

Literature Component of the Thesis Defense

At the oral defense of the thesis, the student synthesizes the reading, thinking, and writing that go into earning the M.F.A. degree. We envision the defense as more than the last examination the student passes. We see it as the first of potentially many occasions when the writer will be asked to discuss his/her work intelligently. Whether in interviews for teaching and other positions or as part of the public appearances and interviews that accompany book publication, the writer needs to be able to talk about his/her work, placing it in the broader context of literature and answering questions about his/her writing process and artistic judgments.

Therefore, we require that the student submit a reading list along with the defense draft of the thesis. At the defense, you will be able to refer to the list and answer questions about it. It is strongly suggested that you start putting together the list as you start the thesis, and add to it as you go along, consulting your director for suggestions.

Procedure:

1) Working in consultation with the thesis director, you will draw up a list of 15-25 works which precede and bear upon your writing (note that the scope of your writing while in the program may be broader than the work in the thesis) and which you will be responsible for reading and studying. The books may come from courses taken during the M.F.A. program, outside reading, and suggestions that the thesis director will make. The list must have some historical depth (at the very least we expect 2-3 pre-20th century works) and may include some criticism. No works by MFA program faculty may appear on the list. While presumably most works on the list will be in the genre of the thesis, it may be that work in another genre has also influenced you and can be included.

2) Within the list, you must identify a group of 5-6 books which will form your Area of Concentration, the literary area in which you have a depth of knowledge and interest, an area about which you could, if given the chance, teach. The list, therefore, should constitute the reading list you would use if you were given the opportunity to teach such a literature course. What makes this a group should be readily apparent: the writings of a particular author, a cluster of works from a literary movement or period, or works tracing the development of a particular genre or theme through time. The Area of Concentration should be given a title, as a course would be.

3) The Area of Concentration should be broken out separately and titled, and the rest of the books can be presented as one list (need not be broken into subgroups). For each of these lists, the simplest organization is chronological (by date of first publication, not date of the edition you are using), but alphabetical by author's last name is also acceptable.

4) While program does not require annotation or full bibliographic citation, individual directors may do so. You will be able to bring the list with some notes on it to the defense, to refer to. Again, this is not an exam, but a way to prepare to have a cogent and interesting discussion.

5) After your thesis director has reviewed and approved your list, it will be submitted to the Graduate Advisor (date will be on the list of deadlines for your defense). The Graduate Advisor will review the list to check that it complies with the rules and may ask for some changes in consultation with the director. The goal here is to make sure that all defenses are equal and that all of our graduates are equally prepared as they leave the program. Once the Graduate Advisor approves your list, it's in final form.

6) At the time that the defense draft of the thesis is turned in to the committee (currently two weeks into the defense semester), the list must accompany it.

7) At the defense, the committee will ask questions about the thesis and the reading list. The student will discuss the reading and how it forms a background or context for your work, ways in which writing the thesis and your study of literature would go into possible future teaching, as well as the writing of the work itself, personal aesthetic principles, and plans for further revision of the thesis.

Note:

At this time, we are not requiring a written examination on the reading list (something we have considered). As long as students do a good job demonstrating their grasp of the reading at the oral defense, we will not have to move in future years to a written examination.

If you have any questions about the reading list, or about the thesis procedure in general, please speak to your thesis director or graduate advisor.