



Thesis versus Project: Finishing your MA, Professional and Technical Writing Concentration

Spring 2021



College of Humanities
and Social Sciences



Degree Requirements

- <https://english.gmu.edu/graduate/advising/sheets>
- Core Classes (12 credits)
- PTW Classes (9 credits)
- Theory Class (3 credits)
- EITHER:
 - Thesis (6 credits 799)
 - OR
 - Project (3 credits 797 PLUS an elective)
- (This is now posted on: <https://writingandrhetoric.gmu.edu/ma-students/finishing-your-ma>)



The Process

Thesis

- The **semester before you begin the thesis**, you must:
 1. Write the proposal
 2. Assemble a committee of one director and two readers
 3. Finalize the proposal and have it approved by the department chair
- Once your committee has approved your proposal, you can sign up for 799
- Depending on your director, you may meet occasionally during the thesis period
- The thesis must undergo format review by the library
- The thesis will usually be due a few weeks before the official end of the semester
- To submit the thesis, you must have completed format review and have obtained signatures from all of your committee members
- Overall, the thesis typically takes **one year**, from proposal to submission

Project

- The **semester before you begin the project**, you must:
 - Have an idea for a project that includes **collection and analysis of some data**
 - Draft the 797 Independent Study Proposal and Syllabus
- 4-6 weeks before the end of the semester, you should check in with the Program Director (Dr. Heidi Lawrence) to notify her that you are completing a project. Ideally, you should have a draft of your Proposal and Syllabus ready at that time.
- Dr. Lawrence will review your proposal and, upon approval, you will be added to English 797—Projects in Professional and Technical Writing
- Unless told otherwise, you will complete your 797 Independent Study with Dr. Lawrence, another PTW faculty member, and all other students completing 797 that semester.
- During your project semester, you will meet as assigned with the faculty and students.
- You will submit your final project by the end of the semester, and you will complete a short presentation on it at the Department's Professional Development Forum if possible
- Overall, the project takes a semester and a half to complete




Timeline--Thesis

Thesis

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Sample Timeline—Spring 2022 graduation

- January 2021—get thesis idea; develop into draft proposal
- March 2021—contact director; see if that person is interested in directing, confirm timeline, get feedback on proposal
- April 2021—secure remaining readers; get proposal approved and signatures obtained
- May 2021—sign up for 799, 3 credits, in fall 2021
- Summer 2021—pre-work for thesis; get approvals; maybe obtain IRB approval
- Fall 2021—read and collect data; meet weekly/bi-weekly with director
- Winter 2021—begin drafting
- February 2022—have first draft ready for director; get feedback
- Late March 2022—complete second draft and send to readers
- Mid-April 2022—finalize changes and send to library



Timeline--Project

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Sample Timeline—Spring 2022 graduation

- March 2021—Email Dr. Lawrence to let her know you'll be doing a project
- April 2021—Send draft proposal and syllabus to Dr. Lawrence
- May 2021—Sign up for 797
- August 2021—Talk with Dr. Lawrence and other faculty about your project and scheduling for fall; finalize syllabus
- Fall 2021—meet with the 797 IS like you would a regular class
- November 2021—finalize project
- December 2021—graduate



Ways that they are similar...

- Both require that you complete a major capstone task for the MA
- Both research-based, requiring extensive literature/library research **as well as** possible empirical work (interviews, observations, corpus development, archival work, etc.)
- Both must be “ready to go” **before** the semester you start the work. So you should be thinking about this ahead of time, and you should leave the semester prior to your thesis or project ready to go the next semester
- Both will require mostly independent work and individual deadlines



About the Thesis

- Long, academic document
- Best for big questions, lengthier work
- If you want to do interviews or a workplace study, a thesis gives you more time and space to do that
- If you have future academic pursuits, a thesis can be a good “test run” of lengthier research-based work



About the Project

- End product is up to you—we recommend white papers if you do not have another idea
- You can do something that solves a problem in your workplace or other organization
- The project should be used as a time to build your portfolio—make sure that your final portfolio has everything in it to get you the job you want that you need
- But—the work still must be grounded in the theory, methods, and research of our discipline; you will be asked to write an essay that discusses and argues for how you’ve used program concepts in your project alongside the final product



Recent Thesis Examples

- “Reevaluating Workplace Authority of the Technical Editor,” Kimberlyn Pepe fall 2020-spring 2021—Interviews with editors
- “The Rhetoric of Parasocial Relationships in New Media,” Paul Webster, spring 2019—Interviews with gamers
- “Role and Value of Grammar Knowledge for Professional Writers,” Madeline Graham, spring-fall 2018 (director)—Interviews with editors
- “Communication Matters: A Study of Methods of Delivery and the Role of Persuasion in Army Suicide Prevention Training Materials,” Nooshin Sherkat, spring-fall 2018—Textual analysis, training materials
- “Risk Communication: A Study of the Effects of Asymmetries in Public and Expert Risk Perception,” Katelyn Noland, fall 2013-spring 2014—Interviews and textual analysis



Recent Project Examples

- “Rhetorics of Workplace Communication: A Qualitative Study,” (ENGH 797) Emily Bourne, fall 2019, observational study
- “Workplace Documentation,” (ENGH 797), Lauren Hoerath, fall 2019, textual analysis and website development
- “Rhetorical and Formatting Patterns of Standardized and Non-standardized Process Emails,” (ENGH 797) Alex Flesch, spring 2019, textual analysis
- “Utilizing Email as a Learning Tool for Students with Mental Illness,” (ENGH 797) Brandon Cantrell, spring 2019, textual analysis
- “Prescribing Ethical AI for Non-binary Subject Matter,” (ENGH 797) Manal Assad, spring 2019, theoretical paper
- “Rhetorics of Graves Disease,” (ENGH 797) Luana Shafer, fall 2018, interviews





Project v thesis is different for everyone

- You can let a lot of things guide this decision:
 - Future aspirations
 - Current collateral and portfolio
 - Workplace/organizational problems
 - Your own interests and goals



Important things to remember

1. The work begins **before the semester that you intend to begin working**. You cannot register for 797 or 799 until you have an approved plan.
2. If you want to complete a thesis, you need to get to know our faculty and get a sense of who can serve as a reader/director.
3. Projects are nearly always completed as an independent study, so you will not see them as courses for which you can register.
4. Do not plan on official summer work; faculty availability during the summer varies, and projects are not run during the summer.



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