

## Thesis Readiness for Poets: An Insider's Guide

### *What is thesis?*

Your thesis, the culmination of your MFA experience, will be a collection of poetry, a manuscript of 35-65 pages that represents your best work over the past few years. Writing a quality manuscript also serves as proof that you can work independently and, therefore, are positioned to produce future works of equal or higher quality after graduation. Here in academia, “thesis” also refers to the process of producing the manuscript, and so enrolling in “thesis” means that you are taking credit for the independent process of writing a poetry collection.

### *Am I ready for thesis?*

You are ready for thesis if you have a preponderance of poems—a minimum of 20—that are publishable and would not benefit significantly from further workshops. You are also ready if you have hit your aesthetic stride and can continue to produce poems in which you are confident without the benefit of a workshop. Typically, this means you have already taken a number of writing workshops, which is why the department mandates that you have at least 24 credits under your belt before enrolling in thesis.

### *Who should my advisor be?*

If you're confident of your body of work, your next step is to seek out an advisor. Your advisor should be a faculty member who knows your work. Make a list of potential advisors and contact them, starting with your first choice. Be prepared to explain why you are ready for thesis, what you hope your manuscript to be in terms of both length and aesthetic, and how long you think you'll need to complete it to your satisfaction. Faculty members are not required to take you on as an advisee, so make the case for why you want to work with that person in particular.

### *What does my advisor do?*

Once you embark on thesis, you will no longer be receiving the kind of line-by-line edits you enjoyed in workshops. Rather, you will be focusing on the challenge of shaping a collection of poems. Your advisor helps you with that. Plan to meet with your advisor twice per semester to appraise him or her of your progress toward a completed manuscript.

### *How should I structure my time while taking thesis credits?*

As an independent project, the structure of thesis preparation is entirely up to you. However, here are a few tips:

- Don't start taking thesis credits until you are ready.
- Do create a schedule working backward from your anticipated graduation date. Set that date for the semester AFTER you think you'll be done writing and revising your thesis. The semester in which you graduate will be spent mostly on making sure you're meeting all of the Stony Brook requirements, but you still have to be enrolled, so...
- Do hoard your 6 thesis credits, if you can afford it, so that you don't run out of them before you finish your collection. Your credit load doesn't have to correlate with your workload. For example, you could do the heavy lifting of producing 35 pages of poetry during the spring and summer terms while taking only 1 credit of thesis. Then you could take 2 credits during the fall, while you're revising and shaping the collection, saving the final 3 credits for the following spring, when you anticipate graduating, even though your workload in the spring term will consist mostly of formatting page numbers and getting forms signed. The reason for this hoarding is that you may decide to make a major overhaul of your manuscript at the last minute, in which case you won't be able to graduate in the spring after all. A stash of credits gives you flexibility. Once you're sure your manuscript is completed, you can use up all the remaining credits on your graduating semester. You and your advisor should discuss your credit distribution on a semester-by-semester basis.

- Do meet with your advisor when you have substantial progress to show or if you're really stuck. Thesis is an independent project, not a weekly course.

*No, really, how should I structure my time while taking thesis credits?*

Here's a sample schedule for a theoretical student planning to graduate in Spring 2012:

- Fall 2010: identify thesis advisor; fill out thesis planning form and meet advisor to review it; get approval to enroll in thesis. You will need to get approval for each semester in which you're taking thesis credits.
- Spring 2011:
  - January: register for 1 credit of thesis
  - February: leave advisor with initial batch of 20-35 poems you feel are thesis-ready.
  - Feb-May: continue generating poems, adding your best ones to the thesis.
  - May: meet advisor with first full draft of thesis, at least 35 pages. Discuss shape of manuscript and principles for ordering poems.
- Summer 2011: continue writing; figure out sections and overall structure of ms. Drop off second draft of manuscript, with poems in your best effort at order, to advisor at end of summer.
- Fall 2011:
  - September: meet to review 2<sup>nd</sup> draft.
  - Sep-Dec: continue revising ms.
  - November: Deliver 3<sup>rd</sup> draft by Thanksgiving break; prepare lists of potential second and third thesis readers.<sup>1</sup>
  - December: meet to review 3<sup>rd</sup> draft and decide on graduation readiness; report status on contacting thesis readers; prepare manuscript and signature page to send to outside reader.
- Spring 2012:
  - January: manuscript to readers
  - February: declare that you are graduating; readers' reports returned; enroll in any remaining thesis credits
  - March: tweak ms.; format thesis and meet with graduate school to review any problems<sup>2</sup>
  - April: submit thesis
  - May: graduate!

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<sup>1</sup> *Who are these people?*

Your thesis readers are responsible for making sure that you and your advisor aren't insane. Your second thesis reader is another faculty member who teaches either in the summer or regular terms and who knows your work. Consult your original list of potential advisors for ideas. Your third reader is someone reputable and knowledgeable about poetry who does not have an affiliation with the MFA program. This could be someone from whom you've taken a writing workshop as an undergraduate or a poet you admire or have come to know through your activities in the field. Consult your advisor for guidance if you can't think of any prospects.

*What do my readers do?*

Your 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> readers will look at your manuscript and respond with a paragraph to a page of general commentary. They will not give you line edits. Your thesis should be in final or near to final condition before you send it to your readers, though you can arrange for them to be your readers well in advance. The only reason you would have substantial revisions after hearing back from your readers would be if they had serious reservations about the quality of your work. You and your advisor would both have to be fairly deluded to send an unqualified thesis to your readers.

<sup>2</sup> Keep in mind that if you miss the deadline for successfully submitting your thesis, you'll have to postpone graduation until the summer session...and you will have to enroll in zero credits for the summer. If you miss a summer deadline, you will have to buy a 7<sup>th</sup> thesis credit that fall, in order to stay enrolled.