or not the thesis is acceptable "in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy." This report is submitted at least 10 business days in advance of the oral defense, at which time a copy will be provided to the candidate and the examination committee. The External Appraiser asks at least one and often two rounds of questions.
- Supervisor: usually asks a leading question or two at the beginning of the oral exam, but in the Department of English it is standard practice for the supervisor not to ask questions otherwise.
- Two Supervisory Committee Members, each of whom asks a round or two of questions (if there is an additional Supervisory Committee Member, they may participate in the exam as a **non-voting** member of the committee: non-voting members may participate in the questioning of the candidate and may remain during the committee's deliberations but have no vote).
- Internal Examiner: a member of the Department with the same functions as the External Appraiser, except the Internal Examiner does not provide a written report.
- Departmental Representative: Director of Graduate Studies or a delegated member of the graduate faculty in English, who tends to ask a round or two of questions but may defer to provide more time for the external or other examination committee members.

With the exception of the Chair and the Supervisor, each member of the committee usually receives one or possibly two rounds of questions (15-20 mins each).

## 13 Final Submission of the Thesis

Please see the School of Graduate Studies website under *Producing Your Thesis*:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/current-students/program-completion/producing-your-thesis/>

Style templates (Word and LaTeX) are available from the SGS website, and workshops have been developed to assist students with the production and submission of Electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs).

As of Fall 2009, the School of Graduate Studies requires all PhD students to submit the final corrected version of their thesis **electronically in PDF format**. However, it is a requirement of the Department of English that **one bound hard copy of the thesis MUST be submitted to the Department no later than one month after the defense**. (For more information, please see Section 14, “Submitting the Bound Copy of the Dissertation.”) If submitting the bound copy is an issue for the candidate, they should contact the graduate assistant immediately for advice.

**Before submission, ALL theses must be converted to Adobe Acrobat Portable Document Format (PDF) as a single file that complies with the SGS Guidelines for thesis file format and naming convention.**

To enable thesis conversion, there is a computer in the Information Commons equipped with Adobe Acrobat that has been designated as an ETD workstation, and the Help Desk at Information Commons is available to respond to technical enquiries.

Files are submitted through a self-submission process complete with vetting procedures and web input forms that allow documents to be uploaded into a repository. The digital copy of the ETD in the institutional repository will be considered the “official” version of the thesis. Each ETD will be assigned a permanent URL that will not change, ensuring reliable access to the digital version.

As it is the University of Toronto’s intention that there be no restriction on the distribution and

publication of theses, theses will be released after each convocation and become freely available to the public online.

However, in some cases, you may wish to consider delaying thesis publication. Typical reasons for embargo include:

- currently seeking publication of part of your thesis in a journal or publication of the thesis as a book;
- content of a sensitive nature in the thesis, the publication of which might endanger the wellbeing of the author or of persons associated with the work;
- a patent in process.

If you intend to restrict the release date of your ETD, please submit a restrict thesis release date form to SGS (dated and signed by your graduate unit director or chair), and include a copy bound inside the front cover of the bound paper copy for the Department. Please see *Embargoes on Thesis Release*:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/current-students/program-completion/electronic-thesis-submission/>

Full instructions and publishing guides are available through the ProQuest ETD website at:

<http://www.etdadmin.com/cgi-bin/school?siteId=623>.

ETDs will be housed in the digital library repository (“T- Space”), the institutional research repository for the University of Toronto community:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/academic-progress/program-completion/electronic-thesis-submission/>

*N.B.: When uploading through the ETD site, you may be prompted to order printed copies of your thesis through the site as part of the submission process. If you have requested an embargo on your thesis, do not order printed and bound copies through the ETD site. The system will charge you for the copies and debit your card but will not release your thesis or produce the printed copies for the duration of your embargo. You will not be able to submit a bound copy of your thesis produced through this method to fulfill your Departmental requirements.*

## 14 Submitting the Bound Copy of the Dissertation

It is a requirement of the Department of English that one bound copy of the thesis must be submitted to the Department before convocation and no later than one month after the defense.

This bound copy must be printed single-sided, with slightly larger margins as outlined in these guidelines, Section 10, “Presentation: the Form and Style of the Thesis.” If you intend to restrict the release date of your ETD, a copy of your restrict thesis release date form must also be included inside the front cover of your thesis.

Although students may choose to use any binding/printing service, the Graduate Assistant can answer questions about the Department’s thesis binding requirements and alternative printing options, and will provide contact information about options for thesis binders.

## 15 Access to the Thesis -- towards publication?

At the end of the examination, a successful candidate has to indicate in writing whether access to the thesis by other scholars will be restricted for a certain period. The decision as to whether a restriction is prudent or unnecessary will depend on the nature of the research and whether the candidate intends to publish the thesis. Previously unknown material may need to be protected.

As to publication, the criticisms and suggestions of the examiners will often be made with this in mind, for it is seldom that the thesis, though in principle publishable, is already in book form.

One of the uses of the Oral Examination—particularly when there is a high level of satisfaction all round—is to encourage and assist the candidate with that next project.



## Appendix 1: Curriculum Vitae Template

**Note that these titles indicate the sections only and the minimum information required on a candidate's CV.** Candidates should include any academic papers, publications, conferences, or teaching that relates to their degree and/or thesis topic. **Typically an academic CV submitted by a candidate should be a minimum of two pages in length, and no more than four pages.** The CV is emailed to the Director and Graduate Assistant as a separate PDF, along with a PDF of the Abstract, and hard-copy of the CV is submitted with and included in the thesis boxes, printed one side only and not stapled.

### CURRICULUM VITAE

#### **Name**

#### **Post-Secondary Education**

*Degrees* [under "PhD, English Literature, University of Toronto," list the thesis title and the names of the supervisor and supervisory committee members]

*Certificates*

#### **Honours and Awards**

#### **Publications and Presentations**

*Refereed Articles and/or Chapters*

*Reviews*

*Conference Presentations*

*Campus / Departmental Talks*

#### **Teaching**

*Course Instructorships*

*Teaching Assistantships (Seminar Leader)*

*Teaching Assistantships (Marker / Grader)*

#### **Research Assistantships**

#### **Related Experience**

(NB: references other than the supervisor and supervisory committee members are not necessary for this CV)